



The Willows by Algernon Blackwood, *das Unheimliche* and sociology: Horror literature in the dispute on what is recognized as real

Andrzej Kasperek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1466-5153>

University of Silesia in Katowice

Institute of Sociology

e-mail: andrzej.kasperek@us.edu.pl

Abstract

The article is an attempt to analyze *The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood in terms of the sociological concept of multiple realities. Trying to answer the question of how people experience reality, due attention will be paid to the literary description of the situation in which a human being is confronted with a reality that terrifies and disturbs. Literature in general, including horror literature, is treated here as an important, from the cognitive standpoint, platform for discussion about human experiences, which, following Sigmund Freud, can be described as uncanny. I treat Blackwood's *The Willows* as a reconstruction of the dispute over the legitimacy of knowledge and the sources of cognition in the conditions of a specific epistemological (categorical) chaos in the face of experiencing the uncanny.

Keywords: multiply realities, the uncanny, *The Willows*, Algernon Blackwood, horror literature, imagination

Słowa kluczowe: wielość rzeczywistości, niesamowitość, *Wierzyby*, Algernon Blackwood, literatura grozy, wyobraźnia

Introduction

Piotr Paziński, in the foreword to the volume *Opowieści niesamowite z języka polskiego* [Mystery Tales from Polish Language], wrote: “a well-crafted horror story triggers off anxiety, questioning the ontic status of the presented world.”¹ This

¹ P. Paziński, *Gotycyzm cudzy i własny* [The Own and Alien Gothicism], [in:] *Opowieści niesamowite z języka polskiego* [Mystery Tales from the Polish Language], vol. 5, P. Paziński (sel.), Warszawa 2021, p. 14.

quote *de facto* contains all the most important threads that are to be undertaken in the article.

Firstly, Algernon Blackwood's story *The Willows* is undoubtedly one of the "well-crafted horror stories" – well-composed and written, *lege artis* characteristic of the genre. Secondly, Blackwood intended *The Willows* to evoke anxiety, a kind of meta-physical thrill, and I have no doubt that *The Willows* are permeated with what can be called, after Sigmund Freud, *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny). Finally, in the case of *The Willows*, an intentional author's device is dealt with the purpose of which is to evoke an impression of uncertainty in the reader – whether by chance, behind what seems to them simply "ordinary" nature, the reality examined by natural sciences, there is a mysterious, unexplored and terrifying reality that goes beyond the exploration possibilities of modern science? In one word, the reader of *The Willows* should be pulled out of the old rut of natural attitude, from the world legitimized by the most important social institutions that uphold the *status quo*.

In the following considerations, the starting point at which different perspectives intersect – the sociological, the one of literary studies (mainly horror literature studies) and of religious studies – is the issue of emotions evoked by horror literature: terror, anxiety, fear or apprehension. These different experiences (it is impossible to equate, for example, experiences of horror and fear) determine the specificity of horror literature.² These comfortless experiences are also an important aspect of social life. People are afraid of horror movies, they feel fear reading a horror story because they have experienced the emotion of terror or fear before, in a non-fictional reality. Thus, horror literature can play on our emotions because they are something real, something previously experienced, and these uncomfortable experiences appear at specific moments when one is pulled out of the routine and predictability that characterize the world of everyday life. Horror literature depicts fictional events, yet the emotions it triggers are real. Not only this,³ fictional events are not something alien to the readers if they evoke specific experiences in them.

The article is aimed at an attempt to answer the question formulated by the Austrian philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz about how the reality is experienced.⁴ At the same time, I am interested in the situation of the human being's confrontation with a reality that scares them, cannot be explained, disturbs them because of its supernatural origin, and even constitutes an existential challenge for them. What protective mechanisms are activated to save the reality of the experienced world? What is experienced as real? Although I reach for literary material, I assume that cognitive

² In his study on the issues of horror Noël Carroll recognizes repulsion, disgust as another distinctive feature of horror literature, see: N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York–London 1990, pp. 19–24. The motif of repulsion is not developed in this article.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 24–42.

⁴ A. Schutz, *Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality*, [in:] *Collected Papers, Studies in Social Theory*, vol. 2, The Hague 1976, p. 136. In his concept of multiple realities, Schutz was inspired by the works of e.g. William James and Henri Bergson. Blackwood highly appreciated these authors as well (A.C. Camara, *Dark Matter: British Weird Fiction and the Substance of Horror, 1880–1927*, doctoral dissertation, Los Angeles 2013, pp. 132, https://escholarship.org/content/qt4ns5q1fv/qt4ns5q1fv_noSplash_74326748a493ee6b7bfeea6f404065ac.pdf [access: 2.01.2023]).

values should be attributed to literary fiction as well. It is based on actual events and experiences, and – though the fiction is invented – it grows from the observation of the narrator.⁵ Fictional narratives are based on socially shared knowledge, and literary fictions tend to be closer to pre-scientific interpretations of the reality than abstract sociological theories. Even though the narrative is invented by the writer, the author is often closer to reconstructing the way people perceive reality than a sociologist drifting apart from the concreteness of everyday life by immersing in abstract theory.⁶

My intention is to treat *The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood as a specific study of the dispute on both the sources of the legitimization of reality and the sources of cognition. This is an utterly modern work in the sense that it came into being in the world of the triumph of science as a way of describing the world. Yet, it is a work that becomes a stage for the argument about modernity, about a place in the “disenchanted world” of the reality which is related to what is supernatural and comprises the things beyond scientific legitimization (the scientific worldview). The aesthetic category of the uncanny refers the reader of *The Willows* to another, category – rejected knowledge,⁷ which provokes strictly sociological questions about the legitimization of knowledge. The framework of Blackwood’s short story is constructed on the conflict between two sources of cognition: the mind and the imagination – this is an argument about the existence of a reality that sneaks out between the senses and scientific observations.

Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951) is one of the most important horror literature writers of the twentieth century and his *The Willows*, published in 1907, is a “classic” example of a story evoking a specific type of anxiety that H.P. Lovecraft referred to as cosmic fear.⁸ Lovecraft, a unique figure in the history of the horror literature genre, treated Blackwood as the undisputed master of the “weird atmosphere.”⁹ Leaving aside Lovecraft’s fundamental remarks on the significance of Blackwood’s work for the development of horror literature (including *The Willows*), I would like to draw attention to the sociological potential of the story, consisting in reconstructing the dispute about how a reality is experienced by the characters and how this experienced reality (or rather realities) is then justified (legitimized). From the standpoint of sociology of knowledge – as the concept of multiple realities is situated within this sociological subdiscipline, the story of the expedition presented in *The Willows* can be described in terms of a dispute over the legitimacy of knowledge and the sources

⁵ D.S. Erasga, *When Story Becomes Theory: Storytelling as Sociological Theorizing*, “Asia-Pacific Social Science Review” 2010, no. 1(10), p. 29.

⁶ M. Longo, *Fiction and Social Reality: Literature and Narrative as Sociological Resources*, London–New York 2016, p. 137.

⁷ This term was popularized by W.J. Hanegraaff, a researcher into the tradition of Western esotericism (see: W.J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London–New York 2013; *idem*, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge 2014). Blackwood himself belonged to the secret association Golden Dawn in London, similarly to other significant authors of horror literature (Bram Stoker and Arthur Machen), who also belonged there (J.-L. Steinmetz, *La littérature fantastique*, Paris 1990, pp. 34–35).

⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Corvallis 2016, pp. 4–5, *passim*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

of cognition. *The Willows* are a kind of record of the reactions to what is alien, to what escapes categorizations through which the world of everyday life is captured and scientific discourse is constructed. Blackwood's story is also an example of unmasking the daily life, unmasking the everyday lie.¹⁰ This sociological perspective, enriched with the category of the uncanny, confronts both the reader and the researcher, who is also a reader, with a situation of categorization chaos, with problems with translating the map of experience into the map of epistemological categorization grids which constitute a common resource of knowledge.

The sociological concept of multiple realities versus the experience of the uncanny

Alfred Schutz used the figure of Don Quixote from Cervantes's novel to answer the question how human beings experience the reality. He did that by treating the adventures of the knight-errant in an innovative way and by entwining literary fiction with a sociological commentary. Schutz asked: How is Don Quixote able to preserve his belief in the reality of the subuniverse of fantasy even though that belief is constantly exposed to clashes with the dominating reality (among others as represented by Sancho Panza), in which the reality of the world of magic, giants or chivalric books is questioned? How can both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza maintain their belief in the genuineness of the basic (for them) reality in spite of the intrusion into their worlds of some experiences which go beyond this reality? In a work of a more systematizing character, Schutz distinguishes the following worlds (subuniverses in William James's terminology), specifying them as finite provinces of meaning: the world of dreams, imagery and fantasy (including the world of art); the world of religious experiences; the world of scientific contemplation; the world of children's playing; and the world of madness.¹¹ These provinces differ in the level of their tension of consciousness and "circulate" as if around the so-called superior (paramount) reality of daily life, which is characterized by the highest tension of consciousness.¹² According to Schutz, each of these provinces has its own cognitive style, consisting of, for example, a specific tension of consciousness, a specific form of epoché, a specific form of sociality or a specific time perspective.¹³ Schutz focuses most on the characterization of the reality of daily life as the paramount reality. The world of everyday life is based on adopting a natural approach, a kind of routine, repetitiveness and a practical

¹⁰ Bruce Bégout describes the illusory and superficial nature of everyday life as *mensonage quotidien* (the lie of everyday life). The lie consists in hiding under the veil of what is known and familiar an element of strangeness (something unknown), thus hiding the existential anxiety lurking under the layer of the *taken for granted* sphere (B. Bégout, *La Découverte du quotidien*, Paris 2010, p. 49).

¹¹ A. Schutz, *On Multiple Realities*, [in:] *Collected papers: The Problem of Social Reality*, vol. 1, The Hague 1962, p. 232.

¹² This "privileged" and dominant character of the world of everyday life is the result of its intersubjectivity and its transfer of knowledge, which consists of transferring the so-called reference knowledge.

¹³ A. Schutz, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

attitude. Its bodily dimension (experiencing the world through the body and senses) is important. The world of daily life will be experienced as real until its characteristic cognitive style is not disturbed, until – as Schutz wrote – a certain shock (leap) does not take place, resulting in going beyond the paramount reality and recognizing another finite province of meaning as being real. The cases of such leaps occur in the moments of falling asleep or waking up, when the theatre curtain falls down or goes up, when an image appears on the screen in a dark cinema hall or the light is switched on after the film ends. Dreaming sleep, a theatre or cinema viewer, a playing child, a mystic in a state of ecstasy, a person in a trance or, finally, a person suffering from a persecution complex feel what they experience after a leap from the superior reality (of daily life) as the most real as long as they do not make a return leap to that reality or another finite province of meaning.

It should be emphasized that in Schutz's concept, the "roaming" in the various finite provinces of meaning basically starts and ends in the reality of daily life, which for this reason is called the paramount reality by the Austrian phenomenologist. From the standpoint of an actor returning to the paramount reality, their stay – for example in the world of dream or fantasy – is essentially treated with distance and is not treated as something real. This prominent rank of the reality of daily life, and therefore the whole concept of multiple realities, was modified by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their study *The Social Construction of Reality* and then upheld in their article *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning*.¹⁴ The authors seriously undermine the belief in the indisputability of the reality of the daily life.¹⁵ As they wrote, "All social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos."¹⁶ Muzzetto claims that while Schutz accepted the idea of the illusory nature of the world, he placed it within the space of philosophy, literature or imagery. Only in some extreme situations, it can become a part of the paramount reality: "Within the confines of the world of everyday life, this idea would be a sign of madness."¹⁷ From the theoretical standpoint, Berger and Luckmann enrich the concept of multiple realities with the category of symbolic universes, which provide thereality of daily life with the superior status towards finite provinces of meaning,¹⁸ and simultaneously tame the shock associated with passing to other provinces by integrating the experiences from various worlds with the paramount reality. However, Berger and Luckmann pay their special attention to the situations which strain the feeling of reality characteristic of the paramount reality of daily life. Writing about an unceasing threat of going to "the dark side," Berger and Luckmann highlight the illusory and fabricated character of the social

¹⁴ P.L. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Orientation of Modern Man*, Gütersloh 1995. See also: P.L. Berger, *The Problem of Multiple Realities: Alfred Schutz and Robert Musil*, [in:] *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, M. Natanson (ed.), The Hague 1970, pp. 213–233.

¹⁵ L. Muzzetto, *Schutz, Berger and Luckmann: The Question of the Natural Attitude*, "Società Mutamento Politica" 2016, no. 6(12), p. 250.

¹⁶ P.L. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London–New York–Victoria–Ontario–Auckland 1991, p. 121.

¹⁷ L. Muzzetto, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹⁸ P.L. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *The Social Construction...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–146.

reality. “The thought keeps suggesting itself (the “insane” thought par excellence) that, perhaps, the bright reality of everyday life is but an illusion, to be swallowed up at any moment by the howling nightmares of the other, the night-side reality.”¹⁹

Ultimately, the society as a community in the face of death,²⁰ using symbolic universes to order human experience amid chaos, is a kind of Plato’s cave of appearances, which drowns out the fear of death and chaos (that dark side of human experience) and covers up the fundamental care by stretching the intricate reality of our identities, convictions and beliefs over the world of “the abyss.” Going out of the cave is a sort of ecstasy which has little in common with a mystic experience. Ecstasy – as Berger wrote – is stepping outside the facade of Potemkin’s fiction, it is the awareness that what is given is only a possibility.²¹ Ecstasy is going beyond the world taken for granted. The heroes of *The Willows* experience such an ecstasy, so does Don Quixote, who treats the world of daily life as imprisonment.²² The ecstasy which the heroes of *The Willows* undergo takes place in the aura of supernaturality, it is this ecstasy that constitutes a specific gate directing the reader’s attention towards the world which goes further than experiencing the daily routine – further than “the bright side of the reality.” A kind of double leap is dealt with here: firstly, the reader’s leap into the world of fantasy (an example of finite provinces of meaning), and secondly – the aura of supernaturality directs the reader towards a different province of meaning – the world of religious (quasi-religious?) experiences. How does a literary text do this? By building the reader’s feeling of horror, anxiety, and by entering into contact with something that causes fear. The category of the uncanny, popularized by Sigmund Freud, exemplifies the merger of what is tamed and well-known with what is alien, different, and surprising.²³ The expression that “something is not right” evokes a feeling of anxiety – what is known becomes different, and strange. This is the feeling which the heroes of *The Willows* experience, but Blackwood leads his narration in such a way that the readers experience a feeling of supernaturality as well.

The presence in literature of the category of the uncanny, as manifested by the growing popularity of horror literature, may be treated as a specific reaction to the process of the secularization and rationalization of the nineteenth century world.

Uncanny literature is an unwanted child of the Enlightenment: when the separation of cognitive powers was done in the Western mentality by ennobling the mind and dethroning the sacrum (and relegating it to another sphere), the *mysterium tremendum* must have returned – or rather remained where it always was: in human hearts which tremble when faced with the primary mystery of existence and the impenetrable darkness of the world. Horror literature tells readers about this trembling; is a report from a trip into this dark region [...].²⁴

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

²⁰ P.L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 87.

²¹ *Idem*, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Harmondsworth 1975, p. 157.

²² *Idem*, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, London 1970, p. 91.

²³ S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, vol. 17, London 1955, pp. 220–221.

²⁴ M. Płaza, *Gawędziarze i fataliści* [Storytellers and Fatalists], [in:] *Opowieści niesamowite z języka angielskiego* [Mystery Tales from the English Language], vol. 4, M. Płaza (ed.), Warszawa 2020, pp. 44–45.

Thus, the nineteenth century horror novel undertakes the eternal issue of omnipresent evil in the world, the human proneness to evil, as well as the issue of fear.²⁵ This supernaturalism is discovered during literary trips into the gloomy. Anyhow, dark regions (this imagery is compliant with Berger and Luckmann's imagining of a constant threat to "the bright reality of daily life") will take the shape of a supernatural reality or "hide in the imagination and emerge from the darkness of the tormented mentality."²⁶

This context of a society in the process of secularization is where I would like to place Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows*. From the sociological standpoint, this short story can be viewed through the lens of the conflict between scientific legitimization (partially also such which is based on common sense) and imagination-based legitimization. This is – by spirit – a romantic conflict and it is not accidental that horror, supernatural literature became popular in the period of Romanticism, which treated imagination as an exceptional organon of cognition.

"A bad place" as an uncanny place

The main storyline of *The Willows* is a journey of two friends (one is the narrator, while the other has been defined by his nationality as the Swede).²⁷ They set out for a voyage along the Danube in a Canadian canoe. The story starts at the moment when the heroes have already passed Vienna but are far away from reaching Budapest (the time: mid-July, soon before a flood). The characterization of the heroes is minimized, the narrator presents himself to the reader as a person capable of experiencing gusts of imagination, whereas the Swede is described as a man without imagination, a mainstay of power and reason. The notion of imagination appears 11 times in the short story, imaginations (1), imagine (3), imaginative (3), imaginings (1), unimaginitive (2). The narrative framework is stretched between two poles: imagination on the one hand and common sense on the other – therefore initially, some tension is signalled between the two heroes, the "romantic narrator" and the "reasonable" Swede. However, it should be emphasized that, at the beginning of the short story, Blackwood uses the term "imagination" and its derivatives in a colloquial way, rooted in everyday speech. A person with imagination in this sense is a person with a "romantic," dreamy nature, slightly detached from the treadmill of daily life, hungry for new experiences. Imagination fulfils mostly aesthetic functions here.

The aura of horror is introduced already in the first sections of the short story and is consistently developed in its later parts, moving towards Hungary takes place alongside a growing feeling of isolation, and is associated with reaching the gloomy

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

²⁶ P. Paziński, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁷ The trip described in *The Willows* is based on an expedition that Blackwood and his friend made in the summer of 1900 (M. Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*, London 2001, pp. 106–109, quoted after: E. Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, Cham 2020, p. 215).

regions of the Danubian landscape. Blackwood constructs the mood of horror around the topos of “a bad place,” an element characteristic of horror literature.²⁸ A place, in this case a small island on the Danube, becomes a trap, from which the heroes will try to flee. The space of the island, tamed through earlier experiences, starts to scare with its otherness. The title “willows,” which previously constituted such a tamed element, become the symbol of another, only just sensed, dangerous reality: “[...] we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain – where we ran grave risks perhaps! The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace.”²⁹ My intention is to highlight the significance of the topos of a “bad place,” “haunted place” for my analyses due to the cognitive confusion that such space introduces, namely the experience of contact with a reality that escapes rational explanations. The moment of such a confrontation is heightened by the experience of uncertainty about what is real. Another important motif is the transformation of nature, which it undergoes in a “wrong place.” Nature becomes dangerous, threatening, exactly as in the experience of the heroes of *The Willows*. What is more, this space begins to be perceived as a living organism.³⁰ In the case of Blackwood’s story, nature not only begins to terrify, but also evokes religious reverence in the characters. The motif of entering a qualitatively different space, a *numinosum* which raises fear and fascination, is a leitmotif of the Gothic imagery and novel.³¹ *The Willows* assume the existence of two worlds – the first, from which the heroes come, has all the features of the *profanum*; the second, which they enter on the island, refers to the reality of the *numinosum*, *sacrum*. Those two worlds (finite provinces of meaning) co-occur with two ways of cognition: on the one hand, common sense and rationality, and on the other – going beyond the *ratio*, to which the increasing importance of imagination corresponds in the short story. At the moment when the island starts to appear mysterious, a change takes place in the function of imagination – this change makes a switch from the aesthetic to the epistemological function and becomes a way of cognition that enables the exploration of the *ratio* transcending sphere. In *The Willows* and – more broadly – in horror

²⁸ K. Olkusz, *Archetyp „złego miejsca”*. *Opowiadania grozy Algernona Blackwooda* [The Archetype of a „Bad Place”: Horror Short Stories by Algernon Blackwood], “*Studia Filologiczne*” 2007, vol. 1, p. 217.

²⁹ A. Blackwood, *Willows*, p. 4, <http://algernonblackwood.org/Z-files/Willows.pdf> [access: 26.12.2021].

³⁰ H. Kubicka, *Terytoria strachu: przestrzenne mechanizmy budowania grozy w literaturze popularnej i we współczesnym filmie* [Territories of Fear: Spatial Mechanisms of Building Horror in Popular Literature and Contemporary Film], [in:] *Groza. Społeczno-kulturowe mechanizmy kreowania emocji* [Horror. Socio-cultural Mechanisms of Creating Emotions], B. Płonka-Syroka, M. Szymczak (eds.), Wrocław 2010, p. 145.

³¹ Balancing between a reality that can be explained on the basis of “earthly laws” and a reality of a supernatural nature has characterized the Gothic novel since the beginning of its existence, i.e. from the second half of the eighteenth century. (J.E. Hogle, *Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture*, [in:] *Gothic Fiction*, J.E. Hogle (ed.), Cambridge 2002, pp. 2–3). The evolution of the Gothic novel and horror literature consisted, among other things, in their psychologization and secularization. In the twentieth century, Lovecraft opposed this tendency, also searching for a kind of religious experience in literature (N. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 163). I think that a similar thesis can be put forward in the case of Blackwood’s work.

literature, the reality is reduced to two worlds. The other worlds (finite provinces of meaning) are as if allotted between the two worlds (the *ratio* and what goes beyond it). From the moment the characters set up their camp site, the game has been played to save the experiencing of the aforementioned “bright reality of everyday life” in the face of “the howling nightmares of the other, the night-side reality.” Berger and Luckmann are referred to here again – in their re-interpretation of Schutz’s concept of multiple realities, they place special emphasis on the façade and unsure character of the world of daily life (differently from Schutz).

While it is beyond the sociological discourse to determine the ontic status of the different world (from the one recognized as real) described in the text, it is crucial to recognize that this world is perceived as real by the heroes of the story. It is them who start defining this situation in the categories of contacts with another world – compliantly with Thomas’s theorem, the situation becomes real in its effects.³² Our heroes will act as if that reality actually existed. From the sociological point of view, an attempt is important to answer what makes the heroes consider the other world as real and on what they base their belief in the reality of that world. In a further part of this article, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the course of that process, with focus on the legitimization of reality. In the sociological perspective, the sneaking of doubt into the paramount reality (the world of daily life) is important. At the same time, all attempts seem important to defend this reality, despite the permeating (into the heroes’ experiences) of some elements that undermine it, as well as the later acceptance of the reality of the other world.

The Willows or the issue of reality

The island – and primarily, the willows – raise the narrator’s anxiety; he develops a sense of encountering an alien world. This feeling, the hero reassures, cannot be compared with the respect or horror evoked through encounters with the natural world, as it comes from another order altogether and cannot be rationally explained. Yet, the feeling does not bother him at that point. What is more, he decides not to mention it to the Swede – a person without imagination, as he presumes. Having erected the tent, the heroes are looking for firewood and then they notice an otter,³³ which they previously mistook for a drowned man. Afterwards, they notice a man in a boat, whose appearance is surprising to them (What is he doing at dusk on the

³² W.I. Thomas, D. Swain Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*, New York 1928, p. 572, quoted after: R.K. Merton, *The Thomas Theorem and The Matthew Effect*, “Social Forces” 1995, no. 2(74), p. 380.

³³ One may be tempted by the following interpretation: the otter lives in water, so it carries the feature of liquidity characteristic of this element – it is not by chance that the trip itself refers to a river trip along the Danube. The amorphous nature of water corresponds to the experience of specific cognitive chaos. Referring to the concept of impurity as categorization disorders (according to Mary Douglas) used by Carroll to characterize horror, I would like to draw attention to the feature of amorphousness (and therefore liquidity) as one of the distinguishing features of the objects evoking terror. (N. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 32).

overflowing river? Did he want to warn them of something?). The reasonably thinking Swede comments on the incident in the following way: ““These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish; you remember the shopwoman at Pressburg warning us that no one has ever landed here because it belongs to some sort of beings outside man’s world! I suppose they believe in fairies and elementals, possibly demons, too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the islands for the first time in his life,’ he added, after a slight pause, ‘and it scared him, that’s all.’”³⁴

Trivializing the incident, the Swede casually indicates an important element: there are people for whom the existence of beings from a different world in the Danubian islands is real, they share their knowledge concerning the existence of those creatures. The narrator starts noticing a certain change in his companion’s behavior. “The Swede’s tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.”³⁵ His own imagination becomes a burden for the narrator; therefore, he begins to appreciate its lack in the Swede – by noticing in his practical nature a kind of Archimedean point, which domesticated the fear of something unnamed, of the mood of mystery, strengthened by the blowing, wailing wind and the sounds resembling booming cannons. With his behavior, the Swede legitimizes the world which can be cognitively explained, but this legitimization is repeatedly exposed to doubts. “For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He too was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place.”³⁶ Step by step, Blackwood reports a human struggle – in this case of the narrator, who is confronted with experiences which he cannot explain by reaching the reservoir of the socially shared knowledge he has acquired so far. When the narrator exits the tent, he notices indefinite shapes, tree branches forming terrifying figures. Sober self-observation is very important: “I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was not dreaming.”³⁷ The narrator rules out both his being in the dream world and the fact that it might be an illusion (hence – not the world of madness), he keeps the tension of consciousness that is characteristic of daily routine. He carries out a rational reasoning, searches both for the proofs of the real existence of the creatures he notices and for a language that can be used to describe what he can see and what goes beyond his earlier experiences. However, a fundamental doubt appears here as to whether what he sees can be described in any familiar way. As the narrator predicts, the standards which he knows of reality have been re-evaluated. This is nothing else but the supposition that an ecstasy is dealt with here – quite an unknown reality, inhabited by real and living creatures, whose existence goes far beyond the cognitive abilities of biologists and the possibilities to register (photograph) them.³⁸

³⁴ A. Blackwood, *op. cit.* p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

Yet, the narrator keeps a “cold” mind, he excludes hallucination or a specific amok and confirms that what he saw really happened. Looking for proof that his senses do not fail, he states that they undoubtedly functioned well as he felt the wind and the warmth of soil. He feels an urge to pay respects to the creatures he saw. This suggests that the narrator enters the world of religious experiences. However, the pious feeling that is being born is soon suppressed by a sober judgement of the situation. Although all the time the narrator can see the figures emerging from the heart of the night, common sense returns in his judgement. “It must be a subjective experience, I argued – none the less real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective.”³⁹ A kind of cognitive helplessness or uncertainty can be seen here, also when the narrator says he was a victim of an interesting hallucination. His senses work well, but what he can see makes him believe in another, alien kind of reality. What can be done with this experience – an experience of something real but belonging to which world? Each of the finite provinces of meaning, as Schutz wrote, has its own cognitive style. In the case of the narrative lead in *The Willows*, some hesitation appears of which the style should be referred to alongside the inner conflict about what is experienced as real. Having returned to the tent, the narrator confirms his “hundred per cent certainty” that someone sneaked past him. Yet, he keeps his wits about him and, in the morning (after four) takes measurements of the distance between the willows and the tent to verify if it just seemed to him that the willows were moving and coming closer towards the tent.

Daylight changes the narrator’s attitude, and the aura of mystery seems to disappear: “With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.”⁴⁰ Night fears go away and, it can be said, everything reverts to normal – the reality of “the bright side of life” is restored. However, not everything returns to normal, as in the behavior of the Swede (so far very soberly thinking and not yielding to episodes of imagination), a change can be noticed. He starts to be afraid that they might not get off of the island, though the fear is not due to the rising waters of the Danube that makes the journey impossible but due to the beings that may be on the island. Having discovered the disappearance of the steering paddle and a hole in the canoe bottom, the Swede goes further in his suppositions, relating these events to the creatures (powers) that might be present on the island. Moreover, he utters these terrifying words: “There, you see an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice.”⁴¹ A peculiar change is going on in the short story – the one who has discovered his proneness to waves of imagination (the narrator) transforms into a defender of the *ratio* and decides to ignore this sacrificial explanation as complete nonsense. How has the hole in the boat come into being? “‘We must have scratched her in landing, of course,’ I stopped whistling to

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 9–10.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

say. ‘The stones are very sharp.’”⁴² Yet, this rational argument collapses very soon – there were no stones around. What is more, it turns out that the second paddle has also been destroyed. Maybe one of us was sleepwalking? Or, is it all because of the sand carried by the wind? The steering paddle must have been taken by the wind as well. Sleepwalking is a poor argument, but maybe the Swede did that? No – the narrator struggles against his thoughts – he could not do it deliberately, this is impossible. It is also impossible that the Swede’s logical and rational nature has undergone such a metamorphosis as a result of an attack of madness supposedly caused by some unknown factors. Additionally, there are some traces on the sand, not left by the heroes. On the other hand, the measurements made at night turn out to be identical to those made during the day.

The heroes start preparing for another night on the island, the water level does not allow for river boating. The tension is enhanced by a radiating disturbing sound, something like a gong. The narrator tries to rationalize this: it is the wind blowing into the holes in the sand or some bush branches rubbing against each other. “I don’t think a gramophone would show any record of that. The sound doesn’t come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimensional sound might be supposed to make itself heard.”⁴³ – these words are uttered by the Swede. Moreover, he starts to claim that the island on which they are is an ancient temple and that they deal with ancient gods. They have got in touch with an alien form of life and different forms of communication, earlier not known to humanity. Yet, it is important that the suppositions pertaining to the island’s character are based on quite rational arguments – and are in a way compliant with scientific methodology. This refers to an attempt to explain what the heroes are dealing with: “‘It’s not a physical condition we can escape from by running away,’ he replied, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; ‘we must sit tight and wait [...]’”⁴⁴ The Swede says that the creatures still have not noticed them, they feel but cannot see them – the heroes need to calm down and control their thoughts, because they are in danger of losing their identity. As the narrator notices, the Swede kept his mental integrity, was quite normal, and his advice was apt and proper – from the sociological perspective of multiple realities, the problem consists in the mixing of cognitive styles. The question that should be asked here is: in what reality is the Swede? In the world of daily life? In the world of science? In the world of religious experiences? In the world of madness? The mixing of cognitive styles takes place here and this fact is significant for understanding the

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 18. The Swede’s attitude resembles the one of inspector Ichabod Crane, the film hero from Tim Burton’s film *Sleepy Hollow*. The plot is set in the nineteenth century in a gloomy place called Sleepy Hollow, to which the inspector is summoned to solve the problem of mysterious murders committed there. The murders are associated with magic and a headless rider, whom Crane meets and then (figuratively) loses his own head, experiencing an identity crisis. He overcomes it by creating a peculiar cognitive hybrid approach, applying deductive reasoning to a supernatural phenomenon. He starts to accept what he has not believed in, though he does not abandon the method of scientific deduction.

modern world, for the issue of modern identities, which can be reconstructed on the basis of reading *The Willows* and the dispute about the interpretation of reality.

Finally, our heroes manage to survive the second night, although the narrator saves (at the last moment) the Swede from a suicidal death (he wanted to go into the river) – in the narrator’s interpretation, he wanted to sacrifice himself. There are some hollows in the sand after the night’s “oppression” of the creatures. The willows, that symbol of another reality or “symbols of power,”⁴⁵ stop moving, the wind ceases to blow, the level of the river goes down. Yet, in the water just at the bank, the Swede notices a drowned man’s body, out of which a strange buzzing can be heard, and it is easy to see some hollows on the body’s surface, which resemble the ones left on the beach. In the Swede’s interpretation, and it seems in the narrator’s as well, they have survived the night owing to the sacrifice made by the drowned man and this will enable them to escape from the island.

Conclusions

Summing up, what did the characters of the story experience on the island? Certainly that the experience of the reality of “the bright daily life” was disturbed, they experienced its disintegration and they entered into a world filled with the nightmares of “the night-side reality.” The metaphor of “the night-side reality,” which I have borrowed from Berger and Luckmann, refers to the situation of experiencing epistemological uncertainty, a kind of cognitive chaos that raises questions: What are we dealing with? Does what we experience really exist or is it just an illusion? How to describe this experience? The above presented way of interpreting what happened on the island in terms of a dispute over the legitimacy of the reality is also a testimony to the experience of epistemological chaos (mixing of categorical divisions) by the heroes of the story. The description of the experience in terms of such epistemological chaos corresponds to a very apt observation by Anthony C. Camara, who notices an analogy between the metaphor of “the night-side reality” and Noël Carroll’s interpretation of horror in terms of violation of cultural categorical schemes.⁴⁶ Carroll wrote: „Following Douglas, then, I initially speculate that an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless.”⁴⁷ It seems significant that the reading of *The Willows* complicates a simple interpretation of the concept of multiple realities: it is not always possible to specify in which finite province of meaning one has been placed. *The Willows* shows a situation of mixing and fluent permeating the various finite provinces of meaning. In other words, the experiences of the heroes of *The Willows* can be described as an expression of hesitation between divergent interpretations, characteristic of different

⁴⁵ In an interesting interpretation of *The Willows*, Emily Alder treats the situation of confrontation between humanity and nature in terms of a struggle for control over energy, with willows symbolizing entropy and chaos, and humanity – action and rationality. (E. Alder, *op. cit.*, p. 219).

⁴⁶ A.C. Camara, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–119.

⁴⁷ N. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

cognitive styles (the world of everyday life, science, religion, and finally the world of madness). Blackwood's narrative undoubtedly meets the characteristic condition of fantasy,⁴⁸ while from the sociological point of view this story can be described in terms of a confrontation of cognitive styles typical of various limited provinces of meaning and, at the same time, the experience of confronting human beings with an alien, amorphous reality that triggers fear in them.

Another conclusion can be drawn – this time of a more generalized nature. The sociological concept of multiple realities does not assume that there are rigid and unchanging boundaries between particular limited provinces of meaning. Microworlds in the terminology of William James or limited provinces of meaning in Schutz's concept are social constructs. What most of people today consider a dream, in the not so distant past could have been regarded as communing with the supernatural reality, as an element of revelation – for example, the world of “romantic madness” in the circles of artistic bohemia could also have been regarded not as a disease but as an increase in creative forces or communing with secret knowledge. It is not difficult to point out that what is a “natural” element of everyday life for the contemporary man, e.g. the sound of a car or the sound of an electric washing machine, did not appear to everyone in the same way a few decades ago. This remark is significant when one takes into account the experiencing of what is considered uncanny.

The Willows constitutes a polemic with the reasoning in the categories of a simple opposition between the pre-modern, enchanted world, inhabited by people and supernatural beings on the one hand, and – on the other one – the modern, disenchanting world (based on scientific methodology) of a rational human being who infinitely trusts science. At the same time, this is some criticism of the binary reasoning: mind – imagination. As mentioned earlier, horror literature, in which the uncanny is the key category, became popular in the times of Romanticism. This had a lot in common with the meaning (attributed by Romanticists) of imagination as a tool of cognition. *The Willows* undertakes this motif in the dispute about cognition and – at the same time – about what is real. Imagination is not a lesser sister of the intellect, as Georges Gusdorf wrote in his reflections upon science in the times of Romanticism.⁴⁹ Romanticists in fact did not reject the world of the old man with a piece of glass and an eye,⁵⁰ they extended it with those dimensions of reality which the old man was unable to see with his glass. Yet, the principle of symmetry does not work both ways. Whereas Romanticism did not reject scientific knowledge, but rather suggested its re-interpretation, the old man refused any cognitive status to the Romantic visions. Cognitive pluralism was gradually giving its way to monism. *The Willows* by Blackwood can be treated not only as an apologia of imagination in the age of steam and electricity, but also as presenting such an image of modernity which comprises different ways of cognition (which do not seem opposite to each other).

⁴⁸ See: T. Todorov, *Introduction a la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970.

⁴⁹ G. Gusdorf, *Fondements du savoir romantique*, Paris 1982, p. 227.

⁵⁰ This is a reference to *Romantyczność* [Romance] by Adam Mickiewicz, in which the old man and his piece of glass become a synonym of the complete trust of the mind.

References

- Alder E., *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, Cham 2020.
- Ashley M., *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*, London 2001.
- Bégout B., *La Découverte du quotidien*, Paris 2010.
- Berger P.L., *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, London 1970.
- Berger P.L., *The Problem of Multiple Realities: Alfred Schutz and Robert Musil*, [in:] *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, M. Natanson (ed.), The Hague 1970, pp. 213–233.
- Berger P.L., *The Social Reality of Religion*, Harmondsworth 1973.
- Berger P.L., *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Harmondsworth 1975.
- Berger P.L., Luckmann Th., *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London–New York–Victoria–Ontario–Auckland 1991.
- Berger P.L., Luckmann Th., *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Orientation of Modern Man*, Gütersloh 1995.
- Blackwood A., *Willows*, <http://algeronblackwood.org/Z-files/Willows.pdf> [access: 26.12.2021].
- Camara A.C., *Dark Matter: British Weird Fiction and the Substance of Horror, 1880–1927*, doctoral dissertation, Los Angeles 2013, https://escholarship.org/content/qt4ns5q1fv/qt4ns5q1fv_noSplash_74326748a493ee6b7bfeca6f404065ac.pdf [access: 2.01.2023].
- Carroll N., *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York–London 1990.
- Erasga D.S., *When Story Becomes Theory: Storytelling as Sociological Theorizing*, “Asia-Pacific Social Science Review” 2010, no. 1(10), pp. 21–38.
- Freud S., *The Uncanny*, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, vol. 17, London 1955, pp. 219–252.
- Gusdorf G., *Fondements du savoir romantique*, Paris 1982.
- Hanegraaff W.J., *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London–New York 2013.
- Hanegraaff W.J., *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge 2014.
- Hogle J.E., *Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture*, [in:] *Gothic Fiction*, J.E. Hogle (ed.), Cambridge 2002, pp. 1–20.
- Kubicka H., *Terytoria strachu: przestrzenne mechanizmy budowania grozy w literaturze popularnej i we współczesnym filmie* [Territories of Fear: Spatial Mechanisms of Building Horror in Popular Literature and Contemporary Film], [in:] *Groza. Społeczno-kulturowe mechanizmy kreowania emocji* [Horror: Socio-cultural Mechanisms of Creating Emotions], B. Płonka-Syroka, M. Szymczak (eds.), Wrocław 2010, pp. 131–157.
- Longo M., *Fiction and Social Reality: Literature and Narrative as Sociological Resources*, London–New York 2016.
- Lovecraft H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Corvallis 2016.
- Merton R.K., *The Thomas Theorem and The Matthew Effect*, “Social Forces” 1995, no. 2(74), pp. 379–422.
- Muzzetto L., *Schutz, Berger and Luckmann: The Question of the Natural Attitude*, “Società Mutamento Politica” 2016, no. 6(12), pp. 245–277.
- Olkusz K., *Archetyp „złego miejsca”. Opowiadania grozy Algernona Blackwooda* [The Archetype of a „Bad Place”. Horror Short Stories by Algernon Blackwood], “Studia Filologiczne” 2007, vol. 1, pp. 217–229.
- Paziński P., *Gotycyzm cudzy i własny* [The Own and Alien Gothicism], [in:] *Opowieści niesamowite z języka polskiego* [Mystery Tales from the Polish Language], vol. 5, P. Paziński (sel.), Warszawa 2021, pp. 5–33.

- Płaza M., *Gawędziarze i fataliści* [Storytellers and Fatalists], [in:] *Opowieści niesamowite z języka angielskiego* [Mystery Tales from the English Language], vol. 4, M. Płaza (sel.), Warszawa 2020, pp. 5–45.
- Schutz A., *Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality*, [in:] *Collected Papers, Studies in Social Theory*, vol. 2, The Hague 1976, pp. 135–158.
- Schutz A., *On Multiple Realities*, [in:] *Collected papers: The Problem of Social Reality*, vol. 1, The Hague 1962, pp. 207–259.
- Steinmetz J.-L., *La littérature fantastique*, Paris 1990.
- Thomas W.I., Swain Thomas D., *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*, New York 1928.
- Todorov T., *Introduction a la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970.