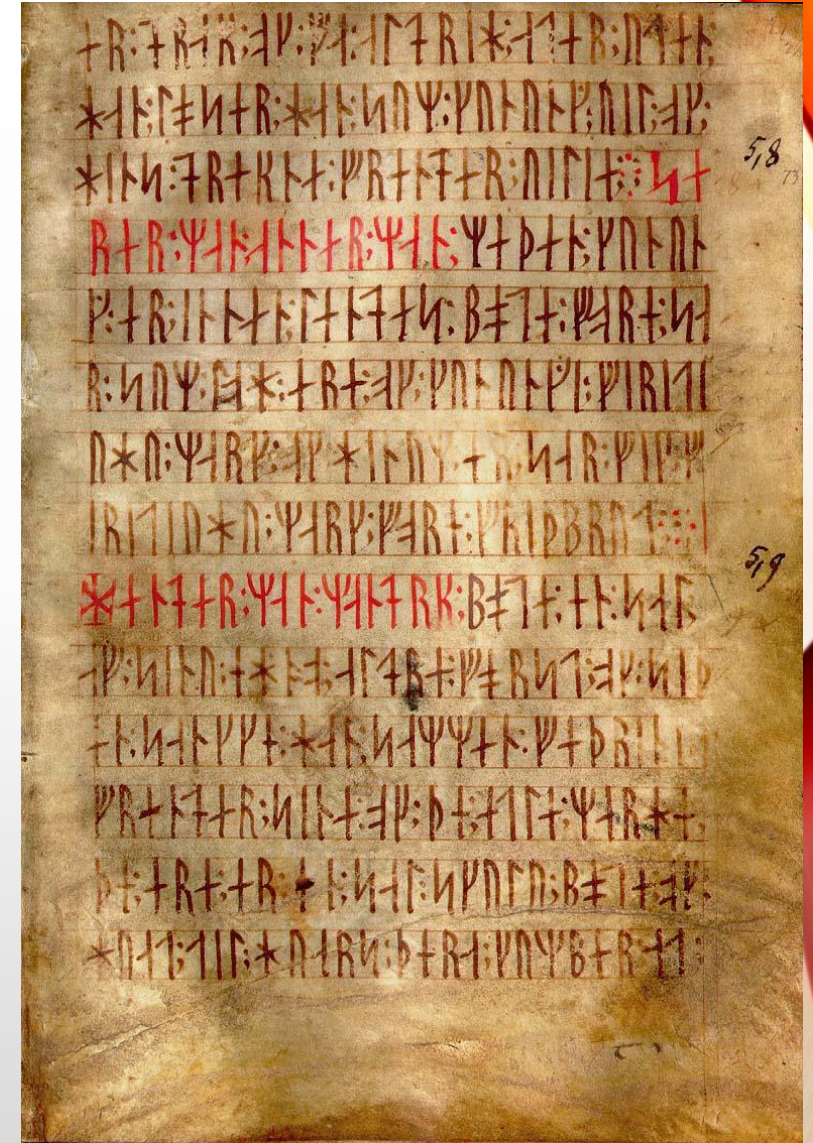


## HORROR MODULE - 2

Theme: Curse of the Demon: The supernatural in the ordinary

STORY FOR ANALYSIS:

“CASTING THE RUNES.” 1911.  
M.R. JAMES.  
THE WEIRD, PP. 56-66.



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# THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE ORDINARY

One sense of the demonic is the sense of the uncanny (from last week)

Another way this might appear is the sense of the demonic dimension of ordinary life. For example, we use the phrase “living hell” to describe a terrible state of anxiety.

Another way this might manifest is the sense that we “can’t escape” someone who is overly possessive such as a lover or a parent.

Some of the stories on this list this week are about this sort of curse of the demon.

“Casting the Runes” creates a sense of uncertainty by always leaving the question open about whether the demon in the story is imagined or real.



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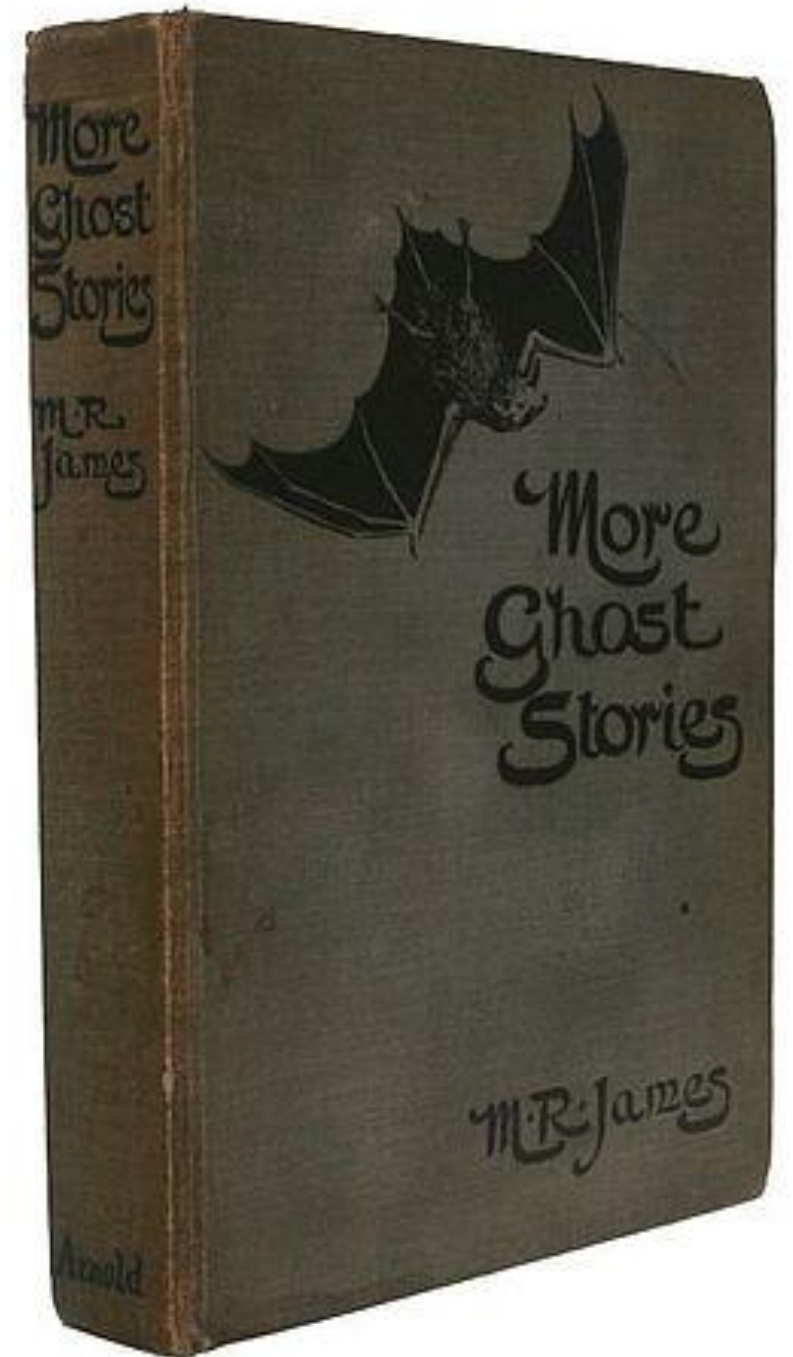
# OPTIONAL STORIES FOR THIS WEEK (SEE ASSIGNMENT 1)

- “Sredni Vashtar” 1910. Saki. *The Weird*, pp. 53-56.
- “The Man in the Black Suit.” 1994. Stephen King, *The Weird*, pp. 844-854.
- “My Mother”. 1978. Jamaica Kincaid. *The Weird*, 518-521.
- “Same Time, Same Place”. 1963 Mervyn Peake. *The Weird*, pp.368-372.
- “The Ice-Man”. Haruki Murakami. *The Weird*, pp. 792-797.



# CONTENTS: "CASTING THE RUNES"

- Plot and Characters
- Motifs in the story
- Theme: What is the Curse of the Demon?
- Influence on Horror Fiction
- Key terms
- Other Stories





# PLOT

- Mr. Edward Dunning is a researcher for the British Museum. At the beginning of the story he has recently reviewed *The Truth of Alchemy* by a Mr. Karswell, an alchemist and occultist. Afterwards he begins seeing the name John Harrington displayed wherever he goes. He learns that Harrington also reviewed Karswell's work and died in a freak accident not long after.
- Harrington's brother helps Dunning to discover that Karswell cursed both men by slipping them a piece of paper with some runes on it. They deduce that the curse, once cast, will cause the bearer to die in three months. They track down Karswell a day before the curse is set to kill Dunning and manage to return the runes to him. Karswell dies the next day, killed by a stone that fell from scaffolding around St. Wulfram's Church in Abbeville.

-Wikipedia

# CHARACTERS

- Mr. Edward Dunning is a researcher at the British Museum
- Mr. Karswell, an alchemist and occultist.
- John Harrington also reviewed Karswell's work and died in a freak accident not long after.
- Harrington's brother helps Dunning.





# SETTING



























- The setting is modern life in England, 1911.
- The setting is not an old house or church that carries an overall feeling of a haunted past, as it would be in the traditional Gothic tale.
- Dunning notices weird intrusions in the glass window on the train—this is clearly not a medieval place for a haunting; rather, it is a modern piece of technology.
- There is no sense that the demon presence is from the past; it seems more like a force that is always there but “somewhere behind” our world. It is an archaic life form, and eternal form from beyond the human experience.

# MOTIF

- Definition: a motif is a repeated image in a story that becomes meaningful through repetition.
- Writing
  - The alchemist Karswell submits his paper and is rejected.
  - He was rejected before, and what followed was Harrington's death.
  - The curse is written on a piece of paper in runes (strange, mysterious lettering) and transferred from Karswell to Dunning.
  - In the end, Dunning transfers the mysterious writing—the paper with the runes—back to Karswell before Karswell dies. In this sense, the cursed writing is an open letter, and it kills the holder on the date the writing is “published”, meaning, when it “comes to life”.

## Rune Symbols

							
<b>Fehu</b> [F]	<b>Urus</b> [U,V]	<b>Tpurizas</b> [Th/P]	<b>Ansuz</b> [A]	<b>Raido</b> [R]	<b>Kanu</b> [K,C]	<b>Gebo</b> [G]	<b>Wunjo</b> [W]
feoff/own (wealth)	aurochs (power)	thorn (troll/tor)	asir/ash (mouth)	ride (road)	ulcer (torch)	gift (talent)	win/vane (joy)
							
<b>Hagall</b> [H]	<b>Nyedis</b> [N]	<b>Ice</b> [i]	<b>Jera</b> [J]	<b>Eywas</b> [Ē,Ey,Ei,Y]	<b>Pertho</b> [P]	<b>Ælghiz</b> [Z,X,Y,-R]	<b>Sowuli</b> [S]
hail (havoc)	need (night, not)	ice (freeze)	year/yeild (harvest)	yew (strength) (egis)	pear? (hidden) (game)	elk/reed (defence)	sol (sun)
							
<b>Teiwaz</b> [T]	<b>Berkana</b> [B]	<b>Ehwaz</b> [E,Eh]	<b>Mannaz</b> [M]	<b>Lagu</b> [L]	<b>Ingwaz</b> [-Ing,ŋ]	<b>Dægaz</b> [D]	<b>Othala</b> [O/Ω]
tyr (warrior)	birch (birth)	horse (wheel/luck)	man (human)	lake (lagoon)	ing (living)	day (dawn)	heritage (estate)

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# THEME: RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

- Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis shows that censored thoughts and emotions from our conscious awareness return in the form of strange symptoms that we must work to interpret.
- He made the analogy of a doctor "reading" symptoms to "discover" the underlying disease that causes them.
- Can we find this pattern in "Casting the Runes"?



# THEME: RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

## Resentment

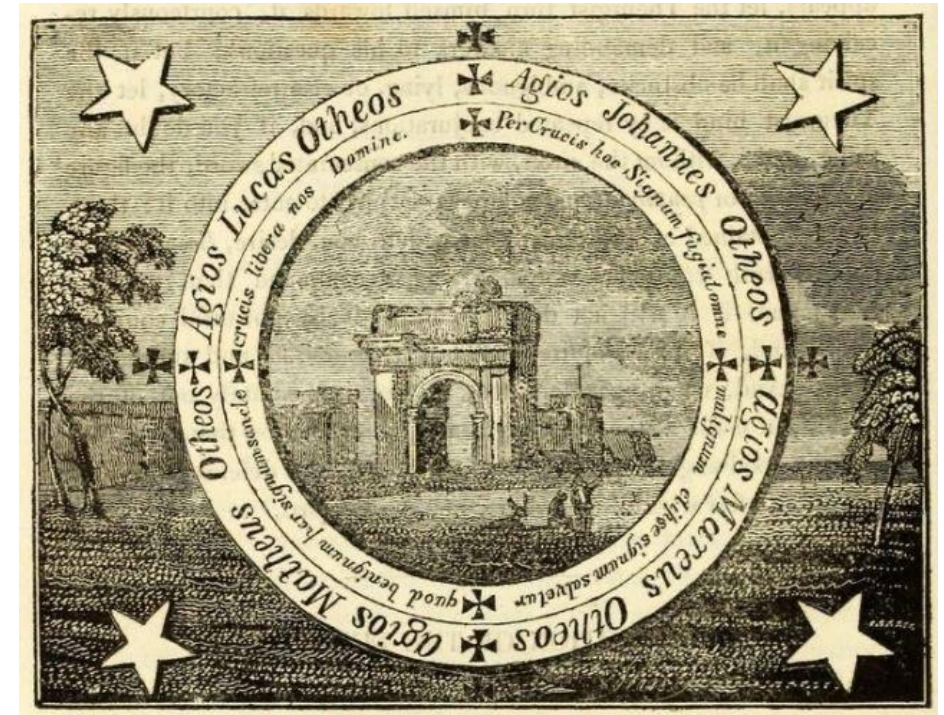
- Defined as a an emotional response of feeling bitter indignation at being treated unfairly.
- Karswell feels resentment over the rejection of his paper, and seems to take revenge on the scholars that refuse to publish his work.
  - This is opposed to the scholars' attitude of "objectivity".
- Karswell even acts out against the local children for trespassing on his property; he puts on a show for them that frightens them to the point where they stampede for the exits.
  - Here he seems to violate the "innocence" of children by holding them accountable and taking revenge.





# THEME: RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

- Karswell's resentment isolates him from the scientific community. He attacks everyone as an injured sorcerer rather than work with them to improve, as a modern scientist would do.
- Rather than work on his bad writing and his reasoning, he acts outraged. The scholars and their wives at the beginning of the story refuse to socialize with him. They gossip about his menacing behavior
- He takes revenge on the "innocent" children and further isolates himself.
- Karswell's resentment causes him to cast the runes, but the curse returns to him in the end and causes his death.





# THEME: RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

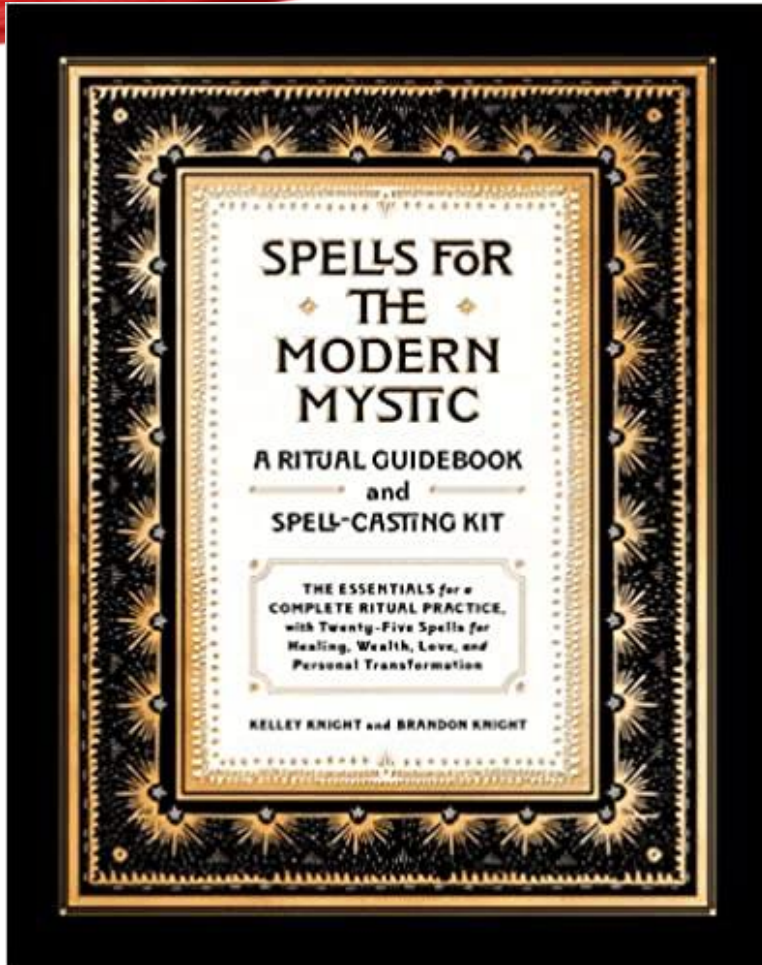
## Paradox of Capitalism

James' story of a man who offends a sorcerer and is subsequently put under a time-sensitive curse has a twist to it: the curse can be transferred to another person.

This is clearly a modern story in that the form of the curse is very modern:

"The demon in 'Casting the Runes' bizarrely announces its intent by means of an advertisement in a railway carriage. The attack which the runes occasion is brought down quite amorally on whoever took them last, according to the depersonalised passings-on of bits of paper. The horror is of the universal equivalent in mass commodification: the runes are Bad Money." China Miéville Nov 29, 2011.

As we see here, the theme of return of the repressed can apply to social life as well as individuals, and in this sense the story seems to deal with the censored thoughts of capitalist society—the stuff we don't want to know about comes back to us as a cursed monster we don't understand unless we are willing to work to confront it.



# Theme: Materialism and the Monster:

## FUSION

- Critic Noel Carroll (The Philosophy of Horror) argues that monstrosity occurs in four ways. Let's look at them.
1. Fusion: construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on...A fusion figure is a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in unambiguously one, spatio-temporally discrete entity" (43).
- In other words, when we see, all in one place, a mixture of categories that should be separated, we identify that as monstrous.



## Theme: Materialism and the Monster: FISSION

2. Another monster structure Carroll offers is fission, a structure in which

“categorically contradictory elements are fused or condensed or superimposed in one unified spatio-temporal being whose identity is homogeneous” (46).

Examples of this category:

- Werewolves
- Doppelgangers
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.
- In werewolves, for example, the wolf and human occupy the same body at different times.





**Theme: Materialism and the Monster:**

# MAGNIFICATION AND MASSIFICATION

The third category offered by Carroll is

3. Magnification and massification.

- an elephant is ordinary, but if we encounter a cockroach the size of an elephant, it is a monster.
- similarly, if we are given a massive number of tiny creatures all working together in common purpose AS IF they were one creature attacking humans, that too is a monster.



**Larval Procession of a Fungus Gnat**

# Theme: Materialism and the Monster:

## METONOMY

4. Finally, Carroll describes the way in which a monster is created by the loathsome or disturbing things which surround it.

In other words, the monstrous effect is created by the association with these things.

Example: Dracula.

- Dracula seems to be a man.
- However, he is surrounded by things we are afraid of and find disgusting such as vermin—bats.
- The literary term of association to create meaning is METONYMY (pronounced: me-ton-imy).



# THEME: MATERIALISM AND THE MONSTER

- If we look again at "Casting the Runes", we notice that the physical is emphasized in relation to the monsters; they are not simply haunting spirits.

"Touch and touchability is central. James's is the horror of the physical universe." One of his stories is named, "The Malice of Inanimate Objects"... consider the demon in the story Casting the Runes; the creature in the pillow is visceral but a mix of things; the invisible demon chasing Harrington; and that gets on the boat at the end. It is not a man from the past taking personal revenge."

-M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire, China Miéville  
Nov 29, 2011.

Which of the four categories applies to the "demon in the bed"?





# THEME: MATERIALISM AND THE MONSTER

From Casting the Runes:

"He put his hand into the well-known nook under the pillow: only, it did not get so far. What he touched was, according to his account, a mouth, with teeth, and with hair about it, and, he declares, not the mouth of a human being."

- Clearly, touching such a creature was NOT what Dunning expected when he lay in bed and reached into the pillows. He refuses to discuss what happened that night alone in his bedroom, keeping it to himself.



# THEME: MATERIALISM AND THE MONSTER

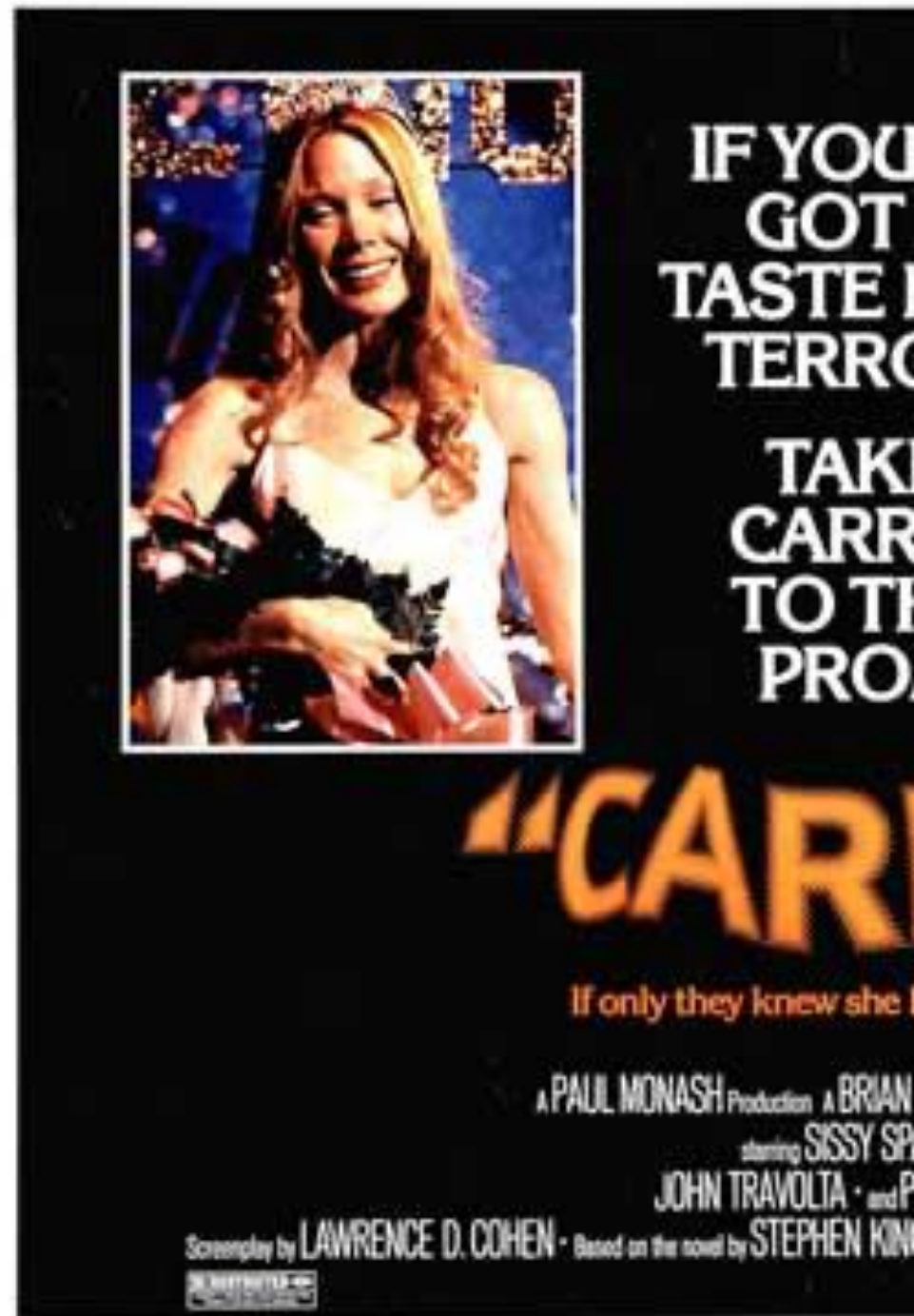
Thinking again about our theme of the Return of the Repressed...

One critic argues that the repressed thought here is the material of the body:

"It is not difficult to place this detail on the spectrum of sexual alarm. As Darryl Jones says, in his introduction to the new edition [of M.R. James' story collection], here is a classic instance of the *vagina dentata*—the epitome of what Jones calls "the monstrous-feminine..."

-from Fright Night, New Yorker article: The Horror of M.R. James.  
Anthony Lane February 6, 2012

- In other words, the critic sees in this monster a repressed sexual thought, the "monstrous-feminine".
- It is worth noting that the writer M.R. James was a single male living in a conservative English society.



# “CASTING THE RUNES”

Consider the form of the story:

- James goes through the motions of plot
  1. He doesn't try to hide the direction of the story; at each step of the story we seem to have a good sense of what the next step will likely be; and
  2. he knows this, and repeatedly uses formulations like 'I surely do not need to tell you ...' or 'It will be redundant to conclude...'

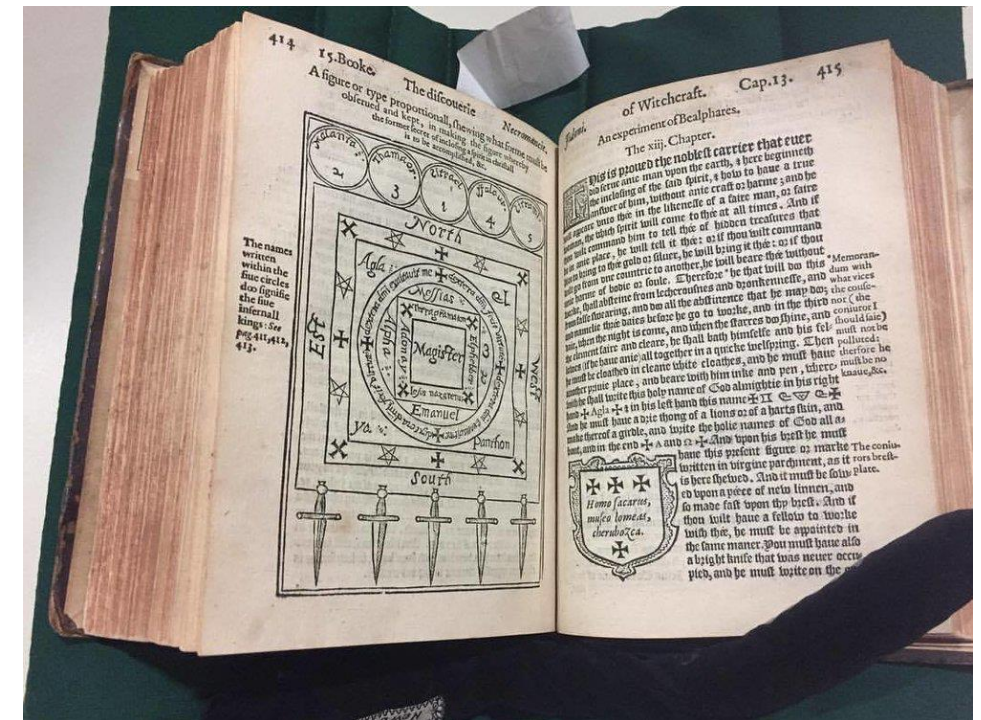
He does not seem to take the form of the story seriously. This suggests that he wants us to focus on the “strangeness” he is describing more than the storytelling experience.



# CASTING THE RUNES

This formlessness is itself a “return of the repressed”, part of the “monstrous” nature of the “weird” tale. He is making the story itself “strange”.

- H.P. Lovecraft, now acknowledged as the greatest of the weird tale writers, credits M.R. James as a huge influence. He admired both the form and content of his work.
- H.P. Lovecraft wrote his stories in the form of spell-books, secret scientific reports, etc.





# KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Fusion

Fission

Magnification

Massification

Metonymy

Materialism

Repressed