

# The red room – literary analysis



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Herbert George Wells, now more commonly known as HG Wells was born on September 21, 1866. One of the most defining incidents of his life is said to be an accident he had in 1874, when he was seven years old, which left him bedridden with a broken leg.

To pass the time he started reading, and soon became devoted to the other worlds and lives to which books gave him access; they also stimulated his desire to write. He is now considered one of the most defining authors of his time, and the leading role in the creation of the science horror / fiction genre. One of the most memorable short stories from his horror fiction stories is ‘ The Red Room. ‘ I will be examining how fear is represented in this story. The aspect of writing that HG Wells employs is the genre of horror fiction.

Horror fiction can be described as “ a painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay. ” Horror fiction is intended elicit powerful emotions from the reader. Although a good deal of it is about the supernatural or the unexplained; any fiction with a morbid, gruesome, surreal or frightening theme may be termed “ horror”. Horror fiction often overlaps with science fiction; Wells was a master of the genre. Many or all horror fiction readers actually desire to be scared by the very books that they read, as the author Douglas Winter stated “ Horror is not a genre, like the mystery, crime or western. It is not a kind of fiction, meant to be confined to the ghetto of a special shelf in libraries or bookstores.

Horror is an emotion. ” The Red Room has the typical standpoint of a gothic story, set in an old manor house. Wells uses an enormous amount of descriptive writing to give the appearance of a house that is alive with fear.

The characters may not even be able to sense it at first, but they come to realise that “ There is fear in that room of hers – black fear. ” The genre of the Red room may also be of importance, Wells was using the “ gothic” tradition in 1897, when the actual genre dated back to the beginning of the 1800’s.

He uses an old genre to show that some view from the past need to be respected. Also, although this appears to be a story which looks to the past it is in many ways forward thinking. Psychological ghost stories did not appear as a genre by themselves until the 20 th century. Grotesque features are used in the description of the three custodians in The Red Room, to suggest that they belong to a different age. One in which ghosts and spectres were much more ‘ tangible’ than the new Victorian times.

The old woman, with her pale eyes staring at the fire tries to make the young man believe that this house is different to any that he may have been before, however, with his mind tied firmly to the roots of the Victorian ‘ reason’ argument he presses on. Classic horror items are included, with the introduction of the third custodian behind a creaky door. He stumbles in with a single crutch and a shade covering his eyes. His lips ‘ half averted’ from his ‘ decaying’ teeth suggests that there is already a sense of living death.

The only speech between them is the repeated phrase from the man ‘ with the withered arm’ of: “ It is your own choosing. ” The limited dialogue between them creates an air of tension, which the newcomer pierces with, “ It’s my own choosing. He is simply humouring them, willing for the time when he will be allowed to see what he had come for. The atmosphere is

slow and plodding, there is a sense that some large amount of time may have passed without the main character doing anything. Sinister imagery is created by the third custodian when he ‘threw back his head’ and we catch a glimpse of the ‘small, bright and inflamed’ eyes.

One could argue that this could be a description of the devil, or another creature of hell. When he begins to ‘cough and splutter’ again, we see his physical frailties as just an old man. There is an important social class distinction between the old custodians of the house, and the new ‘reasoning’ attitude of the man. It is also important to note that the Victorians believed that they were quite revolutionary, and they tended to look back at the past as if it were the dark ages. The setting is also typical of Gothic and Victorian ghost stories.

Dilapidated and derelict buildings were often inhabited by people who neglected their own welfare and were regarded as morally corrupt.

Victorians prized order and appearances important indicators of character. Gloominess suggested by the cold and dark contribute to the atmosphere of oppression and neglect. A ‘monstrous’ shadow is created as the old man pours a drink; the firelight engorges and distorts it so it seems as if the shadow is mocking him. By this time, the narrator's feeling of calmness in the presence of these strange old people has taken a battering ‘I had scarcely expected these grotesque custodians,’ they seem unreal or even atavistic.

He begins to feel uncomfortable with their ‘evident unfriendliness to me and each other. This is why he moves suddenly, asking for a guide to show him the haunted room he had come for. There is little movement except for

another glance from the third custodian with the red rimmed eyes from under his shade; the shade could also be a metaphor for the Grim Reaper, as a bringer of death and dismay. He asks again, and is this time addressed by the man 'with the withered arm' "If you go to the red room to-night-" The old woman cuts in with another warning, "This night of all nights!" which suggests that this may be more than an unusual night, "you go alone."

Imagery is used when the narrator asks for directions to the haunted room. The directions are complex, which gives the impression of a maze, leading further and further away from safety. The corridors could also be described as claustrophobic and subterranean, perhaps even a decent into hell. As the narrator moves towards the door, the man with the shade 'staggered' towards the table creating imagery of two sides.

On one: the narrator, young and with the Victorian sense of reason and sense. On the other: warmth, imagined security and that of the supernatural. The old man repeats again, "It's your own choosing," building tension, there seems to be a greater expectation of something going to happen. The narrator loses a little more of his sense of reason as he walks down the passage, the 'oddness of the three old pensioners affected me in spite of my efforts to keep myself at a matter-of-fact phase. 'Metaphors of darkness of fear are used in 'fashions born in death brains.' As he reaches the landing, the narrator listens for a rustling he thought he had heard, and then is satisfied with absolute silence.

This is another use of imagery, as there is only absolute silence in death. The moonlight picked out everything in vivid black shadow or silvery illumination'

is an oxymoron of light and darkness, it enhances fear; putting it in black and white perspective. A 'bronze group' paints a shadow on the wall that gives the impression of someone crouching to attack the narrator. It is at this point that the reader first hears of the revolver in his pocket; if he doesn't believe at all in ghosts, why would he need protection against them? Once inside the Red Room even the narrator understands 'the legends that had sprouted in its black corners, its germinating darkness. Germinating gives the image of the shadows growing larger, as an unstoppable force of nature. His candle is but a 'little tongue of flame in its vastness' the metaphor suggesting that the shadows are surrounding him, darkness is triumphing over light.

Using reason to 'dispel any fanciful suggestions of its obscurity before they obtained a hold on me,' the narrator has a changing demeanour: from one of almost believing in the legend of the place, quickly moving onto one of reason to scientifically prove that there is nothing there. Fear is created with the narrator continuing to using reason to reassure himself, "in a flash of absent-mindedness?" He then realises that the candles are not just going out from a sudden gust of wind, "the flames vanished as if the wicks had been suddenly nipped between finger and thumb." The tension escalates and fear is represented with a queer 'high note getting into my voice.' His mind starts to give way to the hysterical as he speaks to the rapidly disappearing candle flames. The pace of the section also increases as he struggles to keep up with the rapid extinction of light. Metaphors of fear and darkness are used '.

.. losed upon me like the shutting of an eye' '... wrapped about me in a stifling embrace' Extensive description of his failed attempts to find the door and his ever rising fear are used to heighten tension.

The story reopens in the light, as if he is now back in the real world. The old custodians no longer seem strange or insane; they speak to him as one who ' grieves for a broken friend. ' When describing what ' followed him through the corridor and fought against him in the room' he describes fear as a tangible thing, and gives it human qualities. This kind of personification adds to the effectiveness of the story as a whole.