

The Victorian Gothic Short Story
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Lecture - 18
H.G. Wells's 'The Red Room' - Victorian Gothic


Hello and welcome to this week's lecture. In this lecture I would like to begin by giving a very brief set of pointers about the Victorian Gothic. Once I finish talking about this Victorian Gothic mode, I will move on to a discussion of the second part of H G Wells's The Red Room.

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Victorian Gothic

- Death and mourning
- Supernatural
- Spiritual and the Occult

Occult:
relating to magical powers and activities, such as those of witchcraft and astrology:



So, what is the Victorian Gothic? The Victorian Gothic narratives were obsessed with details about death and mourning and the Victorian Gothic is also related to an association with the supernatural. So, these narratives also have suggestions of the supernatural just as the classic Gothic narrative would and there are discussions of the spiritual or references to the spiritual or suggestions of the presence of the spiritual and the occult in Victorian Gothic narratives.

So, I have there on the slide for you the definition of the occult as well. So, what is the occult? Occult relates to magical powers and activities such as those of witchcraft and astrology. So, these are some of the significances in relation to Victorian Gothic fiction.

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Victorian Gothic

- Revival in the 1840s
- Desolate Castles to Urban environment

Domestic spaces
of the
bourgeoisie



The Victorian Gothic had a revival in the 1840s or the Gothic mode had a revival in the 1840s, leading us to term that period as the Victorian Gothic. So, instead of desolate castles, we had urban environment as the setting for this particular narrative fiction. So, the domestic spaces of the bourgeoisie became the setting for the Victorian Gothic and today I am going to offer some examples from the works of the Brontë sisters especially Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë.

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The Brontë Sisters

- Jane Eyre (1847)
- Jane's childhood terrors in Lowood school

□ The "nocturnal incidents" in Thornfield

□ "Supernatural" suggestions

□ The insane Bertha

*Suggestive
by the
foundational.
Spectral
presence*

*The Red Room
Jane Eyre
H. G. Wells's
Short
Story
✓ Similarities
of setting*



Now, Jane Eyre which was published in 1847 is usually considered as a highly realistic fiction, but it can also be seen as Gothic fiction too and what are the Gothic aspects of Jane Eyre? I have listed out a few there on the slide. We can describe Jane's childhood terrors in Lowood school as Gothic in tone and what is very interesting here is the fact that Jane is shut up in the red room and that is exciting because we have the Red Room in HG Wells's story, which is highly interesting for us.

So, we can see that there is the same terrible ambience in the settings of both Jane Eyre and H. G Wells's short story. The protagonists in both these narratives are confined or willingly confined in the case of H. G Wells's story inside this room and it is a terrifying experience for both the child Jane and for the narrator of the Red Room.

So, we have similarities of setting. Now, in Jane Eyre we have certain nocturnal incidents in Thornfield. Thornfield is the mansion in which we have the protagonist Rochester living with his family and Jane Eyre goes to that mansion as a governess in order to teach his child.

So, the nocturnal incidents are suggestive of the supernatural and we do have more overt supernatural occurrences in the cries that the insane Bertha utters. We do have fires being set by Bertha even though Jane does not know about it until the closure of the novel. So, all these suggestions create a spectral presence in this realist narrative of Jane Eyre.

So, I have picked out all these Gothic aspects in order to point out their resemblance with the classic Gothic, which had its heyday in Britain in late 18th century and early 19th century and I have pointed out how it has been revived in the 1840s in Victorian England and Victorian Britain .

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Emily Brontë *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

- "Domestic violence,
- alcoholism,
- child abuse,
- neglect, sexual obsession
- and torture"



Now, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* which was published in the same year 1847 is also considered to be Gothic in tone. The subject matter of *Wuthering Heights* is highly unusual. I have listed out some of the key themes of this particular work that the critics usually point out in relation to this particular novel. So, there is domestic violence, alcoholism, child abuse, neglect, sexual obsession and torture.

So, these are some of the key subject matter of this particular novel and these aspects also share some of the themes that are found in the Gothic narrative. So, we do have domestic violence in Gothic fiction, we have alcoholism, we have child abuse and so, we can see how the Gothic subject matter and the subject matter that we find in *Wuthering Heights* resemble one another and especially sexual obsession is something that some of the villains in Gothic fiction very frequently manifest and torture of course.

So, the domestic violence in the sense that we have victims, female victims especially being incarcerated in castles and monasteries and we have several patriarchal figures oppressing these young women. So, this kind of thematic is also explored in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

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□ "Whether it is right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff, I do not know," Charlotte Brontë, preface, 1850 edition. *of Wuthering Heights*



And in this slide I have a quotation by Charlotte Brontë and she writes 'Whether it is right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff I do not know'. So, this is her comment in the preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*. So, when she makes this comment her sister Emily Brontë is already dead.

So, what is interesting here for me is this word *things*. And if you think about it that word is used to describe the figure Heathcliff who is the hero or the antihero of this passionate novel *Wuthering Heights*. So, why does she use the word *thing* to refer to a human being is a question that would lead us to ideas of Gothic subject matter.

So, Heathcliff is a problematic protagonist or antagonist because he is both a real human being on the one hand, at the same time he is also seen as a specter itself. So, he is a supernatural presence in the novel too according to some critics and according to some of the characters in the novel too.

So, he is perceived as evil personified, he is seen as a supernatural spiritual presence an evil spiritual presence and therefore, Charlotte Brontë uses this word *thing* to describe or write about Heathcliff. And there are other elements apart from the supernatural associations which are usually the purview of Gothic fiction, what are they?


Insanity, madness is also an aspect of Gothic fiction and we have plenty of references or occurrences of madness in *Wuthering heights*. We have Heathcliff who seems to be mad

literally and figuratively and we also have the mental illness of Catherine; Catherine Earnshaw and later Catherine Linton. So, we do get the sense that this novel is kind of embedded with a lot of Gothic cues by the hand of the author.

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Wuthering Heights (1847) *H.G. Wells*

- Claustrophobic Settings, ghostly hauntings? *(Red Room)*
- Windows and Doors *(dormitory Castle)*
- Incarceration of women *Wuthering Heights → place of Confinement/Prison*



Now, Wuthering height has a lot of claustrophobic settings and the primary setting is the mansion or the house Wuthering Heights itself. And in fact, in one of the most atmospheric scenes in literature, we have at the beginning of Wuthering Heights the child ghost of Cathy- Catherine Earnshaw- trying to get into the house of Wuthering Heights and apparently that is what is witnessed by the narrator, the slightly clueless narrator Mister Lockwood.

So, we do have tangible ghostly hauntings at least according to the narrator Mr. Lockwood in Wuthering Heights. And there are lots of references to windows and doors in this particular novel because they are the aspects of confinement. They keep people in. So, we have women being shut up, we have Heathcliff being shut up when he is when he was a child inside Wuthering Heights. So, Wuthering Heights becomes a place of confinement, it becomes the prison in which several people are locked up at several moments of this narrative. So, incarceration of women and as I said at some moments in the past we do see Heathcliff himself being imprisoned there. So, Wuthering Heights itself, the novel itself becomes identified with this emotion of claustrophobia or incarceration and that idea is something that we find in Gothic fiction too. And I picked

Wuthering Heights because the claustrophobic setting that we have here finds an echo in HG Wells's The Red Room too. So, we have the red room in which the narrator tries to spend the night being a kind of a prison space or a claustrophobic space. We have the Lorraine Castle itself, which is being taken care of by these three old people who somehow convert that space into a kind of a terrible space with associations of the supernatural and so forth.

So, there is a lot of claustrophobia associated with both the Red Room and the Lorraine Castle in HG Wells's story. But what is very interesting here as a contrast is while we have the incarceration of women as being very predominant in Wuthering Heights here we have male figures too, who undergo such incarceration or unfortunate death, as is the case with the young duke who tries to test the theory of hauntings of the Red Room and he dies of apoplexy and we have the narrator who suffers injuries because of his stay in the room, Of course, the incarceration of women is the predominant motif of Gothic fiction and there are references of such cases even in the Red Room story.

Because there is a reference to the countess who was scared to death in the Red Room there; however, since the narrator of the Red Room is a male and since he undergoes stressful situations or stressful experiences during his stay, there is a slight difference in terms of the identity of the victims in terms of these two narratives.

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Gothic Women

- Women as victims -- "traditional gothic"
- Women as violent, and abusive Emily Brontë's women

Lady Audley's Secret



Now, the women in Gothic fiction are usually victims as I have pointed out in my introductory lecture as well and such is the case with the traditional Gothic women as victims, women who need to be rescued. Usually that is the trend of course, there are exceptions, but in the case of Emily Bronte's women in relation to *Wuthering Heights*, we see the women here as violent and even abusive. Catherine Earnshaw or Cathy is especially violent and abusive. She is abusive towards Heathcliff, she is abusive towards Nelly Dean, (Refer Time: 15:18) the woman who takes care of her and who is almost her chaperone and she is also abusive to her husband Edgar. So, and there are other figures too.

So, women as stepping out of their traditional roles is a tendency that we see in the Victorian Gothic especially in works such as *Wuthering Heights*. We also see Machiavellian female figures in *Lady Audley's Secret*, for example, this is the title which has very powerful female characters. So, we do get a tweaking of the gender roles in narratives such as these.

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Now, in this part of the lecture I want to go back to the second half of *The Red Room* and continue with the close reading and its attendant ideological implications.

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Systematic Examinations

□ I must confess some impalpable quality of that ancient room disturbed me. I tried to fight the feeling down. I resolved to make a systematic examination of the place, and so, by leaving nothing to the imagination, dispel the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity before they obtained a hold upon me. After satisfying myself of the fastening of the door, I began to walk round the room, peering round each article of furniture, tucking up the valances of the bed and opening its curtains wide.

not tangible not substantial
Not modern not contempor.
extensive empirical analysis
Past vs Present
Vague fanciful imaginable



Now, if you remember the earlier lecture on HG Wells's *The Red Room*, we saw that the narrator the young narrator who is 28 years old, he has come into the Red Room and he does not like it very much. Let us see why.

He says 'I must confess some palpable quality of that ancient room disturbed me. I tried to fight the feeling down. I resolved to make a systematic examination of the place and so, by leaving nothing to the imagination dispel the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity before they obtained a hold upon me. After satisfying myself of the fastening of the door, I began to walk around the room peering round each article of furniture, tucking up the valances of the bed and opening its curtains wide'.

So, we have this apprehensive young man, he is already apprehensive because as we have seen in the previous lecture he kind of walks through a lot of passages, he climbs up stairs, he is scared by statues, marble statues and shadows, he feels as if the shadows are chasing him and going past him. So, he has arrived in the room and he confesses he says- look at the word confess- he acknowledges some palpable quality- something that is not again very tangible, not concrete, not tangible not substantial, you cannot touch and feel, not substantial- some palpable quality of that ancient room. That word ancient is again very interesting. It is not modern in the sense it's not contemporary. It is not part of the present.

So, there is always in the Gothic narrative a contrast between the past and the present, the past versus the present. So, in the present of late 19th century Britain, there is this room from the past and that past or that setting from the past is kind of scaring him. So, that is what is happening.

So, he says that there is something insubstantial in that ancient room which disturbed me. 'I tried to fight the feeling down' and what he does in order to fight against that past is to make a systematic examination of the place. I have highlighted this phrase because a systematic examination is part of the principles of modernity. You examine everything and come to a conclusion. It's part of empirical analysis, it's part of experiments.

So, what he tries to do as a scientific young man or a young man with a scientific bent of mind is to make a systematic examination. So, what do you do when you do a systematic examination? You collect all the data and leave nothing to the imagination. So, so what he does is, he follows the principles of science, of experiments, of analysis. So, he tries to dispel, get rid of, dispel is get rid of, the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity. So, very interesting turn of phrase- the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity.

So, obscurity is something that is not very clear, something that is vague, will result in fanciful suggestions or imaginative suggestions. So, if you dispel obscurity, if you remove obscurity through a scientific examination you will also remove fanciful suggestions such as shadows which seem to indicate the presence of some specter or supernatural quality or element.

So, what he does is, he kind of examines the place before the imagination takes hold upon me. That is very important. So, he is worried that if he does not do this examination, this obscurity, this vagueness, this past will kind of take a strong hold upon him and everything will be lost.

So, what he does is he kind of walks around the room, he peers around each article of furniture, examines every piece of furniture, he tucks up the valances of the bed- the small curtain like cloth that hangs around the bed- is being tucked up by him and he opens the curtains wide so as to kind of make sure that nothing or nobody is hiding behind it.

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Valance

- Valance: "a narrow piece of cloth like a short curtain that hangs around the frame of a bed, under a shelf, etc."



So, what is a valance? A valance is a narrow piece of cloth like a short curtain that hangs around the frame of a bed under a shelf. It's sometimes even seen on top of those curtain pelmets and so on. So, this is the valance as you can see.

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Gothic Beds



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Scientific Attitude of Mind

□ In one place there was a distinct echo to my footsteps, the noises I made seemed so little that they enhanced rather than broke the silence of the place. I pulled up the blinds and examined the fastenings of the several windows. Attracted by the fall of a particle of dust, I leaned forward and looked up the blackness of the wide chimney. Then, trying to preserve my scientific attitude of mind, I walked round and began tapping the oak paneling for any secret opening, but I desisted before reaching the alcove. I saw my face in a mirror—white.

scientific man

hyper-sensitive
= jumpy!

insecure
anxious



So, 'In one place there was a distinct echo to my footsteps. The noises I made seemed so, little that they enhanced rather than broke the silence of the place. I pulled up the blinds and examined the fastenings of the several windows. Attracted by the fall of a particle of dust, I leaned forward and looked up the blackness of the white chimney. Then trying to preserve my scientific attitude of mind, I walked round and began tapping the oak paneling for any secret opening, but I desisted before reaching the alcove. I saw my face in a mirror- white'.

So, he continues his examination of this room and as he walks around the room, he realizes that the echo of his footsteps increases the silence of that place rather than bringing it down. So, he is kind of aware of each and every sound. He is hypersensitive, I would say. In common parlance he is jumpy. So, what he does is he pulls up the blinds again and examines all the hooks and the fastenings of the windows to make sure that everything is secured.

So, what does this imply? He feels very insecure. He is troubled, he is anxious. And look at the way he is paying attention to every small detail. By the fact that he even notices the fall of a particle of dust—it's a very very interesting thing to do-- dust is very small. Dust is very very small, it's tough to look at. So, he looks at, he is attracted by the fall of a particle of dust and that tells you the intense manner in which he is kind of mapping each and every space, each and every stuff, article, in the room.

So, he is attracted, drawn by the fall of a particle of dust and he looks up the blackness of the white chimney. Its darkness he looks up too, and again darkness is very scary considering the circumstances. That is one thing. The other thing is if you look back at the scientific attitude of mind of this narrator, you also realize that such a mind would lead this man to notice even the simplest or the smallest of things.

So, he is a kind of a scientific man who does not ignore even the marginal things that is around him in the environment. So, this is what a scientific man would do take stock of every little thing. So, and then he tries to preserve the scientific attitude of mind he began to walk around and tap on the oak paneling. Oak paneling-- the stuff that kind of covers the wall, the frame of the wall, and he wants to figure out if there was any secret opening.

So, that is what he intends to do in great detail, but he desisted before reaching the alcove. He stops, desisted is he stops, because what happens then is that he sees his face in a mirror and he is completely blanched because he is terrified, there is there is hardly any blood on his face, because he is acting in a very very scared manner and he does not realize that which is why he looks very pale in appearance.

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Alcoves



These are alcoves. All these niches, the spaces there, this is what an alcove looks like.

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The fire was laid—an unexpected consideration from the old housekeeper—and I lit it, to keep down any disposition to shiver, and when it was burning well I stood round with my back to it and regarded the room again. I had pulled up a chintz-covered armchair and a table to form a kind of barricade before me. On this lay my revolver, ready to hand. My precise examination had done me a little good, but I still found the remoter darkness of the place and its perfect stillness too stimulating for the imagination.

old woman why?
barricade
the fire was laid
the fireplace?
Past the Present Now the Modern

The fire was laid; so in this room there is one positive thing and that is the fire. The fire was laid; there is a big nice fire in the fireplace. ‘An unexpected consideration from the old housekeeper and I lit it to keep down any disposition to shiver and when it was burning well I stood round with my back to it and regarded the room again. I had pulled up a chintz-covered armchair and a table to form a kind of barricade before me. On this lay my revolver ready to hand. My precise examination had done me a little good, but I still found the remoter darkness of the place and its perfect stillness too stimulating for the imagination’.

So, the fireplace is kept ready and he thinks that that is an unexpected consideration from the old housekeeper, the old woman whom we saw at the beginning of the story and he lights the fire and the fire does bring down his disposition to shiver because it’s cold and once the fire is burning well, he stands with his back to it and regards the room again. Looks at the room again. Surveys the room again.

I want to go back to that phrase *unexpected consideration*. He does not expect any kind of consideration from the old caretaker, the old woman, and the question is, why? We saw at the beginning of the story that he does not trust the old people at all and perhaps he has good reason to because they want him not to stay in the Red Room, but again the contrast that I talked about between the past and the present. This young man represents the present, the now, the modern, and the old people are the figures from the past who

represent the principles of the past and perhaps there is a kind of an antagonism between these two ways in which the society has turned out and perhaps that is why that he does not think that the old woman would be concentrate towards him. There is a friction between these two modes- the past and the present- and that is symbolized in the figures that we see in this story.

So, what he does is, he pulls up a chintz-covered armchair and a table to 'form a kind of barricade before me'. He is kind of securing himself, he is readying himself for some kind of battle-- barricades used in battle situations or in situations where there is going to be a potential riot, some kind of threat to civic order. So, the word is very interesting and we kind of see him arming himself as well. See, he has a revolver too on the table.

So, he is ready for a fight and fight with whom, a battle with whom? That is the big question. With whom? The supernatural figures, the supernatural presence? So, we do not know, he is waiting for the supernatural to show itself, to come out for a fight. So, he is kind of barricading himself and he feels that his examination of the room had done him a little good, a little good not quite a lot, because he still found the remoter darkness of the place. Remoter darkness- there are corners in the room which are still dark and which seems to him to be full of presences, spectral presences, lurking there and its perfect stillness, again the silence, is too stimulating. He cannot bear it because it makes him imagine all sorts of things.

So, we can see that this brave young man who is just 28, trying to be brave, but failing all along because of the way this ancient room is set up, because of all the information that has been fed to him before he came here, because of all the stuff that is part of this ancient room kind of weakens his prepared nature weakens his confidence somehow, but he does not kind of accept it so overtly, but it's there on his face and that face is the pale face that he sees in a mirror.

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□ The shadow in the alcove at the end of the room began to display that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking living thing that comes so easily in silence and solitude. And to reassure myself, I walked with a candle into it and satisfied myself that there was nothing tangible here. I stood that candle upon the floor of the alcove and left it in that position.

*nothing
concrete*

*undefinable
intangible
impalpable*



‘The shadow in the alcove at the end of the room began to display that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking living thing that comes so easily in silence and solitude and to reassure myself I walked with a candle into it and satisfied myself, that there was nothing tangible there. I stood the candle upon the floor of the alcove and left it in that position’.

So, despite the fact that he has armed himself with the revolver or barricaded himself by pulling out a table in front of him, he is still not confident that there is nothing in the room except him. Why? Because there is the shadow in the alcove at the end of the room and he feels that there is some kind of undefinable quality. Again, the word undefinable keeps coming up. Undefinable, intangible, impalpable--all these, something that cannot be seen with your naked eyes, something that does not have any concrete shape is what is associated with this darkness, with the shadow.

So, that kind of spectral supernatural presence seems to be there in the darkness and it seems to be lurking there like an animal and this kind of idea comes so easily to us in silence and solitude, when you are all by yourself, when you are in a silent space and when it’s dark and shadowy you start to imagine things and that is exactly what this young man does.

And what he does to reassure himself to make sure that there is nothing there in that darkness, what he does is he takes up a candle and walks into that shadowy part of the

room; he walks into that corner and to that alcove to that niche and he checks for himself that there is nothing tangible there- nothing concrete. Nothing concrete there to scare him and what he does is he leaves the candle upon the floor of the alcove and left it in that position. So, he what he does is he lights it up, he brings light in the darkness and that light gives him confidence and he goes back.

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□ My mind, however, was perfectly clear. I postulated quite unreservedly that nothing supernatural could happen, and to pass the time I began stringing some rhymes together, Ingoldsby fashion, concerning the original legend of the place. A few I spoke aloud, but the echoes were not pleasant. For the same reason I also abandoned, after a time, a conversation with myself upon the impossibility of ghosts and haunting. My mind reverted to the three old and distorted people downstairs, and I tried to keep it upon that topic.

*horrible
candle.*



So once he has done this, he feels that he is better in mind. His mind however, was perfectly clear. ‘My mind however was perfectly clear. I postulated’. Look at the word postulate- he postulates, as if he is kind of coming up with a theory, that he is hypothesizing a theory—‘I postulated quite unreservedly that nothing supernatural could happen’. It’s not going to happen and to pass the time, ‘I began singing some rhymes together Ingoldsby fashion concerning the original legend of the place. A few I spoke aloud, but the echoes were not pleasant. For that same reason I also abandoned after a time a conversation with myself upon the impossibility of ghosts and haunting. My mind reverted to the three old and distorted people downstairs and I tried to keep it upon that topic’.

Look at the way his mind and confidence deteriorate. He is kind of clear at the beginning of this paragraph, he feels that nothing bad is going to happen, there is nothing supernatural that could happen to him and what he does is he starts to sing some rhymes; sing some rhymes in order to pass the time.

So, he kind of makes up some rhymes about the original legend of the place Lorraine Castle. That is where he is, right? And a few he really speaks aloud, but the echoes were not pleasant, the echoes of his words were not pleasant. Perhaps it's scaring him. For that same reason he also abandoned after a time a conversation with myself--- that is very odd because talking to oneself in a silent room especially the Red Room, where he has taken up his vigil in order to test the theory of haunting-- if you talk to yourself then there is this question about, are you sane to do such a thing and so what he does is he stops his conversation and his mind goes back to the three old people. Distorted people is an interesting word. The three distorted people who are downstairs and he tries to think about them and not let his mind wander. So, he does a lot of things to keep his sanity and at the end of the day, as a subtext to his ideas and thoughts, we can see that he is really frightened.

And when you read these statements you can clearly see that, constantly, he is trying to preserve his confidence, preserve his theories, preserve his equanimity against a lot of odds and some of which include the threats posed by the old people about the legends associated with this particular castle.

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The Ingoldsby Legends

- **The Ingoldsby Legends** (full title: *The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels*) is a collection of myths, legends, [ghost stories](#) and poetry written supposedly by Thomas Ingoldsby of Tappington Manor, actually a [pen-name](#) of an [English](#) clergyman named [Richard Harris Barham](#).



So, the Ingoldsby Legends, this is the reference to that phrase that he utters here. Ingoldsby fashion. Ingoldsby the full title is The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels and it's a collection of myths, legends ghost stories and poetry written

supposedly by Thomas Ingoldsby of Tappington Manor, but in fact, they have been written by an English clergyman named Richard Harris Barham. So, that is the reference there for you.

Thank you for listening, I will continue in the next session.