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by Nataliya Oryshchuk

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ABSTRACT

In his ghost stories, M.R. James disclosed the most irrational and fearful aspects of archaic demonology still haunting the modern world. He turns humans into prey species, hunted and haunted by repulsive insect- and spider-like demons. This paper offers a closer look at the creatures of horror and the recurrent theme of the hunt in James's ghost stories, viewing them in the context of Victorian evolutionary theories as well as traditional medieval beliefs. James's protagonists, unimaginative and unadventurous scholars, suddenly come face to face (or face to tentacle) with the enormity of the Universe and its non-human creatures as they invade and shatter the homely Edwardian world. From this perspective, James's works express the social and cultural fears of his generation.

KEYWORDS:

M.R. James, ghost story, Gothic, spider, insect, hunt.

"I believe I am now acquainted with the extremity of terror and repulsion which a man can endure without losing his mind" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 176). In saying this, the Reverend Justin Somerton, a scholar in the story "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas," speaks for most of the characters in the ghost stories of M.R. James. While there are no reports of James's ghost stories actually driving anyone to madness, Jamesian creatures of horror have definitely produced a lasting impression on many readers, and influenced generations of writers in the supernatural genre (Smith 123; Dalby and Pardoe).

James's popularity, however, did not bring his works into the focus of literary studies until the 1970s. For several decades the academic reception of James's ghost stories was verging on dismissive. For example, Julia Briggs in her pioneering study on the English ghost story in 1977 insists that James's stories lack psychological depth describing his characters as "flats" (Briggs 135). Clive Bloom, in his 1993 study of twentieth-century British horror, described James as a "minor" writer for respectable readers craving light entertainment (64). David Punter, in his fundamental work on English ghost stories *The Literature of Terror* (1996), claims that, despite James's popularity, his stories represent the decay of the genre, the bare formula of what once used to be a rich Gothic tradition (90). However, Punter's interpretation of James's stories appears to be somewhat controversial because, as will be shown below, James masterfully uses all main themes

of the Gothic defined by Punter himself, with a particularly strong emphasis on paranoia and fear of being followed, fear of the archaic, fear of alienation and fear of close proximity of physical abnormality (87).

Despite the view on James as a minor writer of ghost stories, his works can be perceived not as the decline but as the innovative development of the Gothic horror tradition that expressed the social and cultural fears of James's generation. These anxieties are clearly manifested through ghostly Jamesian creatures of horror and the nature of their interaction with protagonists: the recurrent theme of the hunt and the fear of the touch of the ghostly ancient creature is particularly noticeable. The writer turns humans into prey species, hunted and haunted by repulsive insect- and spider-like demons, which can be viewed in the context of Victorian evolutionary theories and scientific discoveries, as well as in the context of traditional medieval beliefs. From this perspective, James's writings reveal a new level of complexity: they express the evolutionary anxieties of his time, including the fears of degeneration, while following the ancient tradition of depicting Satan as the Lord of the flies. James's protagonists, unimaginative and unadventurous scholars, suddenly come face to face (or face to tentacle) with the enormity of the Universe and its non-human creatures as they invade and shatter the mundane, protected, homely world.

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THE UNIVERSE AS THE HUNTING TERRITORY

The contrast between human (homely) and inhuman (alien, hostile) is strongly present in most of James's stories. In the story "Casting the Runes," the protagonist, Professor Dunning, is being slowly but inevitably hunted down - haunted down - by unseen demonic forces. He is not yet fully aware of it, but his night in a lonely house is restless. Trying to find a box of matches under his pillow, he suddenly, in complete darkness, touches what he later described as "a mouth, with teeth, and with hair about it, and, he declares, not the mouth of a human being" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 252). It is unclear why James had to specify that it was not the mouth of a human being - surely, the presence of such an entity under one's pillow would not have been less unpleasant if it was human. But the distinction - non-human, alien - is emphasized. James connects this encounter with the acute sense of loneliness experienced by Dunning in the scene leading to this episode. "It seemed to him that something ill-defined and impalpable stepped in between him and his fellow-men" (250). It appears that loneliness makes humans easy prey for the haunting hunters.

Invariably, a malevolent presence creeps up slowly on the unsuspecting scholars. Professor Parkins, the protagonist of "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," begins his journey of horror on a deserted seashore in twilight. A very unimaginative person, Parkins sees a distant silhouette behind him on the beach - apparently human - a figure that tries to catch up with him without making any progress. Parkins suddenly experiences the strange feeling of loneliness and alienation in the vast space - the first symptom of the approaching disaster. The deserted seashore keeps featuring prominently in his recurring night visions. In the climax of the story his nightmare comes to life when the professor is attacked by a ghostly creature of bedclothes with the face of "crumpled linen" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 148). The idea that something as mundane as bedsheet linen can have a horrible face produces the shock of horror. The homeliness of the object serves to intensify the dread and repulsion that are mixed with the sense of betrayal - how can something so comfortable, so intimate, behave in such an aggressive manner and break our trust? Most importantly, this creature is an invader from the outside: it followed its victim from the deserted seashore, the infinite space of the twilight beach. The homely cannot protect the protagonist, it turns against him, abruptly and horribly confronting him with the expenses of the infinite and unknown Universe.

The protagonist of "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," a typical Jamesian scholar called Dennistoun, safely locks himself in his hotel room to investigate a precious manuscript - a scrap book - that he has discovered in a local church. One of the pages depicts a creature crouched on the floor before King Solomon. It makes an impression of such intense horror that, according to Dennistoun's friend (the narrator), it cannot be conveyed in words. The narrator attempts then to "indicate" the essential traits of the figure which, apart from its physical appearance, stresses that it was "endowed with intelligence just less than human" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 12). This ancient demon confronting King Solomon is not content to stay inside the scrapbook: it materialises in Dennistoun's comfortable hotel room to attack the scholar who escapes only through the presence of other humans. As he screams "with the voice of an animal in hideous pain," two local servants break in, helping the protagonist to reclaim his human status (16). It appears that Jamesian ghostly species do not dare to hunt humans *en masse*, and lone, socially isolated scholars are their preferred game. Human isolation and loneliness seem to empower the inhuman menace lurking in the shadows.

The creature that attacks the Edwardian scholar in James's story has inferior intelligence but superior power of hatred and physical strength; in this encounter, the sole reaction of a human participant is the intense feeling of physical and mental loathing. It is clear that this creature, inferior as it might be in its intellectual capacity, can easily overpower James's hero. In this respect, James's narrative is aligned to anxieties expressed by some evolutionary theories of his time. Earlier Victorian theorists, such as Robert Chambers, working within the long dominant Neoplatonic tradition of the Chain of Being, suggested that all living creatures could be placed in a hierarchy where fish, insects, and reptiles occupied lower planes while human Caucasians were placed on the top (Cowlinslaw 167). Brian Cowlinslaw claims that James seems to reverse this hierarchy, representing a Victorian "man of letters," who is supposed to be the pinnacle of evolutionary development (according to Chambers and similar Victorian theorists), as a prey species (Cowlinslaw 170). In the scene from "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," the Edwardian scholar loses his human dignity when he screams "with the voice of an animal in hideous pain" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 16). In that moment, both participants are not human, demonstrating, according to Cowlinslaw, "supernatural regression to an earlier, less civilised stage of humanity" (Cowlinslaw 170).

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This view can be linked to the Victorian fear of degeneration as expressed by one of the followers of Darwinian theory, biologist E. Ray Lancaster, who claimed (several decades after Chambers) that high civilizations tend to decay and give way to intellectually inferior but physically more adaptable races. The fear was extended to humanity in general and was one of the great anxieties of late Victorian and Edwardian times (Glendening 20-21). In this light, Jamesian ghosts might represent the ominous "Other" - a barbarian ascending to take place of the modern "man of letters" who is no longer fit enough to survive in the hostile and cruel universe. He descends into the state of an animal and, further down the line, into an insect. H.G. Wells also expressed the fear of human degradation and degeneration: in his essay "Zoological Regression" (1891), he emphasised the fragility of human dominance in the biological world and gave examples of rises and falls of other species on Earth throughout billions of years. Wells made his readers ponder: what if the same fate awaits humans? Since the mud-fish of the distant pre-historic era is vaguely related to the human race, where is the guarantee that humans will not return to that state by some strange evolutionary whim? (Wells 166-167). Rejecting the idea of evolution as an inevitably progressive process, the science and the society of the nineteenth century had to face the fact that evolution can lead not only upwards, but also downwards. And, as Wells put it, perhaps some other creature is quietly waiting "to sweep *homo* away into the darkness from which the Universe arose" (168). This view deeply resonates with James's stories: protagonists find themselves being constantly watched and followed, even if the identity of the watcher or follower is unknown.

INVERTEBRATES AND ARACHNIDS AS THE HUNTERS

Scenes and images of the hunting often appear in James's ghost stories. As a rule, this hunt involves one creature (inhuman) pursuing another creature (human) with a malevolent purpose: most likely of capturing or killing. Sometimes capturing in itself means killing, as the prey cannot stand the hunter's touch due to unbearable repulsion and terror. Such scenes can appear in a dream ("Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad"), or as a sequence at a magic lantern show ("Casting the Runes"), or as engravings on a tomb ("Count Magnus"). All of these scenes can be summarized by a passage from "Casting the Runes": "And this poor boy was followed, and at last pursued and overtaken, and either torn to pieces or somehow made away with, by a horrible hopping creature in white" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 239). The keywords "followed, pursued and overtaken" describe the essence of haunting (and

hunting down) of many Jamesian protagonists: very often, however, the pursuer will remain unseen until the very last moment, remaining on the "haunted edge of vision" (Brewster 40). As James himself put it, "our ghost should make himself felt by gradual stirrings diffusing an atmosphere of uneasiness before the final flash or stab of horror" (*A Pleasing Terror* 482). The hunted/haunted characters definitely experience a feeling of uneasiness that intensifies as the story unfolds. The haunted Edwardian scholar sees nothing, but he suffers from the sensation of being watched and followed. In this respect, he is a typical ghost story character as defined by Julia Briggs: "alone yet always in company" (48). But who is his companion, and who is his pursuer?

The reader rarely gets to see the hunting creature clearly. It is only through pictures, dreams and engravings that we can have a closer look at him - or it. For example, an engraving on Count Magnus's tomb showed

a man running at full speed, with flying hair and outstretched hands. After him followed a strange form ... The figure was unduly short, and was for the most part muffled in a hooded garment which swept the ground. The only part of the form which projected from that shelter was not shaped like any hand or arm. Mr Wraxall compares it with a tentacle of a devil-fish. (James, *The Ghost Stories* 113)

In a dream sequence from "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," the huntsman is seen as "a figure in pale, fluttering robes, ill-defined ... it would stop, bow itself towards the sand, then run stooping across the beach to the water-edge and back again ... at a speed that was startling and terrifying" (James, *The Ghost Stories* 135). Such movements remind the reader of insects or spiders with their irregular, unpredictable, instinctive and very fast changes of direction. The demon in "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book" is described as "one of the awful South American bird-catching spiders translated into a human form" (12), and the engraving in "The Mezzotint" shows a crawling spider-like figure with black drapery over its face. In "Treasure of Abbot Thomas," an inquisitive antiquarian is followed and attacked by a creature with several legs or arms with "tentacles clinging to the body," and in "The Residence in Whitminster," the hero experiences "a sensation of the long thin arms, or legs, or feelers, all about my face, and neck, and body" (176, 383). The imagery of the hunt often features as a historical artefact to heighten suspense. Examples include the engraving on Count Magnus's tomb and the passage from a mysterious eighteenth century folio in "Mr Humphreys and

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His Inheritance”:

he begun to be sensible of some Creature keeping Pace with him, as he thought, peering and looking upon him from the next Alley to that he was in; and when he should stop, his Companion should stop also ... wherewith he was so daunted that himself set off to run ... Sometimes when his Breath fail'd him, he would cast himself flat on his Face, and hope that his Pursuers might over-run him in the Darkness but ... he could hear them pant and snuff as it had been a Hound at Fault: which wrought in him so extreme an Horrour of mind, that he would be forc'd to betake himself again to turning and doubling ... to throw them off the Scent. (James, *The Ghost Stories* 340-341)

Very soon, however, the scenes from the distant past, legends or dreams enter the present, and the protagonist finds himself followed, pursued and (often) overtaken by the demonic creature resembling a giant insect or spider.

Ron Weighell suggests that the theme of hunt in James's stories is closely associated with ancient demonology and folklore, making a connection between James's main occupation as a scholar of medieval manuscripts and his literary works. He states that James's protagonists are essentially pursued by the creatures from pagan and early Christian demonology, claiming that the insect-like appearance of Jamesian ghostly huntsmen can be explained by the fact that Beelzebub was traditionally depicted as a gigantic fly - “the Lord of the flies” - a subject to which James devoted one of his undergraduate papers (131, 133). Weighell's view is well-justified: James's stories indeed carry a strong flavour of ancient beliefs and contain numerous references to the medieval practices of Black Magic. Insects and spiders have a long history of being associated with Satan. In the Middle Ages it was believed that flies, worms and other insects were creations of the Devil, and the rotting of corpses had been caused by insects hatching from the sins of cadavers after death (Coutts 301). Insects were also linked to the plague - perhaps due to their mass appearance on unburied decaying corpses (Coutts 300-301). This, according to Coutts, placed insects somewhere between the underworld and the real world: they belonged to both, being mysterious creatures essentially hostile to all Christians. James's story “The Ash-Tree” definitely reflects this medieval view: the threat comes from giant spiders crawling out of the body of the dead witch secretly buried under the gigantic ash tree.

Peter Haining in “The Haunted World of M. R. James” mentions James's personal arachnophobia (17). This personal fear is undoubtedly reflected in James's ghost stories - however, the spider-like appearance of the creatures that hunt (and haunt) Jamesian scholars can be viewed in a more generalized context. The fear of spiders itself, at least for the residents of the British Isles, is completely irrational, as is the fear of insects; Freud saw no logical reason for this phenomenon (Coutts 313). Katarzyna and Sergiusz Michalski explain arachnophobia as “an example of a biologically generated fear” rooted in the ancient times (45). Most sufferers from arachnophobia describe their emotion as the intense fear of something invisible, that is crouching and watching them silently - the “unwanted creepy company” (Michalski and Michalski 51). This experience strongly relates to James's protagonists: they are constantly watched by something invisible, followed and hunted down by a horrible unwanted companion with many arms and legs.

Spiders are also associated with cobwebs and therefore with the passing of time, with the past, and with the oblivion. It is a strong Gothic symbol that signifies the encounter with the archaic and the death itself. In “The Tractate Middoth,” the long-dead practitioner of Black Magic is seen as an old clergyman whose bald head and face are covered in thick cobwebs. He hunts down his victim leaving behind masses of cobwebs and spiders on the corpse. Metaphorically speaking, James's protagonists often unsuspectingly walk into this mass of cobwebs and try to sweep them away - but the cobwebs represent a past which is so powerful that it cannot be shaken off. The Edwardian scholars helplessly entangle themselves in the webs of the past, unable to get out.

The entanglement with the past is also represented by a chrysalis that appears in “Two Doctors”: Dr Quinn has a recurrent dream in which he is forced, night after night, to dig a grave in the garden: “the spade would uncover something light-coloured ... and this he must clear with his hands. It was always the same: of the size of a man and shaped like a chrysalis of a moth, with the folds showing a promise of opening at one end”; after parting the folds of the chrysalis, he discovers “his own face in a state of death” (James, *The Ghost Stories* 466-467). In this scene, the future, the present and the past become one: the present Dr Quinn digs out the past Dr Quinn to discover the future dead Dr Quinn - in the form of a chrysalis. Here James demonstrates traditional Gothic framework: grave digging, moonlight, extracting of the corpse, and the horror of the discovery. In his dream, Dr Quinn is unwillingly transgressing

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- through digging up the past and parting the folds of the burial shroud - and is punished by the vision of the dreadful future, his own dead face. The horror is intensified by the insect-like form of the corpse - the chrysalis.

Victorian and Edwardian scholars were fascinated by insects and the phenomenal power of their instinct. Carl Jung, for instance, believed that insects represented the power of the irrational and the “archaic mode” of life and survival (Sleigh 285). At the same time, the study of insects and their habits often inspired horror. It is remarkable that Charles Darwin himself was horrified by Ichneumon fly’s reproductive behaviour that involves devouring caterpillars from inside (Glendening 18). His reaction represents general Victorian and Edwardian attitude towards such facts of biology: advanced thinkers of the era could not comprehend why God, the creator of the Universe, allowed existence of something as ugly and cruel as Ichneumon fly. To a great extent, they continued Edmund Burke’s discussion on the Sublime: while exploring the idea of evolution, Victorian and Edwardian scholars were intently looking for the Omnipotent Creator and his role in preserving the moral order of the Universe. Gradually, many of them despaired to find any morality in the laws of nature: chaos seemed to triumph over reason. The study of the insect world reaffirmed this idea: French entomologist Fabre was simultaneously thrilled and terrified to discover the habit of the female Mantis to devour their partners during sexual act. Fabre described it with typically Victorian sentimentality and modesty as a “lengthy embrace” that “made one flesh in a much more intimate fashion” while the female would “methodically devour her husband mouthful by mouthful, leaving only the wings” (cited in Sleigh 288-289).

This description sounds unexpectedly Jamesian with regards to the scenes of physical contact between the inhuman (insect-like) hunter and his human prey. James’s protagonists express panicky fear at the idea of touch or any physical contact with their dreadful unwanted companion. The most unfortunate protagonists experience something very similar to the embrace of a Mantis. This physical contact can be often interpreted as rape or molestation, or an attempt at such, which may result in death. The protagonist of “Treasure of Abbot Thomas,” for example, narrowly escapes death or madness as a result of such experience. During his night-time search for the treasure in the old medieval well, he pulls out of a cavity what he thinks is a great leather bag. However, this leather bag unexpectedly embraces him:

I was conscious of a most horrible smell of mould, and of a cold kind of face pressed against my own, and moving slowly over it, and of several - I don’t know how many - legs or arms or tentacles or something clinging to my body. I screamed out, Brown says, like a beast (James, *The Ghost Stories* 176)

Mr. Gregory faints and is saved by his servant who pulls him out by the rope from the well. The scholar, however, is haunted during the nights by something that keeps scratching at the handle of his door. Finally, the well is sealed again, and Mr. Gregory leaves the town, escaping the horrible fate. He, and the protagonist of the story, “Oh, Whistle And I’ll Come to You, My Lad,” are lucky survivors; Professor Parkins, as we remember, had a similar experience with the creature of crumpled linen whose intentions were vague but obviously very physical: it desired to touch and embrace - and we do not know what else exactly - but the idea of intimate physical contact with the creature nearly drew Parkins to madness. He, however, escaped through the presence of another human when his neighbour broke into the bedroom.

Others were not so lucky.

OVERTAKEN AT LAST: DEADLY EMBRACE, CRUSHING KISS

A character from “The Tractate Middoth” is found dead. The reader knows that he was hunted down by the ghostly alchemist, the one whose face was covered in the thick cobwebs. The manner of the death is unclear - a heart attack is assumed - but there are some curious black marks and dust around the mouth of the deceased that open up a possibility of a deadly kiss from the creature of cobwebs. Near the body, a thick black mass of cobwebs is found. The face of the dead man is distorted. In “A School Story,” a teacher is apparently watched, visited, and then taken away by a terrible creature – an exact description is unavailable but we know it is somehow connected with the well - and thirty years later, the remains of the teacher’s body are discovered at the bottom of a well. He is not alone, however. There is another body with him, and it has its arms tight around him, in an intimate deadly embrace.

The most tragic of all is the story of Mr. Paxton - a scholar who unearths an Anglo-Saxon crown which has a ghostly guardian attached to it. He puts it back, but he does not escape the guardian’s revenge, which comes in a strange and horrible manner reminiscent, yet again, of the sexual habits of the praying Mantis: he is literally kissed to death, though it is not exactly described in this way (James never makes any direct

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references to sexual intimacy in his stories). What happens to Mr. Paxton is a long walk on the beach with what he believes to be friendly companions. This walk ends in the fall from an old martello tower. His tracks showed that he “must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits” (James, *The Ghost Stories*, 584). His face is terribly distorted. The question is: why was his mouth full of sand? And why are only his teeth and jaw are broken, if he has fallen from a great height? The suggested answer is this: because, when Paxton ran straight into someone’s embrace, that ghostly someone had passionately kissed him, filling his mouth with sand, breaking his teeth and jaw *before* Paxton’s fall. Then it becomes very likely that the poor inquisitive scholar died before his fall, as a result of the violently forced physical intimacy with a horrible creature.

It is not difficult to notice that, if Jamesian ghostly creatures have any gender at all, they are described as males. Even the face of crumpled linen from “Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” is associated with a masculine rather than feminine presence - probably because early in the story professor Parkins identifies the silhouette on the beach following him as male. Mike Pincombe concludes that James in his ghost stories expressed the homosexual panic of the Victorian and Edwardian era. Pincombe argues that James’s secluded antiquarian world in fact contains a lot of physical violence with distinct sexual subtext. And while James himself repeatedly asserted that “dragging sex” into the ghost story is a “fatal mistake,” Pincombe claims that James’s texts represent ideological terror of the invasion of patriarchal society into the life of an individual (cited in Pincombe 184). It is known that some of James’s close friends and colleagues were struggling with their sexuality, and it is also known that Victorian and Edwardian world viewed homosexuality as a crime, as was shown, among others, by Oscar Wilde’s case. James’s own sexuality was questioned by some researchers though the discussion was very inconclusive: it is true that James was a confirmed bachelor, and female characters rarely feature in his stories - but that does not necessarily mean that he was hiding his own homosexuality (Pincombe 185). It is obvious, however, that many men in his scholarly world lived in constant fear of being revealed or even suspected as homosexuals. Therefore, according to Pincombe, the theme of being haunted by an undesirable male companion who occupies a spare bed, or lurks in the bedroom curtains, or hides in the branches of tree waiting for his victim, can be read as the terror of forbidden sexual desire or an assault on an individual’s privacy.

Penny Fielding offers a completely different perspective on the theme of sexual assault in James’s stories. Using a Freudian approach, she reads the lack of sex and especially female characters in James’s stories as strong evidence of his obsession with, and the fear of, sex. In her interpretation, the main threat is represented not by the insect-like “other” or by a male companion but by the deadly female sexuality. According to Fielding, monstrous spiders and demonic “troglodytic characters” represent terror and the revulsion linked to the female presence (750). It must be said that her reading of the story “Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance” fails to provide sufficient ground to prove this point of view. Fielding interprets James’s antiquarian as “anal erotic” (767), and the library as his citadel while the books constitute his objects of sexual desire. She views Mr. Humphreys’s maze as a female symbol that invades the library, which is a male symbol. Therefore, a mysteriously moving “bush-thing under the library window” becomes a symbol of female genitalia, and the hole in the map of the maze, through which Mr. Humphreys is confronted with his horrible visitor, is “vagina dentata” (769). In James’s text the scene is described in the following words:

a terror was on its way ... It took shape as a face - a human face - a *burnt* human face: and with the odious writhings of a wasp creeping out of a rotten apple there clambered forth an appearance of a form, waving black arms prepared to clasp the head that was bending over them. With a convulsion of despair, Humphreys threw himself back ... and fell. (James, *The Ghost Stories* 365)

Fielding reads this passage, and the whole oeuvre of James as the recorded history of sexual repression and the fear of female sexuality. While some of her claims might be justified, most of them appear to result from what Scott Brewster dubbed as a “selective vision” of a Freudian approach (Brewster 40). This scene, however, proves that Jamesian demons crave physical contact with their victims: it looks as if the creature was about to embrace the scholar’s head - and then perhaps kiss him as violently as Paxton had been kissed? While Fielding ignores the reference to the wasp, and its “odious writhings,” it appears to occupy a significant space in the passage, conveying a sense of deep revulsion and intensifying terror. Somehow, medieval images of insects crawling out of and over the dead bodies of the sinners and suspected followers of Satan come to mind. The insect-like movements and the black hands appear to represent the embrace of death from which the protagonist

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draws back with “a convulsion of despair” that saves him. And while this horror of touch can be read as the fear of sexual contact, it can also be interpreted as the attack of cruel ancient chaos on an unsuspecting antiquarian. It can also be viewed from Punter’s vantage point as the essential Gothic fear of physical abnormality and its close proximity (87). The place of the attack - the library - is also significant. Quiet and seemingly safe, libraries hide the knowledge of the past that is dangerous to disturb or attempt to decipher.

Fielding places James within the context of Gothic modernism, strongly arguing against Clive Bloom, who suggested that James’s texts lack any social or ideological depth. While some of her own assumptions appear to be ungrounded, her claim that James’s ghost stories present an “encyclopaedia of social phobias” is justified (Fielding 762). We can also read in his stories the traditional Gothic fears of the archaic and the past as articulated by Punter; the fear of evolutionary regression; the fear of the Universe that reiterates the anxiety of his contemporaries about the nature of the Omnipotent Creator (87). The fear of insects combined with the fear of touch represents a curious mix: it appears as if Edwardian men of letters are in danger of degradation through physical contact with other biological species. Insects in James’s stories feature as human antagonists from the past, the present and the future alike: unseen, they watch and they wait - they prey on humans. Perhaps that “Coming Beast” that H.G. Wells expected “to sweep *homo* away into the darkness from which his Universe arose” is, after all, an insect with the supreme gift of instinct and complete lack of human morality as understood by Western cultures (168).

M.R. James - a well-respected academic, provost of King’s College and Eton College - in his precise academic manner disclosed the most irrational and fearful aspects of archaic demonology still haunting the modern world. Rationality never wins in James’s stories: protagonists’ scholarly well-ordered world turns out to be very fragile and is constantly subjected to hidden horrors and haunted by both the past (the Gothic) and the present (modernity). While modernity invades the private life of the protagonist as an unseen and unwanted companion, the personified past - the ancient insect- or spider-like demon - physically attacks James’s protagonist, making it impossible to escape into the nostalgic world of the bygone era. His hero is a lonely, helpless scholar pursued and trapped in the horror of an inhuman Universe.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NATALIYA ORYSHCHUK
natalia.nz@gmail.com

Nataliya Oryshchuk is a Christchurch-based scholar from New Zealand. With a Ph.D. and M.A. in Russian Studies and a B.A. (Honours) in English Studies from the University of Canterbury, she is an author of a number of academic publications. She currently works at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand.