

The importance of place in "the red room"

Literature



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For many people, the scene of a creepy setting is quite familiar and the stereotypical version of this is used very frequently. Take your standard horror movie for instance; *Scream*, *Freddy*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, they all use the same 'average day' scenery to make it appear as if could happen to anyone at anytime. Then, in the need for tension and anticipation, directors use a vulnerable effect in that a victim cannot escape. In the opening scene of *Scream*, the girl is trapped inside her own house, with the presumption that the killer is inside too.

With the killer taking up her only form of communication; the phone, she begins to panic for she now comprehends that the killer can see her every move. Or take a classic old time thriller like *The Last House On The Left*, the significance of the orthodox setting is inevitably the main supernatural element. Notice how on opening scenes, the matter of isolation and abandonment is used, to make the point apparent that you are alone with no source of help for miles.

The reason being for this effect is to enhance an admission of defenselessness and vulnerability over the audience, and above all, a state of realization that the same could happen to them. The same applies throughout " *The Red Room*", except HG Wells does not begin his quest for explanation and depiction until at least a 1/4 way through. Instead, the piece begins with dialogue and the line " It will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me" tells us two things, 1.) He is an educated and well-read man, and 2.) The story involves a ghost.

It also constructs an atmosphere of irony, as if straight away the reader is told that this is the victim. Just like in Freddy, the person who least believes in the danger, is the first to be axed. The idea of eeriness begins even before the piece starts, in the title. "The Red Room" immediately attracts the reader's attention because it is symbolic but leaves unanswered questions. "What is the red room? " "Why is it red? " We associate red with fear and danger. Is this room dangerous? Overall, the title raises so much curiosity that it has an overwhelming effect, wanting us to read on and find answers to our questions.

Also, by having the other characters persistently repeat the phrase: "It's your own choosing," not only makes the narrator a little anxious but the reader too. We begin to consider, How bad can this room be? The idea of opposites; the skeptics against the wise, also, build drama and drama builds tension. By the mere directions to the room: "You go along a passage for a bit until you come to a door, and through that is a spiral staircase, and halfway up that is a landing and another door with baize.

Go through that and down the long corridor to the end, and the red room is on your left up the steps. tension and anticipation is being added, as it starts to mirror the rhyme "In a dark, dark house, there is a dark, dark..." we read as a child. So, as the bulky paragraph describing the corridor emerges, it's obvious what to expect. In the first sentence alone, three stereotypical remarks are used; moonlight, black shadows and silvery illumination. But then, the following sections begin to add depth, by trailing long, descriptive sentences across the paragraph. By using this effect, the reader gets a sense of nervousness and timidity of the narrator, without having to tell them so.

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It's as if the narrator is trying to mask his emotions by using distracting descriptions of the room. For example, the sentence: " A bronze group stood upon the landing, hidden from me by the corner of the wall, but its shadow fell with marvelous distinctiveness upon the white paneling, and gave me the impression of someone crouching to waylay me. " could effortlessly have been broken into two or three sentences, but instead was used with rapid punctuation to exhibit the anxiety and fretfulness of the narrator. The language of the characters play an important part in the setting.

The old people have an old English vocabulary, whereas the young man is given a very upper class and stylish vocabulary. Around the theme of the story, the language relating to the young man's experience is described in very short sentences with a lot of punctuation. I feel that this makes the reader, as a person, interact more with the character and his journey. By having the every move of the character closely watched and described, we en-gather a more precise understanding of how he acts and how he sees the situation.

For when he says: " The echoing of the stir and crackling of the fire was no sort of comfort to me", we not only find how uneasy he is, but we also find how he pictures and takes on board the events of the room. We also begin to familiarize ourselves with him as he becomes lost for words and unable to put his finger on what it is that's making him uncomfortable. The line: "... that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking, living thing, that comes so easily in silence and solitude," in my opinion, particularly added and heightened the effect of tension.

By following this exceedingly complex sentence: " A bronze group stood upon the landing, hidden from me by the corner of the wall, but it's shadow fell with marvelous distinctiveness upon the white paneling, and gave me the impression of someone crouching to waylay me, " with the line: " I stood rigid for half a minute perhaps," a simple statement, we instantly apprehend the position in which the narrator is in, not only via the specific actions, but also from the way in which the sentence is written.

It is kept short and striking for anticipation purposes and because of this the effect is carried off efficiently. The reader immediately undergoes apprehension because by keeping the suspense trailing on for longer, it builds up the reader's need to discover the room. Then, as the character enters the room, one would presume the climax would have come to an end, yet the suspense is still being held, right through the whole paragraph. It is here that the location of the story is introduced, the location is critical to the short story.

The story is set in a castle. A ghost story in a castle is not a new idea and although it is a rather unoriginal location, it is very appropriate. The old people who inhabit the place cannot use most of it to live in because they are afraid of the 'red room'. This keeps them well away from that section of the castle. A castle is such an appropriate location and here what we do not know is far more frightening than what we do know. A castle is a perfect example of what we do not know! It is full of rooms, corridors and stairs.

As the story continues, the young man explores the castle on his journey to the red room. On route to the red room, he comes across what looks like a

figure in front of him only to find it was an ornament of a Chinaman on a buhl table. Then as he approaches the door to the red room, the tension builds and he enters very quickly closing the door behind him. He finds himself in a huge red walled room. As he continues to arrange the room, the tension is allowed to fall giving the reader a certain release.

As he becomes more aware of the shadows in the room the tension rises again: The shadow in the alcove at the end in particular had that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking, living thing, that comes so easily in silence and solitude. " Again, this shows us how darkness is far more frightening than being able to see and knowing what is there. Tension is built by how the young man expresses his feelings. To conquer his fear of the unknown the man places a candle in an alcove in the corner of the room: " At last, to reassure myself, I walked with a candle into it, and satisfied myself that there was nothing tangible there.

I stood that candle upon the floor of the alcove, and left it in that position. " As he begins talking to himself, the tension mounts but after listening to the eerie echoes, he gets more frightened than before. The tension increases now all the time. He is getting more nervous and he feels the need for more candles. His spirits lift but there is also nervousness created through his black humour. He may be watching what he describes as " cheery and reassuring little streaming flames," but he is getting nervous and he jokes about how he should warn any ghost about tripping over a candle on the floor.

As we realize he is becoming frightened, this big, strong man who earlier boasted of his assurance, we too become slightly nervous. As the first candle goes out, casting a black shadow on the wall, the second candle follows and the tension in the story is boosted as there is uncertainty about why the candle went out. Although the man does not feel any draft, he claims that it was a draft that blew it out. He tries to reassure himself by lying to himself although he has a deeper feeling that he may not be alone.

He states: By this time I was in a state of considerable nervous tension, although to my reason there was no adequate cause for the condition" and " I postulated quite unreservedly that nothing supernatural could happen, and to pass the time I began to string some rhymes together. " And then he enters a true stage of paranoia and begins to talk to himself and he has to dismiss this from his mind otherwise he would become the victim of his own fears. As he goes over to re-light the candle, it goes out, then another and another.

Then one is extinguished in front of him while he is looking at it. Shadows seemed to take another step towards me", which firstly is a use of personification, and secondly a use of symbolization; truth. The light symbolizes the truth and without light, there is no truth. If the light goes out he has no way of finding out what is in the red room. The darkness creates the tension and fear. In light, we can see but when it is dark we cannot see and therefore tension and fear is everywhere. When the man says that the shadows take another step towards him, he is saying that fiction is closing in on him and as it does, he is been drawn away from the truth.

Panic comes as the room plunges into shadows with him racing around trying to keep up with the candles as they go out. Approaching the epiphany, the tension is further highlighted, as the sentences become shorter. Clumsily he knocks his thigh against the table thus his downfall begins from here. From here on he loses control. It is as if he is in sinking sand and the rope stopping him from sinking completely snaps. He loses his quest for the truth as he tries to light the fire with the last candle. He runs into something and knocks himself out. For me this is the epiphany. Then there is a gap in time; tension starts to unwind slowly.

He wakes up the next morning after being rescued at dawn by the old people. He personifies fear with the red room. He has had a fight with his fear and in the end his fear wins. The old man then begins his speech with short, snappy sentences, and in running order, all 4 sentences are written in this manner which creates a weary and distressed ending to a tension filled story. All throughout the piece, we expect the room to be haunted by ghosts, or have daunting monsters lurking inside, but as we get to the final speech, we realize that is isn't any of these things, not even remotely.

For the supernatural fear, is fear itself. The idea that someone or something is inside was brought up by the narrator himself, as a figure of his imagination, a constant worry and paranoia. Because in real life, or real people, the idea of being scared, is frightening enough, without having to test oneself in an inexplicable and unexplained room. I believe that the room was harmless, and with the assistance of a ghostly appearance and a tiny idea set to uncoil in his mind, the quest for tension is rewarded. The writer needs to give his story a carefully considered and appropriate backdrop.

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A short story works through its location, characters, and setting in time and language. These are the ingredients that tie it together and make the mixture complete. In this story however, I feel the setting is insignificant. I feel that it is not necessarily the setting and the scenery that captivates a mood of fearfulness, because as we have now encountered, the background, the room, wasn't scary. It's the idea that something is there, an expectation that creates a constant uneasiness. Because all you have to do is imagine what could happen and your mind begins to play tricks on you.