

ELEMENTS OF HORROR

Notes from Noel Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror*

THE ALL-IMPORTANT EMOTION OF HORROR

Reader Identification, Plus

All fiction seeks to get the reader to identify with the characters of the story. In horror fiction, the emotions of the audience are supposed to mirror those of the positive human characters in certain, although not all, respects. "...[T]he appropriate reactions to the monsters in question comprise shuddering, nausea, shrinking, paralysis, screaming and revulsion. ... This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of the horror genre." (p. 18) Here are some common character emotional and physical reactions to the horrific:

- breathlessness
- chills
- cringing
- crying
- dry mouth
- frozenness
- hair bristling
- heightened alertness
- increased respiration
- involuntary screaming
- momentary arrest
- muscular contractions (tensing)
- nausea
- paralysis
- racing heart
- recoiling
- shrinking
- shuddering
- sweating
- tingling (spine-tingling)
- trembling
- urinate
- weak-kneed

The Horrific Monster. There is a broader scope of fiction that seeks to induce *fear* in the reader. But "...the character's emotional reaction to the monstrous in *horror* stories is not merely a matter of fear.... Rather, *threat* is compounded with *revulsion, nausea, and disgust*." "...[T]he tendency in horror novels and stories [is] to describe monsters in terms of and to associate them with filth, decay, deterioration, slime, and so on." The monster is not only *lethal*, but also *disgusting*." (p. 22)

1. **Threatening**

The monster in horror fiction must be *threatening*—physically, psychologically, socially, morally, spiritually—or all of the above.

2. **Impure**

The horror monster must also be *impure*. What do we consider impure? Anything that violates the generally accepted schemes of cultural categorization. We consider impure that which is categorically contradictory:

- The categorically ambiguous: amphibians (they both swim and hop, can exist both in water and out of water)
- Incomplete representatives of their class: rotting things, things not fully formed, things with parts missing
- Formless things: dirt, blobs, fog

Examples:

Fusion – Disparate entities fused into one stable being. The spider-like erector-set creature with the bald, one-eyed doll's head in *Toy Story*.

Fission – Disparate entities that one being changes into and back from at different times (or a multiple figure being whose identities are opposite). Werewolves and other shape-shifters. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Magnification – Enlargement. Giant people, giant sharks, giant animals.

Massification – Hordes. Unnaturally large numbers of something dangerous or relatively harmless. Jellyfish in *Sphere*. Rats. Locusts. Snakes. Spiders in *Arachnophobia*. Zombies. Vampires in *I Am Legend*.

Metonymy – Something not revolting in itself associated with things that are. Dracula and rats and wolves.

The monster must be regarded as both: 1) threatening, *and* 2) impure. If only threatening, then the emotion is *fear*. If only impure, the emotion is *disgust*. But, if both, the emotion is *horror*. (p. 28)

Being Horrified. (p. 27) As a reader, I'm in an abnormal state of physically felt emotional agitation (shuddering, tingling, rapid heartbeat, etc.) caused by:

1. a) The thought that the monster is a *possible being*,
b) The monster has the property of being *threatening* in the ways portrayed in the fiction,
c) The monster has the property of being *impure*, where:
2. Such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid being *touched* by the monster.

THE STRUCTURE OF HORROR—PLOTING

General Theme and Structure

Most horror fiction represents the *process of discovery*. There are two basic plots: the complex discovery plot and the over-reacher plot.

The point of the horror genre is to exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, in principle, unknown and unknowable.

The Complex Discovery Plot

Theme. Knowledge, discovery of the unknown. (p. 127). Most horror fiction represents the *process of discovery*. (So does most disaster fiction, but without the impure monster.)

The Complex Discovery Plot.

1. Onset of horrific event (evidence).
2. Discovery of its cause.
3. Confirmation of its cause.
4. Confrontation, leading to victory or defeat.

You can have the above elements presented in any combination, but they must follow 1 to 4 order: 1,4; 2, 3; 2, 4; 3, 4; 1; 2; 3; 4. You can start in *medias res* and flash back, but the order is the same. You can only leave out the discovery step when it's already known or assumed that the monster exists.

The Discovery Plot.

1. Onset of the horrific event (evidence).
2. Discovery of its cause.
3. Confrontation, leading to victory or defeat.

The Confirmation Plot.

1. Onset of horrific event (evidence).
2. Discovery of its cause.
3. Confirmation of its cause.

The Over-Reacher Plot

(pp. 118-120) The central character is a mad scientist or necromancer in search of forbidden knowledge—scientific, magical, or occult. This discovered knowledge is tested by an experiment or incantation of evil forces.

Theme. There is some knowledge better left undiscovered. Stages:

1. Preparation for the experiment:
 - **Practical:** Experimenter must secure the materials or ingredients required for the experiment.
 - **Philosophical:** Experimenter will provide both an explanation and justification for the experiment. Experimenter often has a helper (Igor) to whom he can explain how the experiment is supposed to work and what its significance (moral, scientific, ideological, metaphysical, etc.) is supposed to be.
 - Preceded or interspersed with setting, local, other characters who may be close to the experimenter to establish his personal, family, and love relationships. They also may provide resistance to the experiment. They're also there to be put in danger, to generate suspense.
2. The experiment is conducted:
 - It may be preceded by several failed attempts.
 - The experiment succeeds, but goes awry. It unleashes dangerous, uncontrollable forces which usually destroy those nearest and dearest to the experimenter.
 - It is the creation's destruction that causes the experimenter to recant and come to his senses, and commits him to destroying it. Some, however, don't recant.
3. Confrontation:
 - Failed attempts, followed by
 - An all-or-nothing battle with a climax.

Differences Between the Discovery Plot and the Over-Reacher Plot

They both have to do with knowing the unknown. However, the discovery plot centers on the belief that denying the unknown is a dire mistake, while the over-reacher plot deals with some things are better left unknown.

These Plots Can Be Mixed. Plots of discovery or over-reacher can be mixed with subplots of the other type. There are endless combinations.

HORROR QUESTIONS

Working title:

YOUR MONSTER IN GENERAL

[T]he tendency in horror novels and stories [is] to describe monsters in terms of and to associate them with filth, decay, deterioration, slime, and so on. The monster must be *lethal* and *disgusting*.”

1. **Threatening**—Describe how the monster is *threatening*:

Physically:

Psychologically:

Socially:

Morally:

Spiritually:

2. **Impure**—Describe how the monster is *impure*:

Categorically ambiguous?

Incomplete representative of its class?

Formless?

OTHER TECHNIQUES

List which and how any of the following techniques will be used.

Fusion – Disparate entities fused into one stable being.

Fission – Disparate entities that one being changes into and back from at different times (or a multiple figure being whose identities are opposite).

Magnification – Enlargement.

Massification – Hordes of something dangerous or relatively harmless.

Metonymy – Something not revolting in itself associated with things that are.

BEING HORRIFIED

Put your readers in an abnormal state of physically felt emotional agitation (shuddering, tingling, rapid heartbeat, etc.).

1. a) How is the monster a *possible being*?

- b) How is the monster *threatening*?

- c) How is the monster *impure*?

2. Such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid being *touched* by the monster. What are the physical/emotional reactions to the monster?

THE STRUCTURE OF HORROR—PLOTING

What plot is going to be used (complex discovery, over-reacher, etc.)?

The Complex Discovery Plot

Theme. Knowledge, discovery of the unknown. The *process of discovery*.

1. Onset of horrific event (evidence).
2. Discovery of its cause.
3. Confirmation of its cause.
4. Confrontation, leading to victory or defeat.

The Over-Reacher Plot

The central character is a mad scientist or necromancer in search of forbidden knowledge—scientific, magical, or occult. This discovered knowledge is tested by an experiment or incantation of evil forces.

Theme. There is some knowledge better left undiscovered.

1. Preparation for the experiment:

Practical:

Philosophical:

Setting and characters:

2. The experiment is conducted:

Failed attempts:

How does the experiment succeed?

How does it go awry?

How does it unleash dangerous, uncontrollable forces which usually destroy those nearest and dearest to the experimenter?

What is the destruction the experiment causes?

Does this destruction make the experimenter recant, come to his senses, and commit him to destroying it? Or does he not recant?

3. Confrontation:

Failed attempts:

All-or-nothing battle with a climax:

Horror Questions