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Spiritual Telephone—Hamlin Garland’s Spiritualism Novels

Chiho Nakagawa

The turn of the twentieth century interests in spiritualism, or “modern spiritualism,” coincided with the surge of new technologies: it was a time of a great improvement in transportation and communication systems, expanding and extending people’s reach into far-away places. Spiritual communications were often compared to a contemporary invention, the telegraph, since both convey messages from invisible places. The American writer, Hamlin Garland, however, uses the telephone, instead of the telegraph, as a metaphor for mediums and spiritual phenomena. His untiring quest in spiritualism is accompanied by his careful but open-minded approach, but underneath the layer of his “scientific” attitude lies a more curious perspective on spiritualism as a social phenomenon that reveals the darker truth about the family.

By examining Garland’s spiritualism novels, The Tyranny of the Dark (1905) and Victor Ollnee’s Discipline (1911), I will argue that the “spiritual telephone” brings about a change or, rather non-change, exactly as telephones did. People expected the introduction of telephones at the turn of the twentieth century would mark the beginning of a new expanding world, as spiritualists believed that mediums would open the door to a new world. In Garland’s novels, the belief in spiritualism magnifies a medium’s relationship with her family, dead or alive, albeit in an invisible form. She, in turn, finds herself in a situation similar to that of a Gothic heroine, who is locked up by her father or male authority figure. The only difference is those male authority figures are not alive. My paper refers to Sigmund Freud’s comments regarding the telephone; his insight into the new technological device places mediums in the larger context of civilization. The spiritual telephone reveals not just the tyranny of the dark, but the tyranny of patriarchy that is sustained by a
medium and the people surrounding her.

**Garland and Spiritualism**

Today Hamlin Garland’s name is vaguely remembered in association with the local-color movement and that he wrote about Midwest pioneer life at the turn of the twentieth century. It is little known that Garland had a life-long interest in spiritualism and sat in many séances as a member of the American Society for Psychical Research. His interest in psychic phenomena is characterized by his dogged honesty and sincerity, pursuing the evidence that could convince him of the authenticity of spiritual communications. Yet he differentiated himself from other believers in spiritualism, who one time or another believed in a medium’s authenticity, for he was always careful to examine and reexamine what he saw and heard. He marveled at some of the tricks or spiritual miracles some mediums perform, like writings on a slate under a glass full of water, but he was never completely sure of the spirit world. He admitted several times that he could not explain certain phenomena he had just witnessed, yet he was never completely convinced of any of the phenomena.

He wrote two novels and three non-fiction books about spiritualism in the span of thirty years. In his non-fiction books, *The Shadow World* (1908), *Forty Years of Psychic Research* (1936), and *The Mystery of the Buried Crosses* (1939), one can see his interest in a way characteristic of the time in his “particularly scientific and empiricist discourse, as he pursues objective proof of the existence of the spirit world” (126), to use Sheri Weinstein’s words about modern spiritualism. The first two books summarize his contemporary arguments as well as his experience with mediums, and the last book, published a year before his death, records his attempt at exploring and verifying one particular case, in which a medium allegedly located through spiritual messages more than a thousand buried crosses in Southern California from pre-colonial times. In one sense, at the end of his life Garland came
back to the search for the American experience through his interest in spiritualism.

His most persistent theory is that mediums are responsible for phenomena even when they are not consciously deceiving people. Another theory he subscribed to is that participants are also unconsciously complicit in creating spiritual phenomena. He believed non-paid mediums more than for-profit mediums, like many skeptics, but he did not deny for-profit mediums asking for fees, either. He says: “Mediums must eat and be clothed. I can not blame them for dramatizing and selling their powers, whatever they are. An honest medium has a perfect right to charge for her time and energy” (FYPR 109). Yet his suspicions always came back to the same point: who or what causes spiritual phenomena may not be dead, and those spiritual messages may be “produced by some force within ourselves” (SW 76).

Garland’s understanding and sympathy towards mediums is partly due to his experience of his family. He did not expect any dead family member to contact him, but he revealed in non-fiction writing that his mother, aunt, and uncle used to be mediums. He learned about the fact through his aunt and his father, not from his mother herself. This knowledge, it seems, affected his attitudes towards mediums. His aunt told him that her years as a medium were miserable, and those “powers of darkness made her life a hell” (SW 6). Garland’s sympathy towards mediums as damsels in distress trapped by the invisible dark forces must at least partly come from his knowledge about his aunt and his mother. One can suspect that his own feelings towards his mother are reflected in Victor Ollnee’s Discipline, a story of a female medium told from a perspective of her son, while it also is based on a medium, “Mrs. Hartley,” whose story Garland relays in Forty Years of Psychic Research (210-11).

Garland’s fiction about spiritualism, thus, does not focus solely on spiritual pursuits. Although Garland was highly conscious of two more famous writers’ preceding novels, he was discontent:
“Howells touched upon it adversely in his ‘Undiscovered Country’ and Henry James has dealt with some of the dubious practices of mediumship; but their approach has been thus far entirely fictional rather than scientific.” (FYPR 5)

However, his novels are not entirely scientific, either. It is true that Garland spends more pages on the characters pondering spiritual questions, but his novels revolve around the relationship of mediums with their families and their suitors. Courtship plot lines and family dramas are woven together with questions of the authenticity of spiritual communications. While he uses the words “spiritual telephone,” indicating his belief in the possibility of spiritualism from a scientific perspective, the words also suggest that a medium is a technological instrument for others to use. In contrast to his professed open-mindedness, his treatment of spiritualism is negative as one can see in the use of the words in the titles, such as tyranny and discipline. Unlike the mediums in the novels by James and Howells, the voices on the other end of spiritual telephones intervene the mediums’ relationship with people in this world, but like theirs, living humans and their psyches come to the forefront.

*The Tyranny of the Dark—In Her Own Prison*

In *The Tyranny of the Dark*, Garland’s scientific interest in spiritualism is reflected in the main character, Morton Serviss, an analytical chemist and a biologist in Boston at a university, who accidentally encounters a medium on his trip to Colorado. From the beginning, Serviss turns a suspicious eye on spiritual phenomena and mediums. Serviss regards claims of the spiritual world as absurd until he meets Viola Lambert but his interest in the beautiful medium develops into his desire to understand the spirit world and her surroundings. Having him as the main character puts all the spiritual phenomena under a stricter scrutiny.

In this romantic-scientific mode, the story of the medium, a young girl
who is trapped in the force of the darkness, unfolds. She is collaborating with a former Presbyterian pastor, Anthony Clarke, who believes he can communicate with his dead wife through Viola, and that his mission in life is to spread the gospel of spiritualism. He initiates séances, takes her to Boston and to New York, and promotes her to the world. Clarke’s “authority” over her is in his former position as a pastor and his claim as her suitor, although Viola refuses to marry him. Viola sits in séances, partly because her mother wants her to, but mostly because her other authority figures order her to. The spirits that function as Viola’s guides are called “controls,” literally controlling her life. The controls consist of her dead father and her dead grandfather, indicating the young medium is a victim of the united force of patriarchy—male authorities, dead or alive.

Living in the early twentieth century America, Viola is still quite powerless. Like a Gothic heroine, her father figures and suitor force their will upon her. People around her treat her like an object, and a rich New York spiritual fanatic sends for her to access her ability like “a dealer in horses would ask the hostler to drive the proffered animal before him in order that he might judge of her paces” (155), before he decides to patronize her. Viola expresses her disgust towards her situation by describing the house that is offered as her “prison.” Kate Ferguson Ellis argues that in Female Gothic—a Gothic subgenre with a female protagonist in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe—the “heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison” (xiii). Like a Gothic heroine, Viola finds seemingly goodwill spiritualists and spirits to be villains that seek her out like a rare precious creature to be usurped, owned, and collected.

The greatest difference from the Gothic is that the “tyranny” inflicted on Viola Lambert is not conducted by living persons. It is true that Viola’s decision is strongly affected by her mother’s approval, but Viola always bases her decisions on the authority of her father and grandfather. Who regulate
her life, who control her life, and what frightens her come from the spirit world, and since her guardians have no physical limitations, everywhere she goes, they will follow. Viola is in the supernatural Gothic castle, from which it seems very unlikely to devise an escape.

To describe her sacrificial duty and the way she is treated, the medium herself and people around her keep referring to her as an “instrument.” Viola compares herself to a “telephone,” a new technology that had been introduced in the regular household around the beginning of the twentieth century. Her own comparison to a telephone illuminates the perception of her position: she is an intriguing new instrument, a device that enables others to talk to the people of their own choice, and in relation to the scientist, Serviss, an object to be investigated and to be mastered. She is there but she is not there as a person with full subjectivity. Jill Galvan’s book-length study argues that mediums share the quality with telephone operators, telegraphers, and typists with the same communication mediating function as “exemplary go-betweens because they potentially combined the right kind of presence with the right kind of absence” (12).

In the early twentieth century setting, the telephone metaphor evokes a particularly interesting association between technology, women, and psychoanalysis. Garland’s choice of “telephone” may make more sense in the historical context: people in the States showed more interest in telephones from early on, as, according to Claude S. Fischer, the U.S. went ahead in installing telephones about eight per one hundred people in 1910, as opposed to under two in the U.K. (55). The rumor surrounding Thomas Edison’s invention, “spiritual phone,” also gives us a hint in the popularity of spiritualism and its strong association with this new device, although Garland does not seem to be aware of the rumor. Edison wrote in The Diary and Observation that he was “giving the psychic investigators an apparatus which may help them in their work, just as optical experts have given the microscope to the medical world” (240). There was a lack of credulity on the “authenticity of
purported communications with deceased persons,” due to the “crudeness of the present methods” (239), yet his invention did not see the light of day, according to Martin Gardner (213). The fictional Thomas Edison in Villers L’Isle Adam’s L’Eve future (The Future Eve or Tomorrow’s Eve, 1886) indeed uses the telephone to talk to the spirit of a catatonic woman. Algernon Blackwood’s “You May Telephone From Here” (1909) also shows us an example of an early twentieth century perception about the new technology. The unnamed protagonist, a newlywed wife, feels uncomfortable about the telephone recently installed in the house, because it keeps tinkling faintly without actually ringing. Her cousin dismisses her qualms—“You’re not used to playing the telephone game yet” (328). In her husband’s absence, she hears the phone ring deep in the night even when the receiver is unhooked. The wife hears faintly from the other end the voice of her dying husband, who searches her “brain direct” (332) first and then succeeds in reaching her through the telephone. The anxiety about the telephone parallels the young wife’s concern of her husband’s safety, expanded into and united with the telephone’s uncanny ability to reach out. Even in later years when telephones became common place, Richard Matheson wrote about the telephone that reaches the dead in “The Long Distance Call” (1953), a story made into a Twilight episode. What mediums—and those spooky phones—as conduits supposedly do is to reach out to the other end, not just geographically but spiritually to the distant land. In Garland’s later spiritual experiments, he repeatedly compares his experience of talking to the alleged spirits of his dead friends with talking on the phone or sometimes on the long-distance telephone: he writes that the obstacle to free communications with spirits was “precisely the feeling [he] experienced when using a long distance telephone” (MBC 243). Through the telephone, geographical distance and spiritual distance are not differentiated. What mediums claim to be capable of doing, or what people believe them to be capable of doing is to communicate with people in a far-away place—both once used to be impossible to achieve.
The ambiguities, or mysteries of the other side, or the “indeterminacy of the telegraphy’s electronic presence,” are the reason, Jeffery Sconce argues, why female mediums could insert their own agencies (50). As Sconce, Anne Braude and other critics argue, spiritual phenomena offered opportunities for women to take the lecture platform to assert their rights in the disguise of a “trance” state. Those spiritualists may agree with Stephen Kern’s assessment of new technologies at the turn of the twentieth century, which he argues created a new perspective in the way people thought about time and space, and, as well, relationships between people. In that sense, the association of spiritual communication with telegraphs, and by extension, with telephones, points at a new possibility that was not available before—as Sconce mentions, opening up a utopian world as many social reformist spiritualists dreamed.

On the other hand, possessed states invite medical—largely male—authorities to intervene, diagnose, and treat the female soul and body. The same paradoxical nature also can be seen in the diagnoses of hysteria, the most suspected illness of mediums, yet Hélène Cixous hailed the speech of a hysteric as an example of l’écriture feminine. Female mediums and their speeches are so highly gendered that could simply be categorized and dominated by the patriarchal ideology to marginalize women, or conversely, that could be used strategically by women themselves to deviate from the patriarchal norm.

The scale is tipped to negative in the case of Viola Lambert. As a new technology and an instrument, she is conveniently utilized by others. Probably a more relevant model of the impact of the new technology is the way in which Fischer explains the influence of telephones in America. He insists that telephones, instead of forging “new links with strange and faraway people,” “resulted in a reinforcement, a deepening, a widening of existing lifestyles more than in any new departure (263). The spiritual telephones in Garland’s novel do not connect with “strange and faraway people” spatially and temporally, but with the inside, or the inner darkness of the medium.
One of the theories the scientist Serviss upholds after reading many proceedings of the SPR to understand Viola’s condition of “hysteria” is multiple personality theory. As if to support his interpretation, Viola’s plea sounds like a desperate cry of a patient to a doctor: “My only hope is in the men of science. Tell him I want him to help me understand myself” (11). Viola does not ask him to solve the mystery of the spirit phenomena she experiences, but the mystery of herself. Yet her language at the séances does not sound like that of a hysteric who resists the Law of the Father. Viola fulfills the duty for the cause of spiritualism and for the people who need to be healed and consoled. Hers is not “hysterical speech” but something logical and accommodating. Or, it is possible that her messages are indeed unintelligible but heard and interpreted to suit the sitters’ purposes. In later writing, Garland wonders who actually produces the meaning of spiritual messages. In one experiment in which he asks a spirit, supposedly that of his friend, Henry Blake Fuller, to translate a letter from the curator of the National Museum in Mexico City, and suspects that the passage read by “him” through his medium’s intervention could come from his own mind for he could translate that sentence (MBC 132). These two theories suggest the medium’s language is either of the medium’s separate self, who purports to be charitable and helpful to others, or of the sitter, who is eager to hear meaningful words in the medium’s utterance. Either way, the medium is there, at the sitters’ service.

With the overwhelming male authority figures in her spiritual life, curiously Viola Lambert’s life outside of it lacks a male supervisor. Her stepfather, who repeatedly admits that he does not have any power over her, is often physically absent as well, rendering the Lambert’s household into the hands of Viola’s mother, who has been a life-long believer of spiritualism. Viola’s mediumistic ability seems to compensate the lack of male authority in the household, while constricting her own freedom and creating a life of martyrdom. Except for Clarke, her husband-elect, Viola may in this actual world be free
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from all the male influences. The ghost male authorities, however, she finds oppressive.

Thus, if one considers the voices from Viola’s spiritual telephone as those of her own, her prison is a creation of her own, a patriarchal prison that she has recreated in her own mind. A spiritual telephone does not convey a message from a stranger or her father or grandfather, but from her own mind that firmly believes that her life has to be regulated by male authority figures.

From this “supernatural” incarceration, first Dr. Britt, a family doctor of the Lamberts, and then, Morton Serviss attempts a rescue. Dr. Britt believes wisely that marrying her will liberate her from the spiritual authority, for he can assume a new patriarchal authority over her as her husband. He reasons: “What would you do when both parents—the living and the dead—consent? Only a husband could intervene, and Clarke seems to be about to claim that place” (119). Yet he cannot gain the “necessary authority” from Viola, i.e., her consent to marry him (159). His reasoning is proven right when Morton Serviss wins Viola’s liberation exactly the same way. The first attempt of Serviss’s proposal of marriage fails because the proclamation of love is not enough for Viola. He has to convince her, who resists his proposal on the ground that she has her spirits controlling her and thus, possibly embarrassing him in the future, that he will assume the authority to control her to gain consent from her. She becomes free from “all fear, all question, all care” when Serviss expresses his willingness to take over the responsibility of spirit “control.” Before this conclusion, the novel already eliminates the other threat, Clarke. He commits suicide but does not come back to claim Viola, who does not know about his death. Viola’s complicity in perpetuating a Gothic prison appears unquestionable, when she accepts Serviss’s control as husband, while she cannot sense that of the dead Clarke in her ignorance of his death. She seems, for a moment, free from the tyranny of the dark, but still willing to enter another prison, although the next one may not involve any darkened room or surrogacy of love.
The spiritual telephone metaphor, therefore, fits most naturally into Sigmund Freud’s perspective on the telephone. In “Civilization and Its Discontents,” Freud sees that human technologies are in fact “prosthetics” or “auxiliary organs,” making humans closer to God: “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God,” (91-92), according to Freud, because “[w]ith the help of the telephone, he can hear at distance which would be respected as unattainable even in a fairy tale” (91). Avital Ronell points out that Freud “situates the telephone both as the perfectability of the womb (one of ‘man’s’ preferred organs), and as something that conspires with death to install a megaphone from the beyond—a voice reconnecting the ‘from me’ (a child of mine) with the ‘beyond me’ a final destination” (87). This image particularly resembles the medium Garland depends upon in The Mystery of Buried Crosses: in order to hear the voice of the dead, the medium puts a cone-shaped instrument or megaphone onto her chest, the location allegedly from which the messages of the dead emanates. By vacating herself, or in her words, having “no more soul than a telephone” (235), Viola becomes an instrument, the other person’s limb, or a surrogate womb to allow people to talk to the dead. The spiritual telephone enables humans to enter the divine field, transgressing the boundary of life and death, and in that scheme, Viola is a prosthetic to the man who becomes closer to God. The relevance of Freud’s suggestion does not stop here. Freud argues that the first technology, the control over fire, is obtained when a man renounces his homosexual instinct by refraining himself from putting it out with his urine, and carries it home to leave it to a woman’s care at the hearth, for she could be trusted with fire on account of her castrated state (CD 90, n.1), and Ronell calls fire and a woman “two subdued entities sitting watch over one another, trimming the silhouette of an original couple equally tamed” (93). Serviss’s acquisition of domestic space by winning the already subdued entity, an obedient woman and a tamed instrument in one, will simply confirm his qualification as a scientist and a civilized man.
Victor Ollnee’s Discipline—Oedipal Conflict Through the Spiritual Phone

Another story by Garland about a medium embodies the Freudian family plot even more faithfully. In *Victor Ollnee’s Discipline*, the medium is not a young girl, but the mother of a college student Victor. Lucille is a professional medium, although she cannot receive monetary compensation for her mediumistic ability, and she has raised her son, Victor, to his university, until a newspaper article coverage of Lucille interrupts his peace. Victor also starts as a skeptic when he tries to see the truth about his mother’s spiritual phenomena from a scientific perspective like Morton Serviss. Victor’s relation to Lucille, although comparable to Serviss’s to Viola in the sense that they both wish to clarify what the mediums’ are doing, greatly differs since Victor cannot offer an alternative authority over the heroine-medium. Instead, Lucille has her “control” discipline him for not believing his mother’s ability. *Victor Ollnee’s Discipline* unfolds as a story of a late Oedipus, in which the son finally overcomes his attachment to his mother and the competition with his father when his mother passes over to the other side, liberating her son from the dark world altogether.

Victor finds rescuing his mother from the life as a medium impossible, mostly because Lucille does not need saving. The focus is more on the mother-son relationship, and the son finds for the first time in his life that there stand the two men between himself and his mother. Lucille Ollnee’s “controls” are, like Viola’s, her late husband and father. One can speculate that this patriarchal dominance over her is her creation, because Lucille’s husband was separated from her when he died for he did not approve of her mediumistic “tricks.” Her late husband’s miraculous return after death looks like nothing more than her wishful scenario. Lucille’s mediumship seems even more suspicious when she claims that she receives investment advice that she imparts to her clients from famous dead financiers via her husband and father. Lucille’s quality as a medium is undoubtedly more secular, commercial, and practical, but her belief in her ability is as firm as Viola’s.
Her son does not know his mother’s life as a medium until the beginning of the story, and then Victor starts trying to understand her; it seems it is him who was kept in the dark, not his mother.

When reading *Victor Ollnee’s Discipline* alongside *The Tyranny of the Dark*, we can see that these two stories of the tyranny of dead patriarchs reveal accomplices that perpetuate the oppression. I have argued that a psychological Gothic prison is a medium’s own creation, but there is a prison warden that encourages and maintains the prisons—the mother. In Viola Lambert’s case, her mother herself does not order or regulate her daughter’s action, but she always nudges her daughter to ask for the spirits’ opinion about every move Viola is going to make. Viola’s spiritual communications secretly and assuredly support unspoken wills of her mother, as if those spiritual patriarchs were real men who scolded their children after their wives asked them to. In *Victor Ollnee’s Discipline*, Lucille herself is a Gothic heroine and a Gothic mother/prison warden at the same time, resulting in her greater freedom. Being a Gothic prison warden allows her male authority figures to be more accommodating to her needs. In order for Lucille to have control over her own life, she creates a pair of patriarchal authority figures that supposedly oversee her. The mother here plays the proxy of the oppressors, or she uses the spirits as her proxy oppressors, perpetuating the ideal format of the patriarchy as an obedient wife and mother.

In order to maintain the order in this smallest unit, Victor’s mother separates him from other family members, in addition to keeping him away from her séances: He notes: “It seems as though she had kept me purposely ignorant of her family” (118). *Victor Ollnee’s Discipline* is indeed a story of a young man who for the first time faces his own family, or what his mother believes to be his family. The only family Victor himself knows up to the point is his mother so when he reads a newspaper article, he feels his world falling apart, learning his mother is what he believes to be a con-artist. He has to renew his worldview again when he learns that he and his mother are
supposedly under the control of his father and grandfather.

Yet Lucille’s seeming agency is not enjoyed without reservations; in other words, she is not asserting her own self like trance speakers. It is clear in Lucille’s case that the father and the husband help maintain her family, while also instilling guilt into her. Sigmund Freud argues in “Civilization and Its Discontents” that creating and maintaining families and communities are at the mercy of two opposing instincts, Eros and death. Therefore, Freud insists, in order to suppress the death instinct’s aggression, a sense of guilt coming from the superego intervenes so that families could be maintained. As he claims in “The Ego and the Id,” the superego is more likely to be the internalized father, and in Lucille’s case, it is the internalized father and husband. The spiritual telephone seems to be under the medium’s control, unlike Viola’s case, but it does not become a prosthetic that brings her closer to God. It still invites the superego that regulates and limits her life. Her spirits/superego do not allow her to receive monetary rewards for her work as a medium, keeping her barely independent, and watch over her so that she would not enjoy her single life. Furthermore, for her son Victor, the spiritual father’s voice is called upon to contain his rebelliousness: Lucille’s dead husband and father “discipline” her son, who shows a grave disbelief in his mother’s mediumistic ability. They also hold Lucille in their world for a while when she falls into a prolonged death-like trance, after her son proclaims his even stronger rejection of her claim. Lucille’s prolonged trance would be called today a “conversion disorder,” a modern name for hysteria. Through this “stunt” she maintains the patriarchal family in the absence of her husband without stepping out of the boundary of femininity, for as Freud mentions in “‘Civilized’ Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” “Nothing protects [a woman’s] virtue as securely as an illness” (195). Her spirits are her superego, but when her superego makes her play the non-feminine role, it is considered to be the manifestation of her illness. Lucille’s spiritual phone contributes in perpetuating “civilization,” or more precisely, patriarchy.
Finding out his own mother is a medium in this novel changes Victor’s world, like a new technology changes the world. Victor finds an obstacle he has to overcome, and a problem he has to solve. Victor has believed his mother to be his own, but the revelation of his mother’s profession jeopardizes the foundation of his family relationship, while his persistent questioning of the truth about his mother’s mediumistic ability agonizes his mother: Lucille feels that her son becomes “hostile and derisive” (52). At one point, Victor accuses his mother like a small child that she values the spirits more than him, and his mother answers that accusation by saying that he is more important than “all the earthly things” but not the spirits (209). In a sense, this is a late Oedipal crisis: Victor’s investigation into his mother’s spiritual phenomena symbolizes his desire to take back his mother from the hand of his father (and his grandfather). Lucille shows him that he cannot win by falling into an extensive death-like trance, as if to tell him that Victor’s desire to monopolize his mother may result in losing his mother entirely.

Victor overcomes his attachment to his mother, not because he liberates his mother from the haunting patriarchy, but because he finds another object of attachment arranged by his mother and (or) the spirits. During the course of his spiritual investigation, Victor meets a spirit, called Altair, who is alleged to be the spirit that attends Lucille’s patron’s niece, Leonora Wood. Victor has a vague romantic feeling towards Leo, but after the séance in which he sees an ethereal beauty, a “gloriously beautiful soul of another world, a world of purity and light and love” (153), Leonora senses that “Victor the boy [has] given place to Victor the man” (154). Later he comes to believe that Altair is a “union of [his] mother’s astral self” and Leonora, and that his mother’s “guides”—his father and grandfather—bring him and her together. His attachment to his mother has now successfully transformed into his love for the real woman, via the illusion his mother creates, to overcome his Oedipal desire.

At the end of the novel, one thing is clear: Victor becomes his own man.
The novel gives us an open ending: Leonora does not give a favorable answer to Victor’s courtship, although she does not completely deny him, and Victor’s college education will not be resumed but he probably starts working for a lawyer who helps his mother when she is in a legal trouble over her investment advice. With an uncertain future before him, his discipline may have been the loss of his mother, but it is a blessing in disguise. He grows up and gets liberated from his mother, free to choose his own profession and his woman. His discovery of his mother’s mediumship and the dark world leads him to explore his relationship with his mother to overcome it. The spirit telephone allows the medium to posit on the other end the dead male authorities that instill guilt within the living family members to put together the family, or to create a new family.

In Garland’s two novels, the spiritual telephone conveys messages not from unknown or faraway places but from what is very familiar and close to home. The spiritual “guides” those female mediums invoke from the other world are tyrannical fathers and grandfathers, who create psychological prisons for them. Both novels end with the liberation from psychological/spiritual prisons, but during the course of the stories, they do illuminate the existing rigid and oppressive family structure, in which fathers and husbands control women, which Freud sees as a basis of civilization. The two scientifically-minded men fail to understand the mechanism of mediumship, but they succeed to put an end to agonizing situations, only to create others. Morton Serviss succeeds in liberating Viola from her psychological prison by becoming her new “control,” and Victor is ready to create another prison, after having been freed from being hostage of his mother’s psychological prison.

The spiritual telephone metaphor in these novels points to the questions about the medium’s agency and its limitation. The unknown and unclear nature of the spiritual telephone allows a medium to insert what or whom she thinks is appropriate on the other end. Viola inserts her father and
grandfather with her mother’s approval, and Lucille inserts her late husband and her father with her own accord. These two cases, with Viola desperately asking for another male authority as her husband, and with Lucille invoking the dead patriarchs to run her family, reveal that the psychic world, which seems to be free from all the rules governing society is, in fact, even more severely limited by those same rules and simply reflects the world of the living, patriarchal society. Garland’s spiritual telephone, instead of conveying the voice of the dead, just amplifies the inner voices of the living, trapped and locked in the same Gothic prison.

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