

The Victorian Gothic Short Story
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Lecture – 17
H.G. Wells “The Red Room” Close Reading and its Implications

Hello and welcome to this lecture on H. G. Wells’s *The Red Room*. In this lecture, I will do a bit of close reading of the first half of the story and talk about the implications of such close reading in terms of the meaning it offers for the readers.

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H.G. Wells

- Herbert George Wells
- “father of science fiction”
(Jules Verne)



H. G. Wells, to give you brief introduction about him, is also known as the father of science fiction. It is a title he shares with Jules Verne too.

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H.G. Wells

- The War of the Worlds (1897)
- The Time Machine (1895)

Prolific novelist
Wide variety of genres

Scientific prophet

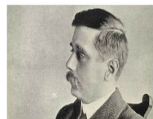


He is also well known for works such as *The War of the Worlds* published in 1897, and *The Time Machine* published in 1895. He was a prolific novelist and not only was he a novelist, but he also wrote in a variety of genres ranging from poetry to prose to autobiography to biography to satire. So, he was indeed a very prolific writer and he is also known as the scientific prophet because he was able to predict a lot of the things in the world of science and technology which actually came true in the succeeding decades.

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H.G. Wells "The Red Room"

- 1894
- The Idler Magazine, 1896
- Gothic short story



H.G. Wells
credit: British Library



Now, the particular story The Red Room was written in 1894, but it was published in The Idler Magazine in 1896 and it is a story which is in the gothic mode. H. G. Wells usually writes science fiction, but he makes a change in this particular story to write a horror or a kind of a supernatural story which can be termed as gothic.

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The Red Room

- "I can assure you," said I, "that it will take a very **tangible** ghost to frighten me." And I stood up before the fire with my glass in my hand.
- "Well," I said, "if I **see** anything to-night, I shall be so much the wiser. For I come to the business with **an open mind**."

Concrete

*Seeing is believing
→ data ⇒ conclusion*

"sceptic"?



It is a very interesting story and it begins with a young man telling his auditors that it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me and I stood up before the fire with my glass in my hand. So, this is a narrator who asserts that he is not going to be easily frightened and that he needs to come across something very concrete, something very substantial to believe in ghosts and he further says 'Well, I said if I see anything tonight I shall be so much the wiser for I come to the business with an open mind'.

So, he also tells his listeners that he has an open mind, that he is a skeptic who does not believe or disbelieve in ghosts, but is open to being informed about such presences or its absence. And, this story begins in a big house, a mansion and further details of this house will be informed to the reader as the story progresses. But, to inform you at the very outset we have a young male narrator and we have three old people who try to prevent him from spending a night in the apparently haunted Red Room and that is the premise of the story.

And, the narrator insists that he will test the theory that this particular room is haunted and what is very interesting here in this set of ideas is that the narrator wants to see

before he believes. So, seeing is believing for this young man and you can also get the sense that he believes in experiential data. He wants information, facts, data before he can make up his mind, before he comes to any kind of conclusion. So, even if it is a theory about ghosts that has to be tested before he believes it for himself.

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"The likes of this house"



single minded

- The old woman sat staring hard into the fire, her pale eyes wide open. "Ay," she broke in; "and eight-and-twenty years you have lived and never seen the likes of this house, I reckon. There's a many things to see, when one's still but eight-and-twenty." She swayed her head slowly from side to side. "A many things to see and sorrow for."

hallucinating



The old woman who is one of the listeners, who is one of the occupants of that room which is kind of a housekeeper's place, the old woman sat staring hard into the fire, her pale eyes wide open, 'Ay, she broke in; and eight-and-twenty years you have lived and never seen the likes of this house, I reckon. There is many a thing to see, when one's still but eight-and-twenty'. She swayed her head slowly from side to side. 'A many a thing to see and sorrow for'. So, the narrator informs this old woman that he has lived in this world for 28 odd years and he has not seen a ghost in his entire life and she says that 28 years is too young to see many many things in this world and she says that there are still a lot of things to witness and be sad about. And, she implies that this man is young and naive to know about the horrors of this particular world.

And, what are further interesting in terms of the description of the old woman are words such as her pale eyes, look at the manner in which she stares hard into the fire in a very single minded manner, and she sways her head. She is kind of moving her head in a rhythmic manner, it is almost a kind of a hallucinatory action.

So, these details about the old woman, her pallid appearance, her disregard of any other aspect at except her single minded opinions about the red room tells us something that this old woman is almost in a way akin to a ghost herself. She is pale, she is single minded and she is swaying her head in a rhythmic manner which is apparently preternatural in manner. So, all these ideas about the old people of this house have a particular significance which I'll also unpack in great detail as we progress.

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The likes of this house

- *This house as a place of threat
- *Past as a mystery
- *Suggestion of tragedy

Gothic cue

Perfect setting } Red Room

Now, she mentions the old woman mentions that you have never seen the likes of this house and immediately we understand that this house is a perfect setting for a gothic story and in this particular house we have a particularly dangerous space called The Red Room. So, we see the gothic cues in all these spaces and locales. And, she also mentions that or indicates that this young man is unaware of certain things perhaps from the past which continues to have the impact on the present which is why she says that he is too young to still see many things and be sorrowful about. So, it is not over yet for the young man to remove his misconceptions of the world. And, there is also a suggestion of tragedy or a suggestion of sadness to come and which again alerts us to some of the key attributes of gothic fiction which is that things are not going to turn out for the better for the protagonist. And that is usually the case with gothic narratives. Or things are going to be full of threat, places are going to be full of threat for the safety and security of the major protagonists, the central protagonists.

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The Aged

I heard the faint sound of a stick and a shambling step on the flags in the passage outside. The door creaked on its hinges as a second old man entered, more bent, more wrinkled, more aged even than the first. He supported himself by the help of a crutch, his eyes were covered by a shade, and his lower lip, half averted, hung pale and pink from his decaying yellow teeth.

stumpy
great abnormality of old people
ancient door



If you read very closely you will understand that the three aged figures, we will have one other old man come in as the story is progressing. So, we have an old woman and we have an old man, her companion, and we have another old man who is going to come into the door of that housekeeper's place as the narrator is talking to this woman. So, we have the aged, the old people dominating the scene at the beginning of this particular story and we have the young narrator, the young male narrator almost outnumbered-- he is literally outnumbered by the old people. And, this particular section as I said it describes the way in which an old man walks into the room, it is a kind of a caretaker's kind of place, housekeeper's kind of place inside the castle or the big house.

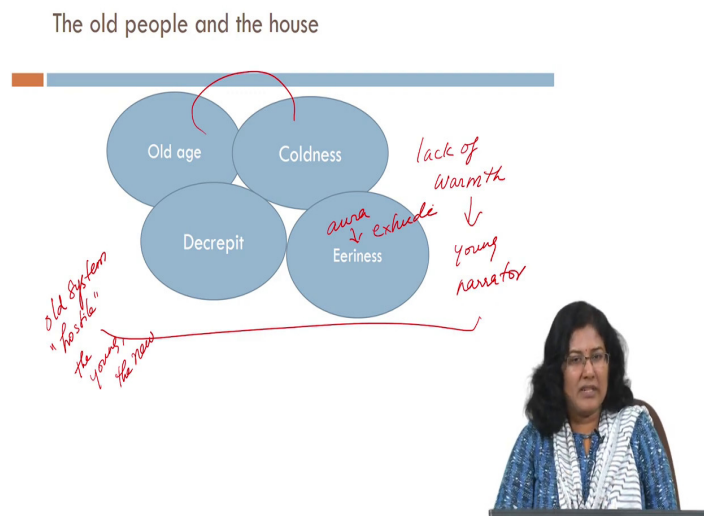
'I heard the faint sound of a stick and a shambling step on the flags in the passage outside. The door creaked on its hinges as a second old man entered, more bent, more wrinkled, more aged even than the first. He supported himself by the help of a crutch, his eyes were covered by a shade, and his lower lip, half averted hung pale and pink from his decaying yellow teeth.' So, it is a fantastically rich set of information about not only the old man, but also the setting, the house and its immediate environment that is kind of indicated here.

So, look at the way in which certain words always already indicate that it is an old man who is coming in and that it is a decrepit ancient setting that we are in, in terms of the story. The sound of a stick, we have the sound of a stick. So, we can imagine a man with

a crutch trying to walk in a shambling step, it is not a steady step, it is an awkward clumsy step. And, the word *flags* again indicates that it is an old stone pavement that is outside in the passage. And, look at the creaking; the door creaks, makes a noise in its hinges. So, again indicating that it is ancient, it is not well kept up, it is not well maintained. It needs some kind of rework or refurbishment. So, it is creaking; so it is an ancient door perhaps. And, the second man enters and he is more bent as if that is possible, he is more bent, more wrinkled, more aged than the first man who is inside and obviously, we are correct in imagining that he is walking with a crutch.

And, interestingly there is a shade to one of his eyes. He is perhaps blind or he has a sensitive eye and which again adds to the threat, the abnormality, the extraordinary quality of these old people. And, look at the way his lips are described, his lower lip half averted hung pale; once again the word pale. This word had already been used by the narrator to describe the old woman her pale eyes and here the lips of this old man is pale and pink and it is also decaying and there is an association of decay in terms of his yellow teeth. So, they are ancient, they are decrepit, they are decaying, they are also somehow threatening. So, all these details about the description of these aged people are perfect in terms of the characters who populate the gothic narrative.

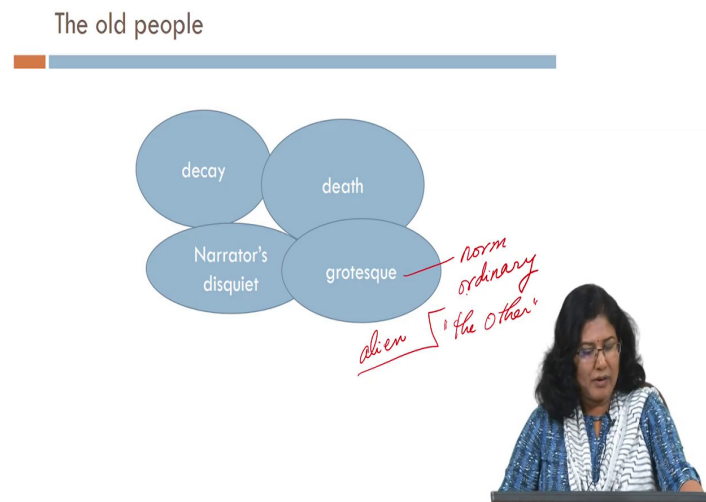
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Now, to kind of spell it out in a very clear cut manner the old people, old age here represents coldness; there is a lack of warmth. There is a lack of warmth or cordiality

towards the young narrator. Can we extrapolate from this dynamic and suggest that the old way of life or the old system is somehow hostile to the young and the new? That is one way to interpret the significance that is invested or embedded in these old characters. Again, the old people as I said are decrepit or decaying, they are kind of on their way out of this particular life and most importantly they have an aura of eeriness they kind of exude some kind of eeriness or strangeness which is both unwelcome and perhaps dangerous for the narrator too. So, all these set of ideas increase the weird quotient of this particular gothic work.

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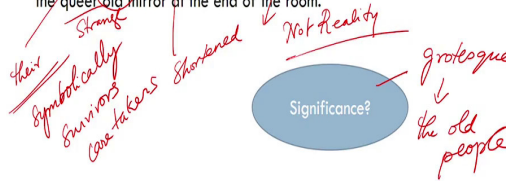


And again the decay suggests that death is not far for these old people and this decay impresses upon the narrator and makes him further uncomfortable and not enjoying the company of these old people. And, once again the appearance is also grotesque, that is, they are not somehow the norm, they are not the ordinary, they are not in the pink of health and therefore, they are somehow the other; somehow alien. So, all these character attributes need to be thought through and we need to probe as to what they symbolize or indicate in terms of the larger, ideological or meaning of this particular story. So, what do the old people represent, what do they stand for, what do they signify in terms of the larger message of the story.

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The mirror

□ I half suspected the old people were trying to enhance the spiritual terrors of their house by their droning insistence. I put down my empty glass on the table and looked about the room, and caught a glimpse of myself, abbreviated and broadened to an impossible sturdiness, in the queer old mirror at the end of the room.



The narrator finds a mirror and he catches a glimpse of him in that mirror and that is what is touched upon in this particular set of statements. The narrator says 'I half suspected the old people were trying to enhance the spiritual terrors of their house by their droning insistence'. I put down my empty glass on the table and looked about the room, and caught a glimpse of myself, abbreviated and broadened to an impossible sturdiness in the queer old mirror at the end of the room. So, the first line of that paragraph once again points to the narrator's awareness that these old people are trying to increase, expand on, the spiritual horrors or the terrors of their house and so, they are trying to scare him. That is what he says or implies here, they are trying to increase the horrors of this place. And, what is interesting to me here is the possessive pronoun here—'their house', it is their house. It is not literally theirs but it is kind of symbolically theirs and since they are the survivors or since they are the people who take care of this particular house. So, it kind of belongs to them in a symbolic way, even though the property might not be theirs in the property deed. So, their house is very interesting there.

And, look at the manner in which they talk to the narrator, they are droning, they are kind of repetitive. So they are both repetitive and reductive. They keep repeating the same things, they suggest that he should not go to The Red Room tonight of all nights. So, that is a kind of a refrain that keeps coming up in the story. And, the narrator he just puts down his empty glass on the table and he takes a look about the room and he catches

a glimpse of his reflection in a really strange mirror; this means strange, strange, old mirror. So, it is not a new one, it is an old one and it is befitting- that it is old, because it is an ancient place. So, what is interesting about this reflection? The narrator is abbreviated, shortened and broadened. Look at the way, he is shortened and broadened and to an impossible sturdiness. So, this is not an actual reflection- not reality- that is something we need to remember. So, the mirror is not projecting reality. It is projecting an alternate kind of illustration or an image of the narrator. What can it signify? So, the significance in my interpretation is this. The mirror makes the narrator grotesque just like the old people. So, when he comes to this space somehow the narrator himself is reoriented by the specialty of this particular house. The house has a spiritual influence on the narrator too and symbolically he becomes one amongst the people who are already there. So, what we have is a grotesque character of the narrator who somehow losing his original viewpoints, originality, his own opinions as he spends more and more time inside the house. So, that is one way to read it. That is my way to read this particular section.


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The haunted room

- "If," I said, a little louder, "if you will show me to this **haunted room of yours**, I will relieve you from the task of entertaining me."
- "There's a candle on the slab outside the door," said **the man with the withered hand**, looking at my feet as he addressed me. "But if you go to the Red Room to-night—"
- "This night of all nights!" said the old woman, softly.

Handwritten notes:

- Refrain* (next to the first quote)
- No proper frame* (next to the first quote)
- Significance?* (next to the first quote)
- Quality* (next to the first quote)
- Value* (next to the first quote)
- Idea* (next to the first quote)
- Planning* (next to the first quote)
- anniversary?* (next to the second quote)
- Suggest* (next to the second quote)



Now, he has had enough of the company of these old people, the old woman and the two older men, and he says that, if, I said, a little louder, so that he could be heard very well by these old people. If you will show me to this haunted room of yours, I will relieve you from the task of entertaining me and he gets a response from the old man who has a withered hand. There is a candle on the slab outside the door, said the man with a

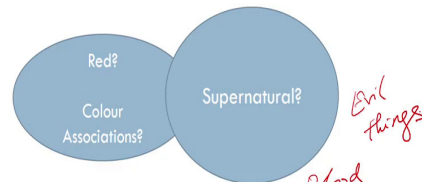
withered hand, looking at my feet as he addressed me, but if you go to The Red Room to-night. This night of all nights said the old woman, softly.

So, once again if you look at the highlighted lines in the text there, they are very very interesting because they have something very interesting to state about either these old people or about some path that is connected with this particular house. So, if you look at the first one this haunted room of yours-- again the narrator is unconsciously suggesting that it is haunted according to you, it is your haunted room and I want to check whether that is the case by spending the night there. So, he is still the skeptic, he is not entirely agreeing with the account that the old people have given him of that Red Room and the man with the withered hand-- look at the phrase, look at the identifying phrase; the man with a withered hand, the man with the shade over his eye and the old woman. We do not have proper names. We do not have proper names for the characters in this particular story. What does that suggest? What is the significance of this lack? Are these people types? They represent a particular quality. Therefore, there is no need for any specific name. They come to stand for some value, some idea, some notion, some meaning which is common to all people who belong to that kind of ideas. So, the old people who believe in the supernatural are a particular type and this narrator, this young man, this 28 year old narrator, he is a man who has a scientific bent of mind and he wants to test it out. So, there is no need for any kind of particular names to individualize the characters. They are representing particular thoughts-- school of thought.

So, he says that if you go to The Red Room tonight and then- look at the refrain this becomes a refrain- this night of all nights the old woman softly. So, there is a suggestion that there is some kind of anniversary on this particular night, but what is that anniversary? We do not know. It is very suggestive, not spelt out. Once again it is a gothic attribute or to heighten the threat, heighten the emotion by suggesting that things are going to happen badly because it is an anniversary of a particular tragedy.

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The Red Room



Blood
Tragedy
Passion



Now, The Red Room is something we need to think about in terms of it is color association. What are the set of ideas, the color symbolism associated with the color red? Does red indicate supernatural element? Does red indicate blood? Does red indicate some kind of tragedy, passion and other evil things? So, why the Red Room? If you read the story you will understand that the decor of the room, the interiors of the room are in the color red- are of the color red. Therefore, it is called as the red room. But why this color choice for this particular room is a question that you can probe in your time.

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The way to the red room

- And the passage I was in, long and shadowy, with a film of moisture ^{alive} glistening on the wall, was as gaunt and cold as a thing that is dead and rigid. But with an effort I sent such thoughts to the right-about. The long, ^{ghostly} draffy, subterranean passage was chilly and dusty, and my candle flared ^{despair} and made the shadows cower and quiver. The echoes rang up and down the spiral staircase, and a shadow came sweeping up after me, and another fled before me into the darkness overhead. I came to the wide landing and stopped there for a moment listening to a rustling that I ^{from} fancied I heard creeping behind me, and then, satisfied of the absolute silence, pushed open the unwilling ^{barred} saize-covered door and stood in the silent corridor.



Now, this is a big chunk of passage from the story and I have picked this passage for close reading because the amount of information and the way the narrator is led to the Red Room is very interesting and it is also significant in an ideological level too, it has a lot of symbolic significance too. So, 'And the passage I was in, long and shadowy, with the film of moisture glistening on the wall, was as gaunt and cold as thing that is dead and rigid'.

So, this young narrator has left the three old people in the caretaker's room. He takes a candle and he gets out into the passage, the corridor and it is a long and shadowy corridor and look at the way the wall is. It has a film of moisture. It is damp and it is glistening, it is shining. It is almost as if that wall is alive. And look at the simile that is going to be part of that statement- it was as gaunt and cold as a thing that is dead and rigid. So, the wall is gone, it is almost without life. It is emaciated and cold it is cold to the touch as a thing that is dead and gone-- dead and gone rigid. So, it is like a dead body, the wall is like a dead body. So, that is a very very ghastly way to describe it. So, I would call this a ghastly description of the corridor wall. So, if you read this story very closely and understand in great detail the function of the words you will understand that the atmosphere itself is brought alive by the power of writing of H. G. Wells and it is that setting which makes this story or the narrative or the passage scary for both the narrator and for the readers.

So, he is in this passage and it is as if this whole place is alive and contradictorily it is also like the newly dead. 'But with an effort I sent such thoughts to the right-about'. So, with great effort he just dismisses those scary thoughts. 'The long, drafty subterranean passage was chilly and dusty, and my candle flared and made the shadows cower and quiver'. Look at the passage, it is a lengthy passage; the corridor is very long and it is drafty, it is full of cold wind. It is not warm, it is cold; subterranean passage, subterranean means underground. And, again chilly and dusty and the candle makes the shadows move and look at the choice of words- cower and quiver. So, it is as if the shadows are like actual figures; it is as if there is somebody there cowering, hiding and fearful and shaking in fear. So, as he is moving through this passage he is making shadows come alive and these shadows act like human beings that are terribly frightened and threatened. So, we get an overall sense of coldness in this corridor.

‘The echoes rang up and down the spiral staircase, and a shadow came sweeping up after me, and another fled before me into the darkness overhead’. So, as he is walking about there are echoes everywhere and there is a spiral staircase in which he climbs and then there is a shadow which comes after this narrator and a shadow flees before him. So, what the writer is trying to do here is to point out the number of shadows that keep coming up and going past this narrator and these shadows are somehow performing the function of chasing, symbolically chasing the narrator.

‘I came to the wide landing and stopped there for a moment listening to a rustling that I fancied I heard creeping behind me, and then satisfied of the absolute silence, pushed open the unwilling baize-covered door and stood in the silent corridor’. So, he comes to a landing and he kind of freezes. He stops there abruptly because he feels as if there is somebody creeping up behind him coming behind him to attack him and then he checks there is nothing and there is just silence. So, what he does is he opens the baize-covered door; baize refers to a green cloth. So, it is a cloth covered door and he opens that door and look at the word unwilling. You associate this word with a figure, not with an inanimate object, not with a lifeless door. So, the door itself seems to be unwilling and he pushes it open and he enters the silent corridor- there is another corridor there. So, it is a very very elaborate passage, it is a long passage and it takes a while for him to cross this and keep going until he comes to the Red Room. I want to unpack the significance of this really lengthy passage in a minute.

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Moonlit Corridor

*Sublime
beautiful or fearful*

□ The effect was scarcely what I expected, for the moonlight, coming in by the great window on the grand staircase, picked out everything in vivid black shadow or reticulated silvery illumination. Everything seemed in its proper position; the house might have been deserted on the yesterday instead of twelve months ago. There were candles in the sockets of the sconces, and whatever dust had gathered on the carpets or upon the polished flooring was distributed so evenly as to be invisible in my candlelight. A waiting stillness was over everything. I was about to advance, and stopped abruptly.

*anxiety
period*

personification



The effect, so, he has come to another corridor. So, he has traveled for a while inside this big house, this castle and he has come to another corridor; I call this the moonlit corridor. 'The effect was scarcely what I expected, for the moonlight, coming in by the great window on the grand staircase, picked out everything in vivid black shadow or reticulated silvery illumination'. So, again a very evocative passage; evocative means it brings lots of images into your mind. So, he is in this passage and the moonlight is kind of filtered through the window and the light falls everywhere on the grand staircase and the light picks out it kind of brings to the attention everything in shadows or in kind of reticulated; reticulated is striped, we have a network of patterns that is reticulated and everything is illuminated by the moonlight. So, everything is in shadows or silvery illumination. So, it is beautiful as well as haunting, I would also associate the word sublime, it is awesomely beautiful, but threatening too. Let us say fearful.

'Everything seemed in its proper position'. So, all the stuff is there in their right places, the stuff that is there in this big house. 'The house might have been deserted on the yesterday instead of twelve months ago'. So, nobody has disturbed this place. Everything is in its rightful place. So, it could have been deserted yesterday instead of a year ago, that is when the inhabitants have vacated, quote unquote, this house.

'There were candles in the sockets of the sconces'; a very interesting word, I will come back to this, 'and whatever dust had gathered on the carpets or upon the polished flooring was distributed so evenly as to be invisible in my candlelight'. So, the whole surface, this vast surface is covered with dust and this dust has not been disturbed. So, it is already even and almost not noticeable. *Sconces* is a very interesting word because it is a wall bracket for candles and it is a word that is used usually in the ancient period. And, it once again takes the story back into the middle ages rather than to the late nineteenth century when it was written. So, if you remember late 19th century we have lighting, all kinds of lamps and, but H. G. Wells wants to recreate the ambience of the middle ages in this particular story for the most part which is why his choice of the word sconces here. 'A waiting stillness was over everything'. Look at the word waiting here like in the last passage that I discussed, the unwilling door, here we have a waiting stillness. Stillness is waiting, something that is very quiet. Is the quiet waiting? That is a very interesting word. We have on it the personification here.

So, inanimate things and ideas are being personified and they are almost turned into human like figures to increase the eeriness or the strangeness of this atmosphere. 'I was about to advance, and stopped abruptly'. So, this young man is about to move forward, but he stops again because he is kind of frightened or he is taken aback by something.

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Ganymede and Eagle



- A bronze group stood upon the landing hidden from me by a corner of the wall; but its shadow fell with marvelous distinctness upon the white paneling, and gave me the impression of some one crouching to waylay me. The thing jumped upon my attention suddenly. I stood rigid for half a moment, perhaps. Then, with my hand in the pocket that held the revolver, I advanced, only to discover a Ganymede and Eagle, glistening in the moonlight. That incident for a time restored my nerve, and a dim porcelain Chinaman on a buhl table, whose head rocked as I passed, scarcely startled me.

pounce to manifest
decorative in nature
mythological reference



A bronze group; so, what is he taken aback by? 'A bronze group stood upon the landing hidden from me by a corner of the wall; but its shadow fell with marvelous distinctness upon the white paneling, and gave me the impression of someone crouching to waylay me'. So, once again he feels that there is a group of people here who is going to attack him, pounce on him; waylay- assault him- and that is what he is worried about.

But, he realizes that it is not a group of people, but it is a set of statues and the shadow of these statues falls on the wall. So, it is not the substance, but it is just a shadow. The thing jumped upon my attention; the thing jumped upon- it is as if he is being jumped upon by group. So, the thing jumped upon my attention suddenly, he notices this set of objects suddenly and I stood rigid for half a moment, perhaps. Then, with my hand in the pocket that held the revolver, I advanced only to discover a Ganymede and Eagle, glistening in the moonlight.

So, when he sees the shadow, he immediately places his hand on the revolver which is inside his pocket and drawing courage from that weapon he moves closer to that thing which jumps upon his attention to discover a statue of Ganymede and Eagle glistening in

the moonlight. Glistening once again is shining, something which is shining in the moonlight you can go back to that earlier passage that I discussed in detail where the walls seemed to glisten and there are dewdrops perhaps it is damp and it glistens and now the statues are glistening in the moonlight.

‘That incident for a time restored my nerve, and a dim porcelain Chinaman on a buhl table, whose head rocked as I passed, scarcely startled me’. So, he realizes that this is just a set of statues and he chases away his fear and he walks on and then he comes across a Chinaman statue on a buhl table. The buhl table- very decorative in nature, a decorative table and this Chinaman it is rocking its head. You can think back to the swaying head of the old woman and these swaying figures no longer scare him because he has just now realized that he has been scared by a set of statues. So, he passed through this passage without being startled anymore.

I want to go back to this set of sculptures of the Ganymede and the Eagle that this is a mythological reference and the story goes like this. Zeus was very attracted by the beauty of this handsome young boy Ganymede. So, what he does is he changes into an eagle and abducts this young man and takes him away and makes him his cup bearer in his domain, in his kingdom so, in Mount Olympus. So, that is the story behind this particular mythological reference.

So, what is the function of including these mythological details here? It is a question that should make you wonder about its role in this particular story, perhaps there is a kind of allusion to how power functions. And, the power of Zeus here is in the fact that he can physically take someone away by force and by using his magical or spiritual powers he is able to do that. So, power and its manifestation is a major subject of gothic narratives and so, and that is perhaps being indicated here through this reference.

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Pallid silence

□ The door of the Red Room and the steps up to it were in a **shadowy corner**. I moved my candle from side to side in order to see clearly the nature of the recess in which I stood, before opening the door. Here it was, thought I, that my **predecessor** was found, and the memory of that story gave me a **sudden twinge of apprehension**. I glanced over my shoulder at the **black Ganymede** in the moonlight, and opened the door of the Red Room rather hastily, with my face half turned to the **pallid silence** of the corridor.

without colour
fear

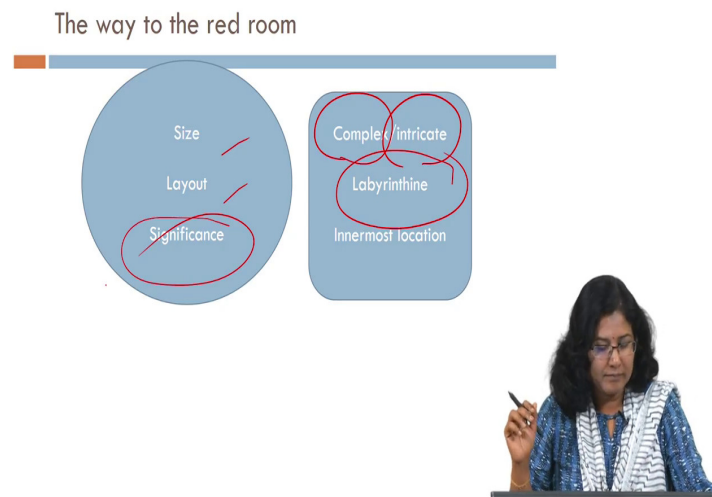


Now, the narrator has come to the door of The Red Room and the steps up to it were in a shadowy corner. Again, shadowy corner- it is hidden once again. 'I moved my candle from side to side in order to see clearly the nature of the recess in which I stood, before opening the door'. So, the narrator is trying to figure out how exactly everything is positioned, where exactly he is standing and what are the objects around him. 'Here it was, thought I, that my predecessor was found, and the memory of that story gave me a sudden twinge of apprehension'. So, the narrator is standing at the exact location where the dead body of the previous occupant of The Red Room was found. So, his predecessor was also a young man who wanted to test whether this particular place was haunted and quite unfortunately, he dies in the process and his body is found in that exact place where he is standing right now. And, that memory gives him a sudden twinge, experience of fear, twinge of apprehension; apprehension means fear.

I glanced over my shoulder at the black Ganymede in the moonlight, and opened the door of The Red Room rather hastily, with my face half turned to the pallid silence of the corridor. So, what he does is he turns back to look at the statue of the Ganymede. Why does he do that? Why does he look at the statue of that shadowy Ganymede here is a question that can be answered with a little bit of thought. Perhaps, he is thinking of himself as the Ganymede whose going to be abducted into this room, he is going to be somehow kidnapped, kept prisoner in that room just as Zeus had abducted Ganymede, we do not know.

So, that is one of the possible ways in which you can think about this connection between the narrator and the statue of Ganymede. And, what he does is he opens the door of The Red Room rather hastily, again a movement which suggests that he has lost his equanimity, he has lost his equilibrium, he is acting hastily and his face half turned to the pallid silence of the corridor. He is still looking at the corridor as he opens the door. Once again the phrase pallid silence is very interesting because silence cannot be pallid. Human beings can be pallid, without any color. Pallid- if somebody is sick they look pallid, they look drawn; there is a lack of proper blood flow, that is why they would look pale and pallid. So, silence of the corridor looking pallid is a very interesting association. So, once again silence is being personified as a human being that itself is being frightened by this whole set of affairs around The Red Room.

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Now, the way to The Red Room is very interesting, that is what I pointed out early on. It is complex; I would call it very intricate. If you want to draw a map of the way to The Red Room when you read the story, it is a very interesting exercise and you will realize that there is a long passage, there is a staircase, he climbs onto the staircase, a landing, again he goes into another corridor and there is a long passage and then again there is a set of steps. So, it is labyrinthine, it is very convoluted. It is like a maze and it is very long winded and what is the significance of such sized layout? What is the importance of this setup?

We are kind of in the subterranean world; literally the word subterranean is used in the story. So, literally we are in the belly; belly of the house perhaps and symbolically we are in the innermost regions in the depths of the house and psychologically we are going into the inner recesses of the mind where dark secrets are buried, where horrors are hidden and things which we usually like to submerge are to be found.

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Lorraine Castle



I entered, closed the door behind me at once, turned the key I found in the lock within, and stood with the candle held aloft surveying the scene of my vigil, the great Red Room of Lorraine Castle, in which the young Duke had died; or rather in which he had begun his dying, for he had opened the door and fallen headlong down the steps I had just ascended. That had been the end of his vigil, of his gallant attempt to conquer the ghostly tradition of the place, and never, I thought, had apoplexy better served the ends of superstition. There were other and older stories that clung to the room, back to the half-incredible beginning of it all, the tale of a timid wife and the tragic end that came to her husband's jest of frightening her.



Now, the Lorraine Castle is referred to for the first time in this passage. So, that is the name of the castle in which we have The Red Room and to which the narrator, the brave narrator visits. So, 'I entered,' he says- the narrator enters The Red Room of Lorraine Castle- 'closed the door behind me at once, turned the key I found in the lock within, and stood with the candle held aloft surveying the scene of my vigil, the great Red Room of Lorraine Castle'. So, after a long time we have this reference to the name of this particular house 'in which the young Duke had died or rather in which he had begun his dying, for he had opened the door and fallen headlong down the steps I had just ascended'. So, we have the name of the castle and we also have specific details about the young man who died a year ago trying to test the theory. So, the man who dies is a young Duke one of the nobility, one who is in the very higher ranks in society and he had begun his dying in this Red Room because he just opens the door and he just falls down the steps and he is found dead the next day.

And, that had been the end of his vigil, that had been the end of his adventure of staying awake to witness the ghost, 'of his gallant brave attempt to conquer the ghostly tradition of the place, and never, I thought, had apoplexy better served the ends of superstition'. So, what the narrator here suggests is that the Duke who had died has had a stroke-apoplexy- and people think that he had been killed, scared to death by the ghost of this particular room. So, that is what this young narrator believes. So, his death had served the ends of superstition. Has fed the needs of this superstitious narrative that is kept alive in terms of this particular Red Room.

There were other and older stories that clung to the room, back to the half-incredible beginning of it all, the tale of a timid wife and the tragic end that came to her husband's jest of frightening her. So, on top of the story about the young Duke who died of stroke, there are other stories. Stories associated with a timid wife, a frightened wife who died because her husband tried to scare her just as part of a joke in The Red Room. So, that is also another tragedy which is associated with The Red Room. So, that again is also interpreted as being death caused by the ghost of this particular Red Room. So, there are a set of narratives which could be interpreted in two different ways- people who believe in the supernatural would claim that these are deaths caused by the ghosts of The Red Room whereas the skeptics like the narrator would suggest that the wife was frightened therefore, she died when the husband tried to scare her as a joke and then the young Duke died of a stroke, not of ghost attacks.

So, these are some of the legends that surround this particular Red Room in Lorraine Castle and the young narrator occupies the shoes of the young Duke who had gone before by occupying this Red Room and starting his vigil. He holds aloft the candle and surveys the room.

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The Red Room



little tongue of light

□ And looking round that huge shadowy room with its black window bays, its recesses and alcoves, its dusty brown-red hangings and dark gigantic furniture, one could well understand the legends that had sprouted in its black corners, its germinating darkneses. My candle was a little tongue of light in the vastness of the chamber; its rays failed to pierce to the opposite end of the room, and left an ocean of dull red mystery and suggestion, sentinel shadows and watching darkneses beyond its island of light. And the stillness of desolation brooded over it all.

shadows like guards



‘And, looking round that huge shadowy room with its black window bays, its recesses and alcoves, its dusty brown-red hangings and dark gigantic furniture, one could well understand the legends that had sprouted in its black corners, its germinating darkness.’

Again, a very dense set of details to describe The Red Room. Once again the narrator notices the shadowiness of the room. There are lots of shadows in the room and the windows are black in color, the window bays are not of a lighter color, but black and its corners of course, would be dark and its hangings are dusty and its brown and red, perhaps the color giving the room its name- Red Room- and the furniture are gigantic, massive furniture. And, because of its setting itself all these legends could have come about and he says that legends had sprouted, had come about in the black corners of this particular room. The corners seemed to breed all these darkneses- germinating, producing darkness- germinating darkneses. My candle was a little tongue of light. Look at the way he describes the light from the candle. It is a little tongue of light, it is very weak; it is very weak and then again the choice of the word tongue once again associates it with some kind of human like quality. It is ‘a little tongue of light in the vastness of the chamber; its rays failed to pierce the opposite end of the room’.

So, it is it is weak in strength and in comparison to the vast darkness surrounding the candle light right. So, it is like a sole light single light against the sea of darkness and therefore, it fails to pierce to the opposite end of the room. It is not able to throw its light

to the very end of the room and therefore, since it is not able to do its job of bringing light to the entire room, there was an ocean of dull red mystery in The Red Room. So, there was a lot of darkness and that darkness reddish in tone and there is mystery to it and plenty of suggestion. 'Sentinel shadows and watching darkneses beyond its island of light and, the stillness of desolation brooded over it all'. The concluding ideas in this passage are extremely evocative. You can almost imagine the vivid shadows which are human being like in their appearance.

Look at the word suggestion, sentinel shadows; shadows behaving like guards like sentinels like watch men and watching darkneses- the darkness has become human like again- and they are watching what is happening in this Red Room and watching darkneses beyond its island. The light- the island of light is produced by that candle the rest is darkness, right? And in that darkness we have all these sentinel shadows and the stillness of desolation brooded over it all. There is a kind of a desperation, there is a bleakness, there is a sadness, there is a negativity that seemed to brood over it all, that seemed to kind of sit over it and think over it all.

Thank you for watching. I will continue the next session.