The Locked Room and Other Horror Stories

M.R. James

About the author
Montague Rhodes James was born in 1862 in Kent and died in 1936. He developed a taste for old books from a precocious age. He was a great scholar, particularly of languages and the Bible, and he studied at Cambridge University (gaining a double first class honours degree in Classics and Archaeology) and later became head of King’s College, Cambridge, and of Eton College, one of the most famous of Britain’s public boarding schools. James’s writing was influenced by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, whom James considered to be among the very best writers of ghost stories. Le Fanu’s stories, some of which James edited, were particularly frightening. James wanted not only to emulate him but also to add the element of supernatural horror to his own stories, which he did, to chilling effect, in several collections of short stories published in the first part of the twentieth century. His output of learned books was prodigious, and the ghost stories for which he is now chiefly known formed only a tiny part of his busy life: his books, the university and Eton were his life. He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1930.

Summary
These stories are more frightening than those of almost any other writers. They have revenge, murder, ghosts, and black magic. There are strange and horrible creatures, witches, hearts that are cut out of bodies, paintings that seem to be different every time somebody looks at them, strange screams that are heard in the night and bodies without eyes, noses or mouths.

The Ash-Tree
Mrs Mothersole is hanged under the suspicion of being a witch after Mr Fell described her climb into an ash tree outside Castringham Hall. He and later his grandson are killed by strange hairy animals. When the tree is burnt down, the bones of a woman are found.

A School Story
Mr Sampson teaches Latin and he is well liked because he asks students to invent sentences. He keeps a coin with his initials. Then strange things happen. Mr Sampson disappears. A year later, his bones and the coin are found in a well.

The Curtains
Mr Denton loves books. He must get curtains for his new house but buys an old diary instead. He finds a nice drawing and has it turned into the design for the curtains. But it is the hair of a dead student.

The Flies
Mr Davis and his young friend often walk together in dark lonely places. One day, the villagers discover the body of the young man hanging from a rope dressed in black. They want to tell Mr Davis about it but he is dead too. There is a knife next to him and his heart is gone. Not being believers, they are buried outside the village. Later a pool of blood appears and flies feed in it. When the insects fly to Mr Davis’s house, the villagers burn it.

The Locked Room
Thomson opens the locked room in the bar where he is staying and a pile of clothes with a knife in them and blood running down comes towards him. He faints and then learns from the owners that it is the ghost of a man who was murdered comes back to haunt his old house. He promises not to tell anyone so as not to scare guests away.

The Painting of—ngley Hall
Mr Williams collects paintings and is sent one that might interest him. The picture is rather uninteresting and also very expensive. But there is a strange person in it that changes as time passes. He finds out the name of the place it depicts and the mystery of a disappeared baby and a man who was hanged in Essex.

Lost Hearts
Mr Abney has read that you can control things by magic. But first you need to take the heart of three young children under twenty-one. He has done this to a
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stranded boy and girl and is now planning to do the same to his bereaved young cousin, Stephen Elliot. The ghost of the other two return to save him and kill their killer.

Martin’s Lake
George Martin, a young gentleman, makes a poor unwanted waitress happy by dancing and walking with her. This later prevents him from marrying an excellent match, and so he stabs the girl and drowns her in a nearby lake but she comes back and takes revenge on him.

The Two Cousins
Here, a man comes back from the grave to prevent someone from trying to destroy his will. Mr Eldred goes into the library looking for a book called The Tractate Middoth but Mr Garret, the assistant, finds an ugly short man reading it. On holiday, he learns it hides the will of a rich man to favour his niece. She has not been able to find it but he helps her recover the inheritance and marries her daughter.

Background and themes

The stories of M.R. James include the traditions of both the ghost story, which had become so popular in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the horror story, a genre which was also to gain in popularity as the century progressed. The collection of short stories is rightly referred to as horror stories rather than ghost stories, as the supernatural plays more of a part than it does in ghost stories. Horror stories were not new even at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their origins can be traced right back to the legends of Greece and Rome, or even earlier, with stories of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Prometheus the firebringer, the bride of Corinth, and the hellhound Cerebrus, who was guardian of Hades. But for many it was not until 1782 that the tradition of horror really began, when the Zurich-born painter John Henry Fuseli exhibited a painting called The Nightmare. It depicted a young woman asleep with an evil spirit sitting on her stomach, and a mirror that should have reflected the spirit but didn’t. This image became the accepted way of visualising nightmares and horror, and it aroused enormous interest in horror stories. It is not surprising, then, that the nineteenth century gave rise to the great horror stories which still play a part in international culture, and can be found today not only in books and films, but also in comics, advertisements, computer games, and even amusement park rides. Most historians agree that the modern horror story was born in the early part of the nineteenth century, when the poets Byron and Shelley, Shelley’s wife Mary, and some of their friends amused themselves while staying on Lake Geneva by telling frightening stories with a supernatural element, which later led to famous novels.

Discussion activities

Before reading
1 Group work: Put students into small groups. Ask them to look up superstitious in their dictionaries and then to discuss the following:
   a What should a good horror story contain?
   b Are you superstitious? If so, what are you superstitious about?
2 Write: (page vii) Ask students to make a list of the elements James uses to make his stories real and frightening.

The Ash-Tree

After reading
3 Role play: Act out Sir Matthew Fell and the vicar’s conversation after Mrs Mothersole has been hanged. Sir Matthew feels uncomfortable and guilty and the vicar tells him it’s not his fault.
4 Pair work: Get students to talk to another student and answer the following: Do you believe in witches? What kinds of thing can witches do?

A School Story

After reading
5 Pair work: Ask students in pairs to make up a story around the following: Why do you think the tall, thin man comes to get Sampson?
6 Discuss: Ask students to discuss their school days. What is/are their school days like? Is/Was this a positive, pleasant, rewarding experience? Why/why not?

The Curtains

After reading
7 Role play: Ask students to role play James Denton and his friend’s conversation when James Denton rushes to his friend’s room after seeing the thing that is ‘almost human’.
8 Discuss: Ask students to make up a story about how and why Everard Charlett died. Then have the class vote for the most frightening one.

The Flies

After reading
9 Group work: Put students into small groups. They imagine they have just bought the land where Mr Davis’s house had stood. They want to build a house on the land. However, they have just been told the story of ‘The Flies’. What are they going to do? How do they feel?
10 **Pair work:** One of the men from the village thinks the young man put Davis to sleep, killed him and then killed himself. Do you have any better ideas? Talk to another student.

11 **Discuss:** People dislike flies. They are associated with dirt, rot and decay. What do people think of flies in the students’ culture?

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**The Locked Room**

**After reading**

12 **Write:** Ask students to write the postcard Thomson could have written his family to tell them about the house and his plans.

13 **Role play:** (page 23) Ask students to imagine Thomson meets them after he has seen the body in the locked room. He is definitely upset. They role play the conversation in pairs.

14 **Discuss:** Ghosts do not come near you if you leave them alone. This is what Mr and Mrs Betts did in the best interest of their business. They learned to live near a ghost. Ask students what other difficult situations they might have to put up with for a greater good, although not necessarily a financial one.

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**The Painting of—ngley Hall**

**After reading**

15 **Group work:** Draw on the board a simple picture of Mr Williams’s painting as he first saw it. Ask students to copy it and change the picture to one of the other descriptions of it in the story. For example: A person is standing under the dark trees at one side of the picture. The other students have to say who in the story saw the picture in that way (John Garwood). Then the groups compare their versions of the picture.

16 **Discuss:** Ask students in small groups to discuss what could have happened at the Hall. People believe that Tom Gawdy’s ghost took the baby. What was the official version of the story?

17 **Pair work:** How did you feel when you read this story? Get students to write four adjectives and then compare them with a partner’s. Then ask students to compare their adjectives with other students’ adjectives.

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**Lost Hearts**

**After reading**

18 **Role play:** (pages 36–37) Put students into groups of three. Students role play the conversation in Lost Hearts where Stephen describes his dream to Mr Abney and Mrs Bunch.

19 **Group work:** In the same groups, students tell each other about a dream they have had. Ask them to discuss whether dreams sometimes come true, and whether it is possible to find meanings in dreams.

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**Martin’s Lake**

**After reading**

20 **Write:** (page 43) Ask students to write an entry in Ann’s diary the night after she danced with George. Encourage them to reflect how happy she must have felt.

21 **Discuss:** (page 45) Ask students to discuss the following questions: How do the rumours in the town shape the story? How different would the story have been if he had lived in a big city? What should George have done differently?

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**The Two Cousins**

**After reading**

22 **Discuss:** Ask students in groups to discuss the following questions: What could have made Dr Rant dislike George? Why did he make it that difficult for Mrs Simpson to get the will? Was he trying to test her character? Then they share their views.

23 **Guess:** Ask students in pairs to guess what could have happened with the book where the will was. Did it go back to the library? Did Garrett and his wife keep it?

24 **Discuss:** Ask students in small groups to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of reading books from a library.

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**Extra activities**

25 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss these questions: Which of the stories in this book has proved the most frightening? Which did you enjoy the most? Why?

26 **Discuss:** Point out to students that many stories have the basic problem as the title of the story e.g. The Ash-Tree and The Curtains. Put students into groups to think of a strange title for a story, then they should give their title to another group, who must make up a story around the title.

27 **Discuss:** Teach *revenge* and *black magic*. Put students into groups and ask them to discuss these questions. Then they share their opinions with the rest of the class.

(a) Do you believe in black magic? (This is described in Lost Hearts and The Flies)
(b) Do you believe in taking revenge on people who have hurt you? Why/why not?
(c) Which characters in these stories do you find the most frightening? Why?