

A Warning to the Curious



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF M. R. JAMES

M. R. James was born into a highly religious family in Kent, England. He was born in a clergy house in Goodnestone, where his father was an Anglican clergyman. James himself remained devoutly religious throughout his entire life. James was three years old when the family moved to a different clergy house in Suffolk, where he spent the majority of his childhood. At age 11, he went to a prestigious boarding school in London and later attended Eton College in Berkshire. James then spent much of his adult life at Kings College, Cambridge as a student, fellow, and provost. Though James is known for his fiction writing and critics have called his ghost stories some of the best in the horror genre, his main life's work was as a medieval scholar. His stories incorporate aspects of his research, tending to be based on historical legends or items. James was friends with his contemporaries at Kings College, but he was never known to have had any romantic relationships throughout his life. He died at age 73 from unknown causes in Eton, Berkshire.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Warning to the Curious" was published just a few years after World War I, and the story embodies the war-related anxiety that engulfed England at that time. Though the story doesn't mention World War I specifically, the old man and the rector talk about keeping German invaders at bay. In fact, the story largely centers around the community's loss of a sense of security, as it feels unprotected from foreign invaders. The women's suffrage movement also coincided with the time of M. R. James's writing, and James was strongly opposed to this development, keeping in line with his traditional and reactionary views. Indeed, his writing doesn't include strong female characters, or hardly any female characters at all.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

M. R. James is known as having invented the "antiquarian" ghost story—most of his stories take place in historical European towns and center around ancient legends or objects. His literary impact in the horror genre is far reaching. Most notably, H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King incorporated aspects of James's style into their writing. James himself was a fan of traditional authors like William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Dickens had a particularly noticeable influence on James's stories, and "A Warning to the Curious" even mentions [Great Expectations](#) in its opening paragraphs. James often uses a Dickensian style to set the scene for his stories, describing gloomy and bleak backdrops in extreme detail. He also had

notably traditional views on culture and literature. He openly disliked James Joyce and other authors who used profanity or sexual imagery, though critics have suggested that M. R. James subconsciously incorporated quasi-sexual imagery into his own writing. Although "A Warning to the Curious" is different in tone, it's worth considering it alongside other famous tales about ghosts, such as Henry James's [The Turn of the Screw](#), Shirley Jackson's [The Haunting of Hill House](#), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Warning to the Curious
- **When Written:** 1925
- **Where Written:** Eton, Berkshire, England
- **When Published:** 1925
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Horror
- **Setting:** Seaburgh, England (a fictionalized version of the real town Aldeburgh, England)
- **Climax:** William Ager's ghost kills Paxton.
- **Antagonist:** William Ager's ghost
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Child Prodigy. James was an extremely precocious child, and it is said that he could read and understand Ethiopic, an ancient Semitic language, before he was in high school.

Christmas Tradition. In Victorian England, reading ghost stories out loud was a Christmas tradition. James was known for the animated way he read his own stories to his friends around Christmastime.



PLOT SUMMARY

The small coastal town of Seaburgh is bright and colorful and features a prominent church atop a hill. The writer describes Seaburgh from memory, as he used to frequent the town in childhood. He recently met a man who told him a story that takes place in Seaburgh, and the writer recorded the story.

The narrator of the story used to go to Seaburgh regularly to golf with his friend Henry Long. In the narrator's tale, he and Long meet a young man one day while spending time in the lounge of their usual hotel. The young man—whose name is Paxton—is agitated and says that he just had a disturbing

experience. A little while ago, he explains, he went to a nearby town to visit a church. There, an old man told him about a local legend that three **holy crowns** were buried in the area to fend off invaders. Paxton was intrigued, so he talked to the church rector to learn more. The rector told him that there was only one crown left and that it was buried nearby. The rector also said that there was a family—the Agers—whose duty it was to guard the last crown, but that William Ager, the last heir, had recently died. Paxton was immediately determined to find where the crown was buried. He asked a few local people for pointers on the crown’s exact location, and when he found the spot he secretly dug into the ground and took the crown.

The narrator and Long are impressed, but Paxton is distraught and says he must return the crown, though he doesn’t explain why. The three of them go to Paxton’s room to see the crown. On their way back to the lounge, the sensation of a supernatural presence comes over the narrator and Long. Finally, Paxton discloses that something has been haunting him ever since he began his plan to find the crown. At first, Paxton tells them, he sensed that something was giving him signs not to go near the crown, and when he first touched the crown he felt fingernails scraping at his back. He took the crown anyway, though he now regrets it, and **the ghost** has been following him ever since. Upon hearing this, the narrator and Long offer to help return the crown. They quickly formulate a plan to sneak out of the hotel that night to replace it. The three men leave the hotel late at night, and throughout their journey to the crown’s original spot, they all have a strong impression that they’re being watched. When they arrive at the location, Paxton buries the crown in a panicked frenzy, and they leave in a rush.

Even after returning the crown, Paxton is still overcome with guilt and anxiety. The three men plan to meet in the afternoon the next day. When the agreed upon time comes, the narrator and Long can’t find Paxton. A hotel servant says she saw him run outside, so the other two take off to find him. They sprint along the sand following Paxton’s footprints, and they see another bony pair of footprints alongside his. It seems that Paxton chased after the ghost thinking it was the narrator or Long, and as they run, the narrator already knows that the ghost will kill Paxton. After a short time, they find Paxton’s body, and his face shows that the ghost violently killed him—it’s unclear what, exactly, happened, though it’s possible that Paxton ran off some sort of ledge. The murder is never officially solved, as the narrator and Long don’t disclose the story to the media. The narrator never returns to Seaburgh again.

Bear hotel, where he discloses that he recently stole a famous holy **crown** that was buried in town. Since then, Paxton explains, he has been haunted by **the ghost of William Ager**, which causes Paxton extreme distress. Paxton knows that the crown is a cherished part of the town’s culture, yet he is unable to resist the temptation to steal it. The ghost sends Paxton various warnings against taking the crown, but Paxton refuses to acknowledge them. The exact motives behind his obsessive drive to get the crown remain somewhat unclear, but regardless, his theft is an undeniable infringement on the community’s security and tradition. Upon learning about Paxton’s situation, the narrator and Henry Long take pity on him and help him return the crown in hopes that the ghost will leave him alone. The ghost doesn’t leave, and Paxton is never able to overcome his guilt. The story doesn’t thoroughly detail Paxton’s background, but it’s clear that he has no social connections aside from the narrator and Henry Long. Paxton planned to travel to Sweden after his stay in Seaburgh, but William Ager’s ghost kills him before he has the chance.

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator meets Paxton in Seaburgh, where the narrator regularly goes to play golf with his friend, Henry Long. The narrator is puzzled by Paxton’s agitated manner at first, but he welcomes his company and gets along with him well. Impressed and fascinated by Paxton’s story of finding **the crown**, the narrator doesn’t pass any judgment. As a regular visitor, the narrator is more enmeshed in the community of Seaburgh than Paxton is, but he is of course still an outsider and does not share the cultural value that the locals place on the crown. The narrator says he will help Paxton return the crown, but really he and Henry Long merely accompany Paxton on the journey. The narrator sees and senses evidence of **William Ager’s ghost**, but the ghost doesn’t target the narrator, and the narrator never touches the crown himself. After returning the crown, the narrator can tell that Paxton is still in danger. He wants to help by making sure Paxton always has company, but Paxton has no friends or family. The narrator realizes that the ghost will kill Paxton, and he eventually comes across Paxton’s gruesomely murdered body. He never tells the media about the ghost or the crown in an effort to stay loyal to Paxton. The entire ordeal traumatizes the narrator, and he never goes back to Seaburgh again.

The Writer – An unnamed writer records the story as he heard it from the narrator, such that “A Warning to the Curious” is a story within a story. The writer has fond childhood memories of visiting Seaburgh, so he is particularly interested in stories about the town. The writer’s narration is only present for the first few paragraphs of the story, in which he describes Seaburgh in vivid detail.

The Old Man – The old man is the first person who tells Paxton about **the holy crowns**. Paxton meets him at a church in Froston, a town near Seaburgh. The old man tells Paxton that the crowns have saved the area from German invaders for



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Paxton – Paxton, the protagonist of “A Warning to the Curious,” is a young man visiting Seaburgh. He meets the narrator at The

years. He is very insistent and becomes agitated when he thinks Paxton doesn't believe the legend. This conversation is the spark that starts Paxton on his quest to find the crown, and it's also one of the clearest examples in the story of the crown's utmost importance to the locals.

The Rector – Paxton meets the rector, the leader of the church, while speaking with the old man. The rector elaborates on the legend about **the crowns** and tells Paxton that there is no one guarding the last crown now that **William Ager** is dead. The rector is happy to explain the local legend to Paxton, but he purposefully withholds information about the exact location of the crown. The rector also explains how lamentable it is to the community that William Ager was the last of his family line, further reiterating the cultural significance of the crown.

The Boots – The boots (whose job it is to clean the guests' shoes) is one of the servants at The Bear hotel where Paxton, the narrator, and Henry Long stay. The three men have a good relationship with the hotel staff despite their differing social classes. The boots in particular is concerned when he suspects the three men might be in trouble, and he stays up late at night to ensure they return safely after returning **the crown**.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Henry Long – Henry Long is the narrator's good friend who is present throughout the story. He witnesses all the same events as the narrator, and he seems to share the narrator's views on what unfolds. Henry Long has already died by the time the narrator tells the story to the writer.

himself—simply listening to the old stories like everyone else in town is, apparently, not enough for him. The old man at the church tells Paxton that without the crown, invaders would have “killed man, woman and child in their beds.” The emphasis with which the old man talks about the crown makes its cultural and historical importance obvious, and Paxton later says that he “didn't disbelieve” this legend. And yet, he goes in search of the crown anyway. Even though he recognizes that the surrounding community views the crown as a form of protection, he pompously sets out to dig it up, thus defiling an important cultural object. In turn, his transgression is not mere curiosity, but a selfish desire to possess this precious piece of history as his own.

Once Paxton successfully uproots this cultural treasure, his need to possess it gives way to intense guilt. What's more, there are tangible consequences to his selfish behavior, as the ghost of William Ager—the former protector of the crown—haunts him and intensifies his guilt. Paxton feels deep regret and resolves to return the crown, but he knows the ghost won't forgive him. He's right, and the ghost kills him the following day. That the story ends this way suggests that certain transgressions can't simply be undone: even Paxton's attempt to correct his wrongdoing cannot bring relief, and this is because his misbehavior upended a longstanding cultural legacy. The consequences of such disruptively selfish behavior, the story implies, can be catastrophic.



COMMUNITY VS. INDIVIDUALISM

“A Warning to the Curious” dramatizes the potential downsides of defying the rules and customs of a tightknit community. The townspeople

Paxton meets in Seaburgh are all strikingly welcoming and friendly. The rector and the old man he meets outside the church show concern for each other and seem to be friends, which is especially notable because the rector is clearly of a higher social status than the other man, and fraternization between different social classes wasn't all that typical in England in the early 20th century. The men are also exceptionally friendly to Paxton and welcome him into their community. They don't hesitate to tell Paxton all about the holy crowns and their local folklore, and they show him around the church. The woman who later fights off a dog that attacks Paxton has the same attitude—they are all willing to go out of their way to help. Even the narrator and Henry Long, who are visitors like Paxton is, are allies of the townspeople. The narrator and Long regularly stay at the same hotel, where they tip the servants well in exchange for the servants' help and protection. Furthermore, William Ager, guardian of the **crown**, is loyal to his societal duty even after his death, as his **ghost** is determined to get the crown back in order to protect the town. There is, then, a strong sense of communal support and good will in Seaburgh, and this is what Paxton ultimately undermines



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HISTORY, CULTURE, AND DISRESPECT

In “A Warning to the Curious,” the fact that Paxton steals an object imbued with such cultural and historical value shows how overpowering selfish desire can be. To that end, his eventual death suggests that disrespecting culture and history is highly disruptive and can sometimes come at a great cost.

Though the story's title—“A Warning to the Curious”—seems to imply that curiosity is Paxton's offense, he's ultimately punished (by the **ghost** and by his own guilt) for his disrespect, not just his curiosity. Of course, he's initially curious upon hearing about the mysterious hidden **crown**, but this curiosity goes too far when he decides that he needs to find the crown

by stealing the crown.

To that end, Paxton is the only character who does not cooperate with or positively participate in the Seaburgh community. By stealing the crown, he chooses to betray the people of Seaburgh—and, in doing so, he denies himself the protection of the community. He becomes a threat to Seaburgh, and the ghost of William Ager kills him as a result, reinforcing the idea that communities care only for their members and allies—outsiders and people with bad intentions are left vulnerable to attack. Interestingly, Paxton was an outsider even before his experience in Seaburgh, as the narrator notes that Paxton had no friends or family who might have been able to help him. Paxton even separates himself from the narrator and Henry Long at the end of the story, who perhaps could have helped him. He is completely isolated, and the story suggests that his anti-social, individualist behavior is what leads to his downfall.



FOLKLORE, RELIGION, AND BELIEF

“A Warning to the Curious” presents a broad view of spirituality that incorporates aspects of Christianity as well as folklore. Some aspects of the

story’s underlying spiritual landscape are unknown even to the characters, but the story implies that in times of uncertainty, unconventional signs of spirituality or otherworldliness shouldn’t be automatically ignored—in fact, the story even hints that there might be reason to *embrace* such beliefs when facing the unknown or the inexplicable.

Paxton seems not to believe that the **crown** has any real power. He senses a presence as he digs for the crown and even feels nails scraping his back, but he continues as though these supernatural threats are meaningless. Since he ignores these signs, it seems likely that Paxton holds a traditional religious view that doesn’t incorporate ghosts or local legends, so he’s stubbornly and arrogantly unmoved by otherwise obvious signs that something supernatural is afoot. After all, he certainly encounters signs of some kind of greater force or power. But he overlooks them, and this demonstrates just how arrogantly set in his ways he is. By the end of the story, the power of the **ghost** and the crown is finally made clear to Paxton, but it’s too late: the damage has already been done, and the ghost kills him as a result. In turn, the story warns against thoughtlessly discounting certain systems of belief simply because they don’t align with more traditional ways of thinking.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE CROWN

The crown represents the tempting yet dangerous human desire for material possessions. Paxton is enticed by the crown immediately upon learning about it, but it is the superficial quality of the crown’s mystery that intrigues him, not necessarily its protective properties or history. Upon hearing that there is nobody currently guarding the crown, Paxton seizes the opportunity to dig it up himself. Whereas the townspeople value the crown for the tradition and safety it brings them, Paxton is merely fascinated by the novelty and excitement around it. The story doesn’t explicitly detail Paxton’s exact motives, but it’s clear that he’s attracted to the enigmatic lore surrounding the crown, regardless of whether or not he believes it. It’s also reasonable to assume that the crown’s beauty and monetary worth contribute to its allure. Paxton’s desire is proven to be superficial by the fact that he gains no fulfillment or satisfaction once he possesses the crown—in fact, he is worse off than he was before. In contrast, the story suggests that the crown plays a crucial role to the community that values it for its practical and cultural importance. Therefore, the crown’s role in the story is twofold—it has a superficial allure, but it also fulfills the town’s fundamental necessity for culture, security, and tradition. Through the crown’s multifaceted appeal, the story cautions against giving in to materialistic desire while placing a higher importance on more basic and sensible needs.



THE GHOST OF WILLIAM AGER

The ghost of William Ager, the late guardian of the **crown**, is real in the story—that is, it’s truly present—but it also functions as a symbolic representation of Paxton’s guilty conscience about stealing the crown. The crown’s importance to the community is made obvious to Paxton, and he clearly feels shame about taking the crown, but this shame only surfaces in tangible ways after he has already dug up the cultural artifact. He tries to absolve his guilt by narrating the account as though he had less agency in the matter than he really did, attributing his discovery of the crown to “fate” and “luck.” In reality, of course, Paxton does know that he is to blame, but his obsession with the crown clouds his mind, and his culpability is too difficult for him to confront. In this way, his guilty conscience is embodied by Ager’s ghost, which Paxton can only see in his peripheral vision at first. The ghost disappears when Paxton tries to look straight at it, in the same way that Paxton can’t yet fully face his guilt. As his quest for the crown proceeds and Paxton’s guilt intensifies, the ghost’s presence also gets stronger until Paxton can physically feel it scraping him. But this doesn’t stop him, and it’s only when he’s past the point of no return that he expresses remorse about taking the crown. From that point forward, the guilt never leaves him, as the damage done by the theft is

irreversible. In keeping with this, William Ager's ghost haunts Paxton until it kills him. William Ager's persistent and murderous ghost thus symbolizes Paxton's remorse and suggests that the guilt following a serious wrongdoing can be permanently disruptive and defeating.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Wordworth Editions Ltd edition of *Collected Ghost Stories* published in 2013.

A Warning to the Curious Quotes

☞ There were cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs...but why do I encumber you with these commonplace details? The fact is that they come crowding to the point of the pencil when it begins to write of Seaburgh.

Related Characters: The Writer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

The writer opens with a lengthy exposition describing the town of Seaburgh, where the story takes place. He assumes a casual and friendly tone by breaking the fourth wall and addressing the reader directly. In this quote, he even seems to trail off as though lost in thought. In effect, the writer establishes an intimate rapport with the reader, which helps enable the suspension of disbelief that the story will later require. The writer knowing Seaburgh so well also hints at the town's inclusive community, which later becomes an important feature of the story.


"A Warning to the Curious" is a ghost story, so the colloquial introduction allows it to read as though it's a tale one friend is passing along to another, in the traditional way ghost stories are told. In fact, M. R. James was known for often reading his stories out loud to friends.

Seaburgh is a fictionalization of a real town called Aldeburgh, and the imagery and geography of Seaburgh as the writer depicts it is almost identical to that of Aldeburgh, from the red cottages described here to the Martello tower to the neighboring town of Froston (whose real-life counterpart is called Friston). To the same effect, the writer can be seen as a fictionalized version of M. R. James himself, who spent ample time in Aldeburgh in his youth.

☞ [...] them Germans would a landed here time and again, they would. Landed with their ships, and killed man, woman and child in their beds. Now then, that's the truth what I'm telling you, that is; and if you don't believe me, you ast the rector. There he comes: you ast him, I says.

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), Paxton, The Rector

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

Paxton meets an old man at the church in Froston who tells him that the crown wards off foreign invaders. This encounter is notable because it piques Paxton's interest in the crown and because it clues readers in to the idea that Paxton may not be a trustworthy ally of the community. The fact that the old man implores Paxton to talk to the rector shows that he senses Paxton's skepticism. Paxton tells this old man that he believes the story about the crown just to placate him, but it's clear that, in reality, Paxton is indifferent to the community's traditions and values—his eventual attraction to the crown, in other words, is purely motivated by self-interest, not any sort of respect for the regional beliefs surrounding the treasure.



M. R. James changes the dialect of the old man to clarify to readers that he's of a lower class. This is an interesting choice on the author's part, considering that everything readers know about the old man is quoted first by Paxton to the narrator and then by the narrator to the writer (such that it seems like a stretch that the writer would record the old man's speech this way). But this characterization of the old man is important because the relationship between himself and the rector exemplifies the egalitarian community value that is upheld throughout the story. The same idea is mirrored later on through the symbiotic relationships between the narrator and Henry Long and the hotel staff, who also speak in this lower-class dialect.

☞ "You see," he said, "anybody would call it the greatest bit of luck. I did, but I don't know. Of course I asked the shopman about William Ager, and of course he happened to remember that he lodged in a cottage in the North Field and died there."

Related Characters: Paxton, The Narrator (speaker), Henry

Long

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis



After speaking to the rector, Paxton sets off to find the crown. He finds a prayer book containing the names of the Ager family in a charity shop. These events are recorded according to how Paxton reports them, since the narrator didn't witness them himself. Paxton does seem to be a reliable narrator regarding the accuracy of events, but he constantly justifies his own actions with asides meant to create the impression that anyone in his position would have acted the same way.


Paxton refers here to finding the prayer book in the shop as "the greatest bit of luck." But, in reality, it's the direct result of the fact that Paxton intentionally searched for information that would help him find the crown. Paxton comments at one point that "fate" brought him to the charity shop, but he makes a deliberate choice to enter the shop in order to find out where William Ager's house is. His narration continuously insinuates that he has little agency in finding the crown, but it's clear to readers that his actions are calculated and intentional. Even Paxton's repeated use of "of course" in this passage has the same effect of rationalizing his actions as though they were bound to happen no matter what.

Paxton's style of recounting events is evidence of his inability to confront the reality of his selfish and disrespectful behavior. He also wants to conceal this reality from the narrator and Henry Long, which he does successfully—they take Paxton's side, seeing no wrongdoing.

☞ You see, he's light and weak, but all the same I daren't face him. Well, then, when I was making the tunnel, of course it was worse, and if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time.

Related Characters: Paxton (speaker), The Narrator, Henry Long

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis


Paxton describes to the narrator and Henry Long how William Ager's ghost has been following him. At the climax of the story, Paxton finally grabs the crown while the ghost is behind him and scraping at his back. For the most part throughout the story, the characters can only sense the ghost's presence and see it in their peripherals. This is one of only two occasions when the ghost makes physical contact, imbuing the scene with a unique intensity. It also illustrates that, though the ghost may seem "light and weak," it is indeed capable of violence, which builds tension towards and foreshadows the story's graphic final scene of Paxton's violent murder.

Paxton also says here that he can't face the ghost, which symbolizes his inability to face his guilt. As the ghost tortures Paxton, so does Paxton's guilty conscience, yet he is "so keen" to possess the crown that his desire overrides his physical and emotional suffering. In fact, pursuing the crown directly causes this suffering, exemplifying the dangerous pitfall of overwhelming material desire.

☞ We looked out of the window: there was a brilliant full moon—the Paschal moon.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis



As Paxton, the narrator, and Henry Long prepare to depart on their journey to return the crown, the narrator notes that there is a full moon in the sky. The presence of a full moon provides visibility and allows the group to leave the hotel at night while nobody is around. But more significantly, it's the Paschal moon—the last full moon before Easter. In Christianity, Easter celebrates the day of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. This recalls Nathaniel Ager's poem in the prayer book Paxton finds, which asks God to remember Ager after he dies. The

Paschal moon appearing on this night in the story relates the ghosts (the narrator notes that he felt multiple “presences” on this night) to the Christian idea of resurrection, suggesting that William Ager and his predecessors were brought back to the physical world by a sort of divine intervention. This aligns with the story’s overall spiritual outlook, which often blends aspects of traditional Christianity with folklore and legend.

Well, we were pretty regular customers of the hotel, and did not give much trouble, and were considered by the servants to be not under the mark in the way of tips; and so the boots was propitiated, and let us out on to the sea-front, and remained, as we heard later, looking after us.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long, The Boots

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  


Page Number: 314



Explanation and Analysis

Paxton, the narrator, and Henry Long have decided to leave the hotel late at night to return the crown. In order to be discreet and avoid stirring up suspicion, they tell the boots (the hotel servant) that they’re going for a walk and that he shouldn’t wait up for them. The narrator implies here that normally the hotel staff wouldn’t allow or be happy with this request, but since the narrator and Henry Long have formed a cordial relationship with the boots by tipping him generously, he does them a favor by letting them out. The boots seems to have a hunch that there is some danger, so he stays up to watch over them out of his own concern. This is one of many instances in the story of communities looking after each other, and it speaks to the valuable protection that social relationships offer individuals. The relationship between the boots (usually the lowest-ranking servant), the narrator, and Henry Long transcends the class disparity between them, hinting at the inherent benefit of social relationships—regardless of socioeconomic differences.

But under observation we felt we were, as I have never felt it at another time. Specially was it so when we passed out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close high hedges, through which we hurried as Christian did through that Valley; and so got out into open fields.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 315



Explanation and Analysis


At this point, Paxton, the narrator, and Henry Long are making their way toward the spot where they will rebury the crown. They have the sensation of being watched by not only William Ager’s ghost but by multiple unearthly spirits. The reference to “Christian” here is an allusion to the 17th-century Christian allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which tells the story of a man named Christian’s journey from life on earth to death and salvation. In the book, as Christian travels through the Valley of Death, he hears a voice saying not to fear death because God is always present—even in death.

The narrator comparing himself and his companions to Christian from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* crossing the Valley of Death—on the same night as the Paschal moon—reiterates the motif of religious salvation and resurrection, including the idea that William Ager’s ghost (and his ancestors’ spiritual presences) are like souls resurrected by a Christian god.

Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 315



Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, the group has just arrived at the place where Paxton found the crown, and now the narrator and Henry Long stand by while Paxton digs a hole in which to bury it. The narrator notes that though he can't see or hear anything, he still has the definite sensation of some nearby threat. The imagery in this quote contributes to the overall mood of the scene—one of uncertainty, fear, and horror.

Anxiety and tension build up slowly throughout the story to create a feeling of imminent danger, though the ghost doesn't do any real harm until it murders Paxton at the end. The story relies on this mounting suspense to lead into the shocking and horrifying end. The "restrained hostility" and comparison of the ominous presence to a dog on a leash suggests the potential of an extreme and disturbing force—one that is just barely being held back. All of this foreshadows the violence that is to come.

☞ You'll wonder why we didn't insist on accompanying him to his home and seeing him safe into the care of brothers or someone. The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in Sweden[...]

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, Paxton, and Henry Long have just returned to the hotel after reburying the crown. Even though Paxton has now "undone" his wrongdoing, he still senses looming danger. The narrator and Henry Long want to offer Paxton the safety of company until he's with loved ones, but the problem is that Paxton doesn't have any family members or strong social connections. The following day, Paxton is alone when the ghost finally comes to kill him. It seems like Paxton's death at the hands of the ghost is inevitable, but the narrator at least hoped that being around others would help Paxton or buy him more time.


Aside from the implicit danger of Paxton's solitude, it's also

just peculiar that he has no friends or family at all, adding to the enigmatic nature of his character. Paxton's plan to go to Sweden is also a surprising detail. The narrator has not said much about Paxton's background thus far, and the information about Sweden makes readers realize just how little is known about him, adding a sense of mystery to the events leading up to Paxton's death.

☞ His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paxton, Henry Long

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Henry Long chase Paxton—who appears to be following someone himself—from the hotel down the shoreline. They don't catch up in time and ultimately discover Paxton's murdered body. The story leads up to this moment to make it as shocking and ghastly as possible, as it's the first time a character is seriously harmed. The narrator's matter-of-fact description of the body poses an uncomfortable juxtaposition to the horror of the image. Though it's obvious that the ghost acted violently, the details given about Paxton's face cloud the exact cause of death.

For most of the story, Paxton can't face his guilt head on, mirroring how he can't look directly at the ghost. It's only now, in the moment before his death, that the ghost forces him to look right at it by turning around on him suddenly (at least, the narrator supposes this is what happens). This represents Paxton's attitude toward his guilt. It's always present, but he only confronts it and expresses remorse for stealing the crown towards the end of the story, once he realizes that it's too late to do anything to reverse his actions. Paxton's death ultimately solidifies the idea that some offenses are unforgivable.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

The coastal town of Seaburgh contains a white church uphill from the waterfront, a train station behind the church, and several small red houses. The scenery of the town is reminiscent of the novel [Great Expectations](#). An unnamed writer recalls the time he spent in Seaburgh as a child and notes that the town hasn't changed much over the years. He has fond memories of spending time there as a kid, so he is intrigued upon meeting an acquaintance who tells him about something extraordinary that happened in Seaburgh. The writer decides to put this story down on paper, recording it as he heard it from the man who originally narrated it to him.

The narrator—who tells the writer this tale—and his friend Henry Long used to frequent Seaburgh to play golf there, but Long has now passed away. They always used to stay at a hotel called The Bear. One day in the spring of “19—,” the narrator and Long are sitting in an otherwise empty lounge at The Bear when a younger man comes in to join them. He seems anxious, and the narrator can tell that he is eager to socialize. The three men begin to chat, and the younger man says that he's just had a distressing experience and could use some advice. A waiter brings them a drink as they prepare to discuss the young man's experience.

The young man starts explaining what happened. In his story, he rides his bike to a neighboring town called Froston to see a church whose architecture he is interested in. He meets an old man outside the church who engages him in conversation about a symbol on the church's porch. It's a symbol of three crowns—the coat of arms of East Anglia. The old man says that the symbol stands for the three holy crowns that were buried by the sea in order to keep German invaders at bay. The old man thinks the young man doesn't believe this and tells him to ask the rector about it. The rector approaches them, and the young man confirms that he does believe the story about the crowns. Curious to hear more, he goes off with the rector.

The unnamed writer describes Seaburgh in considerable detail as a way of setting the scene for the story to follow. It's a calm and cheerful vacation town of which the writer has pleasant memories. But by referencing [Great Expectations](#), a bleak novel that opens in a graveyard, the writer imbues the beginning of this story with a foreboding tone. Already, there is a sense of some disturbance in the normally peaceful Seaburgh. This introductory section also breaks the fourth wall in that the writer acknowledges the fact that he is recording a story, which creates a relationship with the reader and pulls them into the story, embodying the inclusive community feel of Seaburgh.



The writer no longer has any presence in the story. He records the events exactly as the narrator shares them. Omitting the exact year is a stylistic choice by M. R. James in order to make the story seem more realistic—he feigns at censoring the year for reasons of privacy or uncertainty, as one would in a journal. As the story begins, it becomes clear that Seaburgh is an affable community. The young man's agitated state adds an undertone of disturbance, but the narrator and Henry Long are unbothered, act kindly towards him, and seem to be on friendly terms with the hotel staff.



The encounters the young man has at the church exemplify a tightknit but rather open community. The rector and the old man seem to be close friends despite their clear socioeconomic differences, and even though the young man is an outsider, the townspeople he meets welcome him without hesitation. This interaction is the first mention of the holy crowns, a central symbol of the story. The old man's insistence on the folklore surrounding the crowns shows how important this bit of culture is to his community. It's also an early sign that perhaps the young man can't be fully trusted—he claims to believe in the power of the crowns, but something about his behavior leads the old man to doubt him.



The rector speaks openly and easily to the young man about the local legend. He says that the crowns were all buried in different locations to fend off various invaders (“the Danes or the French or the Germans”), but one was dug up and melted in 1687, and another has been washed away at sea. The last **crown** is still buried nearby. The rector goes on to explain that a family named the Agers were the guardians of this remaining crown. The rector personally knew Nathaniel Ager, who watched over the crown during the War of 1870. The next Ager guarded it during the South African War, and **William Ager**, the last in the lineage, recently died of consumption. The rector tells the young man that now no one is left to watch over the crown.

The young man is fascinated and becomes determined to find the **crown**. He rides away on his bike after talking to the rector and happens to catch a glimpse of **William Ager’s** gravestone, which he attributes to “fate.” He thinks he can easily find where Ager lived. “Fate” again leads him to a shop where he comes across a prayer book containing entries from many of the Agers. The young man considers this a lucky find, and he asks the shop worker about William Ager. The man in the shop tells him where Agers lived, and the young man sets off to find the old house. He runs into another towns person and inquires to her too, pretending that he knows more about Ager than he really does. She leads him to the exact spot where Ager once lived.

The young man scopes out the terrain and decides to dig into it to find the **crown**. He makes up an excuse to tell the others at his hotel why he’ll be out in the dark for so long, and he heads out to dig in the middle of the night. He tells the narrator and Long, “I won’t bore you with the details of how I supported it and filled it in when I’d done, but the main thing is that I got the crown.”

The rector’s grasp of the town’s history suggests that he is perhaps a leadership figure in the community—which, in turn, indicates that this is a society centered around the Christian church. The rector’s warmth and openness speak to the camaraderie of the community as a whole. “A Warning to the Curious” was written and published in the wake of World War I, at a time when the threat of foreign invasion was a real and sensitive topic. With this in mind, if the town is under constant threat of invasion, the possibility that the crown might really have protective qualities is quite significant, since these protective qualities would be essential to the town’s welfare. It’s not yet clear if the young man believes in the crown’s power, but the rector seems to. This passage also contains the first mention of William Ager, whose death is a tragedy from the rector’s perspective, as his death has left the crown (and thus the community) in a state of vulnerability.



The young man’s immediate determination to find the crown suggests that he doesn’t believe in its magical powers—but regardless of his belief, he displays a notable lack of sympathy. He selfishly takes advantage of the rector’s kindness, knowing that the crown disappearing or being harmed is exactly what the community fears. The young man seems to try to absolve his blame as he recounts the steps he took before finding the crown, speaking as though it all happened by chance. But really, it’s clear that he intentionally sought out the crown because of a superficial desire to see it for himself.



The young man avoids dwelling on the details of digging up the crown, implying that he feels some guilt about having done so. He does admit that he lied to some people at his hotel about where he was that night—hiding what he did is further evidence that he knows that taking the crown is an infringement upon the community.



This story thrills the narrator and Long, and they're shocked when the young man (they learn that his name is Paxton) tells them that he wants to return the **crown**. He invites them to his own room to take a look at it. Paxton seems to be in anguish, but the narrator doesn't understand why. He and Long see the crown and are deeply impressed. The narrator confirms that it is definitely genuine. Long proposes that they all go back to their room so that Paxton can explain what exactly the problem is. As they leave, Long and the narrator feel that they're beginning to share Paxton's nervous energy, and they sense a presence in the hotel hallway as they pass through.

Back in the room Paxton first met the other two in, he explains the issue. He describes noticing a presence with him since he first began planning to dig for the **crown**. He could see a man in his peripheral vision, but he could never look directly at him. Whenever Paxton went back to his room in Froston, the prayer book was open to the page with the Agers' entries. As Paxton was digging into the ground, he could feel a person's fingers scraping at his back, and he heard a scream at the moment that he first grasped the crown. Afterwards, wherever Paxton went people looked behind him as though there was another person following him.

Paxton cries after finishing his account, and the narrator and Long agree to help him return the **crown**. It's already 10:30 on the night of a Paschal moon, so the group starts to formulate a plan to return the crown that very night without anyone noticing what's going on. Long tells the hotel servant ("the boots") not to stay up and wait for them, and the three men set out to return the crown, concealing it under a coat. They don't see anyone on the streets, but the narrator feels that someone is watching them. As they get closer to where they will bury the crown, all three sense an increasingly troubling sensation of invisible presences watching them.

The narrator and Henry Long are not yet clued in to the cause of Paxton's agitated state, as they don't see any problem with what transpired. It's only after they first see the crown for themselves that they become aware of a ghostly presence, directly linking the crown to supernatural activity.



The fact that the presence (assumed to be William Ager's ghost) appears as soon as Paxton started digging suggests that he must have known early on that what he was doing was wrong. He couldn't look at the ghost straight on, just as he can't fully face his culpability (as he circumvents it in his recollection of events). In this way, the ghost parallels and represents Paxton's guilty conscience, though the ghost is not a mere figment of Paxton's imagination—the other characters sense it as well. In fact, the ghost displays real, tangible power both by moving the prayer book and scratching Paxton, but Paxton ignores these warning signs. He seems not to believe in the folklore around the crown simply because the idea is foreign to him, and he's too absorbed in his own materialistic motives to be open to evidence that contradicts his beliefs.



The Paschal moon is the last full moon before Easter. This detail contributes to the story's complex spiritual backdrop by tying traditional Christianity to the otherworldly goings-on of the ghost and crown. The ghostly presences become stronger as the group approaches the crown's original site, removing any doubt that the removal of the crown is the root of the supernatural chaos. On another note, the boots is a low-ranking hotel servant with whom the narrator and Henry Long have a friendly relationship—a relationship that parallels the egalitarian spirit of friendship between the rector and the old man who first told Paxton about the crown. This, in turn, reminds readers of the open, trusting, and tightknit nature of this community, thus emphasizing the unfortunate fact that Paxton selfishly betrayed these communal values.



When they arrive to where the **crown** was originally buried, Paxton frantically digs into the earth. They are terrified, though they don't see anything or anyone around. Paxton quickly finishes burying the crown, and as they leave, Long and the narrator notice a coat lying on the ground. But when they look again, the coat is gone, and they second-guess whether the dark shape was a coat at all. They arrive back at the hotel before midnight, and the boots is still up. He tells them that he saw someone else following them.

Long and the narrator try to console Paxton by telling him that no harm is done now that the **crown** is back in the ground, but Paxton is unconvinced. He feels that the harm is already done, and that more hardship awaits him—even religion won't help him. Long and the narrator invite him to spend the next day with them playing golf, but Paxton is indifferent. The narrator notes that they would have made sure Paxton was safe with loved ones at that point, except Paxton did not have any friends or family.

The next morning, the three men reunite for breakfast. Their plan is that Paxton will stay in while the other two golf, and then they will all go out together later in the day. But when Long and the narrator are ready to go out with Paxton, they can't find him. A concerned hotel worker tells them that she saw Paxton run outside when he thought he heard the other two calling for him. Long and the narrator rush out to find him. The two men run in the sand along the waterfront, and Long spots Paxton ahead of them. It's sunny out, but the air is hazy from the sea, so they can't see very well. They can make out two sets of footprints in the sand. One pair of the footprints appears to be "more bone than flesh."

The narrator supposes that Paxton is chasing after someone or something whom he thinks is Long or the narrator himself. He wonders how Paxton could have made such an error, but he remembers Paxton mentioning that the **ghost** "has some power over your eyes." As the path they're running on comes to an end, the narrator and Long stop and climb up an artillery battery to look around. They can't see much at first because of the mist. Suddenly they hear a horrible laugh, and when they look down they see Paxton's dead body. His face is violently damaged. The narrator speculates that Paxton ran after the ghost until it suddenly turned around—revealing itself—and killed him.

The "coat" on the ground is implied to actually be William Ager's ghost, as is the figure the boots saw following them. Though Henry Long told the boots not to wait up, the boots stays up out of concern for the men. This is a caring gesture and shows the reciprocity of the relationship, as the narrator mentions at one point earlier that they tip the hotel servants very well.



Paxton didn't initially believe in the local folklore, but now his tune has changed. It's not until his life is endangered that he's willing to entertain ideas that go against his system of beliefs.



At this point, Paxton's death seems the most likely outcome. Nevertheless, the narrator and Henry Long do their best to protect their friend. Paxton seems to have spent his whole life alone, and just as he betrayed the community that Seaburgh offered him, Paxton refuses the potential benefits of company by declining the invitation to golf.



The ghost can somehow control what Paxton sees or doesn't see with its "power over [his] eyes," recalling how, earlier, Paxton found it impossible to look directly at it. Again, this mirrors his relationship to his own guilt, which he can't directly face. He does so only after he has the crown, at which point the irreversible damage is already done. In the same way, Paxton can only finally see the ghost when it turns around in the second before it kills him. As the ghost represents Paxton's guilt, his demise serves to caution against the irreversible disaster that severe disrespect and betrayal can cause.



A watchman from the nearby tower approaches the scene, having partially seen what happened. The watchman as a witness ensures that Long and the narrator could never be blamed for Paxton's death. The incident is deemed a mysterious murder, but only the narrator and Long know what really happened. They agree not to tell the press what they know about the **crown**. Since Paxton was so socially isolated, the investigation into his murder never gains traction. The narrator never goes back to Seaburgh after this incident.

The narrator and Henry Long are loyal to the Seaburgh community to the very end. They protect the community by keeping the story of the crown a secret, and in doing so, they protect Paxton's honor as well.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Merberg, Maya. "A Warning to the Curious." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Mar 2023. Web. 24 Mar 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Merberg, Maya. "A Warning to the Curious." LitCharts LLC, March 24, 2023. Retrieved March 24, 2023. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-warning-to-the-curious>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Warning to the Curious* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

James, M. R.. *A Warning to the Curious*. Wordworth Editions Ltd. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

James, M. R.. *A Warning to the Curious*. Hertfordshire, UK: Wordworth Editions Ltd. 2013.