

# The Awakening



**DIRECTED BY:** Nick Murphy

**CERTIFICATE:** 15

**RUNNING TIME:** 102 mins

**COUNTRY:** UK/Europe

**YEAR:** 2011

**KEYWORDS:** supernatural, thriller, period drama (1920s), post-First World War – context; war's impact

**SUITABLE FOR:** KS4/5 media/film studies, English literature and language, history

## INTRODUCTION

The best ghost stories are not about special effects and cheap thrills designed to make audiences' jump. This is certainly the case with Nick Murphy's first feature film, *The Awakening*, in which everyone of his characters is haunted by the recent loss of loved ones, either on the First World War battlefields or due to the terrible Spanish Flu epidemic (1918-1920) which is thought to have caused the deaths of anything between 20-50 million people worldwide. This then is the context for ghost hunter Florence Cathcart whose mission it is to expose false-mediums and spiritualists; anyone trading on people's grief for profit. It is a mission that brings her no particular delight with each successful 'exposure' leaving her drained physically and emotionally. She has her own sorrows and regrets. So when she opens the door to teacher Robert Mallory and hears of the ghost child that appears to be haunting Rookford – a boarding school in Cumbria – she is customarily cynical and almost refuses the job. Her decision to go will prove a momentous one. As events unfold her beliefs are fundamentally challenged and her eyes are opened to more than the possibility of the existence of ghosts.

## WHAT'S IN A TITLE?

*The Awakening* - what does this title suggest to you? Think of all the genres you can and imagine how this film's name might change in meaning if it was a:

- detective thriller
- horror film
- supernatural film
- love story
- family drama
- war film
- teen/coming-of-age movie

Can you think how 'an awakening' might apply to a key character in each and every one of these kinds of films and when you come to watch Nick Murphy's film see how many kinds of awakenings occur? This in turn will alert you to the quite complex mix of genres that occurs in this film. At least three genres apply to elements of this movie throughout.



**WHAT'S IN A POSTER?**

Posters are a key part of film promotion. Often they are the first hint the audience has that a new film is on offer and they are crucial in ‘winning’ an audience for a film. In other words, they set up expectations and reach out to those that find some aspect of the movie, such as its stars or director or its possible subject matter compelling. What messages then does this ‘quad’ poster convey? Does it raise more questions than answer them? Clearly the centrality of Rebecca Hall’s character Florence Cathcart cannot be denied, but how do you ‘read’ her stance and her expression – is she blocking our route to the large house behind her or is she putting it behind her? The muted colours in the film are very important and so consider the way that both the woman and the surroundings marry up and what this might signify? When you see the film such a colour pallet link is actually highly symbolic of what is happening in the story.

‘Tag lines’ are also crucial in setting up expectations. What do you make of ‘Sometimes Dead Does Not Mean Gone’? Does it signal simply that this is a supernatural thriller or could it have other more ambiguous meanings? How could the ‘dead be not gone’ for this woman? What is your reaction to the use of the ‘fish-eye’ lens that has a distorting effect on the image? Does it make the image more disturbing/threatening/sinister? And, how might it reflect the woman’s state of mind and her ‘vision’ of the world around her. What is curious also about the scale of the woman compared to the background? This is a film in which ‘scale’ will play an important part.

In ghost stories and gothic tales, houses often have a significant role to play – even to the extent of being a ‘character’ in their own right. Consider this as you watch the whole film.



### WHAT'S IN A TRAILER?

Watch the trailer and make a list of any repeated images or phrases that crop up. For example, references to 'eyes' occur several times – that certainly is a helpful hint of an important theme in the film. Thinking again of the earlier 'genre' task – does the trailer have the effect of narrowing or expanding your expectations of what the film may contain. To what extent does it suggest a story and in what ways are you left with unanswered questions?

There is also a phrase suggesting that '...it's the living that one should be wary of...' – what do you make of that? How does the trailer include plenty of evidence that human beings are capable of inflicting terrible hurt quite apart from menacing spectres?

Notice how many people are 'menaced' in some way – particularly being shown in long shot from some unseen presence's point-of-view? Once you have seen the film, go back to view the trailer again and see how misleading or not that sense of multiple jeopardy actually is.

Does the trailer give away too much?

The writer/director Nick Murphy describes in his commentary about the film on DVD how, when you write a script, you have to have half a mind on creating good material for the trailer. Several of the most dramatic lines in the film were written with this 'promotional' end in mind. It's a good tip and certainly one to have in mind when you watch other films in the future, or even make films of your own.

### WHAT'S IN AN OPENING SCENE?

In films as in books and plays, the opening scene, should play a crucial part in building our sense of characters or the world in which they operate. The opening of *The Awakening* is extremely rich and the following elements are only a few of the ingredients of which it is composed. You could easily build on this and develop a really detailed study of the scene and how it both hints at what will follow and also misleads.

1. We see Florence's eye – first closed and then open.
2. We see a series of close-ups of Florence's hands holding objects and reaching out to a door handle. We are starting a story and so doors and handles may hold an interesting symbolic value.
3. List all the ways in which the opening séance is made to seem as bizarre as possible. (Murphy explains how the rituals he depicts do not actually resemble any that were employed in such 'ceremonies' but they are meant to suggest a kind of elaborate theatre that Florence is about to puncture.)
4. Consider Florence's behaviour throughout the scene – what impression does she make on you? Consider the manner in which she de-constructs the fraud that has been perpetrated on those genuine bereaved people attending the séance – how does this fit neatly with her approach to the 'haunting' at Rookford School? And what happens to her as she emerges from the house into the fresh air? Is there a sense of the world outside being refreshing or does the rather melancholy mood and colour of the interior carry out into the everyday world?

5. What clues does the almost flirtatious exchange between the police detective and Florence contain given later events?
6. What is Florence's reaction to the woman attacking her and does the woman's disappointment in the face of the 'truth' that Florence has established by exposing the spiritualists as frauds in some way undermine Florence's status?
7. Note the abandoned furniture and the empty chairs littering the street. They are a reminder of the devastating flu epidemic (1918-1920) only just over in terms of the film's setting in 1921 and was responsible for emptying more chairs in more homes than ever the First World War managed.

Director Nick Murphy talks about the opening scene as having a lot in common with the kind of Hercule Poirot detective stories created by Agatha Christie and a mainstay of UK television drama. What do you make of this observation? Note how it sets up Florence as a kind of no-nonsense, super-rational person and how far she has to travel as a character (and the actress playing her) to reach her state of mind in the closing scenes of the film.

### WHAT'S IN AN EFFECTIVE GHOST STORY?

#### SETTING

A realistic setting within which the uncanny can emerge is essential. According to the master of the English ghost story M R James, the best such tales include a realistic setting in which the uncanny can slowly peep out and make itself felt. The convincing nature of the environment and the characters in a ghost story is essential if the supernatural is to seem both weird but also 'reasonable'. It's a hard trick to pull off, especially in a form such as a short story. Films like short stories do not have much time in which to build a believable world, and a ghost story film is faced with the double task of creating a convincing 'real' world and a convincing 'supernatural' one at the same time.

What then do you make of the setting of *The Awakening* in an isolated school? What is it about a school in an old building, catering even in term time to very few children that help contribute to the overall atmosphere of the film?

What about the grounds and woods and lake around the school too – are they suitably atmospheric?

What about the objects that fill the rooms and spaces in the house? Do they add to the broad spookiness of the tale? What objects in particular stand out as being especially significant and potentially sinister? Consider the important function of so many items in the film that initially appear quite unimportant: a pool of brandy on the floor, a broken glass, a discarded shoe, the pictures in the school's main entrance, the 'scientific equipment' that Florence deploys on her first evening in the house; the rabbit/doll toy, the card that the 'housekeeper' Maud keeps as a marker in her Bible, and many more. (Note: the film's creator and co-script writer Nick Murphy speaks of the rule established by the Russian writer Chekhov that if a gun is referred to in the first act of a play, then it should be used to shoot someone or thing in the third act. Consider this in the context of how *The Awakening* highlights a lot of objects and usually finds a new purpose or hidden significance in them by the end of the story.)

## MOTIVATED CHARACTERS

Nothing is more irritating in scary films than when a character makes a seemingly irrational decision to place themselves in a scary or forbidding setting for no better reason than the story requires it. Happily, *The Awakening* avoids such clumsiness and it is fair to say that there is not a person in the school setting that has not a reason to be there and strong motivation to remain despite its all-pervading menace. To test this statement, make a list of the main characters and see if their reasons for being in such an environment are convincing in the first place and whether or not their remaining there makes sense. The background of the First World War and what some characters may have witnessed in the trenches certainly provides some good reasons for their continued endurance in the spartan and spooky Rookford School.

Consider Florence's motivation too. Hers is actually quite complex given her superficial seemingly 'pride-filled' mission is to 'ghost-bust', but also there is the underlying craving for something more than herself – a craving deriving from the multiple losses in her life that slowly start to emerge. That same Chekhov rule also applies to character motivation too. For example, note the added significance of Mallory's mention of 'orphans' in his first scene with Florence. If ever there was 'a gun on the wall' – then that's certainly one.

The second major narrative thread that runs through the film is a 'romance'. Again, in order not to 'cheat' the audience, Nick Murphy works hard to establish right from the start that there might be an emotional bond between Florence and Mallory. Just as the ghost is given the time to emerge into the film, so the intimacy that eventually blossoms between this pair, has time to breathe. Make a note of the ways in which their connection grows and how this is done in very subtle ways as well as more crudely via the spying scene(s) through the bathroom wall. (Scenes that cleverly see an overlap between the ghostly and romantic strains in the film.)

## GHOSTS

'Ghosts! Treat them gently', said M R James in a famous essay published in 1931. What he meant was that writers of such fiction should not indulge in all sorts of extreme gothic horrors. Instead they should allow their ghost to emerge slowly but gradually out of a realistic setting. It is that steady emergence that will chill the reader. The same applies to film ghosts. It is hard not to reveal the plot here, but do consider how cleverly Murphy manages not to cheat along the way given the final revelation his story contains about the nature of Rookford School's haunting. This 'not-breaking-the-rules' also applies to the behaviour of the ghost in the film that, while it can achieve miracles in terms of time and space, is also bound by constraints too, so that it can't be in two or three places at the same time. Also consider the ghost's depiction in the film. Do you feel that Murphy's decision to go very easy on the special effects was a good one?

As a way of establishing the slow build of the tension and suspense in *The Awakening* plot a simple graph showing how certain incidents kick start the spookiness and how there is a sequence of scary but contained scenes that build in intensity throughout. For example, notice the importance of Florence's initial success at Rookford and how that leaves her much more vulnerable to the impact of really supernatural events when they begin to occur from the 'lake incident' onwards.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY AND MUSIC

The contribution of both cinematography and music to *The Awakening* are crucial. Space here only allows the highlighting of two crucial themes – one photographic and the other musical. So as you watch *The Awakening* make a note of the many scenes in which the scale of people to objects or buildings is disrupted. This motif comes to a head in the first scene with the dolls' house which Murphy himself describes as 'pivotal' in the DVD director's narration. (By the way one of M R James' most famous tales is *The Haunted Dolls' House*.)

On the music front, consider how Daniel Pemberton cleverly repeats the hymn 'Be Still My Soul' sung during the church scene later in the film and how that second usage then carries all sorts of additional significance.

## WHAT'S IN A REVIEW?

*The Awakening* would make an ideal film to review for the Young Film Critics Awards:  
[www.filmeducation.org/youngfilmcritic/](http://www.filmeducation.org/youngfilmcritic/)

As well as celebrating (or not) the film's success in thrilling or scaring an audience, consider how like a conjurer Nick Murphy is, as he constantly manipulates his viewers throughout, hinting at Florence's back-story and also the gathering menace of the living! The manipulation continues to the very end when it is momentarily unclear whether or not Florence has not become a ghost herself at one point. And what do you make of the reference to Mallory's ghosts? He even speaks to them at one point in the film but what is their 'reality'?

Is the film a story about loneliness in the end more than about ghosts?

Does it also perhaps make a broad philosophic point about all of us with our memories and our sources of grief and regrets and how 'haunted' all of these can make us.

## ADDITIONAL READING

Any review you write will benefit from sparing but accurate reference to those involved in the film's making. The best source of such information is two-fold: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Awakening\\_\(2011\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Awakening_(2011_film)) and [www.imdb.com/title/tt1687901/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1687901/) (note the variations in the film poster on this site for the film – variations that give a great deal away both in terms of the picture and the strap-line.)

For further information about M R James, mentioned several times in this resource go to my own pieces online published by the Times Educational Supplement in 2011:

[www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6158765](http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6158765) and 2005:

[www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=217027](http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=217027)

and also explore the main online site about him called Ghosts and Scholars:

[www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html](http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html).

His essay 'Ghosts! Treat Them Gently!' Can be found at: [www.roberthood.net/obsesses/treat\\_them\\_gently.html](http://www.roberthood.net/obsesses/treat_them_gently.html).

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