The Evolution of Horror:
A Study of M.R. James’s “The Mezzotint” and Susan Hill’s *The Man in the Picture*

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Introduction

“Gothic” is a term which carries a wide variety of meanings but in a literary context it usually refers to a group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s. David Punter points out that these novels make up “a very disparate collection of works” (7). Despite this, some characteristics spring readily to mind when thinking of the Gothic: archaic settings, stereotyped characters and the portraying of the terrifying and supernatural (1). The Gothic novel was often criticised for its exaggerated characterisation and its hyperbolic style. Nevertheless, it was also an extremely popular form of fiction; during the 1790s it virtually dominated the novel market and it had a great influence on the writers of its time (11). Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* from 1764 is regarded as the originator of Gothic fiction. Other important works are Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1777) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

It was in the Gothic novel that ghosts started to become common literary figures. This laid the foundation for the classical ghost story which has attracted many prominent authors ever since. Despite technological and scientific advances, which emphasise logic and rationality, “the appeal of the supernatural tale has remained constant and looks set to continue for as long as we fear what may emerge from the shadows”, according to Neil Wilson (19). Today, the ghost story is the most common form of supernatural fiction and, as Julia Briggs points out, the term “ghost story” is generally used to describe all stories with the intention to frighten its reader by the use of the supernatural (12).

Because of its continuing popularity, the ghost-story genre is most certainly worth studying, but not solely for literary critics. The accessibility of the stories also makes
them suitable for students in upper-secondary school who study English as a foreign language. The language of ghost stories is often simple, yet rich and varied, providing opportunities for learning textual structures and vocabulary. In addition, the traditional ghost story is a significant part of literary history, which should be studied in Swedish upper-secondary schools according to the syllabuses provided by The Swedish National Agency for Education, Skolverket (“English”). Last but not least, the fact that new ghost stories arise all the time makes them a good starting point for comparisons between contemporary and older literature within the same genre, allowing students to see how the genre has evolved as well as practising their critical thinking.

Wilson points out that all literary genres must evolve continually in order to remain vital and relevant to their readers. Societal changes and events are one reason for this constant need to “exceed the sensationalism of past works” (18). After the horrific events of the Second World War, for instance, “imaginary horrors had to be taken to new levels” and “a darker, more pessimistic tone crept into the work of many supernatural fiction authors” (17). In other words, what used to frighten readers in earlier generations is not as likely to frighten a reader today.

Probably the most influential English ghost-story writer, regarded by many as its master, is M.R. James (1862-1936). Even today, James continues to inspire “numerous imitators who attempt to capture the antiquarian flavour of his work” (Wilson 288). One of his stories, “The Mezzotint”, portrays a group of English scholars and their encounter with a haunted mezzotint engraving. A similar story, written a little over a century later, also tells us about a haunted picture, encountered by a couple of English scholars. This story, The Man in the Picture, is written by Susan Hill (1942- ), who is the author of more than thirty-five books including her famous ghost story The Woman in Black.
This essay sets out to explore the evolution of horror in ghost stories, mentioned above, as reflected in M.R. James’s “The Mezzotint” and Susan Hill’s *The Man in the Picture*. It will be shown that, despite many similarities, *The Man in the Picture* is a more frightening story than “The Mezzotint”, mainly because of five major differences in the narrator, the haunted picture, the build-up of suspense, the relationship between the ghost and its victims, and the resolution of the mystery. These areas will form the basis for an analysis of the two stories.

The essay consists of three chapters. The first chapter will present an analysis of “The Mezzotint”, which is the earliest and also the simplest of the two stories. The second chapter will deal with *The Man in the Picture* and the third and final chapter will present a suggestion of how the stories could be used for educational purposes in upper-secondary school.

The interest in supernatural fiction as a subject for academic studies has increased over the past decades (Wilson 18f), and there are many books and articles to be found on the ghost-story genre and the works of M.R. James. It is not, however, as easy to find literature that discusses the ghost stories of Susan Hill, especially literature dealing with *The Man in the Picture*. Therefore, an interview with Susan Hill, found in *The Guardian*, has been a great source of information. In addition, critics dealing with the genre in general, particularly Briggs and Wilson, have proved to be of great value since they bring up features which are known to frighten readers of horror fiction. Briggs also includes a chapter on M.R. James, which has been very helpful in the analysis of “The Mezzotint”. Although some comparisons between James and Hill can be found among the critics, no one appears to have analysed “The Mezzotint” and *The Man in the Picture* in the way that will be presented in this essay.
Simple and Reassuring: The Horror of “The Mezzotint”

This first chapter will present an analysis of M.R. James’s “The Mezzotint”, with the aim to determine if and how James satisfies what Virginia Woolf calls a “strange human craving for feeling afraid” (qtd. in Briggs 11). The analysis focuses on five different areas. First, there will be a presentation of the story’s setting and how it creates a ghostly atmosphere. After this, the narrator’s characteristics and ability to build suspense in the story will be analysed. We will then turn to the haunted picture, discussing its function and its contribution to the build-up of suspense, followed by the ghost and its relationship to its victims. Finally, the resolution of the story will be analysed.

In order to write a successful ghost story, a suitable setting is needed. “The Mezzotint” is set at an English university with its libraries, museums and common rooms, described by M.R. James as “homely and familiar” (24). This may seem as a strange choice, compared to the stereotypical gothic settings which Dani Cavallaro presents:

ruined castles and abbeys, murky crypts and fungoid dungeons, clammy cellars, 
dank passages and stairwells echoing with howls, groans and tapping fingers, 
dripping charnel houses and ivy-clad monasteries, secret cabinets, storms, bleak 
forests and treacherous marshes. (21)

However, James himself claims that “the more ordinary and normal both setting and actors are, the more effective will be the entangling of them in a dreadful situation” (qtd. in Moshenska 1195). According to Briggs, James also believed that a fairly familiar setting would make the readers fear that, if they were not careful, the same thing might happen to them (124). John Alfred Taylor agrees with James by arguing
that “[w]ithout this sense of the ordinary there would be no fear, no shock of the uncanny when the commonsense fabric is finally torn” (204). In other words, the bigger the contrasts between the setting and the events that occur in it, the more frightening the story becomes.

In contrast to the somewhat unconventional choice of a university environment, James’s decision to let the action take place in winter, associated with both cold and darkness, seems more typical of the ghost story. He makes clever use of the darkness by letting the mezzotint’s mysterious changes either take place or be discovered late in the evening or at night. Cavallaro points out that darkness is usually associated with menace and fear and “[l]onely spots in the grip of forbidding northern winters, preferably in the dead of night, are elements of a well-known matrix” of gothic settings (21f). James’s ghostly atmosphere is, however, frequently interrupted by activities that take place during daylight. This could obviously be used as an effective contrast between light and darkness that might increase the sense of fear. Nevertheless, this is not the case in “The Mezzotint”, mostly because the combination of light and harmless activities, such as casual breakfast conversations and card-playing, creates a much too safe and reassuring environment.

In addition to an eerie setting, a good narrator is essential in order to create a frightening ghost story. “The Mezzotint” has a first-person narrator who will here be referred to as “he” although this is not specified in the story. It is, however, the most logical choice since James usually portrayed male-dominated environments and the few women who appear in his stories “only have ‘walk-on’ parts”, as observed by David G. Rowlands. He also points out that some commentators even called James a misogynist (138).
The narrator appears as distant and impersonal to the reader, despite being a first-person narrator and the fact that he is sometimes part of the action. He has, in fact, seen the mezzotint himself which is proved by the following statement: “I cannot hope to put before you the look of the picture as clearly as it is present to my own eye” (25). However, the narrator is not telling a story about himself but about a friend of a friend. At one point, he even talks about himself in the third-person, mentioning “a discussion [...] which the conscientious writer has no right to inflict upon any non-golfing persons” (26). Briggs argues that James’s use of this “restrained, gentlemanly, even scholarly tone [...] serves to increase our apprehension” (129). She does not mention, however, that by creating a distance between the narrator and the reader, James also creates a distance between the reader and the story itself, which makes it less frightening.

Having a distant narrator telling a story about someone else’s experiences could also increase the risk of him becoming unreliable, which is not beneficial to the ghost story. As W. F. Harvey puts it:

> I will tell you what always has frightened me most
> In reading or writing the tale of a ghost:
> Not details, however grotesque or uncouth,
> But the lurking belief that the story’s the truth. (qtd. in Cox xxvii)

In “The Mezzotint”, the narrator makes frequent use of phrases such as “I believe” and “I suppose”, which might make the reader doubt whether he actually knows what happened. However, instead of seeing these phrases as examples of unreliability, they could be seen as the very opposite. According to Briggs, “[t]he narrator’s scepticism may act as a disarming anticipation of that of his audience. If he himself voices their objections or reservations, then they may be more willing to accept his testimony without question” (17). In addition, Michael A. Mason points out that James’s use of his
scholarly background, for example his use of Latin in “The Mezzotint”, gives authority to his works, thus making them more reliable (254f).

In general, the narrator does not provide the reader with many details, either of the characters or the setting. Since M.R. James saw the plot as the most important feature of the ghost story, “characterization is accordingly reduced to a minimum” and his characters are kept “thin to the point of transparency” (Briggs 134f). On the one hand, details are not necessarily an effective way to convey fear, which is shown in Harvey’s verse above. In addition, Darryl Jones claims that “[t]he great effect and power of James’s stories lies in their acts of exclusion” and that it is the “lack of expansiveness that makes him a great short story writer” (xvii). On the other hand, detailed descriptions could also be an effective way to frighten a reader, which will be shown in the next chapter.

So far, we have mostly seen how the narrator creates a decrease rather than increase of suspense in “The Mezzotint”. There is, however, one way in which the narrator raises anxiety and this is by foreshadowing what is to come later on in the story. He mentions at the very beginning that “even a department so homely and familiar as this may have its dark corners, and to one of these Mr. Williams was unexpectedly introduced” (24). Wordings such as this suggest that something terrible is going to happen, they create anticipation and make the reader eager to find out what these “dark corners” are.

Although the setting and the narrator play important parts in “The Mezzotint”, the most central feature of the story is the mezzotint itself. The importance of the picture is evident, as it is the only thing that is actually provided with detailed descriptions. It presents “a full-face view of a not very large manor-house [...] with three rows of plain sashed windows with rusticated masonry about them [...] and a small portico in the centre” (25f). Throughout the story, the picture undergoes gradual and mysterious...
changes, in accordance with the ghost story convention mentioned by Wilson, that “supernatural features [should] be gradually and cumulatively introduced, ideally in a manner which preserves some degree of ambiguity until a final swift and dreadful climax” (16). In other words, a ghost story becomes more frightening if everything is not revealed at once, and the mezzotint becomes, therefore, an important instrument which contributes to the build-up of suspense.

Mr. Williams is introduced to the mezzotint for the first time when he sees it in a catalogue sent to him by a London art dealer. The picture gives an indifferent impression, and although Mr. Williams agrees for it to be sent to him on approval, he returns “without much excitement of anticipation to the ordinary labours of the day” (25). When he finally sees the mezzotint, he claims that it is “the worst form of engraving known” and he is filled with “a good deal of contempt” (25f). The amount of suspense increases somewhat when one of Mr. Williams’s friends sees the mezzotint and points out that there is, in fact, a figure in the picture, indicating that it has changed. However, it is “hardly more than a black blot on the extreme edge of the engraving” so, at this stage, it would be more logical to assume that Mr. Williams has simply failed to notice the figure before (27).

Nevertheless, towards the middle of the story, there is no doubt that the picture has, in fact, changed. Mr. Williams sees that there is now “a figure where no figure had been at five o’clock that afternoon [...] crawling on all fours towards the house” (28). The fact that we now know for certain that the picture has changed builds suspense and anticipation, and leaves us wondering what is going to happen next. We might even experience a little bit of fear, which is increased by the fact that Mr. Williams himself is terrified by his discovery.
Later, we learn that the figure has entered the house through one of its windows, leaving us with even more anticipation, trying to figure out what it is doing in there. Finally, the climax is reached when Mr. Williams’s servant is found, petrified, gazing at the picture, where a skeleton-like figure leaves the manor-house carrying a child. Once more, our fear is increased by the fear raised in the observers, who are “thankful that they could see no more than a white dome-like forehead and a few straggling hairs” under the figure’s black drapery (32).

Who is this figure then? And why is it haunting the picture? This is revealed towards the end of the story, where we learn that Mr. Arthur Francis, an 18th century amateur engraver in mezzotint and also the owner of the mansion in the picture, was responsible for the death of a man named Gawdy who was the last of his line. A friend of Gawdy’s planned to avenge him by taking Francis’s son away and putting an end to his line too, but it seems as if the ghost of Gawdy, who is now haunting the mezzotint, managed to do this himself. Clearly, Gawdy’s motive is revenge, a desire to harm the person who harmed him. Although Francis is the ghost’s victim, he is obviously not innocent and had he been the only one harmed in this vendetta, justice would have prevailed. However, as Taylor points out, Francis’s innocent son has to “pay in the end for the actions of [his] parent” (200). Punishing innocent people in this way raises fear in the reader in the same way the familiar setting does, by making us worry that the same thing might happen to us if we are not careful. In this case, the fact that the innocent person is also a child obviously makes the situation even more abominable.

Despite the fact that innocent people are harmed and the mezzotint’s mysterious changes are rather uncanny, we are not left unsettled when the story ends. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, suspense is not maintained between the different discoveries of the mezzotint’s changes, because of the interruption by the harmless
activities mentioned above. In other words, the haunted picture serves only as a frightening element in an otherwise safe environment. Secondly, we are constantly reassured that neither we nor the characters are in danger. As Michael Cox puts it: “Mr Williams is only a passive observer of a supernatural event and survives the experience” (xix). One way of reassuring us is to describe the characters’ scholarly and rational way of photographing the picture and documenting the supernatural events, suggesting that there is a logical explanation for them. For example, they watch the picture for two hours, but since it does not change in the course of that time, they arrive at the logical conclusion that “it would be safe to leave it” (32). Even though the observers are afraid at times, most of the mezzotint’s changes are met with scholarly curiosity and “great excitement” rather than fear. The scholars are eager to take on the challenge and try to explain in a rational and logical way what seems to be inexplicable (30).

In the final paragraph, we are also reassured when we are told that the mezzotint has been put in a museum and “though carefully watched, it has never been known to change again” (34). The motive of the ghost has been revealed, the ghost has had its vengeance, and thus the haunting has stopped and everything is at peace. The fear that might have been raised during parts of the story subsides completely. Clive Bloom concludes that “nothing is hidden and there is nothing behind the horror in M.R. James” (219). To a great extent, this conclusion proves to be true in “The Mezzotint” and it is an important aspect that makes the story less frightening. However, we are actually left with some questions unanswered. We never find out why the past replays itself at this particular time and place or if the same thing has happened before.

To sum up, James certainly manages, at least occasionally, to create a mysterious and intriguing atmosphere in his story, mostly thanks to its setting and the haunted picture which helps to build suspense. Nevertheless, he does not manage to raise much fear in
his readers, since the mystery and suspense are not maintained throughout the story. Let us now see how “The Mezzotint” compares to our next ghost story.
Complex and Sinister: The Horror of *The Man in the Picture*

This chapter, dealing with Susan Hill’s *The Man in the Picture*, will follow the same structure as the preceding one, based on the five different areas mentioned above. Hill’s story will be compared to “The Mezzotint”, focussing mainly on the differences between them. After this, we will be able to decide whether *The Man in the Picture* is more frightening than “The Mezzotint”, as suggested in the introduction of the essay.

*The Man in the Picture* is much longer than “The Mezzotint”, allowing a more complicated structure. The story is built up by a series of shorter stories embedded in each other. The outermost one is told by Oliver, a scholar in medieval English who visits his former tutor, Theo Parmitter, at Cambridge. Theo tells Oliver a story about his purchase of a Venetian oil painting hanging in his college rooms. This story includes yet another story, told by the Countess of Hawdon, who provides Theo and us with background information about the painting, which undergoes continuous changes due to the fact that it is haunted. We then return to Oliver’s story, which is finished in the final chapter by his wife Anne.

Like “The Mezzotint”, *The Man in the Picture* is set in “venerable college rooms tainted with an air of malice exerted by an inanimate object”, as pointed out by Alfred Hickling, who also emphasises Hill’s obvious reverence for M.R. James, shown in her choice of setting. Hill has chosen Cambridge University as the starting point for her story and, like James, she describes the college as a safe and homely place. When Theo begins telling his story, he and Oliver are “stretched out comfortably in [their] chairs before a good fire”, and the warm and cosy atmosphere protects them from the howling winter winds outside (3). This creates the effective and frightening contrast between an ordinary setting and extraordinary events discussed in the previous chapter.
Nevertheless, *The Man in the Picture* does not only take place at Cambridge. A considerable part of the story is set in Venice in Italy and fear is raised, once again, by the use of contrasts; what is perceived as a romantic and festive place is contrasted to the supernatural events occurring in it. Hill also emphasises Venice’s “gothic” sides in a clever way, for instance through the Countess’s story. Although the Countess acknowledges the beauty of Venice, she is nauseated by “the smell of the foetid canals”, the “slimy black water” and “all the filth and scum of the city” (92), a description that fits well into the matrix of gothic settings mentioned by Cavallaro above (21).

The last feature of Hill’s setting that will be mentioned here is, in similarity to James’s, the use of darkness to increase the sense of fear. Theo and the Countess both start telling their spooky stories at night and the supernatural events in Venice occur at night. In addition, winter is used here as well and, according to Rosemary Jackson, perhaps “the most powerful of Hill’s images, and the most central, is the one which is found in her work time after time, of a cold, frozen country, of ice, snow, still water, frost, winter” (82). As in “The Mezzotint”, the dark and ghostly atmosphere is sometimes interrupted, in this case by bright and sunny days, enjoyable dinners and even weddings. When Theo tells Oliver about the day he bought the Venetian painting he describes a beautiful day in the spring sunshine. He remembers himself being “cheerful and optimistic [...] keenly anticipating the viewing and the subsequent sale. There was no cloud in the sky, real or metaphorical” (11f). While the intrusion of light made James’s story less frightening, Hill manages to use light and darkness as effective contrasts which increase our fear instead of reducing it. This is because her descriptions, such as the one above, suggest that everything is so perfect that the reader becomes suspicious and feels that there has to be something wrong. Hill’s use of foreshadowing, which we will get back to later, also helps to maintain suspense throughout the story;
even when the characters seem safe, we know that this is just a temporary reprieve and we are anxiously waiting for the horror to be unleashed.

Unlike “The Mezzotint,” *The Man in the Picture* does not have one but several first-person narrators, and unlike James’s narrator, who creates a distance between the reader and the story, Hill’s narrators feel close and personal. They are part of the action, their stories deal with their own experiences and they are also more developed than James’s. By getting to know the characters better, we become more involved in the story and we are frightened more easily. As Jane Goldman claims, establishing the characters in a horror story is vital, “otherwise it is difficult to connect with what is frightening” (qtd. in Kellaway).

In contrast to James’s narrator, who acknowledges his uncertainty, Hill’s narrators continuously claim that every word they say is true. Nevertheless, they are aware that their stories are unbelievable, they barely believe them themselves, and they do not expect anyone else to believe them either. When the Countess tells her story to Theo, she says that he may dismiss it since “[a]ny sane person would” (93). However, despite the unbelievable stories, the narrators cannot be considered unreliable. This is because they vouch for each other since they experience the same unbelievable things the others have experienced. The Countess’s story is confirmed by Theo, whose story is confirmed by Oliver, whose story is confirmed by Anne. The reliability is also increased by Hill’s characterisation of Theo and Oliver as rational and credible scholars. Oliver claims that he is “by no means a man who jumps readily to outlandish conclusions”; he is a scholar who has been “trained to require evidence”, but eventually, even he must admit that the stories about the Venetian painting are true (46).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, providing detailed descriptions is not necessarily an effective way to convey fear. Despite this, Susan Hill has chosen to
provide her story with many details, and she also proves that this can in fact contribute
to an increase of fear in the reader. Goldman’s statement above shows the importance of
establishing characters in a detailed way, but Hill also provides details in other contexts.
When she is about to reveal a change in the haunted picture, she often gives a rather
long description of its appearance, building anticipation, until she finally reveals what
we have already begun to realise, for example in the Countess’s story:

And then I saw [...] the eyes of Clarissa Vigo. They seemed to be both looking
straight at me [...] and to be directing me elsewhere [...] I followed them. I saw.
Standing up at the back of a gondola was a man wearing a black cloak and a
tricorn hat [...] It was unmistakably a picture of my husband. (102f)

Hill also uses detailed descriptions of the characters’ sense impressions, making the
story more vivid. Characters not only see things, but also sense the freezing cold and
smell the foetid canals, making us do the same thing in our imagination. We almost feel
as if we are part of the story and this obviously increases the amount of fear. Sounds, in
particular, contribute to the ghostly atmosphere, for example during a midnight walk
when Oliver hears “a cry, and voices, and even a splash of water”, sounds that are left
unexplained (34). Although ghosts are often related to vision, Cavallaro claims that
“some of their scariest manifestations are frequently heard rather than seen” (62).
However, in *The Man in the Picture*, the lack of sounds can be equally spooky: “There
was a silence so absolute that it was uncanny” (37).

Apart from creating a ghostly atmosphere, the senses also serve as a means of
foreshadowing the supernatural events. For example, whenever it is to be revealed that
someone has been drawn into the picture, the smell of fresh oil paint can be sensed.
Foreshadowing is also used in other contexts, and just as in “The Mezzotint”, it is an
effective way of raising anxiety in the readers. However, while “The Mezzotint”
contains only one or two examples of foreshadowing, *The Man in the Picture* uses it more frequently. It is either conveyed through a narrator: “I did not hesitate to say that I would do anything he wished, never imagining what taking [...] ‘a share of the load’ would cost me” (5); or through other characters’ lines: “I will never have peace of mind [...] until the picture is returned to me [...] And nor will you” (116f).

Just as in “The Mezzotint”, the haunted picture is the central feature of Hill’s story. Here, it is also described in detail, but since these descriptions are just a few of many, the Venetian painting does not become as dominating as the mezzotint. It is a “somewhat dark oil painting” from the late 18th century, “of a Venetian carnival scene” portraying “a landing stage beside the Grand Canal and in the square behind it, a crowd in masks and cloaks milled around among entertainers” (4). The descriptions of the painting create a rather sinister and gothic atmosphere, as mentioned above.

The picture has two different functions, both of them contributing to the build-up of suspense. One of its functions is that it attacks people by “falling” down from the wall. However, its primary function is that it draws people into it; figuratively by mesmerising its observers, but also literally. As a result of this, the picture changes as more and more people appear in it. As in “The Mezzotint”, the changes are gradually introduced in accordance with Wilson’s statement above (16), as well as Goldman’s view on the structure of a horror story: “Always build. If you start at fever pitch, there’s nowhere to go” (qtd. in Kellaway).

A feature which our two pictures have in common is the negative impression they give at first. In the same way as Mr. Williams is filled with contempt when seeing the mezzotint for the first time, the Countess hates the Venetian painting at first sight. In addition, Theo, when describing his first meeting with it, says that it was “in poor condition, it badly needed cleaning and the frame was chipped in several places” (12).
However, while the mezzotint does not manage to catch Mr. Williams’s interest at first, the Venetian painting mesmerises Theo from the start, despite its appearance. It seems to *draw* him into it and he knows that he has to buy it. Immediately, we know that there is something special about this painting, and thus the build-up of suspense starts right away. The build-up continues when an old friend of Theo’s, who comes to visit, looks at the picture and recognises a man he used to know, indicating that this person has been drawn into the picture. However, at this stage it could still be explained in a rational way, just as in “The Mezzotint”. As Theo says, with so many people in the world, it is not remarkable to find two men who look almost identical.

The next important incident involving the Venetian painting occurs when the picture seems to launch an attack on Theo, making it much more active and powerful than the mezzotint. In the middle of the night, Theo gets up, and as he walks by the haunted picture, the wire holding it snaps. The picture hits Theo’s shoulder, he loses his balance and falls. As with the previous incident, there could still be a rational explanation for this; it might just be a strange coincidence. However, the suspense and the mystery created by the painting are intensified.

Suspense is greatly increased just before the Countess’s story begins when Theo learns that her husband, Lawrence, is trapped in the painting. Thus, we now know for certain that the picture has changed and that it is very powerful. The fear that might be raised in the reader is, as in James’s story, increased by descriptions of the characters’ fear: “what I saw made me experience a wave of shock so tremendous that I felt rising nausea and the room seemed to lurch crazily from side to side” (66). Describing the characters’ feelings of fear is something Hill uses to a greater extent than James, and she proves that it is an effective way to convey fear to the reader. If the characters are afraid, the reader must have a reason to be afraid as well. The reassurance that was
provided in “The Mezzotint”, thanks to the characters’ scholarly curiosity rather than fear, is nowhere to be found here.

As in James’s story, the picture, rather than a traditional ghost, is the main conveyor of supernatural horror. However, there is a ghost of sorts, although it is far from traditional. Who is this ghost, then? And what is its motive? The Countess provides us with the explanation. When she and Lawrence first met, falling blindly in love at first sight, Lawrence was on the verge of an engagement to a woman named Clarissa Vigo. When Lawrence chose the Countess over her, Clarissa became “a bitter, angry, tormented [woman] whose only thought was of the injury she had suffered and how she could obtain revenge” (73). She set out to destroy their lives by giving them the haunted picture as a wedding gift. On their honeymoon in Venice, Lawrence disappeared and later, the Countess found him in the Venetian painting, presumably drawn into it by Clarissa. At this point, we feel that Clarissa should have achieved her vengeance. However, she does not stop there; she lures Lawrence’s and the Countess’s son into marrying her, destroying his life as well. Just as in “The Mezzotint”, revenge is pursued into the next generation. Clarissa also banishes the Countess from her house and gets rid of the Venetian painting, which eventually ends up in Theo’s possession.

Theo feels much better after telling his and the Countess’s story to Oliver, and Oliver leaves him with a light heart: “tonight, all was quiet and still, there were no shadows, no whisperings, no footsteps, no faces at any lighted windows. No fear” (119). Had the story ended here, the end would have been quite similar to James’s; the motive of the ghost revealed, the ghost had its vengeance, the haunting stopped and peace restored. However, there is more to come, and Oliver’s tranquillity only renders a false sense of security, in contrast to the reassurance provided by James. Susan Hill herself claims that a long ghost story must have these “rises and falls” to be frightening. According to her,
Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* is a perfect example of this: “you keep turning and, just before the end, let go a bit so your audience relaxes” before the final turn (qtd. in Kellaway).

Thus, in contrast to “The Mezzotint”, *The Man in the Picture* continues after the reason for the haunting is revealed. The picture is involved in two more incidents which contribute to a continuing build-up of suspense throughout the rest of the story. Firstly, the night after Theo has finished telling his story, Oliver is troubled by the feeling of something being unfinished, that “more strange, dark happenings” are on their way. He goes to Theo’s room to check on him, but barely makes it to the door when he hears a “horrible cry [...] followed by a single loud crash” and walks in to find Theo dead (120f). Whereas the previous accident with the painting could have been a coincidence, there is now more evidence that it is not: “The wire, which I knew had been strong and firm the previous evening, was intact, the hook on the wall in its place. Nothing had snapped or broken, sending it crashing down and Theo had not knocked against it, he had not reached it before he fell” (122). Once again, we are frightened by the malevolent power of the painting, especially since it is difficult for us to see a reason why Clarissa would want to target Theo, who is innocent. He had nothing to do with Lawrence’s betrayal and is completely unrelated to the ghost’s history, apart from his obsession with the painting. What is also interesting here is that Theo never appears in the picture after his death.

The second incident occurs when Lawrence’s and the Countess’s honeymoon in Venice is repeated, only this time by Oliver and his wife Anne. Oliver disappears mysteriously and the police assume he is dead. When Anne returns home to London, she receives a parcel addressed to Oliver and it contains the Venetian painting, bequeathed to Oliver by Theo. Since we now know the danger and the power of the
painting, it just has to be present for us to feel uncomfortable. Assuming what the readers might already have assumed, Anne starts looking for Oliver in the painting and finds him immediately. Once more, a seemingly innocent person has been harmed. In fact, even Lawrence could be seen as rather innocent in this story. He may have jilted Clarissa but that does not give her a reason to kill him. Consequently, the relationship between the ghost and its victims creates an important difference between Hill’s and James’s story. While the primary victim in “The Mezzotint” was in fact guilty, one can hardly say the same thing about Hill’s victims. As mentioned in the previous chapter, punishing the innocent is an effective way to convey fear since it makes us worry that there is a possibility that the same thing could happen to us if we are not careful, or perhaps even if we are.

In the last chapter, it is left to Anne to finish the story. While James provides a clear resolution and a predominantly satisfying ending, there is no sense of closure in *The Man in the Picture*, which obviously makes it more frightening. Anne fears that there will never be an ending, and she tells us that she is expecting a child, praying that she will not have a son, since she is convinced that this will continue the haunting cycle. According to Jackson, “[n]early all of Susan Hill’s writing presents problems in such a manner that no positive resolution seems possible” (95).

Thus, while James’s story only leaves a few things unexplained, Hill leaves us with numerous gaps to fill, leaving us unsettled with a lack of closure. In addition to the fact that we do not even know if there is an ending to the mystery, we do not know where the sounds that Oliver hears during his midnight walk come from, whether the picture is evil in itself and has been haunted before Clarissa gets hold of it, or why Theo and Oliver are punished despite their innocence. Nor do we know for certain why Oliver
appears in the painting while Theo does not. However, only men who have been happily married seem to appear in the picture and Theo is not in this category.

To sum up, there are many similarities between “The Mezzotint” and The Man in the Picture. The setting is obviously one of them, as well as the haunted picture as the main conveyor of horror. However, similarities can also be found in much smaller details. In both stories, for example, a subsidiary character rather than a main character is the first one to notice something strange about the picture, indicating that it is haunted. Thus, Hill has clearly been inspired by James and, like him, she manages to create a ghostly and intriguing atmosphere in her story. However, she takes it a great leap further and, unlike James, she manages to maintain that atmosphere throughout and even beyond the story which, as a result, becomes more frightening.
**Ghost Stories in the Classroom**

The final chapter of this essay will add a pedagogical dimension to the analysis above by discussing how “The Mezzotint” and *The Man in the Picture* could be used for educational purposes in English 6, which is the second English course in Swedish upper-secondary schools. What makes these stories suitable to use in the classroom and how can they be related to contemporary society and the everyday life of young people? How could a ghost-story project be carried out practically and how would this project improve the students’ language as well as their knowledge of literature? These are the questions we set out to answer in this chapter.

Before presenting a suggestion of a lesson plan, it is important to consider why we should teach literature in school. First of all, Swedish teachers are obliged to follow the syllabuses provided by *Skolverket*. According to the syllabus for English 6, the course should include both “[c]ontemporary and older literature” as well as the studying of “[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in [...] literature”. In addition, “authors and literary periods” should be studied (“English”). Secondly, the subject of literature is important to study because it provides the reader with important insights into people, cultures and literary traditions, as pointed out by Per Olov Svedner (45). In other words, it provides understanding of the world around us. Thirdly, as Tricia Hedge claims, reading literature could lead to the achievement of several goals that will help to improve the students’ English. These goals could include taking a critical stance to the content of text, and building knowledge of vocabulary and textual structures that the students can use when writing texts of their own (205).

So why are our ghost stories in particular worth studying? Firstly, they fit into the claim of the syllabus saying that teaching should include both contemporary and older
fiction. *The Man in the Picture* is an example of the former and “The Mezzotint” is an example of the latter. Secondly, the level of the language used in the stories is suitable for the age-group. It is simple enough for the students to understand most of it, but it also provides rich and varied language. In other words, there is potential for learning new structures and vocabulary, which was one of the goals mentioned by Hedge above.

Thirdly, the ghost-story genre is likely to engage the students, even the ones who are not very fond of reading. As Briggs points out, both children and adults seem to enjoy the pleasurable fear caused by ghost stories (11).

How could we integrate these two stories in our teaching, then? One way would be to put them in the larger context of a literary history project, and introduce them in connection with the Gothic, which laid the foundation for the classical ghost story. A short lecture by the teacher will provide the students with some background knowledge and it will also result in the fulfilment of the syllabus’s claim of including literary periods in the teaching. Since neither of the stories is very long and the language is rather simple, the students can be asked to read both. The suggestion of the lesson plan that will be presented below will require at least three lessons (of 60-90 minutes each) that are spread out over a few weeks. In addition, the students will have to work at home, reading the stories and preparing the exercises. All of the four language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing, will be included.

According to Hedge, a good reading task is designed as “a three-phase procedure involving pre-, while-, and post-reading stages”. The pre-reading phase should aim to familiarise the students with the context of the text (209f). Therefore, the first lesson will start with a brainstorming session on the theme “What do we find frightening?” The teacher lists the students’ suggestions on the board and makes sure there is room for comments or short discussions. The purpose of this exercise is to activate the students
and also prepare them for the other exercises they are to carry out later on. Moreover, a benefit of brainstorming is that it is “an extremely effective way of getting shy learners involved” in speaking activities, according to Dave and Jane Willis (66). After the brainstorming session, the students will get to listen to an audio book version of “The Mezzotint” which can be found on YouTube (“The Mezzotint – audiobook”). Since the reader is British, this will be an opportunity to practise the reception of authentic, spoken language, which is also part of the core content of the syllabus (“English”). In addition, it re-creates the tradition of M.R. James’s own readings of his stories, which were a Christmas ritual at Cambridge (Jones x). As they listen, the students are encouraged to take notes of plot details, characters, setting etc., and the teacher could stop the recording at regular intervals and ask the students some questions in order to make sure they all follow the development. When they have finished listening, there will be a short discussion with the primary aim of determining if “The Mezzotint” is frightening to a modern reader, and why this is, or is not, the case. Here, it would be useful to link back to the brainstorming session at the beginning of the lesson.

At the end of the first lesson, the students will be given a copy of “The Mezzotint” (in written form) and The Man in the Picture, and they are to read both of these stories for homework. They will probably need three to four weeks to finish and in the meantime, the English lessons could be used for something else. Along with the ghost stories, the students will be given written instructions for an exercise which they are to prepare for a discussion in class. They will be asked to describe the stories’ settings, the narrators, the haunted pictures, the ghosts and their victims, and the resolution of the mysteries, in other words the areas investigated in this essay. The students should especially focus on finding similarities and differences between the two stories, and they will be helped by the fact that they have already discussed some of these areas as
regards “The Mezzotint”. Apart from finding similarities and differences, the students will also be asked to find examples of what is frightening in the stories. These exercises fit well into Hedge’s presentation of a suitable while-reading phase, which “should aim to encourage learners to be active as they read” (210). Answering questions on the text could be one way of doing this.

In the second lesson, three to four weeks later, the post-reading phase will be applied in the form of a discussion in class where the students present their findings and opinions and compare them with those of their peers. According to Hedge, the post-reading phase should “make use of what [the students] have read in a meaningful way”, for example through a discussion (211). In order to give everyone the opportunity to speak, the discussions will be held in small groups first and then in the whole class. If the discussions do not take the whole lesson, there will be time to start working on the final exercise, where the students will be asked to write an argumentative essay. Detailed written instructions will be provided for this as well. The essay could be based both on the students’ own findings and the new input they have received during the discussions. The first part of the essay should be a presentation and comparison of the ghost stories, as regards setting, narrator etc. In the second part the students are to decide which story they think is the most frightening and why. Since English 6 is the second English course in upper-secondary school, the students have probably written argumentative texts before and should be fairly familiar with this type of text, although some repetition is always useful.

The students will continue writing during the third lesson. Since they have already had much homework, it would be a good idea to let them write as much as possible in class. Also, this will allow the teacher to go around and provide help in case it is needed. However, if there are students who are still not finished by the end of the third
lesson, they will have to finish writing at home and hand in their essays at the next lesson. The teacher will then give feedback on each essay, listing both good points and points that could be improved next time. It is important to note that this is only a suggested lesson plan, which will obviously work differently in different classes. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to be flexible in case the plans do not seem to work out as they were intended to.

To sum up, reading ghost stories in the classroom could be a worthwhile way of studying literature. The stories give the students an insight into literary history and hopefully motivate and encourage them to continue reading other works in other genres as well. The students are given the opportunity to compare texts from different literary periods and practise their critical thinking while doing this. Moreover, they will become aware of the function of literature as well as their own and others’ reactions to literature. This will give them an understanding of both themselves and the world around them.
Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to illustrate the evolution of horror in ghost stories using M.R. James’s “The Mezzotint” and Susan Hill’s *The Man in the Picture* as examples. The argument was that despite many similarities, *The Man in the Picture* is more frightening than “The Mezzotint”, mainly because of five major differences in the narrator, the haunted picture, the build-up of suspense, the relationship between the ghost and its victims, and the resolution of the mystery.

Chapters One and Two presented analyses of the two stories, which formed a basis for a lesson plan for upper-secondary-school students of English as a foreign language, presented in the third chapter. The analyses themselves arrived at the following conclusions: both James and Hill use settings that create a ghostly atmosphere, and all of the narrators in the two stories give a reliable impression, which has a frightening effect. However, Hill’s narrators appear closer and more personal than James’s; they provide more details and make more use of foreshadowing, creating a stronger impact. In both stories, the haunted picture is successfully used to create a build-up of suspense, only Hill also manages to maintain suspense between the eerie episodes involving the picture, whereas James continuously reassures his readers that there is no real danger. Both stories present guilty, but more importantly, also innocent victims that are punished by the ghost. Nevertheless, whereas the observers of the mezzotint are never in danger, the observers of the Venetian painting are harmed, making the reading of *The Man in the Picture* a more frightening experience. The same goes for the resolution of Hill’s story, where she suggests that the haunting will go on forever, unlike James’s story where the haunting stops.
At a first reading of these stories, it seemed obvious that *The Man in the Picture* is more frightening than “The Mezzotint”. Therefore it was rather surprising, and also interesting, to find that “The Mezzotint” does in fact contain many of the features that are considered to create an uncanny ghost story, according to the critics. It turned out that there were many more similarities between them than anticipated from the start, perhaps even more similarities than differences, and it was necessary to go into great detail in order to see what actually made Hill’s story more frightening.

One of the similarities between the stories is that neither of them is very traditional. When one of them was published in 1904, and the other one six years ago, it would be natural to expect the earlier one to be more traditional. However, they both depart from the conventional gothic ruins and castles as well as the traditional chain-rattling ghost. In fact, Hill’s “ghost” is even alive when the haunting cycle begins, and thereby fails to fulfil what must be the basic requirement of a ghost, namely that of being dead.

Since Hill published her story quite recently, it is not surprising that she departs from the traditional ghost story. As mentioned in the introduction, any genre must evolve continually to stay vital and relevant to its readers. However, it is more surprising that James does the same. Whereas Hill looks back in time, clearly inspired by James’s story, James himself seems to be ahead of his time. In fact, much of his story works today as well, and it is these parts that Hill has kept in her story. One can say that James lays the foundation for a frightening story, but Hill adjusts it and adapts it to readers of contemporary society, thereby showing the great potential of it.

In conclusion, this essay’s contribution to the critical picture is the insights provided through comparing the two ghost stories, thus showing how the genre has evolved in the last century. The pedagogical element adds another dimension to this by showing how a ghost-story project in upper-secondary school can improve not only the students’
language but also their knowledge of literature and their critical thinking. Thus, this essay shows that ghost stories are relevant to a modern reader. For hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years, humans have been fascinated by ghost stories, and despite the scientific development and the rational approach of today’s society, they continue to mesmerise us. We still enjoy being frightened, as long as we are at a safe distance from the danger, and although there are few genuine believers in ghosts today, we are still thrilled by that lurking belief that the stories might actually be true.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


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