

How do Horror Stories Affect Human Evolution?

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Horror stories have become popular in subcultures: horror movies are constantly released at cinemas; writing a short horror story is increasingly popular among online writers; there are online forums ranking horror stories and promoting reading horror stories together at midnight. However, why do these horror stories exist? It seems counter-intuitive for humans, the apex animal of nature, to create something just for triggering fear in their peers. It is also questionable how horror stories have developed great popularity nowadays. Based on several biocultural studies regarding horror stories in human evolution, researchers have a consensus that the main purpose of horror stories is to spread different kinds of fear across the human population. Here this literature review exhibits similarities and differences between different researchers on how horror stories develop in response to fear, and how they vary between ancient mythology and modern subculture. As a result, future research direction has been proposed, including gaps between research that need to be filled in.

To understand the origin of horror stories, we have to start with understanding the fear of humans. It is widely believed across most studies that horror stories originated in human's natural fear of animals with shapes other than humans during ancient times. Professor Asma (2014) brings out Darwin's study around fear to validate this idea. Asma mentions Darwin explores the fear of primates by constantly bringing snakes in front of them and recording their response. As shown in the study, chimpanzees are extremely afraid of snakes. A morphologically different species could trigger the fundamental emotional response of any primates that causes fear. Asma also presents another continuing study around the same topic, where the results show infant chimpanzees naturally fear animals like snakes without previously seeing anything similar. The conclusion here verifies that morphological differences are the rudimentary reason for fear response to occur in humans.

Before the morphological explanation was established, earlier researchers believed that humans were the prey of the carnivores the main cause of fear. However, morphological differences do not relate to predator-prey relationships. Researcher Marcus Baynes-Rock lists size comparisons between

hominins and carnivores in the pre-classical period (2008). Humans, though shorter at that time, were still much bigger than most predators in the wild. Also, Baynes-Rock proposes there are few predator bites on the skull or other remains from ancient hominins. Later during the Pleistocene age, as humans replaced other hominins to become the dominant primate, no archaeological evidence has shown that humans were prey to beasts.

Professor Clasen from Aarhus University in Denmark mentions something different in his paper regarding fear (2012). Aside from the morphological differences, he believes that the dangerous environment was the main cause of fear. As Clasen mentions in his paper (2012), ancient humans died for various reasons, including snake bites, beast attacks, as well as warfare. Clasen believes fear is a human's adaptation to those various dangers.

Despite the difference in the origin of fear, researchers have come to a consensus on how fear has been passed down through generations. Asma (2014) presents research conclusions from several evolutionary psychologists, in which they claim that any known biological mechanisms are not able to pass down fear responses, rather, fear was passed down through cultural practice. This is where horror stories appear in human evolution. Fear was transmitted across the entire human population both horizontally, as crossing a tribe, and vertically, as crossing generations in a human family, mainly through the spread of horror stories. Clasen in his paper (2012) also proposes that horror stories bring people back to the days when humans were weak, and make people, together as a whole, more united than in ancient times. Another support for this theory could be found in most mythologies across the world, where the horror element in them is always something similar to natural monsters. Those beasts are morphologically different from humans, and it also reminds us of the terrible memories of humankind. Horror stories pass fear down through generations is a consensus between researchers no matter how they believe fear originated.

As horror stories have appeared in human history, they began to evolve, too. Professor Clasen in his paper (2012) has proposed that horror elements in modern stories generally adopt the form of a human. There are several common horror figures in those stories, and these figures are all somewhat related to humans. Like werewolves and vampires, the shape-shifters could easily transform between a human and a beast, which is found in urban

legends across the world. Such a combination of human and beast represents that some humans themselves are dark and ruthless, it is a metaphor for “beast within man,” both literally and inherently. However, not too many studies have been done around this area, where only Clasen has studied each horror figure and its intrinsic meanings.

Modern horror stories have developed and become widespread nowadays. There are a lot of new elements being added to magnify their effect on causing fear among the general public. The most interesting change among all horror stories is that fewer bestial monsters exist, but the horror comes from actual people. Professor Asma in his work (2014) proposes different theories around why horror elements have changed from beast to human. The first theory comes from the horror novelist H.P. Lovecraft. This world-renowned novelist who created Cthulhu horror stories believes that people always believe in what they understand, and as humans, we tend to believe that we know everything about ourselves. When there is some individual human that conducts things others could not do, it brings a much higher level of fear to us, indicating that humans are still fragile, not even fully understanding other people. Professor Asma proposes that one of his early works (2009) in a way brings more understanding of human-origin horror. In that work, he focused on political propaganda. Early in the middle ages, the pope offers investigators in the church to pursue the case of witches. At that time witches are believed to steal infants and sacrifice them. Apart from hunting down this enemy in people’s imagination, the investigators also hunt down Jewish people and accuse them of similar charges. Such a ruthless association has brought a wave of political persecution among the church’s enemies and Jewish people themselves suffer from aggressive emotions from the general public. There are other examples mentioned in Asma’s former paper (2009) about how political propaganda has been associated with horror stories. He concluded all political tricks like this one originated from xenophobia from people, promoting hate towards other humans.

Under a similar tone, Professor Clasen another expert in the field claims that horror stories artificially evoke people’s hate towards what they dislike (2012). Take two commonly found modern horror elements, ghosts, and zombies, as examples, one is a mind without a body, and the other is a body without a mind. At first, they were created to scare people, but in modern horror movies especially, they cause damage to society not in a supernatural way, but by

destroying people's belongings. Such a "financial ruin" (Clasen, 2012) promotes hate instead of fear.

To further study how Clasen focused on modern horror stories, one of his later works is used (2014), in which he studied other horror elements in modern horror culture. Some modern horror movies derive elements from ancient mythology around the world. Those elements are agents for people around the world to know each other better. Since globalization has become the main theme in the world in the 21st century, humans have realized that some horror stories which embedded in people's minds in every culture. Horror stories, as they appear in various forms, promote globalization.

Overall, despite the origin of fear not coming consensus, there is a consensus on horror stories spreading fear to every individual, bringing humans back to the ages when they are under threat from all sides in nature (Asma, 2014; Clasen, 2012). Spreading fear binds people living in the same area together. When it comes to the medieval ages, horror became a tool for the rulers to spread propaganda based on their own will, and people from different backgrounds developed xenophobia to exclude others. Also horror in this period spread not only fear but also hate. During the globalization process, horror stories in the form of films, videos, or games promote people from different backgrounds. However, less research was conducted on how horror elements transformed from beasts to humans. A gap should be filled in researching the differences between the horror elements across periods and what value they reflect on human nature.

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