

# Fear and the Horror Genre

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The horror genre has remained an essential one throughout our time here on Earth, dipping into almost every part of our lives. From our fears of everyday trials to the excitement we feel when filled with adrenaline, fear has provided us with a constant companion when faced with the world. The horror genre has existed for as long as we have been afraid and will continue to live on as long as we are still afraid. The genre has been both loved and hated and yet has become one of the most recognizable art forms on the planet. As someone who loves writing within the genre, fear inspires me to create and imagine things that I'd never previously considered. I am increasingly fascinated by the unknowns surrounding our world and the fears that leech out from the gaping hole we've ripped open in our curiosity to look further into what exactly scares us.

Within the horror genre, there is no prescribed 'good' or 'bad.' Everything within the genre is neutral and open ground for individual perception. Everything that occurs throughout both the literature and media concerning horror tends to revolve around what someone personally believes according to their own ideals. The audience is vast and diverse, having fans almost everywhere, as well as those that despise the genre. Regardless of personal thoughts on the genre, horror has become a mainstay within our society. When it comes to the perception of the audience, individual opinion is almost completely held over initial intentions by the creator of the art. It is vital to maintain an open mind when venturing into the dark hall of horror, and I hope to be able to shine a light on the many attributes shared by the genre, starting with what it actually is.

There is no true actualized definition that describes the horror genre in its entirety. The genre is complex and interconnects throughout every other genre. Viktória Prohászková, in her piece on the horror genre, shares this difficulty in depicting the genre within a defining standard, stating that "Horror is a varied genre that is hard to be defined by one single definition" (132). Prohászková brings into discussion the importance of the genre being part of how we have survived throughout our lives, quoting Dominic Strinati from his study on popular culture that "as a genre that represents the need for suppression if the horror shown is interpreted as expressing uncomfortable and disturbing desires which need to be contained" (132). Fear drives us to act in a protective manner of ourselves. If we feel as though we are in danger, we will act on our impulses. Fear, the primary attribute behind the horror genre, is the driving factor behind our perception of our terrors.

As long as there are elements of fear among us, the horror genre will prevail in its popularity and use. Fear itself is a complex aspect of our existence, promoting many of our reflexes and allowing us to preserve ourselves. Fear in its raw form feeds into the genre, manipulating the perceptions of the audience and creators alike. New terrors will be discovered, unlocking potential

stories, allowing the horror genre to further grow into something that will become more inviting to spectators. As the genre increases in popularity, so too does the discourse surrounding the genre grow to immeasurable heights.

Discourse communities are essential for anything to amass support. In terms of discourse involved with the horror genre, this is no different. Groups are scattered about the internet, as well as throughout the world. One only has to go looking in order to find a community that fits their particular interests. As new material is released to the public, even more discourse begins to pop up. The horror genre has an incredibly broad fanbase, having discourse communities for both successful releases and decidedly lacking productions. To the horror community, however, there is no decided opinion on any release from the genre. Personal opinion is held in high regard within almost every group concerning themselves with the horror genre. It doesn't matter who you are, what you believe in, or even what age you are; you have most likely been exposed to some form of the genre.

People of all ages and backgrounds have a rich resource of potentially untapped fears hidden deep within them, which could be exploited by any person if they so choose. People that do utilize the untouched fears we have trapped within ourselves, typically starting at a young age, are our parents. Most children have been read a bedtime story that serves as a warning through fear. Dolf Zillman further expands on the stories we were told as children, stating that "Most fairy tales feature a good deal of material designed to frighten children and, hence, may be considered bona fide horror stories" (16). One might not consider children's stories to be in relation to the horror genre, but one only needs to look back at their childhood fears to realize that there is a greater connection between the two. Kids are told stories of 'Boogiemen' and 'Monsters,' parents play on individual terrors in order to frighten their children. These children's stories have a purpose besides simply scaring a child.

Stories are told for many different reasons; horror stories are usually used as warnings. Children's fairytales serve as threats to children, not to just inspire fear but care in actions. Zillman explains that "Children could be prevented from wandering off into the woods by stories of fierce creatures roaming there"(16). Stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* are stories passed on to children not just to frighten them but to teach them an important lesson. Telling children to avoid eating candy from strangers through stories of witches in forests fattening up kids to eat may seem a bit far-fetched to some but has provided safeguards to our children for millennia. Fear serves a greater purpose than simply frightening someone. More can be achieved by the horror genre than only terror; lessons can be learned. Kids aren't normally the ones to go searching for these tales; that role typically fits with their parents. There are those that go searching for these stories. They are looking for something else that lies within the experience of the genre.

Those that regularly search for art within the horror genre typically deem themselves as 'adrenaline-junkies.' These people purposefully scour the world for things that will scare them because they like how it makes them feel. Those who enjoy fear, even crave being afraid, look everywhere for a way to get their hands on something from the genre. People love the gripping

sensation of being on the edge of their seats. Those who go looking for danger find themselves locked into the genre, unable to escape without feeling some sort of discomfort. One can always find these spectators littered throughout much of the community surrounding the horror genre. One could even find them screaming their heads off at an amusement park, playing a new horror game, adrenaline coursing through their veins as they hold on tight to a new book that turns their stomach and their mind into ecstasy. These people keep the genre alive and provide more to the community than just fear; they provide a connection to the deeper purpose surrounding the genre: fear. Fear is an understood emotion that exists in every person, every culture, and every part of our society. Everyone is welcome within the genre as we all experience some form of fear. Fear isn't an exclusivity within humanity; emotion is felt all around the world.

Fear is deeply rooted within our existence. Writers continue to work within the horror genre primarily because there are still things to be afraid of. Science has explained away a great deal of the unknown, but questions remain unanswered. For as long as there are unknowns in our world, fear will still remain prevalent. For as long as there are misjudgments and hatred of others, there will be fear. Writers are continually provided with more and more material. Prohászková perfectly encapsulates how fear has remained a constant companion to our lives throughout our time on Earth: "The oldest and strongest human emotion is fear. It is embedded in people since time began. It was fear that initiated the establishment of faith and religion. It was fear of unknown and mysterious phenomena, which people could not explain otherwise than via impersonating a high power, which decides their fates" (132). Fear itself is the building block of our societies, shaping our world around the frightening unknown aspects of our reality. Fear is a part of us, and there is no reason for us to feel ashamed of it as long as we come to the consensus to fight against it with each other. By standing together, our fear begins to melt away, and we can see exactly what we are and what we can accomplish when standing together.

The horror genre is a rhetorical masterpiece, comprised of Ethos, Pathos, and even Logos. Fear is an understood part of every culture, religion, and country. Fear is an emotional response to specific triggers that force us to either shut down, run away, or act in defense. There is logic to fear in the fact that we need it in order to survive. Fear acts as a reflex to the world around us. We make decisions based on observations. Fear is important to us, just as it is essential to the horror genre. We need fear, just as we need an artistic way to express it. Pathos is arguably the most powerful form of rhetoric in comparison to the horror genre. Nowhere else is this more obvious than in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* and Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

The horror genre has been quite popular, especially within the last few centuries, as the broader populous has gained the knowledge to read. One novel that has remained synonymous with the horror genre is the tale of the mad scientist and his betrayed creation, the tale of *Frankenstein*. Starting as a nightmare that Shelly had once had, the story grew into a complex and emotional one. Although not entirely a horror novel, *Frankenstein* still utilizes a common trope found throughout much of the genre: insanity and monstrosities. At the start of the tale, it is apparent to the reader that the creation was at first intended to be the monster. But, as the story progresses, the audience begins to realize the truth of Frankenstein's nature. Shelly's play on the evil creator and the

innocent creation brings into discussion similar ideals that are bound to the story. It is entirely conceivable that the so-called 'monster' is in all actuality a victim, just as Frankenstein is a victim in his own right. Neither character is completely good nor entirely bad. The complexity of their natures has influenced the horror genre immensely, altering many stories into further discussions in accordance with what could have been occurring underneath the bluster of terror. Fear becomes a far more intricate emotion when provided with a connection to something raw and real.

Poe constructs an extraordinary tale about two childhood friends reconvening in their later years. One of the friends slowly descends into madness following the death of his sister, eventually succumbing to his fate after being petrified by the dead visage of his sister. As the house falls around the characters, one is left incredibly bewildered with fear as each line uttered drags out an underlying terror that exists within us all: the fear of fear itself. Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* has prevailed as my favorite of his works. I adore haunted mansion tales, a trope repeated throughout much of the horror genre. A particular comment that has stayed with me ever since first setting my eyes on the story is a statement by the character Roderick Usher, "—I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR" (6). Roderick's comment provides an internal look into his chaotic spiral. His madness is visible to the reader, as is his depressive nature. Roderick is controlled by his fear, lives by its clutches under his skin. Fear, regardless of its many benefits, is still a difficult thing to come to terms with. Mental health has become a primary focus within the horror genre in understanding that certain individuals experience uncontrolled terror within our world. Fear can either be our downfall or our call to rise above the barriers that separate us from one another.

Fear is a deciding factor within many of our lives, but we shouldn't necessarily let that be the case. The horror genre has continuously promoted open minds and open hearts. Consideration for the minds and experiences of others has been repeatedly nurtured throughout much of the genre. Fear is a call to action, an inspirational force that compels us to move forward instead of backward. We are capable of anything, even overcoming our fears if we put our differences aside for the sake of survival and preservation. The horror genre is an intense and well-loved addition to literature and popular media. The genre means a great deal to me personally, and I sincerely hope that it continues to grow in the coming years as there is still so much for us to be afraid of.

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