

A HAUNTED HOUSE

Virginia Woolf • AP Literature / Upper-Level ELA

A HAUNTED HOUSE

VIRGINIA WOOLF



30-MINUTE AP LIT CLOSE READING • FULL TEXT INCLUDED



WHY THE GUIDING QUESTIONS ARE INCLUDED

Woolf's story is only a few pages long, but students may lose track of the two couples and the shifting pronouns. After classroom use, I added five short orientation questions before asking students what the story means. They help students follow the basic situation without explaining the ending for them.

Includes the complete public-domain story, a 3-page student handout, a 3-page teacher guide, printable PDFs, and editable Word files.



THE STUDENT HANDOUT

Full story, five orientation questions, and four interpretation questions.

AP LITERATURE

STAND-ALONE CLOSE READING

A Haunted House

Virginia Woolf

Name: _____

Date: _____

As you read: There are two couples in this story—the ghostly couple who once lived in the house and the living people in the house now. Woolf moves between them quickly, so do not get stuck trying to label every pronoun. Mark one place where your understanding changes, and circle any repeated word, image, or phrase that seems important.

THE STORY

Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure—a ghostly couple.

“Here we left it,” she said. And he added, “Oh, but here too!” “It’s upstairs,” she murmured. “And in the garden,” he whispered. “Quietly,” they said, “or we shall wake them.”

But it wasn’t that you woke us. Oh, no. “They’re looking for it; they’re drawing the curtain,” one might say, and so read on a page or two. “Now they’ve found it,” one would be certain, stopping the pencil on the margin. And then, tired of reading, one might rise and see for oneself, the house all empty, the doors standing open, only the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine sounding from the farm.

“What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?” My hands were empty. “Perhaps it’s upstairs then?” The apples were in the loft. And so down again, the garden still as ever, only the book had slipped into the grass.

But they had found it in the drawing room. Not that one could ever see them. The window panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass. If they moved in the drawing room, the apple only turned its yellow side. Yet, the moment after, if the door was opened, spread about the floor, hung upon the walls, pendant from the ceiling—what? My hands were empty. The shadow of a thrush crossed the carpet; from the deepest wells of silence the wood pigeon drew its bubble of sound.

“Safe, safe, safe,” the pulse of the house beat softly. “The treasure buried; the room ...” the pulse stopped short. Oh, was that the buried treasure?

A moment later the light had faded. Out in the garden then? But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened.

He left it, left her, went North, went East, saw the stars turned in the Southern sky; sought the house, found it dropped beneath the Downs. “Safe, safe, safe,” the pulse of the house beat gladly. “The Treasure yours.”

The wind roars up the avenue. Trees stoop and bend this way and that. Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain. But the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window. The candle burns stiff and

PLOTTING SOMETHING • A Haunted House • Student Handout

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What Changed?

6. When you first began reading, what did you think the ghostly couple was looking for?

7. Find the moment when your understanding of their search begins to change. Copy a brief phrase or point to the detail, then explain what changed in your thinking.

What Is the “Treasure”?

8. At the end, the narrator asks, “Oh, is this your buried treasure? The light in the heart.” What might “the light in the heart” mean in this story? Use at least one specific detail from the text.

Make a Claim

9. Woolf takes something we normally associate with fear—a haunted house—and turns it into something very different. Complete the statement with an interpretation, not a plot summary. Make it specific enough that it could only fit this story.

Through the ghostly couple’s search, Woolf suggests that

Be Ready to Discuss

Who—or what—is actually haunting the house?

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GET ORIENTED

Five quick questions help students keep the two couples straight and notice the details they will need later.

WHAT CHANGED?

Students find the point where their first idea about the ghosts’ search no longer fits and explain what changed.

THE TREASURE

The last questions ask what the “treasure” might be and end with one claim about the story.



THE TEACHER GUIDE

Timing, suggested responses, discussion questions, and a 25-minute option.

AP LITERATURE

TEACHER GUIDE

A Haunted House

25–30-Minute Stand-Alone Close Reading

Text	Virginia Woolf, “A Haunted House” (1921)
Goal	Students keep track of the two couples, follow the ghosts’ search, and use details from the story to decide what they think the “treasure” is.
Materials	Student handout only. No slides or background lecture are needed.

Before You Start

On a first read, students are most likely to get lost in the pronouns and the quick shifts between the ghostly couple and the living couple. Questions 1–5 are there to clear that up. They do not explain the “treasure”; they just make sure students know who is in the house and what the ghosts keep returning to.

30-Minute Plan

0:00–1:00 | Set up — Tell them: “There are two couples in this story—the ghostly couple who once lived here and the living people in the house now. Woolf moves between them quickly, so don’t get stuck on every pronoun.” Do not explain the treasure or ending.

1:00–7:00 | Read — Students read independently. If someone gets stuck, bring them back to the two groups: the ghostly couple and the living occupants. Do not explain what the ghosts are really searching for.

7:00–12:00 | Get oriented — Students answer Questions 1–5 with words or phrases, not full sentences. Quickly check the two couples, the ghosts’ movement, the house’s pulse/heart, the ordinary memories, and what the ghosts notice in the sleeping couple.

12:00–18:00 | Interpret — Students work through Questions 6–9. These do not need to be polished. If time is tight, have them answer Questions 7 and 8 only.

18:00–28:00 | Discuss — Begin with what the ghosts seem to be looking for, move to “treasure,” and finish with the haunting question. Use the sequence below rather than every worksheet response.

28:00–30:00 | Final thought — Ask: “Does this story ultimately make death seem more powerful—or less powerful? Why?” Take two or three responses and end there.

If You Only Have 25 Minutes

0:00–1:00 orient to the two couples. 1:00–7:00 read. 7:00–11:00 Questions 1–5. 11:00–15:00 Questions 7–8. 15:00–23:00 discuss. 23:00–25:00 final question. Skip Questions 6 and 9 on paper.

AP LITERATURE

DISCUSSION & ANSWER NOTES

How I’d Run the Discussion

1. “What are they looking for?” Expect early answers such as an object, something hidden in the house, or literal treasure. Let students disagree before clarifying.

2. “Where does that first idea start to break down?” Listen for “the ghostly couple seek their joy,” “Kisses without number,” “Love upon their lips,” the sleepers’ “hidden joy,” or the ordinary memories near the end. These details move the search away from a literal object and toward a shared life.

3. “Then why call it treasure?” Don’t let the conversation stop at “because love is valuable.” Ask what has actually been preserved. Students may point to shared experience, memory, joy, or the life the couple made together.

4. “Why make them ghosts?” Possible interpretations: the dead remain through memory; places retain traces of human lives; love survives bodily absence; the past and present coexist in the house.

5. “Who—or what—is actually haunting the house?” Take more than one answer: the dead couple, memory, love, the past, or the house itself can all work. Ask students to point to a detail that supports what they say.

6. Final: “Does death seem more powerful—or less powerful by the end?” There is no single answer I would insist on. What I would listen for is the tension: death separates the couple (“Death was the glass”), but it does not erase the joy they left behind.

What to Listen For

Question 1: The two groups are the ghostly couple who lived in the house long ago and the living occupants in the house now. Students do not need to sort out every “we,” “us,” or “one” perfectly.

Question 2: The ghosts move through the house searching, opening doors, lifting things, going upstairs and into the garden, and returning to rooms tied to their past. The point is that their search keeps circling through the house rather than leading to one obvious object.

Question 3: Useful examples include “the pulse of the house,” “the heart of the house,” and the repeated “Safe, safe, safe.” At this stage, students only need to notice that the house is made to feel alive.

Question 4: Students might list sleeping, kisses, morning light, the garden, summer, winter snow, reading, laughing, or rolling apples in the loft. These ordinary memories become important later.

Question 5: The ghosts notice that the living couple is “sound asleep” with “Love upon their lips.” They linger over the sleepers and search them for “hidden joy.” Students may say the two couples are connected by love, shared intimacy, or the kind of ordinary happiness the ghosts remember from their own life.

Question 6: Students will probably begin by thinking the couple is looking for a lost object, hidden treasure, or something they left in the house. A literal answer is completely fine here—that is their starting point.

Question 7: Strong turning points include “the ghostly couple seek their joy,” “Kisses without number,” “Love upon their lips,” the sleepers’ “hidden joy,” or the cluster of ordinary memories near the end. These are the places where the search clearly starts to look emotional rather than material. Students should explain what changed in their reading, not just identify a phrase.

Question 8: Students may read “the light in the heart” as love, joy, connection, or the life people build together. Ask them to connect that idea to something specific: the repeated light imagery, the ordinary memories, or the ghosts recognizing love in the living couple.

Question 9: Claims could go in several directions: love can outlast physical death; people leave something of themselves in the places where they live; the real “treasure” is not property but the life attached to it; the past can feel alive when later people repeat or rediscover its joys.

If Students Are Still Lost

Say: “The ghostly couple lived in this house long ago. The living couple is here now. The ghosts are moving through the house looking for something they call a treasure. We are trying to figure out what that treasure really is.” Then go straight back to the text. That clears up the situation without explaining the ending for them.

Where the Discussion May Go

Many students will begin by assuming the ghosts want a literal object. As the repeated “safe,” pulse/heart, light, and ordinary memories pile up, that reading usually starts to shift. By the time the ghosts look at the sleeping couple, students may begin to see the “treasure” as something connected to shared life, love, memory, or joy. They do not need to land on exactly the same reading; I would just ask them to show where their thinking changed and what caused it.

Details Worth Noticing

- The house repeatedly has a “pulse” or “heart.” It starts to feel almost alive, as if the house itself is holding on to what happened there.
- Light starts as something the characters seem to be searching for and ends as something inward: the final “light in the heart.”
- The ghosts remember ordinary things—sleeping, reading, laughing, apples in the loft. Woolf makes those small pieces of a shared life into the “treasure.”
- The living couple echoes the dead couple. When the ghosts see “Love upon their lips,” they seem to recognize something of their own life in the people who live there now.
- Woolf uses all the pieces of a ghost story—closing doors, wandering ghosts, moonlight, a haunted house—but the effect becomes intimate rather than frightening.

If You Want to Push Further

- What changes if the “treasure” is not something the ghosts can physically recover?
- Why does Woolf repeat “Safe, safe, safe”? Who—or what—is being reassured?
- What does the house seem to know that the narrator does not understand at first?
- Why are so many of the remembered moments ordinary rather than dramatic?
- Is the living couple discovering the ghosts’ treasure, or continuing it?

Optional Foster Callback

If you want a quick Foster connection, ask: “We know by now that ghosts in literature usually do more than scare us. What does this haunting let Woolf show us?” Leave it there; it does not need to become a mini-lesson.

What Not to Overteach

- Do not front-load Woolf, modernism, stream of consciousness, or biographical context. They do not need any of that to do this activity.
- Do not force one meaning for the house, light, or treasure. Different readings are fine as long as students can point to the text.
- Do not turn the claim into a thesis-writing exercise. One solid sentence is enough.
- Do not spend time sorting out every pronoun or pinning down the narrator. If students are truly stuck, simply clarify that there are living occupants in the house as well as the ghostly couple.

Source: Virginia Woolf, “A Haunted House,” *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), Project Gutenberg eBook #29220; public domain in the United States.

INSIDE THE TEACHER GUIDE

You’ll find a 30-minute plan, a 25-minute version, notes for all nine student questions, discussion questions, and a short explanation to use if students lose track of the two couples.

There’s no Woolf biography or Modernism lecture to get through first. The lesson starts with the story.