The Red Room

By H. G. Wells

A pre-20th century short story suitable for Wider Reading coursework. Notes on Genre, structure, atmosphere and language. For Wider Reading Coursework it is necessary to:

- Refer in detail to texts to structure and language
- Refer to language characteristic of author and time noting language used for emotive and figurative effect
- Show awareness of appeal to reader and reader response to literary techniques
- Comment on literary tradition and context

GENRE

Look for similarities to Gothic mysteries. A Gothic story is: *a type of romantic fiction that predominated in English literature in the last third of the 18th century and the first two decades of the 19th century, the setting for which was usually a ruined Gothic castle or abbey. The Gothic novel, or Gothic romance, emphasised mystery and horror and was filled with ghost-haunted rooms, underground passages, and secret stairways.*

- Old, derelict house (look at how characters describe the house)
- Passages, spiral staircase (look at journey to Red Room)
- Ghost haunted room
- Subterranean suggests darkness, enclosed (compare to a tomb?)
- Description of deep-toned, chilly, echoing etc

STRUCTURE

Look at how the story is structured to create and sustain suspense

- Opening - how characters are described, what they say, discomfort of narrator (story told in first person - what effect does this have?)
- Mention of haunted room to engage interest - narrator's confidence introduces conflict
- Alternating tension and cheeriness of narrator in Red Room
- Candles going out - panic building up to final paragraph in red room (look at language here)
- Ends in daylight (contrasting with darkness)

SETTING

Setting is typical of Gothic and Victorian ghost stories. Dilapidated and derelict buildings were often inhabited by people who neglected their own welfare and were regarded as morally corrupt (compare to some Edgar Allan Poe short stories). Victorians prized order and appearances important indicators of character.

Gloominess suggested by the cold and dark contribute to the atmosphere of oppression and neglect.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Comment on typical Victorian language (vocabulary, speech and sentence structure typical of its time).

Comment on how language suggests atmosphere (see ATMOSPHERE) and the effect on readers.

ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere is suggested by structure and action but especially by the author's choice of language. Comment on choice of vocabulary and imagery used explaining the effect (atmosphere) created.

- Description of people - withered arm, pale eyes, monstrous shadow
- Description of house - queer old mirror, door creaked
- Warnings 'This night of all nights' (repeated)
- Repeated references to the old people's fear, darkness, shadows

IMAGERY

Use of similes, metaphor and personification of darkness and fear
- 'fashions born in dead brains'
- 'little tongue of light'
- 'ocean of mystery'
- 'like a ragged storm cloud sweeping out the stars'

Darkness:
- '... closed upon me like the shutting of an eye'
- '... wrapped about me in a stifling embrace'
- '... sealed my vision'
- '...crushed … reason from my brain'