

Toward the Study of Fear as a Global Discourse

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Abstract

This essay updates, relates, and seeks to understand the relationships between horror literature and education, cognitive engagement, and society. A relational content analysis of four horror short stories finds that authors engage their readers emotionally and cognitively in order for them to apply the new ideas they are confronted with in the text to the real world. This essay also reviews research about the benefits of utilizing horror literature in the classroom for students and teachers, shows how horror effects and engages readers, and reflects on the genre's capacity to examine and dismantle social constructs and prejudices. This essay concludes that horror contributes to a learning and growing society by functioning as a discourse for real-world issues. If used appropriately and responsibly in the classroom, horror could enable more knowledgeable, successful, and nondiscriminatory members of society.

Introduction

I was initially intrigued with the cognitive and emotional effects of horror after completing an extensive research paper on apocalyptic literature. Amidst the carnage I found offered by this genre, I noticed something interesting about my consumption of it: I was learning. Not from supporting texts or additional research, but from the end-of-the-world media itself. Why?

Literacy, defined for the sake of this essay as “those meaning-making practices demonstrated by fluency with a wide range of symbolic tools necessary for lifelong learning and the ongoing creation of societies that learn and grow,” determines modern success. Despite its negative reputation, research shows that horror, specifically in an educational context, can foster learning and personal development. This paper seeks to coincide these two ideas by answering: what, if any, benefits does horror media provide to the classroom, the mind, and society?

Methods

Researchers in the fields of literature, culture, psychology, education, philosophy, and more have been uncovering the educational, emotional, cognitive, and social benefits of horror literature for decades. Most of this research pertains to the use of horror literature in a classroom setting, primarily upper education. It also serves to examine defining features of the genre as well as its place in culture. With this understanding of the topic, I performed a relational content analysis on 4 horror short stories from authors of different time periods, races, genders, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. These stories were “The Rats in The Walls” by H.P. Lovecraft, “Zombie” by Joyce Carol Oates, “Headlights” by Samanta Schweblin, and “The Couvade” by Joe Koch. I reduced the texts to code for three categories:

New threats were considered to be any direct or indirect event, object, idea, or entity not widely considered to exist in our current understanding of the world.

Cognitive and emotional engagement were identified through any direct or indirect rhetorical devices, complex language and concepts, sensory integration, attention/interest, and memory.

Real-world issues were considered to be any direct or indirect criticism, analysis, or exploration of the human mind, desire, or existence.

I used multiple classifiers for each of these categories to account for the implicit existence of these concepts.

A relational content analysis identifies and evaluates relationships and emotional concepts in a text, keeping in mind the context, meaning, and intent of the written work. Because of this, these analyses are considered somewhat ambiguous by nature. They are also inherently reductive, typically disregarding of context or too liberally drawing meaningful inferences. Other limitations for this particular analysis include lack of coding and research training and reproducibility.

Results

Horror is a genre of fiction media intended to entertain its audience by eliciting feelings of dread, discomfort, disgust, and fear. It has been relevant for millennia, but considered “abnormal” by Western society since the nineteenth century because it transgresses a boundary of what is considered socially acceptable behavior or “righteousness” in some way (Winter 292). Horror explores issues related to human mind, desire, and existence, requiring its consumer to suspend disbelief and any preconceptions when interacting with a text. As of a result of this, horror can be used as a nonthreatening filter to analyze real world issues from a safe perspective as a reader or viewer (Davis 41).

An important thing to note about horror is its predictability. As James Grant puts it, “No predictability, no Horror” (4). Because of this, it is relatively simple to classify horror media in two main categories: natural horror and art-horror, “the latter of which is both a purposefully created emotion induced by productions of Horror, as well as the works of art that create it” (Grant 3). Simply put, horror either presents us with a fear caused by things in our everyday sphere of reference (terrorism, serial killers, etc.), or threats generally considered to be outside of our current existence (zombies, ghosts, etc.). Most horror texts rely heavily on elements of both categories. With this understanding of existing research on the horror genre, I was able to identify a clear pattern within several short horror texts I performed a relational content analysis on: the reader is presented with a series of new threats in a text, engages with these threats emotionally and cognitively, and can then interpret the threats in the context of the real world. While many horror texts do overtly comment on real-world issues, horror has a unique capacity to allow the reader to make meaning without prescribing it.

The first short story I analyzed, “The Rats in the Walls” by H.P. Lovecraft, follows the story of narrator Delapore as he is driven mad trying to repair his family’s name and ancestral home after World War I and the loss of his son. The reader is confronted with the same new threats as the narrator: supernatural elements, a family cult/curse, “a subterraneous world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion”, and human quadrupeds (Lovecraft). The author then employs several rhetorical strategies to emotionally and cognitively engage the reader, including references to science, history, geography, superstition, legend, human loss, and more. Through these strategies, the new threats begin to fall into place for the reader as the story comes to a close. The family cult/curse begins to symbolize the narrator’s guilt and shame tied to his family’s past and the human quadrupeds serve little purpose beyond commenting on race, slavery, and war.

Joyce Carol Oates presents the reader with a first-person serial killer narrative in “Zombie.” The story explores the inner workings of the psychotic narrator’s mind, loosely based on that of real-life serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Although the new threats are not as obvious in this text, they serve the same function. Through sensory integration and other cognitively engaging tools, the reader begins to understand the zombies as representations of human worth and social status, and the disturbing narration becomes the result of personal, judicial, and racial prejudice.

“Headlights” by Samanta Schweblin follows the story of a young bride, Felicity, who is abandoned at a highway restroom by her new husband. There she encounters a new threat—hundreds of angry, confused, and despairing women prowling in the nearby field waiting for their abandoning husbands to return. In the process, she befriends three other women, including a curt old woman who slowly reveals the real-world application of the story through her emotional yet cynical commentary on the inequitable treatment of women by all genders.

The final short story, “The Couvade” by Joe Koch involves another ancestral home and curse, pitting its main characters against violent and disturbing histories and relatives. After unexpectedly inheriting his ancestral home, Martin and his husband Jerome temporarily move in to fix up and sell the manor. The reader enters a strange dream-like state through sensory integration as they experience the threats posed to this couple alongside them, ranging from werewolves to dark magic. The author balances the perspectives of the couple in such a way the reader engages with Martin’s past at the same time as the present, revealing the real-world problems hidden beneath the fur: abuse, homophobia, and more.

In each of these examples, monstrosity of some kind functions a discourse on a cultural level. This is accomplished by addressing and examining “deviant” identity formations (race, class, sexuality, gender), exposing social conditioning in daily life, and identifying and articulating ideologies of social consciousness that lead to marginalization (Matek 66). It is through personal engagement with these concepts that personal transformation can begin to occur. Because of this, the social world of horror fans could be considered a “counter-public sphere”, particularly a resistance to aesthetic and moral standards set in place by censors (Winter 282).

This can be applied to affective learning, an acquisition of knowledge and skills which emotionally engages students (Davis 3). As Ljubica Matek explains, the more emotionally involved or connected a student is with the material, the greater the personal transformation that will occur as a result of that material (65). In this way, horror literature has the capacity to foster more empathetic and tolerant members of society. Emotionally engaging with a text also enables students to more meaningfully connect with concepts and makes students 16 times more likely to find academic motivation, and therefore success, in school (Davis 163). A student is also more likely to take responsibility for their own learning and engagement if they are already intrigued with the content (Matek 65). Utilizing this new educational authority enables a student’s critical thinking skills and improves writing ability (Miller 174). Similarly, creating both situational and personal interest in a classroom setting provides accessible learning and promotes student and reading comprehension (Davis 38).

Horror in the classroom also promotes metacognitive thinking and serious discussion (Aho 33). Metacognition is defined in Davis’s study as “a critical awareness of a) one’s thinking and learning and b) oneself as a thinker and learner” (46). This improves student learning by enhancing comprehension and enabling transference of knowledge and skills (Kaplan et al.). In addition, the use of horror in the classroom also lessened class management for teachers by

promoting a safe environment and decreasing stress (Davis 143). This trusting environment, as Rainer Winter explains in his ethnographic study of horror fans, enables students to begin “relating techniques of emotion management to the context of the social world” (Winter 293).

The most important benefit of the horror genre is its capacity to develop empathy in students, dismantling prejudices against different racial, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Matek 62). The universality of fear also enables students to “focus not on their mutual differences, but on their inherent similarity and equality as human beings, with the aim of understanding that everyone is entitled to the safety and integrity of their person” (Matek 71). This also helps students understand how ideology “affects their everyday lives, how it evolves over time, and who has stood to benefit most from its placement” (Browning 48). This enables students to begin identifying and articulating the oppressive social consciousness that can lead to marginalization, and subsequently, “more liberal notions of acceptance” of sexual, social, or racial “others” (Browning 51). This shows horror can positively impact more than the classroom environment: it can better a learning and growing society.

Conclusion

As an avid horror fan for most of my life, I’ve heard nearly every misconception and stereotype related to the genre. Research disproves these, but it does not seem to significantly impact public perception. This paper addressed this by answering what, if any, benefits does horror media provide to the classroom, the mind, and society?

The use of horror in the classroom through an affective learning framework emotionally engages students, enabling meaningful connections with and personal transformation as a result of the text. This also makes students more likely to take responsibility for their own learning, subsequently increasing their likelihood of success. Horror can be especially impactful in multicultural classrooms by fostering an empathetic and accessible learning environment and even lessen class management for teachers. At the same time, however, it is incredibly important to understand each individual student and what content could cause inadvertent harm.

As a genre intended to entertain its audience by eliciting feelings of dread, discomfort, disgust, and fear, horror has an interesting relationship with the human mind and emotion. Contrary to popular misconceptions, these are mainly positive implications. These include promoting metacognitive thinking and serious discussion, fostering creativity and imagination, enabling critical thinking and transference of knowledge/skills, improving comprehension and writing ability, and “relating techniques of emotion management to the context of the social world” (Winter 293).

This provides the basis on which horror actively contributes to a learning and growing society: as a discourse. This is accomplished by addressing and examining “deviant” identity formations (race, class, sexuality, gender), exposing social conditioning in daily life, and identifying and articulating ideologies of social consciousness that lead to marginalization. Because of this,

horror assumes its role as a tool for examining and dismantling social constructs and prejudices, dealing with universal anxieties in everyday life, and fostering more empathetic and tolerant members of society. If used responsibly and appropriately, the horror genre could better the world as we understand it.

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