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Supernatural or Material: Haunted Places in H.P. Lovecraft's, M.R. James's, A. Machen's and A. Blackwood's Horror Fiction

Abstract. The horror story writers of the early 20th century presented various views on the surrounding reality. Howard P. Lovecraft and Montague R. James, for their part, rejected the mere possibility of phenomena regarded as supernatural, contrary to other writers, such as Arthur C. Doyle, Arthur Machen or Algernon Blackwood, who were members of theosophical or occultist societies. The writers differed also in the level of their education. Lovecraft was an erudite interested in science, notwithstanding the fact that he did not receive formal education. James was a respected medievalist, a specialist in the history of Christianity. Blackwood, educated abroad (in Germany), explicitly differed in his artistic output from Machen, a Welshman, who left the United Kingdom only to pursue his journalistic career. The aim of the article is to present the haunted places in the literary works of the chosen authors and to juxtapose their narratives with their scholarly achievements and their views on the surrounding reality. Based on the New Historicist approach, the study shows that the roots of horror in the haunted places presented by the authors in their works were more "material" than "supernatural"—what accounted for their choices of haunted places, story characters and haunting horrors were personal attitudes and life experience of each of the writers.

Keywords: H.P. Lovecraft; M.R. James; A. Machen; A. Blackwood; ghost story; Volkist movement; folklore; history.

H.P. Lovecraft, M.R. James, A. Machen, A. Blackwood had quite a lot in common: they lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which was the period of multifocal progress; they represented the Anglo-Saxon culture: Blackwood, James and Machen were the subjects of Queen Victoria; the former two were English and the latter—Welsh. Lovecraft, although an American, described himself as an honorary Englishman (Lovecraft 2013: 18). Each of them had already had a possibility of reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and other gothic novels. Each of them, though occupying various positions and having diversified interests, has been remembered as an author of horror stories, which are often referred to as "weird fiction." Moreover, Lovecraft considered the other three writers as his literary role models (Lovecraft 2016: 560–577).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that each author's preferences as to the form and storylines differed significantly. So did their taste for the setting of their stories. In this article, in accordance with the main objectives of New Historicism, we aim to discuss how professions, religious beliefs, gender or nationality affected the works of these four writers.

Lives and Deeds

The oldest of the four, Montague Rhodes James, was born in 1862 in Kent, England, in the family of an Anglican clergyman and the daughter of a naval officer (Nowowiejski 2005: 5; Cox 1987: xi). It is rightly emphasized that James prepared numerous descriptive catalogues of British libraries and repositories, which are still applicable, as well as translations and editions of Old and New Testament apocrypha[1]; he was also a respected archivist and casual archaeologist (Moshenska 2012: 1194). James was successful in his academic career: he held the position of the Rector of King's College Cambridge and Provost of Eton College (Briggs 1977: 125). As a professor he enjoyed popularity among students and colleagues. It became a tradition that Rector James used to entertain guests—students and fellow scholars—at Christmas meetings with his own ghost stories. The first and main target group of James's literary attempts quickly expanded beyond this exclusive circle (Jones 2011: ix–x).

The extract below is a statement by one of the secondary characters of Arthur Machen's story "The Red Hand":

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[1] For instance, the collection *The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament* published in 1920.

> I will say, then, that I was born in a remote part of the west of England, where the very outlines of the woods and hills, and the winding of the streams in the valleys, are apt to suggest the mystical to any one strongly gifted with imagination. When I was quite a boy there were certain huge and rounded hills, certain depths of hanging wood, and secret valleys bastioned round on every side that filled me with fancies beyond the bourne of rational expression, and as I grew older and began to dip into my father's books, I went by instinct, like the bee, to all that would nourish fantasy. Thus, from a course of obsolete and occult reading, and from listening to certain wild legends in which the older people still secretly believed, I grew firmly convinced of the existence of treasure, the hoard of a race extinct for ages, still hidden beneath the hills, and my every thought was directed to the discovery of the golden heaps that lay, as I fancied within a few feet of the green turf. (Machen 2014)

Though only a quotation, it is indeed a very telling description and a quite good characterization of Machen himself. He was born in 1863 in Caerleon in Monmouthshire, to John Edward Jones, who two years later took the position of a Catholic vicar in one of the Welsh parishes (Joshi 2003: 12). As a young man, Machen received basic classical education. Later on, he attempted to get into medical school, albeit without success (Nowowiejski 2007: 5); instead, he moved to London where, in order to make a living, he took up various jobs and became quite a successful journalist (Hassler 1996: 606). After his father's death in 1887, Machen inherited family assets, which allowed him to pursue his interests in the field of literature for some time (Joshi 2003: 12). He already had his literary debut: in 1881 he published a poem *Eleusinia* (Nowowiejski 2007: 5). Living in Victorian London, Machen published several translations and new literary works (Joshi 2003: 17), including the stories involving fantastic elements (Nowowiejski 2007: 6). Having married Amelia Hogg, who introduced him to A.E. Waite, a member of a secret society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Machen became a member of the Order in 1890 (Hassler 1996: 606; Gilbert 1983: 27). Though often interpreted as noncommittal, his joining the organization marked the reinforcement of his interests in mysterious matters, which was reflected in numerous stories, increasingly gravitating toward the genre of weird fiction.

The third author who influenced H.P. Lovecraft—Algernon Henry Blackwood—was born in Shooter's Hill, Kent, in 1869. His father was a postal worker and landowner. As the financial situation of the family was very good,

Algernon was sent to the Protestant school in Königsfeld in Baden, run by the Moravian Church. For Blackwood, raised in a strict Calvinist family, the travel to Germany was an opportunity to meet peers from other Protestant countries. Fond memories of this travel strongly influenced his literary output (Nowowiejski 2006: 5). He became an adept of Volkism, a philosophical and social trend, focused on the idea of the unity of man and nature, proclaiming that a man should be rooted in his right place on Earth (Mosse 1972: 77–81). After graduation, Blackwood travelled to Switzerland and Canada. In 1888 he enrolled at the university in Edinburgh, but he did not complete his studies (Blackwood 1923: 51). In Canada he made his living in many different ways: as an owner of a milk farm, French and German teacher, actor or journalist, and even a model. At that time he also became involved with the Theosophical Society by Helena Pietrowa Bławacka, and the Society for Psychical Research. In 1895 he worked as a NY Times reporter; two years later, as an assistant of James Speyer, a banker (Blackwood 1923: 297). Back in Europe in 1899, he joined The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn a year later (Gilbert 1983: 82). Afterwards, he worked as a magazine editor and broadcaster. During the First World War the English army found his contacts and language skills very useful— Blackwood became an employee of British intelligence in Switzerland (Joshi 2003: 87–91).

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a literary heir to the previously presented writers, became the most widely known author of horror stories. Lovecraftian mythos are still inspirational for genre enthusiasts. Born in 1890, Lovecraft was the only child; at the age of three, he lost his father, who was taken to a lunatic asylum. It is members of his closest family—Howard's aunts (Lillian Delora Phillips and Annie Emelina Phillips) and grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, a wealthy businessman, who had the greatest influence on the young boy. Thanks to his grandfather, Lovecraft became interested in history, sciences, astronomy and literature, including the genre of weird tales. Still as a child, Howard published his first literary work (at the age of six he wrote a short story about the sunken treasure "The Little Glass Bottle") and first scientific paper (he was publishing his own magazine *The Scientific Gazette* at the age of nine) (Wydmuch 2004: 5–6; Joshi 2010: 25–64; Płaza 2012: 762–765).

His grandfather's death and the financial difficulties that followed it, as well as health problems, did not prevent young Lovecraft from acquiring a thorough education. Nonetheless, despite his extraordinary intelligence and erudition, Lovecraft did not take his final examinations due to nervous breakdown and he failed to formalize his education. Apart from the short period when he was married to Sonia Green and lived in New York, Lovecraft

spent his whole life in Providence (Houellebecq 2007: 105–110; Płaza 2012: 767). He earned his living working as an editor and proof-reader (Joshi 2010:1060).

Haunted Places

Although the authors varied significantly in terms of the choice of haunted places, they had one thing in common: it is their experiences and interests that contributed to their selections of settings.

As for James, the master of the ghost story (DiBiasio 2009: 81–94), the choice of place is the effect of his view on the genre. He distinguished two elements indispensable for a perfect ghost story: first, a carefully constructed atmosphere, which turns from familiar into disturbing; second, a thrilling climax (James 2014). The sense of familiarity was achieved by James indeed by the use of a familiar setting—that is, familiar particularly to him (Briggs 1977: 124, 127). It was often emphasized by researchers that James tended to describe the regular workplaces of archivists, librarians, historians and casual archaeologists (Briggs 1977: 125–126). Typically, he set stories in the places he knew, read about or visited personally, for example in Aldenburgh and other locations in Suffolk or in Danish and French towns (Jones 2011: xi–xii; Simpson 1997: 11). Still, these places needed to be potentially mysterious, so that their haunting by an unspecified horror could be interpreted as credible. Symptomatic examples of such settings are "a rural Swedish mausoleum in 'Count Magnus,' the ruins of a remote abbey in 'The treasure of Abbot Thomas'" (Moshenska 2012: 1195), or Tolouse in "Canon Alberic's scrap-book," whose area was associated with mysterious legends of Graal and memories of Catharist past (Eco 2013: 257–265); we can infer that James could have been aware of its functioning in the European culture.

Arthur Machen's imagination, on the other hand, from an early age was fed with inspirational stories and legends dating back to the Celtic and Roman heritage. Caerleon, his birth place, was once an ancient Roman fortress, whose remains could be still traced (Joshi 2003: 12). Both his semi-autobiographical novel *The Hill of Dreams* and his short stories are set in places vulnerable to haunting, such as Welsh towns and villages, as it is presented in "The Novel of the Black Seal." The other type of setting in Machen's literary output is his place of residence, Victorian London. As an inhabitant and journalist working in the city, Machen did not need to work really hard to present the city as an almost impenetrable place, where gruesome things happen, as for example in "The Red Hand" and "The Great God Pan"; yet perhaps both

places were presented most vividly in autobiographical *The Hill of Dreams* (Simons 1993: 37–38).

Taking a closer look at these locations, attention should be paid to the climax of the stories. Usually a protagonist ventures into some forbidden, remote or shady place—particularly a great wilderness, as in *The Great God Pan*, "The White People" and "The Shining Pyramide," or some city district as in "The Red Hand"—where she or he comes across creatures or phenomena, or even items detached from their original, actual historical moment. In Machen's horror fiction, the hidden, remote places conceal the potential of combining two historical moments: the reality of today and the reality of the past. Machen's haunted places had already been haunted by the past—unsullied by civilization, unruly, wild, almost mythical form of the past—before they are revealed or discovered by generally inquisitive and, as in James's stories, rational protagonists.

The plot of the majority of Blackwood's stories is set in places he visited, similarly as in James's or Machen's stories. In his story "Secret Worship" Blackwood described an old school in Schwarzwald in Germany— very similar to the one he attended. In "Willows" the plot is set during the Danube kayaking, a very popular entertainment of young Germans. Possibly Blackwood participated in such activities. Another place associated with the personal experience of the writer were the dense forests of Canada described in the story "The Wendigo."

However, in Blackwood's works what causes suspense is not the change in the structure or atmosphere in one place, or the interweaving of historical moments in another. Both types of setting are similar with regard to the enormity of nature they represent. They are simply natural, but, at the same time, they are perceived as haunted by unprepared men revealing their mystery, which is clearly a reference to the ideas of the Volkist movement.

Lovecraft, whose fictional locations were indeed very diverse, assumed (just as Baudelaire, Poe or James) that the precise use of schemes, formulas and compositional tricks would result in building a truly permeating mood of horror. Similarly to James, Lovecraft set his stories in the vicinity of really existing towns and villages to build the sense of familiarity in order to demolish it by introducing a series of supernatural events and to make readers feel terrified. Hence, the choice of proper locations was the first step (Houellebecq 2007: 50). Many of Lovecraft's stories are set in his homeland, New England, which, covered in forests, inaccessible mountains and isolated villages, was the place little known to travellers. As such, it was perceived by Lovecraft as a perfect setting for his stories. There are also stories set in places he never visited, but became interested in for other reasons. For

example, the story "At the Mountains of Madness" is set in Antarctica, a very popular region in the early 20th century after the South Pole was discovered by Roald Amundsen, whereas "Imprisoned with the Pharaohs," set in Egypt, was a story commissioned to Lovecraft by Harry Houdini (Joshi 2010: 559–562).

The most important place in Lovecraft's stories is the mysterious city of Arkham. This fictional place received its geographical description which allows readers to locate it on the map—it is allegedly situated in the north-eastern part of Massachusetts, in the county Essex, at the river Miskatonic and at a certain distance from the sea (Kołyszko 2014: 108). Lovecraft intermingled the origins of the fictional city with the actual 1690s events: the witch trials in Puritan New England. The selection of these events results from Lovecraft's interest in the subject of witchcraft and witch hunts (Lovecraft 2013 [1930]: 34–49). Arkham's vicinity was a potentially fascinating setting too: megaliths, situated in New England, were mentioned in the stories "The Lurker at the Threshold" and "The Dunwich Horror." Although erected by the colonists and their descendants, in Lovecraft's fiction they are presented as the relics of prehistoric times (Stoczkowski 2005: 102).

Interested in research on the past, Lovecraft eagerly included the popular knowledge of archaeology in his literary pieces. Many objects discovered in Pre-Columbian America were ascribed by him to foreign civilizations. Visions of the cyclopean walls of R'lyeh were inspired by the discovery of Machu Picchu ruins (Stoczkowski 2005: 102). Mysterious mounds erected by the Indians in the valleys of Ohio and Mississippi are mentioned in the story "The Mound," while abandoned caves in Virginia—in "The Shadow out of Time" (Colavito 2005: 34–36). In his other story, "The Haunter of the Dark," Lovecraft referred also to the hypotheses of the existence of a single centre of civilization, the topic tackled in publications by Ignatius Donnel—*Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, or Lewis Spance—*History of Atlantis.* The authors looked for evidence of Atlantis among the great ancient civilizations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, relying on archaeological and linguistic evidence. Recognizable and popular, the works were used by the writers of pulp fiction, such as Robert E. Howard and indeed Lovecraft (Louinet 2014: 394). Lovecraft's interest in these theories is visible in the stories set in lost cities, such as Iram of the Pillars ("The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Nameless City"), African cities ("Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family") or Atlantis ("Temple"). It is worth noting after Stoczkowski (2005: 300) that all these places fulfil two conditions indispensable for this kind of fiction, which is their spatial remoteness and temporal distance.

Adventurers, Witnesses, Victims

Typically, professions or personal interests of the authors were reflected in the choice of characters inhabiting the haunted places. James populated his stories with characters acutely similar to him or his colleagues. As he wrote about formulating the plot:

> 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. (James 2014)

Thus, his protagonists are commonly scientists, writers, archivists and librarians, similar to James's colleagues (Punter 1996: 88); moreover, the same set of characteristics, enabling mysterious and disturbing events to take place, is assigned to them: carelessness in following the clues, strongly limited perceptiveness and strong belief in the rational explanation of anomalies. It is noteworthy that the elements of horror are enabled to haunt places as a result of employing scientific methods of analysis by James's adventurer, as Briggs (1977:126) hinted at. Those who are presented as more sceptical towards the observed phenomena are the narrators of the stories, often introduced as editors of the notes left by their peers or friends of characters who witnessed some strange events (Joshi 2003: 136–138). They reflect better the personal attitude of James as to the possibility of supernatural phenomena (Briggs 1977: 124–125). It is characteristic that only male characters are the heroes revealing mysteries. In James's stories, women are usually presented as servants, maids, widows, and wives, rather irrational or needing a man's support. Such a model results clearly from both the gender structure of James's profession at that time and indeed his personal reluctance to accept the professional and social emancipation of women (Jones 2011: XII–XVI).

Machen's characters are definitely different. The activity of the people populating his haunted places is necessary to make or provoke alarming things to happen. Their actions may be multifaceted: a Hawthornian doctor in "The Great God Pan" wants to "look behind the curtain of human senses" and make the pagan god visible; doctor Black is possessed by the devil and he sacrifices his wife's soul to make his fantasies come true. The narrator of the "Green Book" becomes a witch and unintentionally harms her mother.

The protagonists of "The Shining Pyramid," exploring the mystery of bizarre shapes and drawings, witness a bloody pagan ritual, yet they cannot stop the victim's suffering. Machen's characters are truly members of the Victorian society: accustomed to a rational understanding of reality and at the same time willing to seek the paranormal; shocked by the outrageous situations and too cowardly and passive to prevent their effects.

Certain of Machen's characters—let us call them the seekers of truth—are clearly the performers of his philosophy, whose only goal, as Joshi writes is "to restore the sense of wonder and mystery into our perception of the world" (2003: 16). His protagonists do not shy away from pursuing this goal, they are ready to encounter the paranormal, alternative world and accept its toll—which is actually very characteristic of the author who was keen on occultism (Gilbert 1983: 35). However, Machen repeatedly reminds his readers that such a task is dangerous and malevolent—he either punishes the protagonists themselves (the student in "The Novel of the White Powder") or their loved ones (Helen's mother and lovers in "The Great God Pan") for undertaking an action. Strikingly, those who suffer are adults who dare to investigate the mysteries for their selfish goals, whereas children, maybe as more honest, are left intact.

Blackwood's characters are adventurers, with whom the author could easily identify. The most famous protagonist was John Silence, "physician extraordinary" and "spiritualistic investigator" (Parlati 2011: 214). Generally, among Blackwood's characters we can distinguish two categories: those who maintained the connection with nature and supernatural world and those who lost it. It is best shown in his story "Secret Worship." An English cloth merchant named Harris returns to a boarding school in Germany. He is not aware that a group of Satanic ghosts living there wants to sacrifice his life in one of their rituals. Fortunately, Harris is rescued by another Englishman, John Silence, who explains to him what happened:

> Harris made no reply. He was trying hard to concentrate his mind upon the sweet and common things of life. He even thought of silk and St. Paul's Churchyard and the faces of his partners in business. "For you came all prepared to be caught," he heard the other's voice like someone talking to him from a distance; "your deeply introspective mood had already reconstructed the past so vividly, so intensely, that you were en rapport at once with any forces of those days that chanced still to be lingering. And they swept you up all unresistingly." (Blackwood 2012a)

As a person deeply focused on material issues (trade), Harris lost his union with nature and, as a result, he became a passive victim of supernatural forces. This motif becomes clearly understandable if considered within the framework of the Volkist movement. Another example of a story where the connection with nature plays a huge role is "Willows." It describes the Danube kayaking: the protagonists reach the places hitherto undiscovered by men. The same route on the Danube was very popular among the Volkists (Goodrick-Clarke 2005: 35). The visited places are terrifying for people who are not accustomed to direct contact with nature. It is the "racially valuable" Swedish man who first realized why the place so strongly affects other participants of the trip.

Also Lovecraft obviously identified with the characters of his stories. Despite the fact that he himself did not take his final high school exams, he was fond of the characters who were well-educated scholars, interested in both history and science, or artists. An example of such a protagonist is Professor Armitage from "The Dunwich Horror," who is successful in preventing Yog-Sothoth from awaking. All of Lovecraft's characters also shared his political and social views—Lovecraft was an atheist, socialist and conservatist (Joshi 2010: 950–970), while the protagonists of his stories are usually well-born and well-behaving Anglo-Saxons, such as Professor of Semitic languages, George G. Angell from "The Call of Cthulhu," or Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, Professor of Political Economy, a character in "The Shadow out of Time." Certain characters are more sensitive to the overwhelming reality hidden from the eyes of mortals, such as the artist H.A. Wilcox featuring in "The Call of Cthulhu."

These characters are, however, victims of their own perceptiveness:

> Lovecraft's protagonists completely renounce life, reject every human joy, they are becoming intellectualists in pure form, minds directed to a single objective: the search for knowledge. At the end of their search there awaits the frightening revelation: . . . everything proclaims the universal presence of Evil. (Houellebecq 2007: 118)

Generally, then, Lovecraft's protagonists are always less ignorant than the rest of the human population, but the price they pay for their gnosis (Kołyszko 2014: 47) is very high.

Haunting Creatures, Items, Phenomena

The authors selected for the analysis vary significantly in terms of the choice of haunting elements. In James's fiction it is typically a ghost, a demon, a spider, or the dead returning from the grave, who can emerge in the commonest of places. It is the direct opposition between the atmosphere in a single place before the moment of haunting and after that is a basis of the climax of every story. Most fully, it is demonstrated in the stories about archaeological excavations, as Moshenska (2006: 91–92) points out. It is the violation of taboo, breaking the symbolic seal separating a demon or evil spirit from the material world, that causes that the world is penetrated by sinister beings (Moshenska 2012: 1197–1198). Every regular place could be made dangerous by the activity of these beings, encountered by an excessively curious, strictly rational and, thus, unprepared for the task person.

To "scare the dickens out of his readers," James diversified his scarers. Some of them can be interpreted through the prism of the author's personal uncomfortable experience: repetitive descriptions of large spiders result from James's arachnophobia (Oryshchuk 2016: 16), while suggestive presentations of dead bodies could have been drawn from the memorized scene of exhuming corpses in St. Michan's Church in Dublin, recalled by James (Briggs 1977: 130). Nevertheless, James was keen on employing specific artefacts or motifs known from early modern folklore (Doig 2005: 6). Mysterious artefacts, such as fictional books (in "The Tractate Middoth"), photographs ("The Mezzotint"), notes in foreign languages ("The Treasure of Abbot Thomas"), enchanted glasses ("Dead Men's Eyes") or a whistle[2] ("Oh Whistle and I Will Come to You, My Lad") are malevolent items that cause haunting. James was also well-versed in the topic of apocrypha, and he knew how to suggestively present authentic early modern books or texts to arouse the disturbing impression that a hero encounters something mysterious, forbidden or even sinister. In "Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book" the protagonist comes across a reference to biblical King Solomon and the source text "Clavicula Salomonis," which is a 17th-century grimoire ascribed to King Solomon himself. "Clavicula" describes ghosts, demons, angels and specifies how to make them obedient—thus, the artefact brings down a demon that haunts the protagonist (Davies 2009: 15). In "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" we come across the titles of authentic cryptologist works: *Steganographia* by Joachim Trithemius, *Cryprographia* by Selenius and

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2   On the folklore motif of whistling see Briggs 1977: 133.

De Augmentis Scientiarum by Bacon, whereas in "Count Magnus" there is a direct reference to the Sibylline series of Apocalypses and the city of Chorazin, the birth-place of the Anti-Christ announced in the prophecy (Zowczak 2003: 350–353). As Briggs (1977: 125) indicates, such a choice of motifs could fulfil also the function of "convincing the reader" by providing "a spurious air of academic authenticity."

When it comes to folkloristic motifs, these fulfilled the same function as artefacts. Simpson (1997: 9–18) notices that James constantly complemented his knowledge of not only English and Irish, but also Swedish and Danish folklore, which is traceable in his ghost stories. Thus, in the short story "Number 13," the Scandinavian setting is enriched with Danish superstitious fear of the number 13. The scary being from "The Mezzotint," if understood as the dead man taking his revenge, has its source in not only English and Danish legends, but also the wider, Indo-European fear of revengeful vampires. The being appears on a photograph of a regular, English cottage, which is even more disturbing. In "Ash-Tree" it is directly stated that the Irish are afraid of ash-trees. The horror under the same tree represents not the fear of women or female body, as Darryl Jones (2011: xxvii) would interpret it, but rather a *maleficium*, which is the revenge of the witch sentenced to death—thus, the story refers to the witch trials, another motif from European folklore and history (Levack 2009: 89–90, 130–138). Similarly, we cannot agree with Joshi's (2003: 135) interpretation of the hairy ghosts appearing in James's stories as representing the opposition civilized vs. savage; instead, these should also be interpreted rather as forms of reference to the Celtic motif of hairy boggarts (Briggs 1977: 271–283).

Cultural and folkloristic motifs proved to be equally fruitful for Arthur Machen, as he made use of pagan folklore in his literary output. Sophie Mantrant stated the following:

> The nineteenth century was marked by an upsurge of interest in the past, which became a kind of fascination with paganism in the fin de siècle. Following in the footsteps of Swinburne and Pater, late-Victorian writers were particularly drawn to antiquity and its mystery cults. Machen's first published text, a long poem he wrote at the age of seventeen, reflects the period's interest in Greek chthonic ritual. The poem is entitled "Eleusinia" (1881) and depicts the rites of Demeter's worship. A few years later, Walter Pater would stage the return of Dionysus in Medieval France ("Denys l'Auxerrois," 1886) and Vernon Lee that of Venus in contemporary Italy ("Dionea," 1890), both exploiting Heinrich Heine's theme of "the gods in exile." Thus, pagan gods resurface in fin-de-siècle

> literature and the subversive potential of their return is choice
> material for writers of the supernatural. (Mantrant 2014)

Just like Walter Pater, also Machen made use of the Dionysian theme in his horror stories. As it has been noticed, the world of his stories is haunted by the past—by the pagan remnants of the past, to be more specific. One of Machen's most typical scarers are the little people, appearing, for example, in "The White People"[3] or "The Shining Pyramide," that could be described as dwarfs, or, according to Lovecraft (2013 [1930]: 44), interpreted as Picts, the native populace of the British Isles. This argumentation was developed in 1921 by Margaret Alice Murray (Simpson 1994: 89–96). According to the latter, the dwarfs worshipped the pagan horned god, Pan. The same pagan deity scares people in Machen's "The Great God Pan." Hence, Machen referred to the popular "fascination with paganism" in his literary output, employing the pagan motifs in order to scare his readers.

However, we may inquire what exactly this scary and malevolent element is that Machen's protagonists are repeatedly shocked and disgusted by. It is not an easy question to answer, as Machen's writing is characterized by "preparedness to concentrate not on the revelation itself but on the contexts and processes of the revelation. Thus, the horror is rarely explicit; rather the reader is led to a climax which is never fully manifested" (Simons 1993: 37). Contrary to Blackwood, Machen reluctantly defined or specified the actual horror, as if to suggest that a human being, as an intruder at the site which experienced extraordinary events, would fail to comprehend their whole significance—by this means, he was trying to make the horror even more frightening. Only children give the impression that they are resistant to this sort of epiphany, which was a belief held by the members of the Order of the Golden Dawn (Gilbert 1983: 121). There is also another interpretation of the source of Machen's horror that takes into account Machen's audience. Perhaps, as Nowowiejski (2007: 6) claims, the horror is shockingly scary because it represents the opposition to the norms and principles of the Victorian society—for instance, liberation of women, sexual freedom ("The Great God Pan"), or the problem of mental disability ("The Three Impostors").

In Blackwood's stories the horror is evoked by two factors. The first is the overwhelming and devastating power of nature, the other—permanent imprints on the material world caused by ill deeds. In the story "Willows"

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[3]   The term "white people" was popular in not only British, but also European folklore (see Wijaczka 2008: 104).

it is the contact with nature that is the cause of the dramatic events. At the
Danube River the sun is shining differently, the wind sounds rather sinister,
and the shadow cast by the trees is mysterious. The terror caused by the
contact with the supernatural nature is visible in the following description:

> I dashed back to my fire, warned by the sound of bubbling that
> the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape
> further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the
> exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin about the
> gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and
> I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later.
> (Blackwood 2012b)

The sinister powers of nature are also revealed to the protagonists
of "Wendigo," who are visiting the wilderness of Western Canada—the
territory that Blackwood visited personally. The characters encounter the
terrifying creature known from the Indian legends. The appearance of the
beast is signalled by a strange smell, sudden weather changes, unjustified
panic attacks, and the sensation similar to being burned; thus, it is a motif
consistent with the Indian folk image of the beast (Johnston 1995: 221–222;
Joshi 2003: 113–114).

Such a description of the direct contact with nature understood as
a spontaneous power of autonomic and savage character was typical for
the Volkist philosophy (Mosse 1972: 35). After the Great War, Blackwood
developed the concept of unity of man and nature in other, non-horror novels
(Nowowiejski 2006: 11), where he criticized materialism and institutionalized
religion (Joshi 2003: 116). The terror evoked by the contact with untamed
nature bears the marks of religious experience (Otto 1993: 40–43).

The second type of Blackwood's haunting horror are the permanent
traces of misdeeds, as for example in "The Empty House" or "The Listener."
The conviction as to the possibility of such traces was characteristic
of theosophists, members of secret societies, such as Order of the Golden
Dawn. It is noteworthy that Blackwood was more devoted to the theosophical
theories of the members of this organization than Machen was (Gilbert 1983:
87–88). Finally, both types of horror are intertwined in some of Blackwood's
stories, the example of which may be "Secret Worship."

The universe created by Lovecraft is inhabited by all sorts of creatures.
Some of them are actively hostile to mankind, whereas others are so powerful
that people are not worthy of their attention. It is worth emphasizing that
supernatural beings, events or circumstances do not necessarily have to come
from another universe. Frequently, these supernatural forces, though asleep,

inhabit the human world. When awakened, they are indifferent to the human race which turns out to be irrelevant and too weak to face them. However, these beings are not supernatural: their unusual properties arise from their development into something infinitely more perfect than the human species (Houellebecq 2007: 33). Other foreign creatures reached the perfect forms of social and economic organization, not attainable naturally to people. These utopian societies, for instance the Great Race in the story "The Shadow Out of Time," were actually close to the political ideas of the writer (Joshi 2010: 970). The realization of the insignificance of mankind is a source of terror in Lovecraft's stories.

The Great Old Ones, forgotten races and other primordial groups share the world with humans, who are neither equal nor equally positive characters. People of "coloured races," whom Lovecraft considered mediocre (Houellebecq 2007: 111–113), worship these creatures. Such a scene is described in "The Call of Cthulhu" or "The Horror at Red Hood." Nevertheless, white people who voluntarily choose to serve alien beings—for example Innsmouth inhabitants copulating with "deep ones" in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," or with Keziah Mason in "The Dreams in the Witch House"—were a greater dishonour to the human kind than "other races," and a source of terror for the innocent. The presentation of degenerated people as sources of terror reflected Lovecraft's personal view, expressed in a letter to Robert Erwin Howard, in which he claimed that the worst sort of people were not the non-white, but those who disgraced the higher races (Lovecraft 2013 [1930]: 38–39; Punter 1996: 40–41). At that time, such a view was common among American intellectuals (Maleszka 2015: 154).

Lovecraft emphasized the strangeness of physical appearance of cosmic beings, which was extremely far from humanoid. Great Cthulhu himself was an aquatic, demonic god of somewhat anthropoid silhouette; he has the head of an octopus, the face full of tentacles, the sponge-like body covered in scales, massive claws, and long and narrow wings on the back. Such monsters do not even have flesh, in fact they are not even material (Kołyszko 2014: 51), being only a collection of electrons (Houellebecq 2007: 33). All these creatures are as alien to the human species as possible. They share the same universe with human beings, but their presence is seldom manifested on Planet Earth. They haunt our world, choosing specifically inaccessible, infamous places. However, visits to these sites are not their intrinsic goal, but their true intentions evade human abilities of understanding: for instance, the mysterious Mi-Go from the story "The Whisperer in Darkness" haunt mountain peaks as they apparently colonize space, and the alien form of life in "The Colour Out of Space" traverses the universe for reasons unknown

to the humanity. Their actions are seen as evil and harmful to people, but any moral evaluation of them is inappropriate, because these beings simply dominate over mankind in Darwinist terms, and people are not any of their concerns.

Conclusion

Each of the authors, having specific life experiences, education and views on paranormal phenomena, created his own, unique writing style in his horror stories. James and Lovecraft, sceptical towards the supernatural, tended to scare their readers in ways different from those adopted by Machen and Blackwood, who strongly believed in such unusual phenomena. James, a well-educated expert in historical sciences, included folkloristic, archivist and even Biblical motifs in his stories. Although lacking formal education, Lovecraft was an erudite too; his interest in various fields of science left traces in the form of astronomical, biological and also historical themes in his horror stories. Blackwood and Machen, on the other hand, did not avoid pagan or even occultist motifs in their literary works. Blackwood was even more fond of them than Machen, and both gentlemen belonged to the Order of the Golden Dawn (Gilbert 1983: 87–88). With the exception of Blackwood, the nature of the haunting element is rarely explicit; commonly, the more unspoken it is, the more uncanny the effect. Furthermore, comprehending the terror requires unique skills hard to master and, typically, takes its toll on a daredevil, which is generally a European motif. Overall, it should also be noted that the stories created by each of the authors consistently express the same image of the world peculiar to a particular author or at least present the readers with a specific idea of what the horror story should be like.

The authors' profession and their socio-political views affected their choice of narratives, but also their preferences as to the characters with whom they populated their haunted places. In the stories by Machen, a journalist, not only adults are the main characters. A conservative academic teacher—James—gave voice almost exclusively to men. Lovecraft consistently cast well-behaved Anglo-Saxons, while in Blackwood's stories only the characters corresponding to his vision of a man connected with nature usually came out unscathed from the mysterious adventures.

The selection of haunted places also remains mixed, but is far from accidental in every case. James chose places associated with his own profession and scientific community, as did Blackwood. The sites in Machen's stories—Welsh towns and villages as well as London—definitely coincide

with the places where he grew up or worked. Much more varied haunted places in Lovecraft's stories still reflect his own personal or professional interests. There is a lot of the authors' lives and opinions in their own stories, and quite a lot of really-existing places in their haunted settings; we can only hope that in reality these places conceal much less horror.

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