

The Ancestor Haunts. Ghosts in Don Rosa's Donald Duck Comics

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Abstract

Haunting can be divided roughly into two categories. First one is evil-intentioned, which usually takes place in horror stories. The second is benevolent haunting, in which the ghost wants help from the protagonist, or wants to help him. In the latter case haunting happens in a fantasy setting. This paper discusses on the haunting that takes place in Don Rosa's Donald Duck comics. Rosa, being one of the world-known Disney comic artists and writers, follows the history of Scrooge McDuck in the footsteps of Carl Barks. The haunting in Rosa's comics takes place in the Castle McDuck, situated in the Dismal Downs in the central Scotland. The castle is an ancestral home of the McDuck clan, of which Scrooge is the final heir. The three stories that include the haunting are situated in the youth of Scrooge, when he has to fight to keep the castle to the clan. It is rumored that Sir Quackly McDuck, an ancestor who sealed himself to the wall of the castle with his treasure, haunts the castle and keeps the unwelcomed guests away. Scrooge meets Sir Quackly in his youth without realizing he's a ghost – that is only revealed to the readers later on. Scrooge also experiences some sort of borderline experience between life and death, during which he meets a group of his ancestors playing golf on top of a cloud. Later on he can't remember what happened.

The ancestors who haunt the castle McDuck are there for the readers to see, but the ducks never realize their existence. It is also important to mention that Rosa is the first Disney comic artist, who shows the death of an important character – and how he turns into a spirit.

Key Words: Comic, Disney, Donald Duck, Don Rosa, ghost, haunting, spirit.

1. Introduction

Generally, there are two distinguished types of haunting. The first one is malevolent, the type that is often used in horror fiction, where the ghost or spirit wants something bad to anyone who disturbs its peace. The other type is benevolent, which usually takes place in fantasy stories.

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Benevolent ghost is typically defined as someone who's died before he or she finished something important, so the spirit wants help from the protagonist to finish the matter. Or, like in my study, the spirit is an ancestor of the protagonist and wants to provide help rather than needs one itself.

My paper concentrates on the comics of an American comic artist and writer Don Rosa (1951-), who is most famous of his work in the field of Disney's Donald Duck comics. Rosa distinguishes himself from the other current Disney comic artists with his unique, detailed style of drawing and intriguing stories that are filled with both fantastic and mimetic elements. Rosa is often referred to as the follower of Carl Barks (1901-2000), the noted Disney artist, whose lifework included creating Duckburg and numerous important characters like Scrooge McDuck. Rosa refers to the stories Barks wrote, writes sequels to them and generally follows the history that Barks created for the ducks.

The most recognized of Rosa's works is the collection of the stories called *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, which tells the history of Scrooge from a little duckling to the old man we know. Rosa received a Will Eisner award¹ of this work in 1995 and later on published a sequel to it. He has also drawn the family tree of the ducks based on the facts Barks gave in his works.

This paper discusses the haunting that appears in the three comics of the book *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*. These comics are *The Last of the Clan McDuck*, *The New Laird of Castle McDuck* and *The Billionaire of the Dismal Downs*. All of these stories take place in a distant area called Dismal Downs in Scotland, where the family of Scrooge comes from and where the castle McDuck is located. It is commonly known to the people that the place is supposed to be haunted, but no one has got any confirmation about it, at least not yet.

I have divided this paper to three sections, each of which deals with one of the stories mentioned. The first one is about the main ghost, Sir Quackly McDuck, who is the guardian of the castle McDuck and who takes to his personal mission to help Scrooge in his life path. The second is about the "borderline" type of experience Scrooge has after he's hit by a lightning. During that incident he meets a group of his ancestors playing golf on top of a cloud. The last part is perhaps the most important, because in this comic Rosa describes how an important character passes away and turns into a spirit – a thing that no other Disney comic artist has presented in anywhere.

In the conclusions, I try to summarize all my points on how haunting is described in Don Rosa's Donald Duck comics and how different is the reader's perspective from the character's perspective. I will also emphasize how big of an issue this "death scene" really was on the Disney level.

2. Sir Quackly McDuck – the Haunting Ancestor

There is an ancient legend among the McDuck clan about a treasure. Back in the times of the civil war on 1057, one of the ancestors, Sir Quackly McDuck was “given a **chest of gold** in return for defendin’ King MacBeth”. But while protecting the chest, Quackly accidentally sealed himself into the wall with the treasure. Since then the whole clan has looked for both but never found them.² But there is still widely known rumour that the ghost of Sir Quackly roams the now deserted castle and will scare away anyone attempting to steal his treasure.

In the comic *The Last of the Clan McDuck*, Scrooge (as a young duck) was cutting peat for sale on the old land of McDuck clan. He was scared by the spiteful neighbours, the Whiskerwilles³, and sought a way to get out. At that time, someone called to him from the castle and Scrooge hurried his horse through the ruined wall. In the castle, Scrooge met a duck wearing a kilt. He never told Scrooge his name, but he knew the history of the clan very well. When Scrooge asked if he was a McDuck, the weird duck laughed: ”How could **ah** be a McDuck?! You know that your poppa and your uncles are the last McDuck men -- besides you!” But he did admit on watching over the castle.⁴

The nameless duck gave Scrooge an idea to travel to America to search for his fortune and somehow knew a lot of Scrooge’s job of shining shoes of which Scrooge never told him anything about. Scrooge never learned who the duck was, but the readers get more information from the following frames, when the duck walks alone in the halls of the castle talking to voices of unseen speakers. “Why dinnae you show him where your **treasure** is hidden?” asks a voice and the duck answers: “[- -] If Scrooge is to achieve greatness, he must **work** for it! Only **then** will we regain our honor!!!”⁵

At this point the readers are revealed that the strange duck is no other than Sir Quackly himself. The only known treasure in the castle is his and in his answer he talks about “we”, referring of course to the clan of McDuck, humiliatingly warned off from their own lands. More proving on this statement is the very next frame in which Sir Quackly, now wearing his distinctive helmet, steps **through** the curved wall to the place he sealed himself in.⁶ So it wasn’t a mere duck Scrooge met, it was a real ghost.

What is interesting in Sir Quackly’s ghostly appearance is the fact that he does that in two different forms. At first, he appears to Scrooge in the real world, but not as a see-through figure like we may imagine, but in a tangible form: there are three frames in which Sir Quackly sets his hand on Scrooge’s shoulder, so he definitely is a solid being.⁷ Secondly, he appears in his unsubstantial form, but only to the readers. In his form he is part of the unseen world of the dead: he may talk to the other ancestors of McDuck clan and walk through the walls without any effort at all.

3. "Borderline" Experience – Meeting the Relatives

The second time Sir Quackly appears to Scrooge is in the comic *The New Laird of Castle McDuck*. Scrooge has just got home from America to save his family from the debts, and ends up to a duel with one of the Whiskervilles eagerly wanting to take over the old McDuck castle. Scrooge is about to lose the fight in the high balcony of the castle, when his dropped sword magically rises up to the air to his hand and he can knock out his opponent. Unluckily at the same a lightning hits Scrooge, he falls to the moat and a brick hits him unconscious. The next moment he wakes up on top of a cloud next to a familiar looking duck in a kilt who leads him to a group of other ducks playing golf up in the air. The familiar duck is of course Sir Quackly and the rest are the ancestors of Scrooge.⁸

Scrooge seems to have ended up in some kind of "heaven-like" place with his deceased relatives. Sir Quackly insists they send him back, because "[t]his lad's not due here for **decades!**". After a lot of discussion and checking out the "book of McDuck", which seems to be some sort of chronicle of the clan, the ancestors finally realise Scrooge is going be the biggest "penny-pinching tightwad on earth" so he's worthy of getting a second chance. Sir Quackly gives Scrooge a hint on how to save himself and then he drops him off the cloud. Scrooge wakes up in the moat without any clear memories of what happened and eventually avenges the Whiskervilles.⁹

In this story, the haunting appears only in the spirit world. After getting that nasty hit on the head, Scrooge's mind travels to the spirit world whereas his body remains on its place in the moat. There he meets Sir Quackly and the other ancestors, but he doesn't seem like on connecting this duck to the duck he met in his youth in the castle. At first it seems like Scrooge dreams everything he sees, but that's not completely so. Generally in comic narration, wavy borderlines indicate a dream, for instance in Rosa's comic *The Dream of a Lifetime!*, there are very good examples on that matter¹⁰. But in this story, the borders of the frames remain normal, so what happens, happens for real.

A few other facts also point out that the experience was real. One of the ancestors mentions "how easily the Whiskervilles stole [Scrooge's] bank draft"¹¹. This draft was meant to pay the debt of the clan and Scrooge never saw the Whiskervilles taking it. But when he comes back "from the death", he instantly threatens the Whiskervilles with his sword and claims his bank draft back. Scrooge doesn't know where he got that information; he just had a "feeling".¹² So he remembers bits of his "borderline" experience.

This time Sir Quackly doesn't appear in the castle in his solid form. On the page 97, the readers can see a shadow figure of a strange duck watching how Scrooge's father prepares him for the upcoming duel. Later on, as I mentioned, Scrooge's sword rises up from the floor to his hand and a

bodiless voice screams: “Nay! **Never!**”. Sir Quackly himself states that it was him who gave the sword back to Scrooge starting this whole matter.¹³

Final statement on proving the haunting and the spirits of the ancestors happens to both the reader and the Whiskervilles. As Scrooge’s father has gone to the bank with the bank draft and Scrooge has stayed to watch the Whiskervilles, the evil men make an attempt to take Scrooge’s life – after all, he is the last of the clan. But before they get to Scrooge, a group of glowing heads appear through the walls of the castle and literally scare the hair out of the Whiskervilles. All of the ancestors, who normally don’t haunt the castle, appear in their spirit form (and only as floating heads) ready to protect Scrooge.¹⁴

This comic indicates how the whole ghost family is willing to help their descendant if they’re in trouble, even if they don’t take part in normal haunting.

4. Becoming a Spirit – Death in Donald Duck

In the last of the comics I’m discussing on, the appearance of the ghost of Sir Quackly is very brief and happens only in the final page. But this page includes one of the most interesting and important events that has happened among the Disney comics.

Scrooge has already lost his mother¹⁵, and has returned to Scotland as a rich young man. He has just bought a ten-acre hill in a small town called Duckburg and wants his family to join him and move to America. Scrooge’s sisters get all excited but his father Fergus claims he’s too old to leave. So he decides to stay in the castle McDuck with a young caretaker named Scottie. After a nice farewell party, Scrooge and his sisters leave the castle and see his father in the window waving at them for goodbyes. He’s not there alone, and Matilda, Scrooge’s sister claims that it’s Scottie. But the reader sees Scottie in the very next frame, outside of the castle.¹⁶

So who else was there besides old Fergus McDuck? Yet again, only readers see the glimpse on how the spirit world interconnects with the normal world. The figure standing next to Scrooge’s father is his late wife, mother of Scrooge. Scrooge’s father obviously sees her, as they talk to each other. He says “[-] our job is well and truly done!” and she answers “Yes, it’s time go, dear!”. After this Sir Quackly appears next to them and shakes hands with Fergus. With joined hands the parents of Scrooge follow Sir Quackly through the wall as the reader sees the body of Fergus in the bed with his glasses next to him on the bedside table.¹⁷

Rosa has clearly made history of the Disney comics by showing us, how an important character passes away. Fergus McDuck has died during the night, as he was finally ready to go to his wife knowing that Scrooge was doing well in his new life. So he is already in his spirit form, but visible to regular people when he waves to his children goodbyes. He is also wearing

his glasses at the same time the glasses are on the table, so this is another proof that it's his spirit form we're seeing.

Rosa shows the death of Scrooge's father as a peaceful event, which happens when he's done everything for his offspring and is ready to join with his late spouse and the rest of the ancestors to the spirit world.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have presented three comics by Don Rosa, which deal with ghosts and haunting in various ways. All of these comics take place in the youth of Scrooge McDuck and in the clan's old castle in Scotland. The castle McDuck is said to be haunted by the clan's ancestor, Sir Quackly McDuck, who guards the castle as well as his hidden treasure. What is interesting about this haunting, is the fact that only the reader (and in one case the scared Whiskervilles, who probably blame their mental health on the matter) remains sure of the existence of the ghosts. Scrooge never finds out his old home is haunted, he even says in the end of the *The New Laird of Castle McDuck*: "[- -] If I didn't know better, I'd think his place was... [- -] **haunted!**"¹⁸

So Scrooge never realises the connection between the duck who gave him the idea to go after his luck in America, and the duck whom he met in his dreamlike state on top of the clouds. One reason might be that he doesn't remember much of that experience, only glimpses of the things he heard from the ancestors.

The haunting of Sir Quackly McDuck is presented in three different forms. He moves between the spirit world (the heaven-like place with the golf-playing ancestors) and the normal world and can appear first in solid form, when he can touch living beings; secondly in a transparent form, which only readers can see and in which he can move through objects; and finally in invisible form. He was in this last form while he gave Scrooge his sword back in the previously mentioned comic. In this last form of him, he is invisible to both the characters and the reader.

But the most important matter is how Scrooge's father Fergus turns into a spirit. Rosa is the first Disney comic artist who describes a death of an important character. This is remarkable, as in general Disney comics the characters don't have a real history. Everything that has happened to them before comes back to square one in the next story whether it is written by the same or by a different writer. Don Rosa and Carl Barks are the two exceptions of this "rule".

So when everything goes back to where it was, the history doesn't move forward, hence no one ages. Scrooge is old and the nephews are young ducklings. But as Rosa has written the entire history for Scrooge McDuck, it means that his parents had to die at some point. The death of his mother was shortly mentioned in a letter, but the death of his father is dealt with more

profound way. By seeing how gently the spirit of Scrooge's late mother comes to take his spouse with her, the readers feel like this is how it should happen. The death isn't described as a scary unknowing event, but as a transformation to new form, to a spirit in a new world. Fergus himself says that their job here is done; the rest is up to Scrooge. One generation moves away and gives space to a new one. This is a truly historical moment for the Disney comics, where everything has been the same since 1930's.

The haunting and the ghosts in Don Rosa's *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck* are definitely not malevolent. Rosa shows one type of ghost, a spirit of a deceased ancestor, who is willing to help his descendant when they're in trouble. This type of spirits haunt the place they died in because of unfinished business. Sir Quackly has the castle to watch for and his hidden treasure¹⁹. But the biggest thing that matter to him is restoring the clan's glory²⁰. As we know Scrooge is about to become the richest duck in the world, we can assume Sir Quackly has done his duties and his spirit can now rest.

Notes

¹ Will Eisner award is considered being the “academy award” of the comic books. It is given for the creative achievement in American comic books. It is named after the famous comic artist Will Eisner.

² D. Rosa, *The Last of the Clan McDuck* published in *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, p. 10.

³ There is an obvious reference to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of Baskerville* here as it was the Whiskervilles who warned off the McDucks from their own land by scaring them with the “ghostdog” 200 years ago. This is mentioned in *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ This happens in *ibid.*, on pages 16, 17 and 18.

⁸ D. Rosa, *The New Laird of Castle McDuck*. *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone Publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, pp. 95-96; 99-100.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 103-105.

¹⁰ D. Rosa, *The Dream of a Lifetime! Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck companion*, Gemstone publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2006.

¹¹ D. Rosa, *The New Laird of Castle McDuck*. *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone Publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, p. 103.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 105.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 97; 99-100.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁵ This was mentioned in a letter in Rosa's comic *King of the Klondike*. *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone Publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, p. 163.

¹⁶ D. Rosa, *The Billionaire of the Dismal Downs*. *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone Publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, pp. 185-186.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ D. Rosa, *The New Laird of Castle McDuck*. *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone Publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, p. 106.

¹⁹ The treasure is later on found by Scrooge, Donald and the nephews in the story *The Old Castle's Secret* (1948) by Carl Barks.

²⁰ This is mentioned widely on first on the conversation between Sir Quackly and Scrooge, and later on between Sir Quackly and the spirits of the other ancestors on D. Rosa, *The Last of the Clan McDuck* published in *Walt Disney's The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, Gemstone publishing, Timonium, Maryland, 2005, pp. 18-20.

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