

Casting the Runes, and Other Ghost Stories Study Guide

**Casting the Runes, and Other Ghost Stories by
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Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook Summary

An Englishman named Dennistoun visits the town of S. Bertrand de Comminges in 1883. He is traveling with two friends, who are not as interested in archeology as he is. The Englishman wants to visit S. Bertrand Church and document all of the wondrous things he finds in there. The verger, the caretaker of S. Bertrand Church, tends to his needs, but the Englishman notices that he is very nervous about something. Dennistoun sees the man several times appear to be cringing or huddling against the wall. At times, they hear noises and Dennistoun notices the verger has turned white. At one point, Dennistoun is admiring a picture, and turns to find the verger kneeling with a look of agony on his face. Dennistoun asks the man if he has any manuscripts, hoping to find something valuable. The verger tells him there is something he may be interested in.

Dennistoun goes to the verger's house and shows him the scrapbook that was once owned by Canon Alberic de Mauleon. He finds some curious writing inside. The pictures in the book are also very strange, including one of King Solomon showing horror on the faces of his guards. There is a crouched and dark figure in the picture that horrifies those who look at it. Both the verger and his daughter are afraid of the book.

Dennistoun buys the book for a very cheap price. That night, in his bedroom, he looks at the book and he sees the demon, covered with dark and coarse hair with its hand on the table in his room. He swoons and his servants rush in, feeling something pass them by. When he awakens, the verger arrives. The servants tell the verger that Dennistoun has seen the demon. The verger says he has seen it as well, but will not say anything more about it. Dennistoun photographs the drawing and then burns it.

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook Analysis

In the first short story in this collection, "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook," M.R. James introduces the first motif that will become prevalent through most of his stories. A man goes on a solo journey to a unusual place, where something supernatural occurs. In this instance, Dennistoun visits a church that he is interested in researching. The first clues that something is wrong is the verger's attitude. The verger seems to be afraid about something related to the church. Dennistoun notices this, but does not appear to be unnerved himself or to have a great belief in the supernatural. He is presented with a manuscript that seems to be supernatural. Dennistoun does not seem to pick up on this or be exceedingly alarmed when the verger agrees to sell it to him for such a cheap amount. When he looks at the book alone however, he sees the demon and passes out in shock. He learns later that the verger has also seen this before, and they agree to keep it quiet. While Dennistoun now seems to believe in the supernatural, he is skeptical that anyone else would believe what they have seen.



The Mezzotint

The Mezzotint Summary

When Dennistoun returns to England, he does not publish his experiences as he searches for art for the museum at Cambridge. However, he does tell his friends about his experiences. One of these friends called Mr. Williams works for a museum. A friend tells him that a picture of a manor house in a latest art catalog might be of interest to him. Mr. Williams orders it to get a look at it. He is not that impressed by the artwork but decides he may try to find out where the manor house is located before he sends it back. He shows it to his friend who thinks he sees the shadow of a figure at the edge of the picture. Later on, he shows it to another friend who notices the figure. However, Williams is across the room and cannot see the picture. Later, William does get to look at it and notices the figure is now crawling on all fours to the manor house. He realizes that the picture seems to be changing, but he is not yet sure what this could possibly mean.

Mr. Williams locks the picture in a drawer in another room in his quarters. He realizes his friend also must have seen the figure crawling. His friend Nisbet comes over and he gives him the picture to look at without looking at it himself. Nisbet does not see any figures, but does see a window open in the manor house. Mr. Williams has his friend sign a description of what he saw in the picture, and tells Nisbet how it is changing. They decide to leave it alone for a while, and when they return to Mr. Williams' home, they find his servant Mr. Filcher staring at the picture. He sees the figure carrying off a baby from the house. They watch the picture for a little while but nothing happens. The apparition looks like a skeleton. When they look at the picture again, the figure is gone. Williams later finds a reference to the house and learned that a child was taken from the house, and the man that lived there was found dead after completing the picture. He learns that the man who lived there had caught a poacher that was later hanged for his crimes. People believe that a friend of the poacher stole the child.

The Mezzotint Analysis

In a rare move, M.R. James carries over the character of Dennistoun into this story to introduce the next story, "The Mezzotint." This is not something he does for any other story in this collection. However, he quickly jumps away from focusing on Dennistoun and puts emphasis on the true protagonist of the story, Mr. Williams. Williams is another man who is about to encounter the supernatural through his work. Williams buys a picture that he sees in a catalog, but it does not catch his interest until he notices that it seems to change. Being a man of reason, Williams takes a logical approach and, with his friends, try to determine who has seen what in the picture and what it could possibly mean. The picture continues to change until the figure leaves the home with the baby. From the story Williams learns afterward, it can be inferred that the picture shows the

poacher rising from the dead to take the child of the man who was responsible for his death.



Number 13

Number 13 Summary

The narrator's cousin, Mr. Anderson, stays at a hotel in Jutland Viborg. Anderson is researching the history of the church in Denmark, and has heard there were some papers in the town related to the last days of Roman Catholicism in the county. He is allowed to choose his room and picks Number 12. He checks the list of the other people staying at the hotel on his way down to dinner. He notices there is no room numbered 13, something he has noticed at other hotels in the country. After dinner, he prepares to go to bed, but remembers he left his book in the pocket of his coat downstairs. When he comes back, he cannot get back into his room. He looks at the number on the door and notices that the number is 13. He sees his room nearby and goes in. He is about to fall asleep when he remembers there should not be a Number 13. He figures it is a servant's room.

Anderson goes about his work the next day. He returns to the hotel and realizes he forgot to mention Number 13 to the landlord. When he sees the door again, he hears someone talking inside. He goes to his room, and sees it appears much smaller now. He goes to get something out of one of his cases, but his case is not there. He looks out the window, and in the reflection of the windows across the street, he can see his shadow. He also sees the shadow of the person in Number 13, and the man is leaning on the windowsill like he is. He sees a red light flickering in the room. He asks the maid about his missing case and she just laughs. In the morning, his case is there and the room has a normal appearance. When he looks for Number 13, he cannot find it.

He talks to the landlord Kristensen at dinner. Kristensen tells him while he is not superstitious, many people are and so he cannot keep a room numbered 13. Anderson says he had seen one but Kristensen does not believe him. Anderson invites Kristensen to his room that night. When Anderson returns to his room, the shadows across the street make him think the lawyer in room 14 must be dancing. The landlord arrives, and they hear the lawyer begin to sing, but it sounds like a cat howling. However, the lawyer comes in also to find out what the noise is. They find the door numbered 13, which only seems to appear at night. The door disappears as they try to break in. The next day after some searching, they find some documents in the floorboards of Number 12. The documents are written in an old language. They donate the manuscripts to a museum.

Number 13 Analysis

In the story, "Number 13," Mr. Anderson is the man on his own who is staying at a hotel. He notices the hotel has no room numbered 13, because many people are suspicious that the number 13 is bad luck. This superstition is evident even into the present day, as many hotels do not even have thirteenth floors. In the story, Anderson does not believe in the supernatural. He assumes that the hotel does have the room, but uses it as a

servant room. It takes some time before he notices that the room seems to appear and disappear. When he asks his maid about his case disappearing, she laughs, indicating the servants have noticed the rooms 12 and 14 seem to shrink at some times. Anderson begins to notice the person in room 13 acting really strangely. When he learns it is not the lawyer as he previously assumed, it appears it can only be something supernatural. While they do find some documents, they do not solve the mystery of the room.



Count Magnus

Count Magnus Summary

The story begins with a description of a group of papers that are part of a series on travel. The writer of the manuscripts is a man named Mr. Wraxall who travels around the world writing his books. On his last expedition, he visits Sweden. He stays with a family in a manor house, descendants of the De la Gardie family. He finds papers written by Magnus De la Gardie. He learns the count is a hard man, who is cruel to his servants. He also investigates a church on the property but cannot get into the mausoleum. Through the papers, Wraxall learns that Magnus has been on the Black Pilgrimage, but Wraxall does not know what that is. He also finds a strange writing that indicates Magnus was trying to figure out how to gain a long life. The writing mentions the city of Chorazin. A deacon tells him the Antichrist is supposed to be born there.

The landlord tells Wraxall a story about how in the time of the count, some men saw something supernatural in the forest which should not have been alive. Wraxall visits the mausoleum, finding himself drawn there by a mysterious connection with Count Magnus. That night, Wraxall steals the key and goes back to the mausoleum. He talks to the count's coffin when a padlock falls off it and the lid begins to rise. Wraxall flees and the next day returns to England. However, he seems to have become a broken man. His experience at the mausoleum haunts him and he cannot shake it off. On his travels, he keeps writing about seeing two men in dark cloaks. Wraxall arrives in England, feeling pursued. He finds a place to stay, but is found dead, and all those who view his body will not speak of what they have seen.

Count Magnus Analysis

M.R. James uses a slightly different technique to introduce the story, "Count Magnus," using a set of papers as the segue into the actual story. Again, there is a solitary man as the main character. Mr. Wraxall, the protagonist, stays at a hotel in a foreign place for his work. He learns about a count that once lived on the property, and at the same time finds himself drawn to a mausoleum on the property. He does not know what exactly is in the crypt or why he feels so drawn there. He hears stories that seem to imply that Count Magnus had been dabbling in the dark arts and possibly how to resurrect the dead. Still, he has someone allow him into the mausoleum and even steals the key so he can later go back there himself. When he does, his presence seems to awaken the count, and the top of his crypt moves. Wraxall flees, in shock from his experience, and leaves the country. However, the evil he has awakened seems to follow him and causes his death.



Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad

Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad Summary

Parkins is a professor at St. James College. He plans to go to the town of Burnstow for work. Parkins does not believe in the supernatural, and is uncomfortable with those who do. A friend asks him to check out a certain site for him when he gets there. Parkins gets to Burnstow, where he is staying in a room with two beds. He goes to the site and finds a small metal object. When he returns to the inn, he examines it and finds writing on it. It looks like a whistle. He tries it out and finds himself pleased by the sound it has made. A huge gale of wind comes up when he does this, and he has to struggle to shut the window. That night, he is plagued by a vision of a man running along the seaside, trying to climb over obstacles. When he wakes up, he learns from the maids that both beds in his room were slept in, although he had only used one.

Perkins goes golfing, and talks to his partner about how he does not believe in the supernatural. When they return to the hotel, a scared little boy says he saw someone waving to him from Perkin's window. The men at first think that someone has somehow gotten into his room. However, the maid tells them that no one has been in the room. That night, Perkins falls asleep, but awakes when he hears something in the bed across the room. He tries to go for a weapon, but the figure gets up too and stands before the door. Perkins realizes the figure is blind and seems to be made of the bed sheets and curtains in the room. He struggles with the figure and Perkins almost falls out of the window. The figure however disappears when Perkin's friend comes to the door. The Colonel takes the whistle and throws it into the ocean.

Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad Analysis

Once again, we are introduced to the solitary man who experiences something odd on his journey. Parkins goes to an inn, where he is staying while he is there for work. He goes to the site his friend had asked him to visit, and finds a small metal whistle there. He sees some writing on it, but cannot tell what it says. He tries it out, not knowing that anything out of the ordinary would happen. However, the wind picks up mightily and he finds himself seeing visions of a man coming for him. Whatever seems to be coming for him also manifests itself physically, appearing to sleep in the other bed in his room. the supernatural events continue, but Perkins tries to dismiss them. He goes to sleep the next night, but he slowly becomes aware of the figure in the other bed. He sees the figure, which seems to be made of cloth, coming at him. The figure made of cloth is another motif that becomes common in M.R. James stories. It seems to signify that the figures may in fact only be part of the person's imagination.



The Treasure of Abbot Thomas

The Treasure of Abbot Thomas Summary

An antiquarian called Mr. Somerton examines text that refers to a treasure hidden by the Abbot Thomas at the abbey at Steinfeld. He also examines descriptions of the windows at the chapel there. Mr. Somerton is intrigued by the treasure. He and his servant go on a journey, but the servant eventually writes to Somerton's friend Mr. Gregory. He tells him that Mr. Somerton has fallen ill and asks Gregory to come to Steinfeld. Gregory goes to see Somerton, wondering what may have befallen his friend. Somerton asks Gregory if he will put something back for him. Gregory does so and then returns to hear Somerton's story.

Somerton is at the chapel, examining the windows for clues to the location of the treasure. He finds some letters and deciphers it, learning it says 10,000 gold pieces are in the well of the Abbot's house. He and his servant go to examine the site, and in a dark crevice in the bottom of the well, seems to find a bag. He tries to pull it out, but the candle goes out and he realizes something is grabbing him. The two men made it out of the well safely, but do not have time to restore the stone to its rightful place. Somerton says he is afraid the Abbot is coming after him and needed Gregory to return the stone blocking the crevice. Only then does Somerton feel he might be safe from the abbot's reach.

The Treasure of Abbot Thomas Analysis

In this story, a man named Mr. Somerton visits an abbey where he learns there is supposedly a secret treasure hidden. Somerton is very interested by this, and he and his servant go to try and retrieve the treasure. They learn it is in the bottom of a well, and they attempt to go get it. However, once there, it appears there is some kind of supernatural force guiding the treasure. He is unable to retrieve the treasure, and must have his friend return the stone in the well because he cannot have any peace of mind until the stone is returned to its rightful place. In this story, M.R. James seems to imply that greed has gotten the better of Somerton but luckily he was able to come to his senses and make the situation right before it caused his death.



A School Story and The Rose Garden

A School Story and The Rose Garden Summary

A SCHOOL STORY

Two men are sitting in a smoking room, talking about their private school days. They talk about the legends that had gone around during their school days. One tells the other about something that happened as his own school. One term, a new master named Sampson comes to the school, and the boys try to impress him. The master carries around a coin labeled with his initials, G.W.S. Sampson teaches the boys Latin grammar. One day, during class, something odd happens. They have to write sentences about what they remember. One boy finds himself compelled to write something odd. Another time they have to make sentences, and one of the papers makes Sampson run out of the room. The narrator finds the paper, which says, "If you don't come to me, I'll come to you." He keeps it, but when he looks at it later the writing has disappeared. Later, one night, one of the boys sees someone breaking into Sampson's window. The next day, Sampson is gone. Some time later, one of the boys visits someone in Ireland, who tells him about two bodies that were found in an old well. One of the bodies has the gold coin on them.

THE ROSE GARDEN

Mr. and Mrs. Anstruther live at Westfield. They discuss the prospective rose garden Mrs. Anstruther wants to construct. Mr. Anstruther goes to tell Collins, the handyman, to clear the benches and posts away so she can plant. Collins tells them that it is not the place for a rose garden. Miss Wilkins, a member of the family that once owned their home, comes to visit. Mrs. Anstruther shows her where the rose garden will go. Miss Wilkins says she is glad to see it one more time, since she has some memories of the spot. She and a relative, Frank, both hear strange things there. At one time, Frank imagines he was in the middle of a trial. She later hears things herself, and says the feelings are strongest when standing near an old post. Later that day, Mrs. Anstruther thinks she sees a face in the shrubbery and collapses. They later learn that a judge, who apparently felt badly for sending someone to jail, is buried there.

A School Story and The Rose Garden Analysis

In the short story, A School Story, M.R. James frames this story by opening on a scene of two men talking. In this story, we see the first divergence from the motif of one man on a journey. One of the men tells a story from his school days about a master who seemed to be haunted by some kind of presence. The presence appears to have tried to get to him through the students that he teaches. Mysterious Latin phrases seem to indicate something is pursuing the master. This is proved true when two bodies are found and the one with the coin is most certainly Sampson's.

In the short story, "The Rose Garden," a couple is planning to expand their gardens when they learn they have a mysterious past. This is also a break from the usual motif, because the protagonists of this story are a couple. The supernatural object in this case is a post and they learn that it was once involved in a hanging.



The Tractate Middoth

The Tractate Middoth Summary

A man named John Eldred comes to a library looking for a certain book called the Tractate Middoth. A librarian named Mr. Garrett goes to find it for him but it is not on the shelf. Garrett says he sees a man dressed like a parson with the book earlier. After Eldred leaves, Garrett goes to look again and the book is there. When Eldred comes in again, Garrett goes to find the book, but does not return. They find out that he has fallen ill. Garrett later tells a friend he saw the parson again, but when he turns around, his eyes are sunken in and covered with cobwebs. Garrett goes away to recuperate and stays at a lodging house. He meets a woman named Mary Simpson there. Mary tells him about her uncle who used to go around in an old black coat.

Before her uncle died, Mary says he made two wills where one will gave her everything, and the other gave her cousin John Eldred, everything. The uncle leaves them clues to the location of the documents. Garrett realizes the will is in the book that Eldred was looking for at the library. Garrett decides to get the book first but Eldred has already ordered it sent to him. Garrett goes to Eldred's house to intercept it. He sees Eldred go open the book and rip something out, when a black shadow overcomes Eldred. Eldred drops down dead, apparently from a sudden shock. The will is recovered and Garrett marries Mary Simpson's daughter.

The Tractate Middoth Analysis

This short story, "The Tractate Middoth," is a well developed story and much more descriptive than many of the others in the collection. This story is a divergence from the pattern of one man encountering the figure with a quick explanation of why that figure may be there. The protagonist Garrett is not the only one that witnesses the supernatural figure. He finds himself at the heart of a mystery, as the figure seems to be protecting the book to ensure that the rightful person inherits the money. This is also one of the first cases where the figure does not appear to be evil but instead appears to be protecting the good-hearted people in the story. The figure appears to John Eldred and shocks him to death. This allows Mary Simpson, the rightful heir, to obtain the inheritance she is due. In a more complete ending than any of his other stories, M.R. James allows a happy ending as Garrett marries Mary Simpson's daughter.



Casting the Runes

Casting the Runes Summary

The secretary of an alchemy society tells his wife that the paper submitted by a man named Mr. Karswell has been denied. He does not think the man will be happy about it. His wife finds out that Karswell is a vicious man, who shows the village children a frightening slideshow. He has written a book about witchcraft and may have had a hand in the murder of a reviewer who criticized it by the name of John Harrington. The secretary is afraid Karswell will figure out a man named Dunning has read his paper and rejected it. Dunning sees a mysterious advertisement on a train with the name John Harrington, but the advertising disappears when he looks into it. When Dunning gets home, he finds his housekeeper and maid are sick and he must stay home alone. That night, he hears someone in his house and finds what appears to be a dead animal under his pillow.

The next night, Dunning stays with the secretary, who tells him about Karswell. Dunning meets with John Harrington's brother, who tells him he believes Karswell followed John before his death. They find a small piece of paper covered with runes that Karswell must have slipped to Dunning. They concoct a plan to catch Karswell out of his home so they can give the paper back. Dunning gets on a train in disguise and manages to slip the paper into Karswell's ticket case that falls onto the floor. Karswell attempts to board a ship, but the conductor stops him for a moment, convinced that he sees another man with him. Karswell is later killed when a stone falls on his head while he is visiting a church.

Casting the Runes Analysis

Like the previous story, "Casting the Runes" becomes more of a mystery than some of the other stories in the collection. Karswell is a vicious man who is not happy when things do not go his way, and is prepared to use the dark arts to have his revenge. Dunning has only rejected a paper of Karswell's, but Karswell is so unstable that he believes Dunning should die for slighting him. Dunning learns that Karswell has done this once before to a man who gave him a bad review, so he knows they must do something about it. In this story, the supernatural object of power is a slip of paper that has several runes inscribed on it. Dunning learns that John Harrington received a similar paper, and decides that it is the paper which makes the person holding it die. He manages to slip the paper into Karswell's belongings, and his belief is proven true when Karswell dies. Dunning has not only saved his own life, but he has also gotten revenge for John Harrington.



The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral

The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral Summary

The narrator reads an obituary for John Haynes, an archdeacon who was in charge of the Barchester Cathedral at the time of his untimely death. The archdeacon is very devoted to his job. It takes him a while to attain his position, however, because the priest who held the position before him would not retire, even though he is 92. However, his predecessor is killed when he falls on the stairs at his home. An investigation finds a stair rod was missing, and the maid is blamed for not telling him. Haynes gets his position, and begins to devote himself to his work. However, he begins to notice something odd about the woodcarvings in his work room. A carving of a cat seems to come to life when he touches it. The carvings are made from a tree where several people are hung.

Haynes begins to hear strange whisperings in the winter and finds himself unnerved when his sister is not staying there with him. After several other strange experiences, he is one day found dead, lying at the bottom of the stairs. His face looks like some animal has scratched it. The narrator eventually finds out what happened to the carvings. They are broken up and sold. He finds one man who bought them. The man who purchased the carvings tells the narrator that he had to get rid of the carvings, because they frighten his children. However, the narrator finds a paper inside one that indicates that the carver has put a curse on the carvings. If a person with blood on their hands touches it, they will die on a night in February. The narrator believes Haynes is responsible for his predecessor's death.

The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral Analysis

In this story, the main character, John Haynes, is a treacherous man and the victim of his own evil. Unlike other man characters in the various stories, most of whom are innocent, Haynes has murdered his predecessor in hopes of getting his job. It appears that Haynes has succeeded, but there is a supernatural punishment coming his way. The man who created the carvings that were used in Haynes' office took the wood from a tree used to hang men. He also placed his own curse on the wood, saying that whoever touched it, if they had blood on their hands, would die on a night in February. This accounts for Haynes' uneasiness as the winter approaches. He is eventually killed, although the exact method is not apparent to those who find him. It appears he was scratched by an animal. Therefore, it seems as though the carvings themselves, including that of the cat, have come to life and attacked him.



Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance

Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance Summary

Mr. Humphreys comes to see his inheritance, which is a grand estate from his uncle, Mr. Wilson. He meets Mr. Cooper, a neighbor of his uncle's. Mr. Cooper tells him about the extensive gardens on the grounds, including a huge hedge maze on the property. Cooper takes Humphreys to examine the property. They visit the hedge maze, but there is a padlock on it. Cooper goes to try to find a key, and while he is gone, Humphreys realizes he can open the gate. He makes his way through the overgrown maze to the center, where there is a pedestal with a globe on it. Cooper finds him and they return home, agreeing to bring Cooper's wife to visit the maze. In the meantime, Humphreys finds a passage describing a maze that brings trouble for those who enter. Someone has made a notation next to it that its a parable.

The group goes into the maze, but it is hard to navigate and they almost get lost. The maze seems to change by itself, and that makes it hard for people to find each other once inside. However, in the next few days they successfully make a plan of the maze. A woman named lady Wardrop comes to examine the maze, and she is writing a book about them. She asks Humphreys to trace a copy of the maze's plan for her. He complies, but as he is tracing it, he notices a hole in the paper. He stares at the hole in the paper, until he thinks he sees a face there. Humphreys collapses, and when he comes to, he has someone look what is in the globe. It turns out to be ashes, mostly likely the ashes of someone who has been cremated and interred there. Humphreys figures out the inscriptions on a set of stones leading up to the center of the maze indicate going toward the center is moving inwards towards death.

Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance Analysis

In this story, "Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance," the inciting incident is the death of Mr. Wilson and that he has left his estate to his nephew. Mr. Humphreys comes to view the grand estate and is told of its history. The estate includes a large hedge maze, something of a fad in England at the time. They learn that there are stones that used to lead to the center of the maze, but they are out of order and they must be deciphered. Before that happens, however, Humphreys has already become intrigued by the maze and makes his way to the center. He discovers that the maze serves as a guardian to the ashes of someone who is interred in the globe at the center of the maze. He later learns the inscriptions on the stones show that to find the center of the maze is to find death. While Humphreys does not appear to come to any lasting harm as a result of his discovery, it is not clear that the creation of the maze was not to hold back an evil being.



The Diary of Mr. Poynter and An Episode of Cathedral History

The Diary of Mr. Poynter and An Episode of Cathedral History Summary

THE DIARY OF MR. POYNTER

A man named James Denton goes to a bookseller to see if he can find anything worthwhile. A friend points him in the direction of the diaries written by a man named Mr. Poynter. Denton finds these intriguing, so he agrees to buy them and look them over when he gets home. His aunt, Miss Denton, gets annoyed when she realizes Denton has gotten so wound up in his new purchase he has forgotten to run an errand for her. However, she forgives him when she sees a scrap of an unusual material inside the diaries. The pattern on it catches their attention, and they arrange to have curtains made to match the pattern. However, once they are put up, Denton has a vision of a human figure covered in hair coming at him in the night. He eventually discovers in the diary that the pattern was designed by a man who is found dead without any of his hair. When the man's coffin is moved, it is found to be full of hair.

AN EPISODE OF CATHEDRAL HISTORY

Mr. Lake goes to visit a cathedral and study its records. He stays with the verger of the cathedral, Mr. Worby. During a night visit to the cathedral, Worby tells him about the cathedral's history. The last dean that came to the cathedral had much of the inside remodeled. During the process of ripping out the choir area, they uncovered a mysterious tomb. Soon, people in the church seemed to die a little more often. People begin to notice some kind of crying throughout the nights. Some masons try to fix a chink in the tomb, but the piece they put in keeps falling out. They stick a paper in, but it feels like something inside grabs it. Worby, a small boy at the time, sneaks in to watch as the dean, his father and other men open the tomb. When it is opened, the men see a man come out of it. He is a hideous hairy figure. They block the tomb up again.

The Diary of Mr. Poynter and An Episode of Cathedral History Analysis

M.R. James again returns to the motif of men making unusual discoveries in these two stories. In the first, "The Diary of Mr. Poynter," James Denton buys a mysterious set of diaries from a bookshop. He has no clear idea as to their origins, but when they find a scrap of fabric in them that seems intriguing, it seems only natural to use that pattern for the curtains at their house. Even after reading through the diaries, Denton seems to pick up no misgivings about using the pattern. However, once the curtains are up, he has a



horrifying vision of a figure covered in hair. After further examining the diary, he learns the true origin of the fabric and its supernatural implications.

In "An Episode of Cathedral History," Mr. Lake learns about the dangers of awakening the dead. A new dean comes to the cathedral and tries to renovate it. However the spirit of the person in the tomb there awakens and seeks revenge by wreaking havoc on the lives and health of the people of the church. The only way they regain peace is to block up the tomb and leave it undisturbed.



The Uncommon Prayer-Book

The Uncommon Prayer-Book Summary

Mr. Davidson plans to do some work and travel a little while his family is out of town. He goes on a short trip, planning to walk back home, when he meets an old man. The man talks of an estate called Brookstone where his daughter is the wife of the caretaker. He tells him of a chapel there that interests Davidson, who decides to visit. The man's daughter, Mrs. Porter, tells him how the eight prayer books in the chapel are always opened to the same page, but they do not know who does it. She closes the books each time she comes in to clean. Back at the hotel, Davidson meets a strange man who seems to have an evil purpose about him. Davidson resolves to come back on St. Mark's Day on April 25, because the page the prayer-books are open to refer to that day.

Davidson and a friend return to the chapel, but find the prayer books are gone and fakes are in their places. Davidson realizes the strange man he met last time he was there must have something to do with it. Mrs. Porter said the man came to photograph some parts of the chapel. While Davidson figures out how to hunt the man down, two police officers are interviewing the assistant of a man called Mr. Poschwitz. The assistant tells them that he came into Mr. Poschwitz's office, and saw what looked like a great role of white flannel falling onto Poschwitz and appear to bite him. Poschwitz dies from the wounds, and the police think a snake is involved. When Davidson goes to the police with his case, they realize it is the same man.

The Uncommon Prayer-Book Analysis

Once again, a man who decides to travel stumbles on a mysterious object. In this story, it is a set of prayer books that mysteriously open to the same page. Davidson discovers that the unusual books always open to a page referring to a certain day, and resolves to find out what happens on that day. However, it seems he may have saved himself from a dire fate by Mr. Poschwitz, who steals the books. While Davidson is trying to figure out where the books could have been taken, Poschwitz finds out what happens when the books open on that day. A figure made of white attacks Poschwitz and kills him. Once his death is linked to the theft of the prayer books, the characters wisely decide to lock up the books so no one else is in danger. This is another tale of an evil man getting what he deserves at the hands of the supernatural.



A Neighbour's Landmark and A Warning to the Curious

A Neighbour's Landmark and A Warning to the Curious Summary

A NEIGHBOR'S LANDMARK

One day, a man was examining tracts in a library when he came upon an unusual verse about something that walks in Betton Wood that cries out. He is curious and asks his friend about it, who says it is part of his property. However his father had the forest cut down. The man goes to visit the site of the old forest and twice hears something scream in his ear. He flees the area quickly. His friend has been to see his father, who tells him his mother frequently heard the screams when she passes through the forest, and sometimes sees the figure of a woman. They later discover that it appears to be the ghost of a woman named Lady Ivy, who tries to steal the land by forging papers claiming she owns it. People believe that until the landmark marking the right division of land is replaced, she will forever walk the forest.

A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

Two men are vacationing in Seaburgh. They discuss the legend of three crowns that are believed to protect the country. One is dug up and melted down, another lost to the sea, but the third is supposedly still buried somewhere. At their hotel, they meet another man named Paxton who tells them he has discovered the third crown, but it is causing him trouble. He has heard rumors about where the crown is buried in Seaburgh, and they prove to be true. He asks the men to help him, saying he has seen a man following him ever since he took the crown. Later, after returning to their rooms, they find out Paxton has fled the hotel. They chase him, but he appears to run into a vision. When the men reach him, he is found dead.

A Neighbour's Landmark and A Warning to the Curious Analysis

These two stories continue the motif of strange and supernatural figures attacking the characters. In the first story, a man runs into the spirit of a woman in the forest. The woman screams twice in his ear, prompting him to flee and to investigate who she can be. They discover that she is the spirit of Lady Ivy, a woman who stole property from others. This indicates that she is a violent spirit and that anyone who dwells too long in the Betton Wood risks death. In "A Warning to the Curious," a man named Paxton learns that greed and curiosity has its downfalls. Intrigued by the reports of a crown buried in Seaburgh, he digs it up, only to discover that there is something protecting it.

He tries to do the right thing and replace the crown before something terrible happens, but he is unable to escape his fate.



Rats and The Experiment

Rats and The Experiment Summary

RATS

A man named Mr. Thomson stays at an inn in Suffolk, England. On one of his walks around the area, he finds a strange white stone in the road. When he returns to the inn, he asks the landlord about it. They do not know why it is there, but believe a sea mark may have been on it at one time. The next day, he roams through the inn and finds a strange room. However, there seems to be something laying in the room, and when it stirs, he backs out quickly. He makes an attempt to go on with his stay and ignore it. However, as he checks out, he goes back and peeks in, and sees just a scarecrow. He realizes it is a skeleton and faints. The landlords find him and tell him it is the former landlord. The landlord was hung at the stone by some highwaymen. The people from whom they purchased the house tell them to leave him in that room locked up and they would never have trouble.

THE EXPERIMENT

A man named Squire Francis Bowles dies. He has requested burial in an earthen grave instead of a vault. His wife gets everything in his will but cannot find any trace of the riches her husband should have. She and her son, Joseph receive a letter that indicates if they go to his grave and call his name, he will tell him where the treasure is. Joseph does this, but comes back frightened because they have awakened the squire. They try to escape on a boat to Holland, but the squire follows them there. They later confess to poisoning the squire and are executed. A passage indicates that the method they tried will also reveal those who have committed manslaughter.

Rats and The Experiment Analysis

The first story again concerns a traveler staying at an inn in a part of England that is foreign to him. The first indication that there is something supernatural involved is when he stumbles across a mysterious white stone in the center of town. He does not immediately connect this strange stone with the locked room at the inn. Thomson lets his curiosity get the best of him and invades the room, only to be punished with the fright of his life. The landlords come and explain the skeleton is left there because it offers protection to the inn. In the short story, "The Experiment," a woman and her son get what they deserve when they kill the Squire Francis Bowles in order to get their inheritance. However, they are stuck when they realize they do not know where their money is hidden. By a clever trick, they end up raising the squire, but his only goal is to expose their treachery. To escape him, they must confess to their crime and are revealed as murderers.



The Malice of Inanimate Objects and A Vignette

The Malice of Inanimate Objects and A Vignette Summary

THE MALICE OF INANIMATE OBJECTS

The narrator muses that sometimes it may seem that inanimate objects are out to get us. He relates a conversation between two elderly men. One of the men, Mr. Burton, has cut himself shaving that morning. The two men read about an acquaintance who has died after his throat was slit. The men go for a walk, and Mr. Burton keeps getting tripped up by inanimate objects. They see a kite and Burton puts his cane through it. Later, Burton takes a train home after visiting his friends, but is found with his throat slit.

A VIGNETTE

The narrator asks the reader to think of a spacious garden outside a country rectory. There is a gate that leads to a nearby park. The narrator says that the gate makes him nervous, ever since one time in the years before he went to school. As he goes through the gate into the garden, he feels like he is being watched. He begins to have nightmares about the gate. He fears that something watches him from outside at night. One day, when his family is gone, he looks out the window and sees something white through a hole in the gate. He creeps down and looks through, and finds himself confronted with a face. He flees to his house to await his family. The image haunts him for the rest of his life.

The Malice of Inanimate Objects and A Vignette Analysis

In the first story, "The Malice of Inanimate Objects," the characters learn that even the most innocent-looking objects may appear to have a mind of their own. Mr. Burton, a crotchety old man who does not appear to have a good word for anyone, seems to be attacked by the inanimate objects he encounters. He is eventually killed when it seems that his razor turns on him, possibly as revenge for the way he treats the people and objects around him.

In the final story, "A Vignette," the author shifts from his typical tale of a man encountering the supernatural shifts to that of a boy's point of view. In this story, the boy becomes frightened of a gate in the garden near his home. He gets the feeling that someone is watching him, and one day his fears are confirmed when he views a face through the gate. While he never experiences this again, he will never forget the ghostly image.



Characters

Dennistoun appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook and The Mezzotint

In the short story, Canon Alberic's Scrapbook, Dennistoun, the Englishman visits the village of S. Bertrand de Comminges in 1883. He travels with his friends on a vacation but his friends are not as interested in history as he is. He decides to visit the church of S. Bertrand. During his visit, the verger of the church notices him but seems very scared. Dennistoun disregards this, as he does not believe in the supernatural. The verger shows him a book he may be interested in purchasing. The book is a scrapbook created by Canon Alberic. The verger is willing to sell it to him for a price much less than it is actually worth and Dennistoun takes this as a bargain. However, he learns why the verger was so eager to sell it when he also sees the vision of the demon. This story sets up the motif throughout the collection of the solitary man encountering the supernatural. He is the only character to appear in more than one story, as he is also mentioned in the story called The Mezzotint.

Mr. Garrett appears in The Tractate Middoth

Mr. Garrett is a librarian who helps John Eldred try to find a book, but realizes he should actually be helping a woman named Mary Simpson. He is a fully developed character in this collection of short stories. Garrett is willing to help John Eldred find the book he is seeking, but whenever he tries, he keeps seeing a mysterious parson. Eventually, he meets Mary Simpson, who tells him she was supposed to get an inheritance from her uncle but cannot find the will. Garrett realizes the will is hidden in the book that Eldred was looking for, and tries to get it before Eldred can. However, Eldred has already had the book sent to him. Garrett races to his house, trying to stop Eldred before he destroys it. However, the ghost of the parson comes and attacks Eldred, killing him. Garrett is able to restore the will to Mary Simpson, and ends up marrying Simpson's daughter. This short story is the most fully developed in the collection and ends with a happy ending for the main character.

Mr. Anderson appears in Number 13

Mr. Anderson is the narrator's cousin in the short story Number 13. He stays at a hotel in Denmark, and learns about the suspicion that causes hotels not to have a room numbered 13. However, his experiences with the room 13 that he discovers appears and disappears in the hotel make him a believer in the supernatural. He at first believes it is someone else who is staying in the room, but soon learns the room does not always exist.



The Verger appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

The verger, also called the sacristan, is the caretaker of S. Bertrand's Church. He is visibly frightened of something when Dennistoun investigates the church. He eventually sells Dennistoun the scrapbook of Canon Alberic. He sees the demon that comes out of the book.

Mr. Kristensen appears in Number 13

Mr. Kristensen is the landlord of a hotel in Denmark in the short story Number 13. He learns that the mysterious room numbered 13 seems to appear and disappear in his hotel.

Canon Alberic de Mauleon appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

Canon Alberic de Mauleon is the creator of the scrapbook that changes mysteriously.

Mr. Williams appears in The Mezzotint

Mr. Williams works in a museum and acquires an unusual picture of a manor house. He learns that the picture changes and a mysterious figure appears to be proceeding across the lawn. He eventually learns that the events shown in the picture tie in with something that happened previously.

Mr. Nisbet appears in The Mezzotint

Mr. Nisbet is a friend of Mr. Williams who sees the changes in the mysterious picture. He tries to help Mr. Williams learn where the picture is from and why it is changing.

Mr. Wraxall appears in Count Magnus

Mr. Wraxall is a travel writer who visits the tomb of Count Magnus. He finds himself drawn to the tomb but accidentally awakens the count. He is later killed by the count.

Parkins appears in Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad

Parkins is a professor of ontography at St. James College. He finds a mysterious whistle that causes him to be attacked when it is blown.



Sampson appears in A School Story

Sampson is the headmaster of a boys' school. He seems to be haunted by a supernatural being.

Magnus De la Gardie appears in Count Magnus

Magnus De la Gardie is a count in Denmark who dabbles in the supernatural.

Mr. Filcher appears in The Mezzotint

Mr. Filcher is a servant of Mr. Williams. He sees the changes in the mysterious picture of the manor home.

Abbot Thomas appears in The Treasure of Abbot Thomas

Abbot Thomas is supposed to have hidden some treasure at the Abbey at Steinfeld.

Mr. Somerton appears in The Treasure of Abbot Thomas

Mr. Somerton is an antiquary who is interested in the treasure of Abbot Thomas.

Mr. and Mrs. Anstruther appears in The Rose Garden

Mr. and Mrs. Anstruther are a couple in the story called The Rose Garden.

John Eldred appears in The Tractate Middoth

John Eldred is a man who comes into a library looking for a book. He is trying to destroy a will that would take away all that he has inherited.

Mr. Burton appears in The Malice of Inanimate Objects.

Mr. Burton is a man who has terrible luck with inanimate objects. He is killed when his straight razor disobeys him while he is shaving.



Mary Simpson appears in The Tractate Middoth

Mary Simpson is a widow. She is supposed to gain an inheritance even if she can only find the copy of a will that entitles her to it.

Karswell appears in Casting the Runes

Karswell is a man who studies witchcraft and uses it to get revenge. He kills James Harrington and attempts to kill Mr. Dunning.

Dunning appears in Casting the Runes

Dunning is a man who gets on the bad side of Karswell. He is able to turn the tables, saving himself and causing Karswell's death.

John Harrington appears in Casting the Runes

John Harrington is a book reviewer who is killed by Karswell for giving him a bad review.

John Haynes appears in The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral

John Haynes is the former archdeacon of Barchester Cathedral. He is killed in revenge for murdering his predecessor.

Mr. Humphreys appears in Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance

Mr. Humphreys inherits an estate with a mysterious hedge garden.

Mr. Cooper appears in Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance

Mr. Cooper is a friend of Mr. Humphreys. He shows him the estate he has inherited.



Mr. Wilson appears in Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance

Mr. Wilson is the uncle of Mr. Humphreys, who leaves him an estate that includes the hedge maze.

Lady Wardrop appears in Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance

Lady Wardrop is an expert on hedge mazes who comes to see the maze. She visits Mr. Humphreys estate, but finds herself unnerved by the maze.

James Denton appears in The Diaries of Mr. Poynter

James Denton is a man who finds the diaries of William Poynter. He buys the books and allows his aunt to create curtains from a pattern found inside them.

William Poynter appears in The Diaries of Mr. Poynter

William Poynter is the author of a set of mysterious diaries.

Miss Denton appears in The Diaries of Mr. Poynter

Miss Denton is the aunt of James Denton who likes the pattern she has found in the diaries of William Poynter.

Mr. Lake appears in An Episode of Cathedral History

Mr. Lake is a researcher who visits the cathedral and learns its history.

Mr. Worby appears in An Episode of Cathedral History

Mr. Worby is the caretaker and the verger of the cathedral. He outlines the story of the mysterious tomb that is found in the cathedral.

Mr. Davidson appears in The Uncommon Prayer-book

Mr. Davidson unravels the mystery of the open prayer books. He determines that they have been stolen and is able to provide evidence leading to the thief.



Mrs. Porter appears in The Uncommon Prayer-Book

Mrs. Porter is a caretaker of the Brookstone estate. She cleans the chapel there and discovers the prayer books are somehow opened to the same page every time she comes in.

Mr. Poschwitz appears in The Uncommon Prayer-Book

Mr. Poschwitz is the man who steals the prayer books from Brookstone. He is later killed when a supernatural figure emerges from the books.

Lady Ivy appears in A Neighbour's Landmark

Lady Ivy is a woman who tried to steal land from her neighbors. Her spirit wanders the Bretton Wood, shrieking at those who pass through the area.

Paxton appears in A Warning to the Curious

Paxton is a man who finds a mysterious crown that leads to his death. He tries to return the crown to the place he found it but is unsuccessful.

Mr. Thomson appears in Rats

Mr. Thomson stays at an inn in Suffolk. He lets his curiosity get the best of him and invades a room no one should enter.

Squire Francis Bowles appears in The Experiment

Squire Francis Bowles comes back from the dead for revenge on his wife Mistress Bowles.

Mistress Bowles appears in The Experiment

Mistress Bowles is punished for killing her husband, Squire Francis Bowles. She poisons him, but when he is brought back to life she must confess to escape him.



Objects/Places

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook is a scrapbook bought by an Englishman who visits S. Bertrand de Comminges.

S. Bertrand de Comminges appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

S. Bertrand de Comminges is a decayed town in France. It is near the Pyrenees, which is a mountain range in France and Spain.

S. Bertrand's Church appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

S. Bertrand's Church is a church in S. Bertrand de Comminges.

The Pyrenees appears in Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

The Pyrenees is a mountain range in France and Spain.

Jutland Viborg appears in Number 13

Jutland Viborg is a town in Denmark.

The Golden Lion appears in Number 13

The Golden Lion is a hotel in Jutland Viborg.

Chozarin appears in Count Magnus

Chozarin is a city mentioned in Count Magnus. It is supposedly the city where the Antichrist is going to be born.



St. James College appears in Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad

St. James College is a college in England. Perkins is a professor there.

Cambridge appears in The Mezzotint

Cambridge is a city in England.

Abbey at Steinfeld appears in The Treasure of Abbot Thomas

Abbey at Steinfeld is where Abbot Thomas lived and was supposed to have hidden a treasure.

Westfield Hall appears in The Rose Garden

Westfield Hall is the home of Mr. and Mrs. Anstruther.

Barchester Cathedral appears in The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral

Barchester Cathedral is a church in England.

The Hedge Maze appears in Mr. Humphreys and His Inheritance

The Hedge Maze is located on the property Mr. Humphreys inherits from his uncle, Mr. Wilson.

Brookstone appears in The Uncommon Prayer-Book

Brookstone is a country estate in the short story, where Mrs. Porter is the caretaker.

Betton Wood appears in A Neighbour's Landmark

Betton Wood is a wood in England where a ghostly woman cries out when people walk by.



Seaburgh appears in A Warning to the Curious

Seaburgh is a town on the seaside of England where a mysterious crown is buried.

Suffolk appears in Rats

Suffolk is a city in England.



Themes

Supernatural vs. Reason

One of the primary themes running through all of the stories in M.R. James' collection, *Casting the Runes* and other *Ghost Stories*, is that of the supernatural versus reason or common sense. The protagonists of the story frequently start out either directly disbelieving or wary of anything supernatural. They tend to be cultured gentlemen who are more concerned with research or their work than investigating mysteries they may come across. However, through their experiences, they quickly become believers. For example, in the short story, "Number 13," the main character, Mr. Anderson, believes there must be a logical explanation behind his discovery of the thirteenth room. He has seen it with his own eyes and it is not until he has come to accept the other odd experiences that he believes the room is supernatural. Frequently, it takes several experiences to make a believer out of the main character. In the short story, "Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad," Parkins learns that the other bed in his room, which he has not touched, seems to have been slept in. However, he later remarks to his friend that he does not believe in the supernatural. That changes after he is attacked by a mysterious figure. In these stories and many others, M.R. James continues the theme of the protagonists becoming believers after they witness the supernatural with their own eyes.

The Solitary Man

In the majority of the stories contained in M.R. James' collection, *Casting the Runes* and other *Ghost Stories*, the protagonist is a lone man, quite often in territory unfamiliar to him as he travels for work or pleasure. The man is taken out of his element, thereby opening up the character to the fear and wariness that comes from being alone in a strange place, and heightening these feelings once something supernatural occurs. For example, in the short story, *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*, the main character Dennistoun visits the town of S. Bertrand de Comminges in 1883. He is traveling with two friends, who aren't as interested in archeology as he is. Therefore, he goes on his own to visit S. Bertrand Church, where a chain of events begins that leads to his supernatural experience. Frequently, the men who have these experiences have them alone, and are left to wonder if they really saw what they thought they did. The repeated use of a solitary male character also indicates that this is the type of person M.R. James feels most comfortable writing about. As an Englishman and a male, M.R. James is free to use characteristics of his own personality and inject them into the protagonists, giving them more valid and believable personas. Furthermore, as the primary goal of a short story is to get across the point quickly, James can use the reader's previous knowledge of how an English gentleman is expected to act, without spending pages on detailing each aspect of their character.



Religion

Religion is a dominant motif in several of the stories in M.R. James' collection, *Casting the Runes* and other *Ghost Stories*. The protagonists of the stories frequently come across mysterious objects or visit mysterious places with a religious history. Many of the short stories take place in a church, cathedral, rectory, or other religious place or house of worship. The use of religious icons and imagery in the stories serves to stress the differences between good and evil, implying that the supernatural beings that appear are demons or servants of the devil. For example, in the first story, "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook," the protagonist, Dennistoun, comes across a scrapbook that was created by a clergyman. However, one of the pictures in the scrapbook also brings about a demon. In the story, "The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral," the clergyman Haynes is a religious man who is also a murderer. The story revolves around Haynes getting what he deserves for the murder of his predecessor, thereby restoring the balance between good and evil. In the story, "The Uncommon Prayer-books," on a certain day a malevolent figure emerges from the books and kills a man. Throughout the stories, James continues to play with the idea of good versus evil. He reveals how ostensibly good objects and people may actually have hidden and often violent tendencies.



Style

Point of View

Throughout the stories contained in the short story collection, "Casting the Runes and other Ghost Stories," by M.R. James, the author varies in using either the first-person point of view or the third-person point of view. In several of the stories, James uses an impartial narrator who tells the story of a grisly murder or a mysterious occurrence. He uses the first-person narration in this case, although the narrator is someone removed from the action, only describing what he has heard from another or what has been told to him. In short stories like "A Vignette," the author uses a first-person point of view to make the action seem more immediate and to make the experiences the narrator goes through more personal for the reader. In other stories, he uses a third-person point of view, describing the actions of the characters, and to some degree, their interior emotions and views. However, James' heavy reliance on the first-person narrator describing an event told to him or that he reads is used to great effect to add to the believability of the stories. Ghost stories are frequently told as if they have happened to someone in real life. By doing this, James creates the atmosphere a group of people sitting around a fire on a cold winter's night, when they are much more likely to believe there is truth to stories like these.

Setting

There are several basic settings used for the stories contained in the short story collection, "Casting the Runes and other Ghost Stories," by M.R. James. The first and most typical setting is a small village, seaside town, or estate in England. James is a native of England, and by writing about the country he grew up in, he is able to use intimate and precise details to bring the story home to the reader. In addition, many of the people who read his stories would also be in England and would be able to identify with the places he is writing about. James is also very familiar with the city of Suffolk during his lifetime, and this is apparent as he uses this in several of his stories, including "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," "A Warning to the Curious," and "Rats." James also frequently uses religious places to set the stage for his writing, such as rectories, churches, and cathedrals. Using settings such as these adds to the dimension of good versus evil that is found in his stories, as well as the notion of belief in the supernatural. Furthermore, James also sets some of his stories in mysterious or ancient towns in other countries, such as France or Denmark. On these occasions, he is taking the characters out of places with which he is familiar, allowing the characters to more fully experience their fright and uneasiness when strange things occur far away from home. He keeps to the time period in which he was alive, most notably the 1800s. Overall, James uses incredibly detailed and well-described settings to ensure the reader is able to fully involve themselves in the events of the stories.



Language and Meaning

The collection, "Casting the Runes and other Ghost Stories," by M.R. James, is told primarily using a Gothic and formal tone. James writes during the Victorian period in England, an era characterized by descriptive and detailed writing. The tone of the stories is primarily suspenseful, luring the reader in by using implication and suggestion to involve the reader in the story. James frequently allows the reader to participate in the story by trying to determine what is happening or why something is happening. James knows that one of the most important aspects of good storytelling is creating a well-drawn atmosphere, especially in a ghost story. The sense of foreboding and uneasiness that the characters feel must also be felt by the reader to be effective. James takes the characters from their calm and everyday situations, and slowly twists the supernatural knife until the shock or twist is revealed. The stories also have a somewhat dark tone because James usually focuses on the darker nature of the spirit world. Most of the spirits encountered in the stories are malevolent or evil and usually out to hurt the protagonist. On only a few occasions is the spirit in a story out to get revenge against an injustice. Overall, James uses the progression from normality to horrific in each of his stories to evoke emotion and the desired response, usually that of fright from the reader.

Structure

The collection, "Casting the Runes and other Ghost Stories," by M.R. James, is divided into several short stories. The author uses a similar structure for many of his stories, usually beginning with a solitary man who has gone on a journey usually for work but sometimes on vacation. The protagonist then discovers a strange object, usually something that no one can explain or shed light on. The protagonist investigates the object or uses it, and the possession of the object is usually enough to bring a supernatural figure to him. Depending on the interaction with the figure, the protagonist may die, or may survive and learn he needs to get rid of the object or return it to its rightful place. Most often, after this experience, the protagonist learns something that sheds light on the identity of the figure and why it may have attacked him. James uses this structure for the majority of his stories. This structure allows James to build up the suspense, as he usually begins with a protagonist who does not believe in the supernatural and does not want anything to do with it. However, as the man goes on with his research or work, he finds himself drawn into mysterious experiences, yet he still may not believe. Finally, when the figure comes to visit him, the man is forced into being a true believer or faces the consequences.



Quotes

"'Once,' Dennistoun said to me, 'I could have sworn I heard a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. I darted an inquiring glance at my sacristan. He was white to the lips.'" Canon Alberic's Scrapbook, pg. 2.

"In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale dusky skin covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny, and wrinkled." Canon Alberic's Scrapbook, pg. 10.

"In the middle of the lawn in front of the unknown house there was a figure where no figure had been at five o'clock that afternoon. It was crawling on all fours towards the house, and it was muffled in a strange black garment with a white cross on the back." The Mezzotint, pg. 18.

"He had tried the wrong door, of course. Was his own room to the right or to the left? He glanced at the number. It was 13." Number 13, pg. 28.

"'Perhaps,' said the landlord with hesitation, 'you gentlemen would like another room for tonight - a double-bedded one?'" Number 13, pg. 40.

"What can he do but lock his door and cry to God?" Count Magnus, pg. 56.

"'But it is not so evident what more the creature that came in answer to the whistle could have done than frighten. There seemed to be absolutely nothing material about it save the bed clothes of which it had made itself a body.' Oh Whistle, and I'll come to You, My Lad, pg. 76-77.

"I believe I am now acquainted with the extremity of terror and revulsion which a man can endure without losing his mind." The Treasure of Abbot Thomas, pg. 94.

"If you don't come to me, I'll come to you." A School Story, pg. 101.

"My deal, I feel as if another of the same would turn me silly. You have no ideas of the dreams I had. I couldn't speak of them when I work up, and if this room wasn't so bright and sunny I shouldn't care to think of them even now." The Rose Garden, pg. 111.

"I didn't take in the lower part of his face, I did see the upper part, and it was perfectly dry and the eyes were very deep-sunk; and over them from the eyebrows to the cheek-bone, there were cobwebs thick. Now that closed me up, as they say, and I can't tell you anymore." The Tractate Middoth, pg. 122.

"Yes, I think he has all the possibilities of a distinguished criminal, has Karswell." Casting the Runes, pg. 138.



"When I grew in the wood, I was water'd with blood, now in the church I stand, who that touches me with his hand, if a bloody hand he bear, I counsell him to be ware, lest he be fetcht away, whether by night or day, but chiefly when the wind blows high, in a night of February." *The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral*, pg. 171.

"Ashes? What did you make of them?" *Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance*, pg. 198.

"But of the face which was now rising to within a few inches of his own no feature was discernible, only hair." *The Diary of Mr. Poynter*, pg. 208.

"'Black it was,' he'd say, 'and a mass of hair and two legs, and the light caught on its eyes.'" *An Episode of Cathedral History*, pg. 226.

"Those who spend the greater part of their time in reading or writing books are, of course, apt to take rather particular notice of accumulations of books when they come across them." *A Neighbour's Landmark*, pg. 244.

"No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown - at least no one had. But our man gazed at us with a rueful eye. 'Yes,' he said, 'and the worst of it is I don't know how to put it back.'" *A Warning to the Curious*, pg. 263.

"In the lives of all of us, short or long, there have been days, dreadful days, on which we have had to acknowledge with gloomy resignation that our world has turned against us." *The Malice of Inanimate Objects*, pg. 288.



Topics for Discussion

The protagonist in each of M.R. James' story is usually a lone man who is frequently in a foreign country. Why does M.R. James use this particular type of character for each story? How does he as the writer use this to identify with the reader?

Why does M.R. James frequently place the action in his stories in foreign countries? Does this enhance or detract from the supernatural overtones to the stories? Why or why not?

How do the protagonists of each story usually act when the supernatural events start occurring? Do they tend to believe immediately or retain some sense of being skeptical? How does their upbringing contribute to this?

Frequently, the protagonist of the story stays at or visits a religious area. How does this bring the idea of good versus evil, and God versus the devil into the stories? Is it effective to create a more definite horror in the reader?

How does the language used by M.R. James contribute to the ghostly effects he attempts in each of the stories? Does the proper, flowery, and especially descriptive language used throughout the stories contribute to the tone effectively? Why or why not?

Several of the stories revolve around one supernatural object or place. How does this anchor the story? What do these items appear to stand for or represent? Explain.

Compare and contrast the descriptions of the supernatural figures used in many of the stories. What similarities and differences can be found? Do the descriptions of the figures differ depending on whether they seem innocent or malevolent? Explain.