### The Horror Genre

### Famous Quotes

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." ~ H. P. Lovecraft

"This predilection for art that promises we will be frightened by it, shaken by it, at times repulsed by it seems to be as deeply imprinted in the human psyche as the counter-impulse toward daylight, rationality, scientific skepticism, truth and the "real." ... And this is the forbidden truth, the unspeakable taboo--that evil is not always repellent but frequently attractive; that it has the power to make of us not simply victims, as nature and accident do, but active accomplices." ~ Joyce Carol Oates

"...Many of the feelings that typically attend being horrified are intrinsically unpleasant; for they include gagging, nausea, choking, stomach churning, tenseness, a creepy or crawling sensation, felt in the flesh, and so on."~ Noel Carroll

"Can there be something tonic about pure active fear in these times of passive, confused oppression? It is nice to choose to be frightened, when one need not be." ~ Elizabeth Bowen

"The problem is that horror is not a genre, it is an emotion. Horror is not a *kind* of fiction. It's a progressive form of fiction that continually evolves to meet the fears and anxieties of its times." ~ Douglas E. Winter

### Definitions

Horror fiction has these common elements:

* Highly improbable and unexpected sequences of events that usually begin in ordinary situations and involve supernatural elements
* Contrast the oddness of these events with the minutiae of daily life so readers identify with the characters
* Explores the dark, malevolent side of humanity
* Main characters are people we can understand and perhaps identify with although often these are haunted, estranged individuals
* Lives depends on the success of the protagonist
* Mood is dark, foreboding, menacing, bleak and creates an immediate response by the reader
* Setting may be described in some detail if much of the story takes place in one location
* Plot contains frightening and unexpected incidents
* Violence, often graphic, occurs and may be accompanied by explicit sexuality
* Most stories are told in the third person
* The style is plain

The key ingredient in horror fiction is its ability to provoke fear or terror in readers, usually via something demonic. There should be a sense of dread, unease, anxiety, or foreboding. Some critics have noted that experiencing horror fiction is like reading about your worst nightmares.

There is some debate as to whether "horror" is a genre or, like "adventure" an aspect that may be found in several genres. Horror is a certain mood or atmosphere that might be found in a variety of places. Traditionally, horror was associated with certain archetypes such as demons, witches, ghosts, vampires and the like. However, this can be found in other genres, especially fantasy. If horror is a genre, then it deals with a protagonist dealing with overwhelming dark and evil forces.

ANCIENT EVIL - Stories where ancient evil, often hidden for centuries, awakes and threatens civilization. Lovecraft is a notable author.

BLACK MAGIC - Magic used for evil purposes. SORCERY is almost always black magic. WITCHCRAFT is often evil but is sometimes good.

WHITE MAGIC is magic used for good ends. Some authors use Magic for good and SORCERY for evil.

CONTEMPORARY HORROR - Horror stories set in contemporary time and in places familiar to the ordinary reader. Stephen King is the best known author. Violence is not usually unusually graphic in its description.

DARK SUSPENSE - Like DARK FANTASY or DARK FICTION, this is an alternative name for horror. However, DARK SUSPENSE relies more on terror, often psychological terror.

EROTIC HORROR - Horror stories with considerable explicit sexual activity, including violent sex. SEXUAL HORROR is an alternative label. May verge on the pornographic. Pulp periodicals combined "blood and bosoms." Sex and death have often been related; this is especially true today with AIDS. Clive Barker is a well-regarded author in this sub-genre. This combination can create censorship problems for the library.

GHOST STORIES - Stories where the spirits of the dead intervene in some way. Ghosts may be either good or evil. Ghosts often live in a HAUNTED PLACE which may be a house, castle, or sometimes just a place like a bridge or a garden.

GOTHIC HORROR - GOTHIC is sometimes used instead of HORROR. As Grolier says, "The earliest Gothic romance, a class of novel dealing in the mysterious and supernatural, which emerged shortly after the establishment of the novel form itself, was Horace Walpole's **Castle of Otranto** (1764). Reacting against the literalism and confined domesticity of Samuel Richardson, Walpole indulged a contemporary taste for the "Gothic," which for the 18th-century reader conjured up a medieval world of barbarous passions enacted in picturesque melodramatic settings of ruined castles, ancient monasteries, and wild landscapes. Within a plot designed for suspense, a delicate feminine sensibility is subjected to the onslaught of elemental forces of good and evil. Sanity and chastity are constantly threatened, and over all looms the suggestion that evil and irrationality will destroy civilization."

HAUNTED HOUSES - Places haunted by ghosts, spirits, and demons are a popular sub genre. Stories are often less graphic and more psychological. GRAVEYARDS are another popular sub-genre.

HISTORICAL HORROR - Horror stories set in the past using reasonably realistic settings. For example, a vampire story might be set in the early days of the Roman Republic.

HORROR MYSTERIES - Mystery stories with a strong horror element. For example, the detective may be a werewolf or ghosts may help to solve the crime.

HORROR SAGA - Horror stories that follow several generations of doomed or evil families. V.C. Andrews is a good example.

LITERARY HORROR - Sometimes also called DARK MAINSTREAM. Usually this is a horror story that is better written and is considered part of mainstream or general fiction. Such stories may be slower paced and less action-oriented with more emphasis on character development and metaphysical problems.

NATURE HORROR - Stories in which other living things become evil or attack humans. Examples might include microbes, rats, birds, or killer plants.

OCCULT - Refers to a variety of "non-rational" pursuits including witchcraft, astrology, tarot, and palmistry. Often used as a summary phrase for things SUPERNATURAL. Assumption that there is a world beyond our own that certain people can contact.

POSSESSION - Stories in which a character is taken over or controlled by another. That other might be a demon, some other evil force, or another human.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR - Stories that rely on the psychological problems of the characters to generate horror rather than the use of external supernatural elements.

SMALL TOWN HORROR - Stories set in a small community. The contrast between the horror and the small town connotations creates a substantial tension. Stephen King has done well here.

SPLATTERPUNK - Horror stories with unusual and explicit sex and violence. Potential censorship problems.

STEALTH HORROR - Milder forms of horror issues as SUPERNATURAL FICTION, FANTASY, THRILLER. The notion is that the horror novel will find more audience under a different label.

SUPERNATURAL FICTION may be mild horror or may be LITERARY HORROR.

THREATENED CHILD - Story in which an innocent child is threatened by evil. The contrast between the child's innocence and inherent good and evil creates considerable tension. The opposite situation would be the EVIL CHILD story where the child is not innocent or good.

VAMPIRE - Creatures, often human, who have some supernatural powers and suck blood from their victims. In recent years, vampire fiction has become quite popular. Anne Rice is a good example of a popular author.

WERE-CREATURES - Creatures, often wolves, who are shape shifters changing from person to animal when certain stimulus is present.

WITCHES - Characters who practice magic. Normally, WITCHES are female and WARLOCKS or MAGICIANS are male but that is not always the case.

### Very Brief History

While horror stories are well rooted in myth and legend, particularly in some of the fairy tales collected in the 19th Century, Edgar Allen Poe's **Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque** published in 1840 was a notable landmark. Even earlier was Horace Walpole's **The Castle of Otranto** in 1765. Ghost stories were popular in the early 20th Century. M.R. James is an example. Lovecraft added his unique blend of fantasy and horror in the 1930s. **Rosemary's Baby**, probably the film more than the book, made horror popular. Stephen King soon followed with a series of increasingly popular novels and horror fiction boomed and has become the "benchmark" author. R.L. Stine's "Goosebumps" series made mild horror popular with children and younger teens. The 1970s and 1980s were a boom time for horror. Interest receded in the 1990s and publishers reduced their horror lists. In the last few years, horror has become more popular and publishing output has increased.

#### Introduction

Fans of the genre says that they reads horror:

1. To discover the possibility of something creepy or dark within themselves
2. To discover the possibility of something creepy about their perfectly normal-looking neighbors
3. To tantalize their suspicions that the world can't possibly be as orderly as it's advertised to be...
4. For plain old-fashioned entertainment and escapism

#### Fundamental Fears

Fear is universal. Some people are afraid of the dark. Others dream of being swept away by giant tidal waves. With fear such an integral part of our daily existence, horror stories are not as distant as they might seem.

Some argue that horror readers read to get control over the things that scare them. We face fears and overcome via horror fiction. We can safely experience terrible things with no ill effects [we hope].

Too, there is considerable evidence that people enjoy being scared. Amusement rides are often popular because they do scare and cause people to scream.

#### Curiosity

Related to the fear mentioned above, most people are curious or even fascinated by horrible events and horror itself. The amazing popularity of the Goosebumps (more than 160 million copies in print) series by R.L Stine indicates that fascination with horror begins at a relatively young age. There is considerable suspense in most horror stories. Horror fiction allows the reader to explore subconscious fears and some conscious ones too.

#### Myth and Legend

Many of the myths and legends associated with various cultures feature stories of supernatural creatures. Greek mythology is a good example in our own culture. There is a long tradition of such stories and the belief by many that events don't just happen but that something is responsible. Supernatural events and creatures are often encountered in myth, legend, and folklore.

Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein** (1818) and Bram Stoker's **Dracula** (1897) have become legends of their own.

#### What Would I do?

Some people enjoy imagining what they would do if they were placed in a situation similar to that of the main character in the work. Horror stories often depict "ordinary people dealing with extraordinary threats. They like to imagine, what would I do if a dark shadow with glowing red eyes appeared in my bedroom at night?

#### Excitement

Horror is rarely boring. It often has an immediate emotional response. Horror appeals more to the emotions than to the intellect. The setting of most horror stories creates an environment that is very special; it creates a special sensation. Ordinarily life is mundane while horror fiction involves us with the unexpected and the unnatural.

#### Rejection

Since horror fiction is often rejected by many adults that may make it more appealing to some readers who see it as a literature of protest and one that challenges ordinary conventions and normality. Horror fiction then is a forbidden attraction. This may be why many teens are drawn to horror fiction and films.

#### Atmosphere

The dark, brooding, threatening atmosphere becomes the main character in many horror stories. Thus, mood and setting are as or more important than plot and characters. The atmosphere is often portrayed in considerable detail so it become alive and immediately threatening.

#### Sub Genres

As is true of other genres, many horror readers will prefer to read in a sub-genre such as vampires or ghosts. The ability to identify works by type of horror is important.

#### Reviewers and Librarians

Reviewers and librarians often have a negative attitude about horror fiction. Modern horror may contain "serial murder, ritual killings, cannibalism and child abuse" as well as some very explicit sexuality so it may attract negative community reaction too. Few librarians read it and many have stereotypical notions about its quality and value. How much explicit violence and sexuality can be tolerated by readers can be a difficult question. The reader who enjoys mild supernatural stories about ghosts and haunted houses may be wholly uncomfortable with Clive Barker. Demonic possession and Satanism themes may be problematic in some libraries.

Horror fiction issued by small publishers is less likely to be reviewed and noticed outside the specialist reviews.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why would readers want to "escape" with a genre that stimulates fear and anxiety as it considers horrible events?

2. Some critics argue that horror fiction causes readers to think and act in unhealthy, morbid ways. How would you respond? Could this be true of other genres too?

3. Horror often deals with two subjects that some find very distasteful--explicit sex and explicit violence. Why should the library select such controversial material? What redeeming value might it have? If you do select horror items, is there any special censorship planning to consider?

4. Is horror more likely to appeal to male readers, (e.g. men like violence while women do not)? Why? Is horror an anti-feminist genre since women are often victims?

5. What relationship, if any, to you see between violence in real life as reported in the mass media and interest in horror fiction? Between horror film and horror books?

6. Is horror fiction really more about shock value than telling a good story?

# “The Psychology of Horror”

By Joseph VanBuren in *Psychology Magazine*, December 20, 2007

**Horror fiction has been terrifying people for generations, yet we still ask for more. Why are we so attracted to being afraid?**

Being a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, the connection between the two often intrigues me. A fiction story usually seems more compelling if it is based on a true account or likely to happen in real life. This is not to take away from well-crafted stories of complete fantasy by talented writers. But in general, the closer to real life fiction is, the more it seems to grasp the attention of readers and to have a long-term effect on them.

The horror genre is home to some of the most exaggerated possibilities and grandeurs of fantasy. At the same time, properly executed horror sticks with us the most, sometimes causing us in real life to look over our shoulder or keep the lights on at night. Horror endures, in various forms of media, as a powerful way to keep fiction in touch with our emotions. What is it about this speculative genre that sits so close to home?

We’ll examine some famous horror icons in the light of our living existence, but first let’s take an objective look at one of the most powerful emotions we can feel: fear.

### Fear: The Emotion of Horror

Horror is all about what we are afraid of. You can debate with different people and never come up with an agreed upon standard of fear and its causes. Fear can be innate (preprogrammed into our behavior and personality), learned (through experience and culture), or some combination of the two. Fear has a physiological basis (our brain reacts a certain way when we are afraid, our heart rate and breathing increase, etc.) and a psychological basis (the subjective experience of being afraid, which can affect our way of thinking and actions).

Obviously, fear is a complex emotion and varies among individuals, as different people may fear different things. Some people even claim to fear nothing. What generations of horror fiction has proved, however, is that the experience of being afraid is fairly universal. Furthermore, as unpleasant as fear can be to experience, there is also an enormous attraction to it when portrayed in a safe manner such as a fiction story. There is a certain thrill of having our fears invoked without the threat of actual danger that has captivated horror readers for centuries.

As fear varies from person to person, not everyone will get a thrill out of every horror story. But fear not (pun intended), for there is a vast variety of scary stories and terrifying tales. There are many subjects and even sub-genres within horror, and each one seems to scare us, tapping into our shared potential to be afraid by toying with our individual differences.

### Vampires

The vampire has been a familiar character of folklore and scary stories for centuries, even before Bram Stoker set the modern standards for vampires with Dracula. Vampire specifics sometimes vary depending on the origin of the tale and an author’s discretion, but the vampire basics are well known around the world by many generations. They are undead, the living dead risen from the grave. They have a thirst for human blood. They are immortal.

The idea of the dead not really being dead is a terrifying concept for most people, even more so if the undead is out to get us. This plays on the mysteries of death. Despite various spiritual and philosophical views, nobody can say for certain what happens to us (and/or our souls) when we die. The possibility of becoming a vampire is sometimes portrayed as romantic and even a way to achieve great power, as in Ann Rice’s The Vampire Chronicles. Still, it goes against any idea of going to Heaven or even resting in peace. In most stories, vampires live in endless suffering. It is frightening to be the victim of such a creature, but perhaps worse to become one.

Blood pumps through our veins to sustain life. The act of a monster drinking this fluid through our very veins is more than just a gruesome and potentially painful death. It is also symbolic of someone else taking away from us that which we hold dear. In this way, the vampire represents a sort of power struggle through a life or death encounter. Both victim and vampire need the blood to continue living. It is a Darwinian theory tested through a scene of fiction – survival of the fittest.

Through centuries of fiction as well as history, the notion of immortality has always interested some people. This goes hand in hand with the mysteries of death. Since we don’t know what happens when we die, many people fear death, as it is presumably the end of everything we are and know. The idea of vampires being immortal can therefore be seen as people’s fear of death being somewhat alleviated through fiction.

### Ghosts

Paranormal activity is a staple in many horror stories, but it is not limited to fiction. Indeed, branches of science are dedicated to proving or disproving the existence of ghosts. The credibility of these studies is sometimes questionable, but the fact that so many people believe in the possibility of contacting or at least witnessing the spirits of those passed on says a great deal about our collective consciousness.

It must be noted, of course, that ghosts are not always scary. Many people believe that they have felt the presence of their dead loved ones. This is often a comforting experience and may sometimes even be connected with a religious experience. It is this comfort, however, that makes malevolent spirits that much more frightening.

An encounter with a ghost of a stranger can be eerie and unsettling. It is also said that the spirits of murder victims or those taken “before their time” are often violent and can affect the living in unpleasant ways. This is an extraordinarily terrifying idea for one who believes in ghosts. Imagine, though, the sheer fright of someone who doesn’t believe in ghosts until he/she meets one. People are generally convinced in what they believe to be facts, and anything disproving these facts can be psychologically damaging. We base our behaviors greatly on what we know and experience – a paranormal encounter can totally shatter one’s perception of reality.

Ghosts induce horror for some of the same reasons that vampires do. Our general uncertainty of death and a possible afterlife affords many potential scenarios, and most of them can be scary due to the mysteries. Science suggests that ghosts are not real, while most major religions speak heavily about an afterlife. Many people are convinced one way or the other, but have we ever truly proved if ghosts exist or not? No, we haven’t.

### Zombies

Zombies have a bit in common with vampires, in that they are undead and take living people as victims. Unlike the bloodthirsty vampires, however, zombies usually feed on people’s flesh. Zombies are normally portrayed as ravenous creatures with low intelligence. A horde of zombies attacks very much like a pack of animals.

If you were out in the woods and you suddenly noticed a pack of wolves surrounding you, chances are you’d be extremely frightened. This makes sense, of course, not only through common sense. We have an innate fear of certain animals, predatory creatures to which we might become prey. Some scientists go so far as to say that this fear, developed through thousands of years of evolution, extends to our relationships with other people as well. In a dangerous situation, the “fight-or-flight” state of mind often takes over, and zombies are certainly capable of inducing this in a person afraid of being eaten alive.

Add to this the fact that zombies are the animated corpses of dead people, and you get a sense of closeness to these animalistic creatures. Not too long ago, a zombie was a person, just like you. Something horrible or strange happened that caused the zombie to rise from its grave with a hunger for human flesh. Once again, we are prone to fear a similar outcome for ourselves.

### Conclusion

This is obviously just a glimpse into the world of horror, as there are countless types of monsters and scary situations presented in fiction. The sense of fear that horror stories employ can be straight forward (such as serial killers), exaggerated (such as monsters from other dimensions), or anywhere in between. But as long as uncertainties about life exist, as long as people occasionally feel afraid, horror is here to stay. It will remain a popular genre of fiction that, possibly more than any other genre, keeps us in touch with our own raw emotions.

An Introduction to Horror Film

**HORROR**  
• noun 1) an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust. 2) a thing causing such a feeling. 3) intense dismay. 4) informal a bad or mischievous person, especially a child.  
— ORIGIN Latin, from horrere ‘shudder, (of hair) stand on end’.

"If movies are the dreams of the mass culture... horror movies are the nightmares."— Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*

Horror films are a movie genre seeking to elicit a negative emotional reaction from viewers by playing on the audience's most primal fears. They often feature scenes that startle the viewer through the means of macabre and the supernatural, thus they may overlap with the fantasy and supernatural genre. Horrors frequently overlap with the thriller genre.

Horror films deal with the viewer's nightmares, hidden worst fears, revulsions and terror of the unknown. Although a good deal of it is about the supernatural, if some films contain a plot about morbidity, serial killers, a disease/virus outbreak and surrealism, they may be termed "horror".

Plots written within the horror genre often involve the intrusion of an evil force, event, or personage, commonly of supernatural origin, into the everyday world. Themes or elements often prevalent in typical horror films include ghosts, torture, gore, werewolves, ancient curses, satanism, demons, vicious animals, vampires, cannibals, haunted houses, zombies and serial killers. Conversely, stories of the supernatural are not necessarily always a horror movie as well.

Early horror movies are largely based on nineteenth-century literature of the gothic genre, such as Universal's Dracula (1931), Frankenstein (also 1931), and the term "horror movie" first appears in the writings of critics and film industry commentators in response to their release, but the term has since been applied retrospectively to similar films from the entire silent period.

***Horror Films: Why We Like To Watch***

Horror is an ancient art form. We have tried to terrify each other with tales which trigger the less logical parts of our imaginations for as long as we've told stories. From the ballads of the ancient world to modern urban myths, audiences willingly offer themselves up to sadistic storytellers to be scared witless, and they are happy to pay for the privilege. Theories abound as to why this is so; do we derive basic thrills from triggering the rush of adrenalin which fear brings, or do horror stories serve a wider moral purpose, reinforcing the rules and taboos of our society and showing the macabre fate of those who transgress?

Horror movies have long served both purposes. They deliver thrills by the hearseload, as well as telling us stories of the dark, forbidden side of life (and death) - cautionary tales for grownups. They also provide a revealing mirror image of the anxieties of their time. *Nosferatu* (1922) is not simply a tale of vampirism, but offers heart-rending images of a town beleaguered by premature and random deaths, echoes of the Great War and the Great Flu Epidemic fatalities. At the other end of the century *Blade* (1998) is not just a tale of vampirism either, but reflects a fear of the powerful yet irresponsible elements in society, echoes down the corridor indeed of the seemingly impunitive behaviour of those at the top.

Each generation gets the horror films it deserves, and one of the more fascinating aspects of the study of the genre is the changing nature of the monsters who present a threat. In the early 1940s, a world living under the shadow of Hitler's predatory tendencies identified a part-man, part-wolf as their boogeyman, whose bestial nature caused him to tear apart those who crossed his path. In the 1990s however, there was no need for a part wolf component: Jonathan Doe (*Se7en* 1994) and Hannibal Lecter (*Manhunter 1986, Silence of the Lambs* 1991, *Hannibal* 2001) were entirely human in their calculated and stylized killing methods. As we move on into the twenty first century, the ghosts and zombies are back in vogue as Eastern and Western superstitions converge, and once more we yearn for an evil that is beyond human. In an era of war, supernatural terror is more palatable than the fear inherent in news headlines.