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What Is the Horror Genre?

Literary Criticism by Sharon A. Russell

SETTING A PURPOSE As you read, pay attention to the points the author makes about horror stories. Do her ideas make you think about horror stories in new ways?

Many people define horror by its subjects. We all think of creatures like Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, and the wolfman¹ as monsters in the horror genre. Each one of these creatures has a history and developed over a period of time. But we also know that horror covers more than just these monsters. We could all make long lists of the kind of creatures we identify with horror, especially when we think of films as well as literature. The minute we would start to make such a list we would also realize that not all monsters are alike and that not all horror deals with monsters. The subject approach is not the clearest way to define this genre.

¹ **Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, and the wolfman:** legendary monsters. "Frankenstein's monster" is the creature created by Dr. Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel; "Dracula" is the vampire in Bram Stoker's novel; in folklore, the wolfman is a man who can become a wolf.

Some students of this genre find that the best way to examine it is to deal with the way horror fiction is organized or structured. Examining the organization of a horror story shows that it shares certain traits with other types of fiction. Horror stories share the use of suspense as a tactic with many other kinds of literature. The tension we feel when a character goes into the attic, down into the basement, or just into the abandoned house is partially a result of suspense. We don't
20 know what is going to happen. But that suspense is **intensified** by our knowledge of the genre. We know that characters involved in the world of horror always meet something awful when they go where they shouldn't. Part of the tension is created because they are doing something we know is going to get them in trouble. Stephen King refers directly to our anticipation of horror. In *Salem's Lot*² Susan approaches the house which is the source of evil. "She found herself thinking of those drive-in horror movie epics where the heroine goes venturing up the narrow attic stairs...or down into some dark,
30 cobwebby cellar...and she...thinking: ...*I'd never do that!*" Of course Susan's fears are **justified**. She does end up dead in the basement, a victim of the vampire.

intensify

(ɪn-ˈtɛn-ᵻs-ɪ-ɪ) v. If you *intensify* something, you make it grow in strength.

If the horror genre uses the character's search for information to create suspense, it controls when and where we get our knowledge. Because we are outside of the situation we usually know more than the characters. Our advance knowledge creates suspense because we can anticipate what is going to happen. The author can play with those expectations by either confirming them or surprising us with a different
40 outcome. When suspense is an important element in fiction we may often find that the plot is the most critical part of the story. We care more about what happens next than about who the characters are or where the story is set. But setting is often considered a part of the horror genre. If the genre has traditional monsters, it also has traditional settings. Only authors who want to challenge the tradition place events in bright, beautiful parks. We expect a connection between the setting and the events in this genre. We are not surprised to find old houses, abandoned castles, damp cellars, or dark
50 forests as important elements in the horror story.

justify

(jʌs-ᵻ-ɪ-ɪ) v. If you *justify* something, you prove it is right or valid.

² *Salem's Lot*: a horror fiction novel written by Stephen A. King.



The actor Boris Karloff as the monster in the 1931 film *Frankenstein*, based on the novel



The actor Lon Chaney as a werewolf in the 1941 film *The Wolf Man*



The actor Bela Lugosi as Dracula in the 1931 film by the same name

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60 Some people make further distinctions based on how the stories are organized. We can divide stories into different categories based on how we come to believe in the events related and how they are explained to us. Stories that deal with **parallel** worlds expect us to accept those worlds without question. We just believe Dorothy is in Oz; we accept Oz as a parallel world separate from ours. Other times events seem to be supernatural but turn out to have natural explanations: the ghosts turn out to be squirrels in the attic, or things that move mysteriously are part of a plot to drive someone crazy. Sometimes the supernatural is the result of the way the central character sees the world, as in stories told from the point of view of a crazy person. But at times we are not sure, and hesitate about believing in the possibility of the supernatural. When I first read *Dracula* I seriously considered hanging garlic on my windows because I believed that vampires could exist. This type of hesitation, when we almost believe, falls into the general category of the “fantastic” (Todorov 25).³ Often horror has its greatest effect on us because we almost

parallel
(pă-r'ô-ləl') *adj.*
If things are *parallel*, they have comparable or similar parts.

³ **Todorov 25:** the author is following MLA style to cite her source for the information just stated: page 25 of a work by an author named Todorov.

70 believe, or believe while we are reading the book or watching the film, that the events are possible.

Yet another way of categorizing works of horror is by the source of the horror. Some horror comes from inside the characters. Something goes wrong inside, and a person turns into a monster. Dr. Frankenstein's need for knowledge turns him into the kind of person who creates a monster. Dr. Jekyll also values his desire for information above all else, and creates Mr. Hyde.⁴ In another kind of horror story the threat to the central character or characters comes from outside. An
80 outside force may invade the character and then force the evil out again. The vampire attacks the victim, but then the victim becomes a vampire and attacks others. Stories of ghosts or demonic possession also fall into this category.

We can also look at the kinds of themes common to horror. Many works concentrate on the conflict between good and evil. Works about the fantastic may deal with the search for forbidden knowledge that appears in much horror literature. Such **quests** are used as a way of examining our attitude toward knowledge. While society may believe that
90 new knowledge is always good, the horror genre may question this assumption, examining how such advances affect the individual and society.

quest
(kwěst) *n.* A *quest* is a search.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION With a partner, discuss how Russell's ideas about horror stories compare with your own knowledge of this genre.

⁴ **Dr. Jekyll . . . and . . . Mr. Hyde:** the good and evil sides of the same character in a novella by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Analyze Text: Literary Criticism

ELA RI.8.2, RI.8.3, RI.8.6
ELD PI.8.6, PI.8.7

One of the pleasures of reading literature is thinking about it afterward. **Literary criticism** is writing that examines, analyzes, and interprets a piece of literature or a general aspect of literature.

In literary criticism, the **author's purpose**—or the reason he or she is writing—is often to inform or to persuade other readers to view a text in a certain way. The chart shows some specific purposes an author might have when writing literary criticism.

Purpose	What the Author Does
To define a genre	explains the characteristics of a type of writing using specific examples as evidence
To categorize works of literature	defines and classifies works of literature based on certain criteria , or standards
To examine the structure of a work of literature	analyzes the organization of a piece of literature
To analyze an author's technique	explains and evaluates the effectiveness of literary techniques, such as using an unreliable narrator, recurring imagery, or flashbacks

What is the purpose of the work of literary criticism you have just read?

Summarize Text

ELA RI.8.2
ELD PI.8.10

A good way to check your comprehension and remember what you read is to summarize the text. When you **summarize**, you briefly retell the central ideas and most important details of a piece of writing in your own words. You can summarize a section of a text or an entire work.

- Begin with a clear, brief statement of the central idea of the section or work.
- Present the most important details that support the idea in the order in which they appear in the text.
- Write in your own words, but be careful not to change the author's meaning.

Summarize the first paragraph of "What Is the Horror Genre?"

Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- 1. Identify** Reread the first paragraph, lines 1–11. Why does the author reject characters or subjects as a way to categorize the horror genre?
- 2. Infer** Reread the first two paragraphs of the essay, lines 1–32. What does the opening suggest about the author’s purpose in writing this essay?
- 3. Cause/Effect** In lines 20–21, the author says that in horror stories “suspense is intensified by our knowledge of the genre.” What knowledge is the author referring to? Explain why it increases suspense.
- 4. Analyze** Events described in the horror genre often defy everyday reality. According to Russell, what are three different reactions the reader might have to supernatural events depicted in horror stories?
- 5. Interpret** In line 87, what does the author mean by “the search for forbidden knowledge”?
- 6. Summarize** After reading this essay, what is your response to its title: “What Is the Horror Genre?” To answer, summarize the text.
- 7. Synthesize** Consider your own knowledge of the horror genre. Which of Russell’s proposed categories do you consider the most useful for gaining new understanding about these stories? Explain your answer by referring to horror stories with which you’re familiar.

PERFORMANCE TASK



Speaking Activity: Discussion Use the characteristics of the horror genre described in the essay to categorize the horror stories you have read and the horror films you have seen.

- Work with a small group to create a list of stories and films.
- Review the characters, setting, events, structure, and organization of the stories and films.
- Decide how to categorize the stories and films. What creates the suspense in each one? Do they have similar themes or settings? Are the sources of horror alike in some way?
- Be prepared to explain your categories as you share your final list with the class or a small group.

Critical Vocabulary

ELA L.8.4b
ELD PI.8.6, PI.8.12

intensify justify parallel quest

1. Which Vocabulary word goes with *similar*? Why?
2. Which Vocabulary word goes with *strengthen*? Why?
3. Which Vocabulary word goes with *search*? Why?
4. Which Vocabulary word goes with *defend*? Why?

Vocabulary Strategy: Using Suffixes

A **suffix** is a word part that is added to the end of a word. The suffix *-ied* is added to verbs that end in the letter *-y* and are preceded by a consonant. Adding *-ied* to such verbs changes the verb from the present to the past tense.



For example, to change a verb like *identify* to the past tense, you drop the *-y* and add *-ied*. Look at the sentences from "What Is the Horror Genre?" that show how the author uses the verbs *intensify* and *justify* in the past tense.

But that suspense is intensified by our knowledge of the genre.

Of course, Susan's fears are justified.

In the case of both *justify* and *intensify*, the author dropped the *-y* and added *-ied* to show the past tense.

Practice and Apply Read the sentences. Change the verbs in parentheses to the past tense by adding the suffix *-ied*.

1. In the horror story, the main character (rely) on her brother for help.
2. She was (mystify) when her calls to him were not answered.
3. She (hurry) to check that all her house doors were securely locked.
4. She was (petrify) when she thought she saw someone looking in the window.
5. Now she was (worry) that her brother would not show up to help her.

Language Conventions: Using Commas

A writer's use of punctuation not only helps readers understand the writer's message, but also signals how the writer wants the text to be read. In your writing, you can use commas to signal a break or a pause to the reader. When you write, read your sentences out loud, noticing where you pause. The parts where you pause probably need to be punctuated by a comma. Look at these examples from "What Is the Horror Genre?"

So, she does end up dead in the basement, a victim of the vampire.

This type of hesitation, when we almost believe, falls into the general category of the "fantastic."

Read the two sentences out loud, noticing where you pause. The commas after "So" and "basement" in the first sentence signal the reader to pause. The commas before and after "when we almost believe" do the same thing. They also signal a break in thought and make the sentence easier to understand. Additional examples are shown in the following chart.

Purpose of Comma	Example
to signal a break in thought	"Often horror has its greatest effect on us because we almost believe, or believe while we are reading the book or watching the film, that the events are possible."
to signal the reader to pause	"If a genre has traditional monsters, it also has traditional settings."

Practice and Apply These sentences include words, phrases, and clauses that need to be punctuated with commas. Rewrite the sentences, inserting the needed punctuation. If you get stuck, try reading the sentence out loud.

1. Yes I absolutely love horror stories.
2. You know of course that the main purpose of horror stories is to inspire fear and dread.
3. If Frankenstein is frightening he is also sympathetic.
4. The long movie was terrifying so much so that several times I just closed my eyes and blocked my ears.
5. Writing a horror story a big dream of mine will take a lot of thought and hard work.