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The short story and beyond: Exploring the folk horror tradition in the British Isles

El Relato de la veta Folk Horror en las Islas Británicas

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ABSTRACT

Although British and Irish authors like M.R. James and Sheridan Le Fanu published supernatural short stories rooted in folklore over a century ago, it is only in the last fifteen years that the term *folk horror* has gained currency, particularly in film criticism. In recent years, folk horror has experienced a true revival and has spread into different media including music, art, handicrafts, and video games. Numerous websites, blogs, online magazines, and social media groups are now dedicated to folk horror. This article explores the landscapes of folk horror and the theme of boundary crossing in the works of the so-called first wave of short story writers from the late 1800s until the middle of the 20th century, as well as in contemporary short fiction. It also considers the reasons behind the subgenre's growing popularity, particularly in Britain.

PALABRAS CLAVE: British and Irish short stories, folk horror, supernatural literature.

RESUMEN

Aunque autores británicos e irlandeses como M. R. James y Sheridan Le Fanu ya publicaron hace más de un siglo relatos de tema sobrenatural basados en el folclor, es solo en los últimos quince años cuando el término *folk horror* ha ido difundiéndose, especialmente en el campo del cine. Recientemente el *folk horror* ha experimentado todo un regreso propagándose en varios ámbitos como la música, el arte, la artesanía y los videojuegos y se le han dedicado páginas web, blogs, revistas en línea y grupos en las redes sociales. Este artículo explora el panorama del *folk horror* y el tema del cruce de las fronteras en los trabajos de la llamada "primera ola" de los escritores de relatos de las islas británicas, desde finales del s. XIX hasta mediados del s. XX, y asimismo en el cuento contemporáneo. Se examinan también los motivos de la creciente popularidad de este subgénero, especialmente en Gran Bretaña.

KEYWORDS: short film, anagnorisis, cataphora, minifiction, didactic.

1. Introducing Folk Horror

Folk horror is widely recognized by critics as a subgenre of horror literature. Since definitions tend to be imprecise and controversial, horror is perhaps best understood by the effect it has on its readers. As Aldana Reyes (2016) writes, it "seeks to create a pervasive feeling of unease and attempts to arouse the emotions and sensations we would normally ascribe to feeling under threat" (Reyes, 2016: 13), the threat may be supernatural, but not necessarily so. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, folk horror literature "typically draws on themes of folk beliefs, pre-Christian traditions, isolation, or the sinister power of the natural world to create an atmosphere of dread, menace, or unease" (*OED* "folk horror"). Since these themes have been explored by folk tales, fantasy, science fiction and the Gothic, we can say that folk horror crosses the boundaries of various subgenres. I would argue, in fact, that this crossing of boundaries is not only characteristic of folk horror as a subgenre but also a key feature in the narratives themselves.

From the very beginning, folk horror fiction has been associated with the short story. The earliest folk horror stories, recognized as such by critics, date back to the late 19th century and were written by Sheridan Le Fanu, Edith Nesbit, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy. However, among the so-called first wave of folk horror writers, M.R. James, who published his short stories between 1904 and 1936, is by far the most widely read and critically discussed.

In recent decades, there has been a general shift toward the novel, largely due to the demands of the publishing market which reflects readers' preferences for longer fiction. As a result, writers of folk horror prefer to write novels rather than short stories. Although Andrew Michael Hurley, arguably the most prominent British author of folk horror, has published numerous short stories, he is best known for his novels and nowadays it is not uncommon for successful authors to write only long fiction, as it is the case of Irish writer A.M. Shine. Nonetheless, short story collections are still very popular among crowdfunded and independently published works, and short stories regularly appear in online magazines and blogs.

In the past ten years, the number of folk horror anthologies and critical studies has been growing from one year to the next. Much of this momentum can be traced back to the introduction and popularisation of the term *folk horror* itself. As the term was first used to describe films, folk horror is primarily associated with cinema and most studies are either entirely about cinema or they analyse both cinema and fiction.

It all started in 2010 when British writer Mark Gatiss in the BBC documentary *A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss*, quoted director Piers Haggard who used the term "folk horror" to describe three films produced in Great Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s.[1] The term was soon extended to new films and TV series and also to works of fiction that described uncanny landscapes, creepy isolated communities and (supposedly) ancient rituals.

Although it is unquestionable that the term *folk horror* gained currency after the broadcasting of the documentary, critics have been debating, even competing, ever since

[1] The three films mentioned by Piers Haggard were Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968), Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) which came to be identified as the quintessential folk horror film and it is still discussed in countless articles, books, blogs and on social media.

to discover who used the term first. For instance, Irish author Sinéad Gleeson in her foreword to *Tales Accursed: a Folk Horror Anthology* (2024) omits any reference to Gaddis and instead asserts that the term was coined in 1970 by Rod Cooper in a film review for *Kine Weekly*, a magazine that covered news about British cinema and television.

I prefer to rely on the *Oxford English Dictionary* which under the entry "folk horror" records its first use in the London magazine *Our Time* in 1946: “that tour de force of folk-horror - Thrawn Janet”, a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson. In his article, the English writer and critic Arthur Calder-Marshall praised the “remarkable diversity of Stevenson’s styles” and his ability to “reproduce accents” (163). It is important to note that, contrary to common assumption, the term folk horror was not applied to cinema, but to literature and, specifically, to a short story. Furthermore, "Thrawn Janet" (1881), which Stevenson wrote in Scots, centres on witchcraft, a theme that is still considered typical of folk horror fiction. In fact, as the narrative reflects key elements of the subgenre, it was recently reprinted in *Damnable Tales: a Folk Horror Anthology* edited by Richard Wells (2021).

In the British Isles today, folk horror is not only popular in literature and cinema, but also in a range of other media, including music, podcasts, visual arts, printmaking, handicrafts, and video games. Its growing cultural presence is further reflected in the increasing number of dedicated websites, blogs, online magazines, and social media communities. For example, on Facebook, there are several public and private groups that discuss folk horror in cinema, literature and the arts, such as Folk Horror Revival, Real Folk Horror, Folk Horror! and one entirely devoted to music, The Sounds of Folk-Horror.

Although some scholars continue to use terms such as supernatural, gothic and weird to refer to fiction (as seen, for instance, in the prestigious British Library’s series Tales of the Weird launched in 2018), in the last fifteen years, folk horror has become a catch-all term that encompasses all of them. In a similar fashion, writers from over a hundred years ago, who were known for their supernatural, Gothic and weird tales are now identified as early folk horror authors, thus retroactively creating a folk horror tradition. For example, M.R. James’s "Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad" (1904) and Algernon Blackwood’s "Ancient Lights" (1914) regularly appear in anthologies of folk horror alongside works by contemporary writers. In the last few years, as folk horror has acquired an international resonance, anthologies published in the United Kingdom also include short stories by authors of other nationalities, mainly American.

Anthologies published in the United States regularly feature writers from the British Isles, for instance *The Fiends in the Furrows: An Anthology of Folk Horror*, edited by David T. Neal and Christine M. Scott. First released in 2018, it was so well-received that it led to two follow-up volumes - one in 2020, which included a foreword by Andrew Michael Hurley, and another in 2023.

2. The “Folk” in Folk Horror

It should be clarified that the *folk* in folk horror does not necessarily mean the folklore (a term coined by William John Thoms in 1846) from the British Isles, that is, the legends, beliefs, culture, and customs of rural or pre-industrial Britain and Ireland.

Some authors have created their own traditions, while others have found inspiration in local as well as foreign folklore. For example, a wendigo, an evil creature from Native American folklore features in Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo" (1910) a story set in the Canadian wilderness, while the krampus, a half-goat half-demon monster from German folklore, in Laura Purcell's "Carol of the Bells and Chains" (2023).

Most past and present authors of folk horror rely on their own adaptation or reinvention of local and foreign folklore. Their works fall into what Michael Dylan Foster (2015) calls the *folkloresque*, that is, those "creative, often commercial products or texts" that are "rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition", but have been "consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements" to appear as if they "emerged organically from a specific source" (Foster, 2015: 5). It is this feeling of authenticity that appeals to readers of folk horror and to the audience of folk horror films.

Indeed, more often than not, the references to local folklore are rather vague and limited to the appearance of a well-known folk character which is enough to locate them in a specific part of the country and to convey a sense of authenticity to the readers. For instance, Alison Littlewood's "Jenny Greenteeth" (2021) features the English water-witch known for drowning children, while Elizabeth McNeal's "Monster" (2021) the shapeshifting Selkies from Scottish mythology. At times, authors deliberately assemble material from a variety of local sources. For example, Jan Edwards explains in the note preceding "The Devil's Piss Pot" (2021) that her story features a "water dragon" from Sussex folklore, "pagan tree rings" and "that stalwart of so many legends world-wide", i.e. "guardian(s) of gate/well/portal".

Although legendary creatures may pose a threat to the protagonists, in most stories the danger comes from the old gods and the folk who believe in them. In fact, many plots in old and new works, centre on remote communities that still follow the old ways. For instance, in E.F. Benson's "Gavon's Eve" (1906), Arthur Machen's "The White People" (1904) and Eleanor Scott's "Randalls Round" (1929), or in Ramsey Campbell's "The Fourth Call" (2021).

In recreating pre-Christian rituals, early authors such as A.C. Benson in "The Temple of Death" (1903) and H. Russell Wakefield in "The First Sheaf" (1940) strongly relied on James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890-1915), a very influential text in literature, anthropology, classical studies and folklore especially in the early 20th century, but not limited to it. In fact, its impact was not limited to these disciplines, but also to cinema. As Ronald Hutton (2023), given the popularity of Frazer's book "it is not surprising that when the script-writer of *The Wicker Man* wanted to find out about paganism he simply went to *The Golden Bough*, and took from it practically the whole portrait of paganism that the film provides" (Hutton, 2023: 31).

3. The Landscape

If a large part of the folklore in folk horror is folkloresque, by contrast, its settings are usually real locations in Britain and Ireland. In fact, one of the characteristics of this subgenre and certainly one of its main attractions, lies in its being rooted in the landscapes of specific areas of the British Isles. The coast of Suffolk, for instance, is described in detail in many short stories by M.R. James, who used to spend his holidays

there, and the coast of Lancashire is vividly portrayed by Andrew Michael Hurley in his novel *The Loney* (2014), possibly the most celebrated work in contemporary folk horror, and *Barrowbeck* (2024).

The short stories in *Barrowbeck*, narrate the history of the fictional village of Barrowbeck, situated on the boundary between Lancashire and Yorkshire, spanning from the time of the early Celtic settlements to a future time, allowing the changing landscape to be the real protagonist, while the local people who come and go are only secondary characters.

Given that a strong sense of place characterises all folk horror, it is not surprising that landscape features as the first element of four in the so-called "folk horror chain" elaborated by film critic Adam Scovell (2017) to describe folk horror cinema and later applied also to the analysis of fiction. He suggests that landscape, isolation, skewed morals and the happening, constitute a chain of interconnected elements that characterize the subgenre. The landscape is "where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants". Isolation means that "the landscape must in some way isolate" the characters whether they are "just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community", while skewed belief systems and morality stand for "folklore, superstition, twisted forms of religiosity" and the happening/summoning is where "the plot culminates" (Scovell, 2017: 17-8).

Eerie settings and skewed belief systems are not limited to remote, rural communities - they can also be found in liminal[2], transitional, in-between spaces, in an urban environment. For instance, in Clive Barker's "The Forbidden" (1985), a bloodthirsty entity is summoned in an abandoned council estate building in Liverpool, while in Andrew Michael Hurley's "The Old Play" (2023), an ancient ritual involving human sacrifice takes place in a theatre located in a nameless town on England's North Sea coast.

Just as there are liminal zones in space, so too there are transitional moments in time, such as dawn and dusk, the turning of the year, annual festivals, or yearly celebrations that connect past and present events. For example, on Michaelmas Eve, the protagonist of Grant Allen's "Pallinghurst Barrow" (1892) narrowly escapes being sacrificed to the fairy King of the Barrow, while in Ramsey Campbell's "The Burning" (1981), on Guy Fawkes night, past and present acts of fanaticism and brutality tragically converge.

4. Boundaries and Crossings

Liminality suggests the presence of limits, boundaries that characters cross, whether deliberately or by accident. Manuel Aguirre's distinction between two zones in Gothic literature - the human and the Other (2008) can be also applied to folk horror: on one side is "the human domain of rationality and intelligible events" and, on the other, "the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason (but which need not be the supernatural)". The two are separated "by some manner of

[2] Folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1909) introduced the concept of liminality when he described the three stages that characterise rites of passage: separation, transition and reintegration. The transitional or liminal phase was later developed by anthropologist Victor Turner who referred to the subjects in transition as "liminal *personae"* or " threshold people" who "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space", liminal entities that are "neither here nor there", but are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 2017: 95).

threshold, and plots invariably involve movement from one site to the other – a movement which, most often, is presented as a transgression, a violation of boundaries" (Aguirre, 2008: 2-3).

In folk horror, the boundaries between the familiar and the uncanny can be easily recognizable, like those between the urban and the rural, human habitation and the wilderness, charted and uncharted, or they can be more difficult to make out like those separating the natural world from the supernatural.

Boundaries, whether natural or artificial, play a fundamental role in folk horror narratives. In Natasha Pulley's "The Salt Miracles" (2023) the remote St. Hilda island in the Hebrides where the story takes place is surrounded by an impenetrable fog and a stormy sea that separates it from the outside world. Similarly, artificial boundaries, such as footpaths, walls or gates, are as important in separating the known from the unknown. The protagonists of folk horror often abandon the beaten track, cross a wall or an ancient circle of stones with disastrous consequences, as it happens in Helen Grant's "The Valley of Achor" (2018) and in Christopher's Harman's "Sisters Rise" (2018). At times, the unwary protagonists cause the crossing of a supernatural entity into our world by removing an ancient artifact from its original place, for example, an ancient bronze whistle that summons a supernatural creature in M.R. James's "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904) and an Anglo-Saxon crown watched over by a supernatural guardian in "A Warning to the Curious" (1925).

In folk horror stories old and new, the protagonists often leave the town, with its accepted frame of reference, and cross into liminal spaces at the periphery of civilization: dark woods, remote islands, deserted stretches of coastline, secluded rural villages. These liminal places are inhabited by threshold creatures, be they otherworldly and physically monstrous like the supernatural denizens of the forests, or human in their appearance, but culturally "abnormal" in their beliefs and behaviour like the inhabitants of isolated communities. They all pose a mortal danger to those who do not share their liminal nature and cross into their territories.

5. Weird Folk

Perhaps the most typical plot in folk horror follows the misadventures of urban "civilized" individuals trapped in remote locations, often a small village, where locals worship pagan deities and engage in arcane rituals which usually involve human sacrifices meant to bind the community together and to grant them some control over their environment. As Bernice M. Murphy writes, these "traditional beliefs and extreme practices usually provoke dread in the incomers and yet they evoke a degree of fascination" in readers "by dint of their apparent 'authenticity' and willingness to resist the expectations of a society that is otherwise defined by the conventions of capitalist modernity" (Murphy, 2022: 140).

The unwary urbanites may end up in these remote locations by chance when they happen to lose their way, or by choice when, for example, when they go on holiday there. In the fiction of the first wave of folk horror, characters often leave town for what they believe will be a peaceful holiday, only to realize they have made a terrible mistake. The protagonist of John Buchan's "No-Man's-Land" (1899) meets a surviving tribe of bloodthirsty Picts in the caves of Gallway, in Ireland and an unlucky hiker in L.T. C. Rolt's "Cwm Garon" (1948) finds himself in the secluded Vale of Ewyas in

Wales where the locals perform “unbelievably ancient” rites to “conjure or appease” the “unearthly, monstrous and very terrible” entities that “stalked through the valley”.

In contemporary folk horror, just as in present-day literature in general, trauma plays an important role adding a new element to the stories. The threats faced by the protagonists are usually more subtle and there is a greater emphasis on their psychology and on their relationships with their family or friends. It is not uncommon for characters to travel to rural areas in the wake of a traumatic experience, such as the death of a loved one, or a painful separation. In Gary Budden’s "Hovering" the protagonist, abandoned by his partner, leaves London for a coastal town in Kent, only to be overwhelmed by loneliness and alienation. He feels like “an impostor, someone looking from the outside in” unable to understand the “alien conversation” of “the local schoolchildren” who speak in “a dead language of northern Europe”, while elderly men sitting on the benches that overlooked the sea, “never registered his presence”. In other stories, the characters hope that a holiday will give them an opportunity to rebuild a strained relationship. In Jenn Ashworth’s "Old Trash" (2018) a single mother goes camping with her troubled teenaged daughter in Pendle in Lancashire, an area associated with the witch trials of the 17th century. These contemporary stories rarely end well for the protagonists or their loved ones compared to the first wave of folk horror, as readers today are more disposed to open endings or tragic conclusions.

6. The Dark Woods

Like remote villages far from civilization, the dark woods [3] are also liminal places. But, if in the former the threat is usually human, in the woods, the danger is often supernatural as the forest has been strongly associated with danger and otherworldly creatures since time immemorial.

Although many folk horror stories from the British Isles are set in woods, in reality, woodland covers only 13% of the UK land area and only 11% of the Republic of Ireland (while across Europe nations average around 35%).For this reason, some authors prefer to set their stories in the past or in a different country, like Adam L.G. Nevill’s "The Original Occupant" (2005) which takes place in an uncharted part of a forest in Sweden.

Even when the trees have been cut down and the forest transformed into farmland, ancient creatures may still be hidden somewhere ready to raise again, like the demon in Clive Barker’s "Rawhead Rex" (1984) who is inadvertently awoken by a farmer whose field stands where the “Wild Woods” used to be and who belonged to a race that “owned” the land “before Christ” and “before civilization” (Barker, 1984: 53).

In folk horror, the woods may not necessarily cover a vast area, but they nonetheless mark a symbolic rather than a physical boundary. Indeed, in M.R. James’s "A Vignette" (1936) what stands between the civilized world – the garden in the Rectory – and a “park of many acres” haunted by a supernatural presence is nothing more than “a belt of trees of some age” known as the Plantation.

In the woods of folk horror, the vegetation itself may pose a threat to humans. In Algernon Blackwood’s "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912) the vampiric Forest

[3] Today *forest* refers to a large area of land covered with trees, but traditionally it designated a large area owned by the monarchy and kept for hunting. The *woods* and *woodland*, instead, indicate an area of land covered with trees and vegetation that is smaller than a forest.

(in capital in the text as it is personified) "with its thousand years of growth and its deep spreading being" looks like a "slumbering monster" to the artist who wants to paint it and will pay with his life.

Trees are sentient beings who strongly resent human trespassers and seem to play hide and seek with the unfortunate surveyor's clerk from London in M.R. James's famous short story "Ancient Lights" (1912). In Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907), two men on holiday are stranded in a forest in a deserted island along the Danube near Bratislava. Each morning, when they get up, they find that the trees are mysteriously creeping closer to the clearing where they are camping. The willows seem to move "of their own will as though alive" provoking a "keen sense of the horrible" in the narrator. In Ramsey Campbell's "In the Trees" (1986), the narrator experiences a similar feeling of dread when he feels that the trees in the forest are "closing their ranks against him" (Campbell, 1986: 10).

Trees are often in league with the supernatural creatures who shelter among them as is the case of the monstrous venomous spider-like creatures in M.R. James's "The Ash Tree" (1904) or the hungry horned creature in Jay Alexander's novella *Elken* (2022).

In all these short stories, whether set in large forested areas or in groves, the legendary dark woods of folk tales and fairy tales survive as spaces out of time, woods within the woods, where the laws of nature are different from those we experience in our everyday life.

7. The Revival

A cursory look at the increasing number of folk horror narratives being published today, at films and television series being produced in the British Isles, is sufficient to appreciate the popularity that folk horror has enjoyed in the last decade. It would be interesting to speculate on the reasons behind its growing popularity, especially in Britain.

One initial observation has to do with a renewed interest in pre-Christian paganism that dates to the nineteenth century when movements like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (of which two eminent writers of folk horror, Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, were members) rejected industrial modernity and advocated a return to a lost legendary past. Aleister Crowley, a former member of the Golden Dawn, established Thelema, a religion incorporating mystical rituals and sexual promiscuity. Both the Golden Dawn and Crowley in turn "influenced Wicca, a modern Pagan religion that came to public attention in 1950s Britain before spreading abroad" (White 2024). It was founded by folklorist Margaret Murray and by author (mainly of non-fiction books) and amateur anthropologist and archaeologist Gerald B. Gardner, considered the father of modern witchcraft, who claimed that some forms of pre-Christian paganism and magic rituals were still performed in the country.

Even today people in England and Wales seem to be attracted by unconventional belief systems. In fact, the latest 2021 census shows a rise in neopaganism whilst less than half the population identifies as Christian.[4] Similar figures emerge from the 2022

[4] Citizens were given the option to enter "paganism" as their religion on the census and 74,000 people declared they were pagan, an increase of 17,000 since 2011, although it is possible that this was a significant underreporting (Beddington, 2023).

census in Scotland. If we look at folk horror across various media and membership of folk horror-related groups on social media, most of them are English, although this may partly be a matter of numbers, as England is the most populous country.

In contrast, in the 2021 census in Northern Ireland, 79.7% of the population identifies as Christian, 42.3 of whom identify as Catholic. Similarly, in the 2022 census in the Republic of Ireland, 77% of citizens identified as Catholic and only 13% as having no religion.

Catholicism strongly relies on collective celebrations of the liturgical year and on community-based activities which are often linked to Catholic schools and Catholic organizations. One could argue that Catholic practices, festivals, processions, are rooted in folklore and are as colourful and even bizarre as the neo-pagan spring festivals popular particularly in England.

A second consideration that may explain the growing popularity of folk horror may lie in a renewed interest in a lost rural past and in local environment at a time when our ecosystems are in great danger. Some scholars, like Roger Luckhurst (2023) interpret this fascination as an expression of regionalism born out of Brexit. The two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive as both may have contributed to the folk horror revival.

8. Conclusion

In his introduction to *The Mammoth Book of Folk Horror* (2021), British writer Stephen Jones notes that "every country, every culture, has its own versions of folk horror" and that it has been his "pleasure to expand the reach of the theme", and include stories set in Denmark, India and Mexico, as well as Ireland and the United States. However, the stories he selected were not written by Danish, Indian, or Mexican authors, but by British and American writers. A meaningful study of the folk horror subgenre requires a truly comparative approach—one that examines texts written by local authors, whether in English or in other languages in English translation. Furthermore, a true understanding the subgenre's enduring appeal in the British Isles, as well as its recent revival, requires us to ask whether this is a uniquely regional phenomenon—and if so, why. It is time for critics and readers of folk horror short stories and novels to venture into new cultural and linguistic territories: the insights to be gained will certainly be rewarding.

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