

Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad (1904)
By M.R. James (England)

Dr. Michael Newton, lecturer in English literature at Leiden University in the Netherlands, writes:

The ghost story depends upon anticipation touched with reticence. Forebodings reach us; a potentially unnoticed strangeness is there to catch the eye. Such stories often avoid outrageous violence; they make us think horrors, not minutely witness them. From their beginnings, what might come lies hidden in the visible world of the story, itself so like the real world we live and die in. As with the detective story, a genre closely related, the reader must look for clues. These are rarely hard to discern. That is because the ghost story is not about guessing an ending, it's about dreading its inevitable arrival. The indications of the ghost's coming are therefore not so much clues as forebodings and portents. Stories are based on hints, deferrals, postponements, while heading towards a denouement that is a confrontation with the thing itself; the end of the tale is often merely the moment when the ghost comes into sight.

Assuming that this is the case or that, at the very least, it is true of M.R. James' "Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", the construction of the ghost story relies on a series of elements intended to be decoded by the reader in such a way so that it creates a sense of foreboding that pays off in the climactic moments of the tale.

Much of this is clearly related to atmosphere or mood. James himself wrote in 1924:

Two ingredients most valuable in the concocting of a ghost story are, to me, the atmosphere and the nicely managed crescendo. [...] Let us, then, be introduced to the actors in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings; and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage.

More precisely, the build-up to the climax is related to the careful management of atmosphere, as there must be both contrast and contiguity-- as the everyday gradually takes on the aspect of the uncanny.

DIRECTIONS: Read M.R. James' "Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" and write an essay of no less than 700 words in which you analyze the way James manages the atmosphere in the story AND to what purpose. Since I am asking you to write about how the atmosphere or mood changes, I would suggest finding places in the text where there seem to be a perceptible shift. This may even help you to organize your argument into paragraphs. As this is an essay, I also want to remind you that you will need a clear thesis, and if this thesis does not explicitly address both parts of the task, make sure your conclusion addresses the purpose portion of the assignment.

The only requirement (other than the word count) is that you analyze things like word choice, descriptions, dialogue, and setting in order to analyze the mood. Look for patterns in the text; do not simply list examples.

This extra-credit assignment is due November 2, and will not be accepted after that point. The grade will replace two lower units of credit that are not zeroes.