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"A Short History of an Overlooked Genre: How and Why Horror can be an Effective Tool in a Classroom and for Creating Social Change"

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My First Kiss

"You're kind of a weird guy, right?" was one of the first things I was asked when proposing the idea of writing a thesis based on the horror genre, and to tell the truth, I am. As a teenager, while my peers would enjoy a Sunday night football game, I found comfort in watching masked killers terrorize and ultimately eviscerate teen camp counselors. There's a strange connection between fear and comfort, one that doesn't always make sense. For me that connection was strong, stronger than the average person who may take in a scary movie on October 31st.

In his novel *Screaming for Pleasure: How Horror Makes You Happy and Healthy,* S.A. Bradley describes the first experience a person has with horror as a "First Kiss" (2018). A person's first experience with horror often has them anxious, with butterflies in their stomach; they experience these feelings in an exciting way, in a way that makes them feel very much alive, similar to a first kiss, I'll describe these feelings in greater detail later as we discuss the philosophy of horror, and why people tend to like things targeted to making them feel stereotypically "negative" emotions. My first kiss with horror came about in an abnormal way. As a kid, Halloween was the family favorite holiday. Every year my family went all out, even so far as to fully convert our garage into a haunted house every year for the holiday. This love for the holiday eventually turned into a love for all things macabre. We'd spend enough time in the Halloween store that the staff would know our names and would cut us deals under the table for large decorations. By the time I was a pre-teen, I had gotten curious about where the various monsters that lived in our garage had originated.

I was 13 years old when I had my first kiss with a horror film. My neighbors had all gathered in the basement of our family home to watch *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). I

distinctly remember the warnings that my mother was giving me prior to putting the DVD in the tray, "I remember when I saw this movie for the first time, I was so scared, I couldn't sleep for weeks without thinking that Freddy was coming to get me." It was these warnings that caused the eager anxiety for the movie to start. Clearly, the film had not aged super well, as I was left laughing at how poor some of the effects held up by today's (or 2013's) standards. I remember distinctly one of the last shots of the film shows Freddy crashing his finger knife wielding hand through the window of a front door, and pulling the main character's mother in through the window by the throat. While this may sound terrifying, on the bluray disk it was clear when they switched out the actress, Ronee Blakley, for a inflatable sex doll in a wig to do the stunt. I know that sounds ridiculous… It's because it is.

After my experience with Freddy Krueger, I felt invincible. Not only had I survived a horror film, but I wasn't even scared. If that was enough to keep my mother awake for weeks, I'd be fine to watch anything. Little did I know, but I was experiencing something that is common in the realm of horror, the idea that the safety net between screen and reality allows for individuals to enjoy the horrifying, without taking it too seriously (Batinaki 2012). So naturally, the next movie we watched one week later was the newly released film that was supposedly based on true events, *The Conjuring* (2013). *The Conjuring* was my first tango with a film that legitimately had me in fear. For some, this may have been the moment of swearing off the horror genre, but as said before, I'm a weird guy, so I doubled down. From that point forward, horror films went from being a fun treat, to becoming a full hobby. I began to watch every scary movie I could get my hands on, and that has continued to this day.

Expanding My Horizons

Additionally, I became interested in horror literature. The first story that really awakened that interest was *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allen Poe. The individual storyteller who is revealed to be an unreliable narrator somehow struck a chord with me. At that point in time, I was taught to trust the person telling the story, but this sense of betrayal and mistrust ended up opening a door that I wasn't even aware existed. That story gave me such a cathartic and visceral reaction, I completely began to rethink my point of view on reading and literature. I think this was the moment that I was able to piece together the idea that novelizations are just semantically recorded storytelling pieces. Being a kid who spent most of his time in the theatre performing, I had developed a love for storytelling, and scary stories were always some of the best ones to tell. My grandparents had shared with me a book of Michigan based urban legends when I was a kid; I swear I read it cover to cover in one night. These stories that had pits to Hell and creatures that hide in the shadows were beyond fascinating, but rather so enthralling that it became a mission of mine to pass the stories on. To this day I still tell people about the "melon-heads of Saugatuck" (Godfrey, 2006). I once again began to rethink the genre as a whole after experiencing a short story "Stone Animals" by Kelly Link. This experience allowed me to see a deeper meaning to horror media and fully develop ideas for how to analyze horror as a stronger medium than just a piece of mindless entertainment.

Tying it All Together

Now a question one might ask is, how do these melon-heads, *The Tell-Tale Heart,* and *The Conjuring* all connect to one another. The clear surface level answer is through horror as a genre. This seems simple enough; we might as well pack up our things and head home, but in reality there's another connection point that is stronger and has specific practical uses. The ability

to create a piece of literature, film, theatre, or even a campfire story that can elicit an emotional response from those in the audience is a tool that can be powerful.

Horror is a genre that has a lot of backstory and nuance. Scholars have written entire books on just subgenres within horror, but I feel it necessary to specifically describe a few key ideas, as well as a few of my own definitions before we venture any further.

Defining Horror

First and foremost, my general definition of horror may be different than those created by others. Many people have a tendency to separate "horror" from "thriller" which to me begs the question of what a thriller even is. In my mind horror is an umbrella term encompassing all things macabre and meant to cause fright. Horror is visceral and meant to be cathartic, yet horror doesn't need to seclude itself into one specific shape. It is an ever-changing genre, creating new subgenres as new materials come to fruition. For example, a widely recognized subgenre of horror, "torture porn" didn't really exist until the film *Saw* was released in 2004. That film invented a new subgenre that is widely seen in the realm of horror today, but at the time it was the only film to belong to that subgenre.

With all of this in mind, some horror is hard to recognize because it is commonly not regarded as such. An example of this phenomenon is the inclusion of the 1979 sci-fi horror masterpiece *Alien* in much discourse regarding the genre of horror, along with Steven Spielberg's original summer blockbuster, *Jaws* (1975) being considered a modern "creature feature" (another horror subgenre), but the exclusion of 1993's *Jurassic Park* in the discourse of the genre. *Jurassic Park* is a film in which people are trapped in a terrible situation, where their lives are threatened by monsters that are killing those around them. The scene where the velociraptors are in the kitchen hunting down the two children, in my opinion, is one of the most nerve wracking

scenes ever put to film. I say all of this as a way of saying, by my definition of horror, materials like *Jurassic Park* are absolutely considered to be a part of the horror genre.

Jurassic Park simply serves as one example of a material that is commonly left out of discussions as a horror film, but one that I would consider to fit under the umbrella of horror. Having this understanding of how I elaborate what is and is not considered horror, may give a better understanding of later concepts, when I discuss the values of horror, and especially its usage in the classroom.

I also genuinely believe that anybody can find something under the umbrella of horror that they enjoy, which is in part one of the reasons why I have such a broad idea of what classifies as horror. I recently had a discussion with a mentor of mine, where she revealed to me that she doesn't like horror, because "it's all just blood and guts, which is just gross." I asked her a few questions about what it was that she didn't like, just to try to think of a movie I thought she might enjoy. After some thinking, she revealed to me that a movie she really enjoyed was M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* "but [she] always considered it more of a thriller, than a horror movie."   This really struck a chord with me, because *The Sixth Sense* is a movie that is all about shocking the audience with creepy and supernatural experiences, a movie that would widely be considered a horror film. Her imagined limitation of what fits into the horror genre being only films with masked killers murdering teens and blood shooting from severed limbs was a roadblock of her enjoying the genre, and after further conversation, I was able to give her a list of media that I thought she would genuinely enjoy.

Opening up the spectrum of horror allows for deeper enjoyment and avoidance of the classic line "I don't like horror because I think it's gross." A more open genre allows for further

enjoyment, as well as more possibilities for the pioneers who create new and meaningful horror related materials.

Keeping this definition in mind, I also find it incredibly important to describe the history of horror, both in terms of what it is, as well as how the general public has perceived horror in the past.

Rob Zombie, famed metal musician and horror filmmaker was quoted in 2019 saying, "Both [metal and horror] are treated like they're just one step above pornography," (Kaufman, 2019). Zombie's sentiment in this quote is a very direct way of concluding that the public perception of horror has largely been that it is an entertaining genre, but it holds no literary merit. I sincerely agree with Zombie's observation, and disagree with this perception. The history of horror, especially horror literature, to me holds the evidence needed to dispel this myth from the public.

Historical Context of Horror

Horror literature can be traced back ages, and when considering the idea of storytelling and urban legends, scary stories have been told since essentially the dawn of time. Horror really started gaining traction via the works of William Shakespeare. The public fear of the supernatural played a massive part in Shakespeare's creation of many of his works, perhaps most notably *Macbeth,* with the inclusion of the witches. Another key moment was in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when the ghost of Hamlet's father disappears from the stage in an illusion that crowds were dumbstruck by, the revolutionary trap door. These moments sparked the minds of many, which can be seen through the years as the idea of horror starts to become more and more relevant.

Horror started to boom in the 1800's with the creation of the gothic novel. Key works from this period are regularly studied today including, but not limited to, Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein,* and the works of Edgar Allen Poe. Following these works, came the production of the Penny Dreadful, perhaps the most well known of which being *The String of Pearls*, released as a serial between the years of 1846 and 1847. This story has been adapted numerous times on film and possibly most notably for the stage in a musical by the late theatre legend Stephen Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. By the time the late 1800's rolled around more Victorian forms of literature started to pop up, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

While these works are widely recognized, as we move beyond them we venture into a territory that I believe is underrecognized. In the early 1900's the usage of film came to fruition, and horror was an immediate genre that came with the medium. Silent films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* and *Nosferatu* shocked audiences with their dark tones and imagery. These dark tones shifted through the late 20's and early 30's as Universal created their collection of classic monsters (Dracula, Frankenstein, The Wolf Man, The Invisible Man, The Mummy, The Phantom of the Opera, The Bride of Frankenstein, and The Creature from the Black Lagoon) most of which were based on classic pieces of literature. These films created a shift in horror filmography to a more campy, and less menacing form of monster. This shift would continue to hold its place, bleeding all the way into the 1950's; the era of creature features, and zany science fiction based horror. These, along with Vincent Price's gimmicky horror films, I believe are the first forms of horror that gave horror the reputation of not having the merit of being meaningful materials.

While this form of film was becoming popular, literature still was being made. Some works that were notable for the time included Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" as well as her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, which would later become a number one watched TV mini-series on Netflix, praised for its storytelling. *The Haunting of Hill House* Netflix series, when Googled, is actually considered first and foremost a drama series, and is secondarily labeled as horror. Frankly, I believe the only reason for this is because of the negative perceptions of horror, and by labeling the series as drama, the ideas of story and literary merit are launched forward.

One key film marked the beginning of the modern era of horror, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho.* This film shifted the tone of horror from campy, to genuine terror. The film shocked audiences so much, and was so experimental that theaters advertised once the film started, there would be no late admittance into the theater. *Psycho* was the spark that led to the next generation of horror filmography, the generation that is probably most familiar to audiences today.

From the 70's forward, horror films have created and followed a methodology. The slasher film came to fruition in the late 70's and they are still on occasion being made today, sometimes as direct sequels such as David Gordon Green's *Halloween Kills*, an immediate sequel to one of the original slasher films John Carpenter's 1978 film, *Halloween.* Other subgenres began to break the mold of the standard horror flick. Psychological horror, science fiction horror, possession films, found footage films, and horror comedies are just a handful of these subgenres, all of which belong under the umbrella of horror.

During this same time, in literature, one specific individual exploded in popularity, becoming the aptly named "King of Horror." Stephen King pioneered the way of new and innovative scary stories, many of which have been put to film. His writing has been consistent

and imaginative for nearly a half century, with his first novel *Carrie* breaking barriers, and creating new narratives.

In the modern era of horror film and literature (especially post 2010) there has been a surge of horror created with the intention of honoring social justice and addressing important topics that are applicable to the real world. While horror has always had a voice, and a motive, many modern materials are using that voice as a way to bring about positive change.

Knowing a little bit of the history of horror, and the purpose of some modern pieces allows for us to create a discourse of the positive impact horror can have on society as a whole, and on a more micro level, how these materials can be used to promote positivity, motivation, and community building with students.

The latter half of this thesis will focus on the idea of using horror as a tool for positive change, and specifically addressing how it can be used in the classroom, with ideas for lessons that will not only align with student learning objectives, but create a classroom environment that leans on ideas of inquiry, equity, welcomeness, and action. The next several sections focus on representation, specifically highlighting positive and negative representation for different cultural groups. Following that, I will specifically make the argument for including horror in the classroom because horror provokes growing anxieties and a sense of thrill, thus provoking interest and motivation.

Horror as a Tool for Positive Change: Social Justice, Politics, and Real World Issues

Horror is an interesting genre when it comes to creating literary materials that are critical. It has an overall complicated history with stereotypes that contributed to racism, sexism, homophobia and many more systemic issues that led to large identity groups being

misrepresented and oppressed in literature and on screen; yet a cultural shift has occurred, especially in recent years for horror to become a welcoming community and actively try to disprove and destroy these negative stereotypes that the genre at one point enforced.

A key to ensuring that horror is used in a way that is critically relevant, is to ensure that the materials that are presented represent both the pitfalls of horror and address previous stereotypes and harmful norms that were created, as well as progressive, and inclusive modern media that has worked to change the minds of those who indulge these materials. Therefore, this section will be used to address some major stereotypes, their history, and materials that are used to disprove those.

Another key way that horror has impacted the world lately is through bringing attention to important real world issues, and opening conversations through art, a concept that has existed in our culture for a very long time, but is commonly viewed as only being effective when observing art that is considered "high brow." The horror genre has shown that all art forms can bring that same attention to these incredibly important topics.

Sexism and Horror: Final Girls and Beefy Dudes

One of the most well known texts that looks at horror through a critical lens is Carol L. Clover's "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film." This text became the anchor for studies on how horror tropes that have specifically masculine, or feminine traits and how it may subconsciously feed into sexist ideologies.

Clover calls into question the method of choice for most on-screen killers, (of which most are predominantly male or male presenting) and focuses on the fact that most attacks are done with some sort of blade. A penetrative and deeply personal force in which the killer can

make a physically close connection with the victim before inevitably killing them. Overall, the amount that a viewer will see a killer in a horror film use a firearm is slim to none, because these quick and non-methodical methods of murder do not create that bond of terror between killer and victim. This same phenomenon applies to real life killers, for example, serial killer Edmund Kemper, who famously murdered his mother using a hammer, before eventually slashing her throat with a knife and decapitating her was quoted saying, "I remember there was actually a sexual thrill. You hear that little pop and pull their heads off and hold their heads up by the hair. Whipping their heads off, their bodies sitting there. That'd get me off" (Paoletti, 2021).

Clover's text was the first to coin the term "final girl," a stereotype usually found in horror films, in which after the ever-looming monster has made victims out of the majority of the cast, one woman is left to have a final showdown, inevitably defeating the monster (Clover, 1992). Usually, these final girls will find a way to outsmart the masculine, and what I like to call beefy villains. The third act of the brainy final girl vs. the brawny villain is usually concluded with the brains overpowering brawn in a one v. one showdown. This ideology feeds into negative stereotypes of women because they "cannot" be strong, as well as negative stereotypes of men, because they "cannot" be smart.

Where there are stereotypes, there are notable exceptions. In the case of male identifying killers, some exceptions include Carrie White in Stephen King's *Carrie,* and Annie Wilkes in King's *Misery*. King has had several non-traditional killers over the years, but these two are standouts of women being the big bads. Although these two are strong characters, it is worth mentioning that both characters do not get their strength naturally, but rather Annie has her power over her victim by taking advantage of him being injured upon arrival at her home, and

slashing at his legs with an axe, rendering him immobile. Carrie has her powers supernaturally gifted to her through ESP, so while strong enough to take down an entire school of teenage prom-goers, her actual strength could be argued to be mentally based, thus once more feeding into the brainy female stereotype.

One key outlier of this stereotype is the film *Happy Death Day* by director Christopher Landon, in which the killer, who is presumed to be male the entire movie, is revealed in a twist to be the lead's roommate a college aged, female that had, while concealed by a mask, demonstrated both excessive strength and brains to try to defeat the final girl, Tree. Oddly enough, the film *Freaky* by the same director fell into the pitfall that King's Carrie had fallen into, where a female villain could not demonstrate physical strength, but was forced to kill using their brains instead. I mention *Freaky* specifically because it is a perfect modern film to lead into our next topic.

Trans Characters in Horror

Transgender representation in horror has been a category that has infamously been problematic. There are a number of films that have referenced the idea of being trans, but often these films have looked at the idea of being trans with a very deficit mindset.

An early example of a film that touches briefly on the idea of being trans is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Funnily enough it's actually stated in the film that Norman Bates is *not* trans, but rather is embodying his mother, yet there is still this connection that audiences had of Norman being a representation of a trans character. This connection led to a mindset that had a lot of negative connotations, and still does to this day.

"We aren't much further away from where we were in 1961," said Joan Ford, a trans television writer when asked about trans representation in horror, "Cis women are the victims in all of these, but trans women are always the monsters." Ford went on to address several characters in mainstream horror that have been problematic, including Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* and Angela Baker in *Sleepaway Camp*. The latter of which uses Angela as a big reveal moment, where upon discovering that she was the murderer all along, Ronnie sees Angela naked, clutching the decapitated head of a camper. He utters the line, "Oh my God, she's a boy." Honestly, an odd first thought after finding one of your campers brutally murdered.

It's moments like the end of *Sleepaway Camp* that led Ford to say, "Every [Horror] movie uses [Trans representation] as a holy shit moment." Another interesting phenomenon that has occurred with trans representation in horror, is that in the majority of horror films where there is a trans character, or representation of the trans community, it is the villain who is trans. "Horror is unique in that trans characters are often if not always, the villain and the evil of the characters in the movie depend on the characters' transness," said Chelsea Rebecca, a popular horror podcaster and researcher.

"Cis women are the victims in all of these, but trans women are always the monsters," said Ford. These films, while not always explicitly featuring characters that are trans, have characters that can be related to the trans community. These characters can influence the perceptions that the public has of trans people, whether they are intentional or not. "Think about how these movies are influencing your own perceptions of the trans community," said Ford, "You absorb these prejudices and preconceived notions when you're not considering what you're watching."

When it comes down to it, there isn't much of a precedent set for positive representation of trans characters in horror. One questionable character that has often been debated for the meaningfulness of their portrayal is the self proclaimed "Sweet Transvestite" Dr. Frank-N-Furter from Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This character is flawed in several ways, having been played by a cisgender White man, Tim Curry, and using outdated language like the word "transvestite," as well as the perceptions of Frank to be an odd character, partially created for shock value can be very problematic. With all of that being said, it's important to note that *Rocky Horror* has been overwhelmingly accepted and embraced by the LGBT community. Now a cult film, *Rocky Horror*'s legacy is that regarding the ability to express yourself for who you are, celebrate pride, and love who you want to love. Therefore, while not a perfect example of representation, Frank set a building block to give some people, like Joan Ford, the ability to see somebody who they could relate to on the screen. It is an important step to recognize *both* the positive and negative consequences of representation, to further understand what authors and filmmakers can do to create media with more positive representation overall.

Now, to come back full circle, we can recognize the film *Freaky* once again, a film that quite literally has a man trapped in a woman's body, and a woman trapped in a man's. This topic is often played for laughs (with Vince Vaughn's portrayal of Millie not knowing her own brute strength after transferring into his body) but there is a deeper subtext of a scene in which Millie (in Vince Vaughn's body) and Booker are having a conversation in the back of a car, and finally express their love for one another. This scene sets a serious and meaningful tone, and while it could've been played for laughs, it allows for both of them to express their feelings for one

another, and for Millie to admit that she would be more comfortable in her own (female) body. The couple shares a kiss, and makes it a goal to be together if they survive the night.

Queer Representation in Horror

"You can't [kill me] there's rules! I'm gay!" exclaims Robbie in *Scream 4* shortly before being killed. Robbie was referring to a stereotype that has come to be a common understanding in the horror film industry; the gay character always survives the movie. This stereotype, while being commonly taken as fact, actually has very few cases where it shows up in horror films.

One example that turned this supposed stereotype on its head was Andrés Muschietti's *It Chapter 2*. The opening scene quickly caused controversy after depicting an apparent gay couple leaving the county fair, and shortly after becoming victims of a hate crime. They are both badly beaten before one of the men is thrown from a bridge and caught in the current of a river. He is seemingly saved by Pennywise the Dancing Clown, and is out of the river for just long enough for his significant other to see the clown take a massive bite out of his side. Further in the film, Pennywise the Dancing (and apparently homophobic) Clown, taunts Richie about knowing that he is in love with his best friend Eddie, later Eddie is killed by the clown, causing a lot of emotional trauma for Richie.

In the long run, representation for the LGBTQ+ community has been largely absent in the horror genre, but that doesn't mean that films haven't existed that have been queer-coded. "This movie is the gayest thing, and we did *Xanadu* last month," said a drag queen prior to a screening of Jack Sholder's *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge. Nightmare 2* is a film that has been notorious for featuring a queer coded main character, as played by Mark Patton. The role of Jesse Walsh was supposed to launch Patton's career, but in the long run

ended up tanking it. He had such a hard time finding work after the release, because of the systemic homophobia within Hollywood, and faced so much backlash by media and reviewers, that he ended up living a life of seclusion for years. It was only recently that the film was reclaimed by the gay community and Patton is now celebrated for his portrayal of the character. *Scream Queen: My Nightmare on Elm Street* addresses Patton's experience and the controversy behind the film.

Having highlighted some of the negative real world impacts the horror genre has had, there have also been moments of positive representation in some media. One such example would be the film *Halloween Kills* by director David Gordon Green, which features a segment with a gay couple. This couple is not shown in a light that targets homophobia, nor do they get special treatment when eventually encountering Michael Myers. They are portrayed in a way that is normal. They're just two guys that love each other that happened to buy Michael's childhood home, ultimately resulting in the Shape brutally killing them (like he does everybody else).

Black Representation in Horror

A common trope of horror that has seemingly became a standard over the past few decades is that "the Black character always dies first," and while this is not always the case, in fact not usually the case, it is a trope that was born based on a specific set of horror films and their impact on the creation of horror characters.

Horror has always had a messy relationship with incorporating the Black experience into their films. Looking back to early horror films often monsters were based on racially charged

stereotypes, such as the giant ape in *King Kong* a monster created with undertones that play on the fear White people had observerd of Black men having sexual relations with White women. If horror was not creating devious creatures to take the form of radicalized and dehumanized Black men, it had gone in another direction, focusing on exploitation and tokenization.

The Blacksploitation phase (especially prevalent in the 1970's) was used as a way to create horror films for Black audiences. Unfortunately, these films relied heavily on stereotypes yet, on another hand they provided exposure for Black folks to be on the big screen. This created a paradox of representation in the idea that it was a positive to have Black characters on screen, some characters that are still loved and recognized today, such as Blacula from the 1972 film of the same name.

The other major problem with horror was, and in many ways continues to be the tokenization of including a Black character in the film. Often this tokenization is what led to the stereotype that the Black characters never survive the movie, and these films were responsible for creating trends that can be traced through much of horror history: The "Sacrificial Negro", and the "Magical Negro."

"The Sacrificial Negro is just a character who literally just puts themself in the face of danger and dies in order for the White character to survive," says Ashlee Blackwell in the documentary *Horror Noire*: *A History of Black Horror*. This trope is more common than it may seem at first, with one of the most famous examples being Scatman Cruthers' Dick Halloran in *The Shining* that comes to rescue a young Danny Torrance after sensing that there was something wrong. After following him on his way back to the Overlook Hotel for almost half of the film, Halloran immediately upon arriving is struck down by an axe to the chest. The only

point of his character being to bring the Torrance family a snow cat to escape in, and another

body to add to the list of kills in the film.

"[The Magical Negro] is one of those boxes that Black people get put in… where they

are afforded some mystical wisdom" said Jordan Peele, director and writer of films such as *Get

Out* and *Us* (more on him shortly). This idea sets Black people apart from White people in

another way, making them seem mysterious and have different mischievous motives for their

actions. In this way, this trope once again is dehumanizing Black people by stripping them of

complex emotions. One key character from recent horror media is Alfre Woodard's Evelyn from

2014's *Annabelle*. This character exists in this universe to act as the "Magical Negro" giving

insight of the demonology for Annabelle to the family that owns the doll, before eventually

becoming the "Sacrificial Negro" by literally showing up in the end of the film after not being

on screen for a while and sacrificing her life to make the demon go away.

As much as there has been negative representation in horror film, there has also been

positive representation, especially in more modern filmmaking. One key resource that has been

cited as a major influence for Black horror filmmakers though is George A Romero's *Night of

the Living Dead*. Romero's film features a main character, Duane Jones's Ben, a Black man who

quickly establishes himself as the leader of the group of survivors. After a series of trials and

tribulations, Ben becomes the only survivor of the night, waiting to be rescued. Unfortunately,

in a very bleak conclusion, Ben is mistaken for a zombie and is shot by a group of vigilantes,

grabbed with meat hooks, and burned in a pyre of dead bodies. Ben's character is often regarded

as one of the first Black hero figures seen in the realm of horror film. "When I first saw that, I

couldn't move… You see lynchings, you think of Emmett Till and it's just too much. So you're

left just sitting there going, 'My God, did this just happen?'" said Dr. Robin Means Coleman,

Professor in the Dept. Afroamerican and African Studies of the University of Michigan regarding the shocking ending of the film. Ben is unapologetically a protagonist, and his ending at the hands of some "good ol' boys" is a powerful reflection of the dehumanization of Black Americans, and a statement that motivated Black filmmakers into making even stronger pieces to add to the horror canon.

In the 2010's and 2020's Black horror artists have become more and more prevalent, creating works that are indicative of the Black experience in America. Perhaps the most well known of these artists is Jordan Peele. Peele, known primarily for his comedy sketch show, took a stab at creating a piece of horror with his 2017 film *Get Out*. Peele aimed at capturing the horrors of systemic racism through his film. Making a piece that had no White saviorism, no "Sacraficial Negro", and no dumb characters making poor decisions. "Spoiler alert, there's no good White people in this movie, this White savior trope always pops up, there's always one good White person, I saw this as the opportunity to use this in my favor," said Jordan Peele when addressing the film, "I wanted to make a movie that's answering every disappointed Black person that goes to a theater and watches a White protagonist make dumb decisions. That sense of marginalization, that sense of 'If there were a brother in here that would've never happened, if there was a sister in here she would be out of the house'."

Critical reception to Peele's film was overall quite positive, especially the ending in which the protagonist Chris is able to escape thanks to his friend Rod in the TSA. "To have Rod show up, and save [Chris], that let's you know there will be no Chris being speared by meat hooks, being burned on a pyre, there will be no lynching today; That's the power of Get Out." said Dr. Means Coleman in response to the meaning of the film to the canon of Black horror. With such positive critical reception, Peele was able to continue his filmmaking with his 2019

film *Us*. Unlike *Get Out* however, Peele's focus in this film was creating a relatable and terrifying film first and foremost. He infamously has stated that the casting of Black actors in the leading family was for casual representation, and unlike *Get Out,* he claims that the story being told in *Us* could happen to any family.

Peele, through his works, was able to spark the inspiration of more filmmakers, and has been attributed to inspiring several new works of horror; perhaps most notably, he was listed as a major inspiration for the 2020 Netflix film *His House.*

In terms of literary works of horror from the Black community one of the most major pieces released in the past twenty years is Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*. This novel takes the classic zombie subgenre of horror and puts a spin on it in which the narrative has important themes and allusions to the real life societal structures that we succumb to. Whitehead has been praised for his works, but *Zone One* is perhaps his most form fitting in terms of the horror canon. This work accomplishes both the necessary draw of a zombie novel, filled with action and many twists, but also ties into important topics of the real world in a way that feels authentic, and not heavy handed.

One other piece of media that garnered a great deal of attention was the limited series *Them* that premiered on Amazon prime in 2021. This series follows a Black family in 1953 that moves into a primarily White neighborhood. While using the reality of having neighbors that are unaccepting, and causing trouble to try to psychologically torment the family, the show also dips into elements of the supernatural, specifically having a ghost-like character that haunts the father, a man in blackface, ala Al Jolsen. This show haunts the viewers using imagery that mimics the Jim Crow like propaganda that had become so prevalent in American society during this time period. The imagery of this does what many horror films will do, which is to create an

image so disturbing that it will leave the audience to be constantly reimagining it for days to come. In most horror films this is an effective tool to create a long lasting impression, but in this case the imagery is not only disturbing because of the fear it induces, but also the shame that it induces.

Indigenous/ American Indian Stereotypes in Horror and Reclaiming Stories

One of the most common stereotypes that has been prevalent in the horror canon is the usage of the "Indian Burial Ground (IBG)." This stereotype has found its way into many of the most popular works in the horror genre including, but certainly not limited to, *Poltergeist*, *The Amityville Horror,* and *Pet Sematary.* This stereotype was born and bred in the horror genre, and unlike other stereotypes that have been mentioned thus far, this one is one that came from the genre, and has been used even in recent years, whilst also being a stereotype that has been frequently challenged in recent years.

Joey Clift, a television and film writer, and member of the Calot tribe described during an episode of "The Dead Meat Podcast" that the most harmful thing about this stereotype is that it is the most common stereotype for indigenous peoples in pop culture. "For a lot of people, that's the only Native representation that they get," said Clift when addressing the topic. He went on to talk about the ridiculousness of the "IBG," calling out authors and filmmakers on their lack of awareness of Native tribes and cultures. One major issue that he called attention to was the fact that many of the places that claim to have been built on an "IBG" are actually nowhere near the actual area where tribes were located; for example, the nearest tribe, the Shinnekok tribe was located over fifty miles from the Amityville house that claims to have been built on an "IBG" (Janisse, 2018).

The other major objection to the IBG was that the frequency of its usage, in comparison to the infrequency of positive Native representation, is a major problem. The IBG is a phenomenon that can be referenced in literature or film without providing any source of Native representation whatsoever. Clift refers to this idea, aptly named "Invisible Native Forces" when saying, "Native people are all dead, and they're all haunting these houses. People just assume that we don't exist… It makes us seem of the past, or worse, fictional" (Janisse, 2018). Clift went on to speak about how the IBG ideology feeds off of the idea of separating Native peoples from the White protagonists in these films and literature, or on a deeper level, the primarily White consumers of these horror materials. "Other people have burial grounds. Our ghosts aren't extra spooky because we're Native" (Janisse, 2018) said Clift when referencing the idea of the rift ideological divide that the IBG puts in people's heads, supporting systemic racism against Native peoples.

As with any form of negative representation, there is positive representation to counter it. One example of this comes also in the form of a text that is accessible to children, with Joseph Bruchac's *Skeleton Man*. In this middle reader text, the protagonist is a young girl who is haunted by the stories that her father, a Mohawk man, had told to her. This text is a prime example of a text that not only provides representation to Native people, but also is accessible for people of other cultures to understand the references to Native culture, as they are highlighted and explained throughout the text.

Another prime example of positive representation is Stephen Graham Jones' 2020 novel, *The Only Good Indians.* This text follows multiple people from the Blackfoot nation as they deal with a ghostly presence of their past. This text combines modern supernatural horror with

the culture of the Blackfoot natives, and the material sits in a place based in reality especially

because of Jones' personal experience growing up in the Blackfoot reservation.

Lastly, a great short story by Leslie Marmon Silko called *Tony's Story* opened up a new

idea for me in terms of how to teach horror, but is also fitting for Native representation as it

follows Tony and Leon, two Pueblo natives who are being pursued relentlessly by a state police

officer, which results in psychological horror and a very violent ending. This story explores not

only Native representation by a Native author, but also real world societal problems (such as

police brutality) that are meaningful to the world that we live in today.

The Real World is Scary: Modern Topics and Social Change in Horror

Tony's Story serves as a perfect springboard for one of the most important ideologies that

are implemented within the horror canon today. As the title of this thesis suggests, horror is not

just a type of entertainment, but can serve as a tool for creating positive social change. Horror

has historically had significant subtextual meaning, and modern horror has taken this to a new

level, focusing on imbedding social issues throughout film and literature through allegorical

usage, as well as symbolically in multiple ways.

One of perhaps the most important social problems that are commonly addressed in

horror are the lack of resources and systemic issues regarding the national crisis of mental health.

One film that addresses this head on is *The Babadook,* a film which serves as an allegory for

grief. The entire film, while on the surface serves as a supernatural horror film, below the surface

is a film that addresses the mental health of a family in mourning after the loss of the patriarch

of their family.

Another example of a cause that is commonly addressed through the lens of horror is climate change. One example of this is Jeff Vandermeer's book that was subsequently adapted to film, *Annihilation*. In both the text and the film, a section of the United States is overtaken by a mysterious force that causes overgrowth and the land to slowly become taken over with new biology based lifeforms. This story is left pretty ambiguous when it comes to the symbols represented in the text. Some may see it as a cautionary tale of the effects of nuclear war, others may see it as a story about the dangers of climate change. Nevertheless, both materials are prescient to the societal issues that we face today.

These examples just skim the surface of the horror canon and the many societal issues that it addresses either head on, or subtextually. Between these isolated social issues, as well as the larger areas of cultural diversity and representation within the realm of horror, it is safe to say that the materials exist for teachers or individual learners to create a meaningful curriculum that allows for students to get a broader cultural awareness or civic awareness as well as contributing to their understanding of a subject area.

Horror as History

One of the best things about the horror genre is that horror materials are created to spike a sense of viscerality and catharsis in the individual who is indulging in the material. Understanding this, it should come as no surprise that horror is typically a tool that uses prescient ideas and scenarios to deliver its mode of storytelling. Understanding *this*, along with the history of horror, as briefly outlined above, can pave the way to making a connection of horror media to the time period that it was created in. Understanding the fears of a population of

people from a certain point in time is a very important and valuable tool to understand the values of that same population.

An example of how horror might fit in with a history class could be the teaching of the 1950's with the imminent threat of nuclear war and the Red scare becoming more and more of a growing anxiety for the American population. Tracking this idea, horror films that were increasingly popular at the time were films that had large creatures invading and destroying our precious American cities. These creatures were often left unexplained, but sometimes were referred as being mutated by nuclear testing, as such in *Them! (1954)* where giant irradiated ants are found in the deserts of New Mexico, and they slowly make their way to terrorize the residential areas of the USA. Another example of this is the classic *Twilight Zone* episode "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" in which tensions rise between neighbors until there is fighting in the streets about who from the neighborhood is or is not to be trusted. The episode itself serves as, in my mind, a perfect springboard into the ideas of McCarthyism, the Red scare, and the fear of communist spread. Of course these are just a few examples of including horror within a history class, but these materials tie so closely into the culture surrounding a time period, that it would not be much of a further step to lay the groundwork for a U.S. history through horror class.

Horror For Students: Why the Classroom?

Horror is a rich and widely untapped mine of materials that would be relevant for teachers.

Understanding horror through the lens of a tool to teach history, along with the lens of teaching critical literacy whilst covering the English standards for the classroom, and prescient social issues are incredibly valuable pieces of evidence to support the idea of bringing it into the

classroom, but one key idea that I haven't touched on yet is the idea of why horror is a valuable tool for students specifically.

To make a connection to the already discussed idea of expanding student relevant critical literacy, the other part for that argument is that these diverse and multicultural stories enhance and enlarge the literary canon of what we consider to be academically relevant for students. The addition of these films or texts allows for students from varying backgrounds, cultures, and identities to see themselves represented in the classroom. This directly connects to the educational theory of identity impacting the motivation of students, in which it is expressly stated that a student's identity, when engaged properly, is the key force that contributes to that students' intrinsic motivation, the widely regarded most powerful form of motivation (Graham, 2018).

A common issue in the schooling system is that the literary canon as we know it today consists primarily of authors that are dead, White, men. While these stories serve a purpose and hold immense literary merit, they do not fully reflect the community that teachers strive to build within their classroom. A common cause of strain, particularly on non-White students is that they feel underrepresented in their classroom, thus feeling a need to suppress their identity when in school (Ormrond, et. al., 2020). Studies have shown that students are more likely to show mastery in a subject area when they are able to relate to the material that is being used for instruction (Arbuthnot, 2009). Keeping this in mind, horror contains the key to relatability, because on one level there is a vast expanse of diverse materials for the usage, but one a separate level horror is a tool for catharsis, in which large audiences feel the same intensity of anxiety within their chest, like Bradley describes with his "first kiss" with horror (2018). Making this pivotal connection to the ability to have critically relevant, diverse horror pieces

that are still accessible to the community at large through the catharsis of this feeling of fear, solves a great issue that has been brewing within the educational community, that the implementation of materials by authors and creators of color would somehow create roadblocks for White students.

Practical Use/ Personal Experience

I have been fortunate enough in the last few months to sneak little bits of horror education into some of my lessons, just to test the waters and see where students stood on this idea. Although I have no hard data, I have some genuine anecdotal evidence that has motivated me to continue my quest with the implementation of horror in the high school classroom.

One such anecdote was after implementing Kelly Link's short story "Stone Animals" into the classroom. This haunted house story is bursting with symbolism and is built with the intention of a growing sense of unease, and does so in a way that grasps the reader and doesn't let go despite the advanced levels of symbolism and hyperreality. In my experience of reading and analyzing this with my 11th grade class, I had never seen the class as engaged. My mentor teacher and myself were surprised to see a student athlete who was not particularly known for the efforts he put into his schoolwork was actively engaged and providing a level of analysis that is beyond that of a high school junior. Through the implementation of a story that grabbed his attention and kept him guessing, we were able to observe his performance go above and beyond that of his everyday efforts that he put into our class.

Another key example that stood out to me was through reading *Tony's Story*. This text was implemented in an English 9 classroom to sit between units on *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Students were at first skeptical of the text, but quickly were able to deduce

themes that had been in their previous text of dehumanization, and took these steps further to introduce a conversation about police brutality, a topic that has been ever prescient in our community, because of its involvement in the story. This connection to the real world piqued the student engagement in my room, and allowed for the students to explore the themes of the text even further, eventually ending up questioning the idea of fate vs. free will. This topic became the primary area that they would focus on when reading *Romeo and Juliet*. In this way, this work of horror allowed for students to get interested in a material that was written by a Native Pueblo author, had current topics that were meaningful to the students, and specifically have the students engage in a work that built upon prior knowledge, leading students directly into the next topic in class. It is widely understood that using prior knowledge and building upon it is a major contributor to a successful education (Donohoo, 2010). Knowing this, having texts that can connect big ideas, like *Tony's Story* did with my own class, is a key to advancing student understanding of a larger concept in class.

Finally, as a future English/ Language Arts teacher, one of my primary goals is to get students to read. To promote literacy, every week in my class I would give a five to ten minute book talk about a book of the week from my recommendations. The first week I did this I recommended *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica. This text explores the fallout of a deadly pandemic, a very prescient issue during these times of COVID-19, and is set in Argentina, Bazterrica's home country. Despite originally being written in Spanish, *Tender is the Flesh* was translated to English in 2020, and after recommending it to my students I was able to witness five different students, three of which were chronic "non-readers" obtain copies of the book and enjoy it. In my mind, just having the ability to have a material that students will enjoy that will promote literacy is a significant goal, but to have that text talk about modern issues and

be written by someone from a culture either different from the students reading it, or in the case of one of my students, that reflects their Argentinian heritage, is icing on the cake.

Overall

In the end, horror as a medium serves a multifaceted purpose, yet through the viscerality of horror stories, their history, and the multicultural materials available, this option should be seen as a door to more engagement in classes, and stronger performance from students. Unfortunately, the entire genre is usually misjudged and overlooked, being seen as lesser than other literary works. The eternal flaw of this mindset is that classic horror has already joined the literary canon. Works like *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, and the works of Edgar Allen Poe are already considered to be of a higher brow than the other works of the same genre. This prejudice is not only unfair, but closes many opportunities for engaging materials for students that hold deep meanings and can promote literacy, meet common standards, and give a deeper understanding of the world that we live in.

Mea Culpa

While this thesis is extensive, it did not hit every mark that I would've liked it to. Through the chaos of intern teaching during a global pandemic, the works presented here commonly found a place to rest on the backburner of my to do list. In the future, I would like to expand this research, both by improving my own literacy and taking in significantly more horror based materials, but also through further research. Each section in this thesis merely is the tip of the iceberg for the greater research to be done. Ideally, I'd be able to write a full thesis level article on each section. In the long run, I ended up settling with creating a document that

would open the conversation, as the work connecting horror to the classroom is frankly sparse.

Another goal for the future would be to get hard data for some ideas that I mentioned here, and

see how horror based classroom techniques may compare to classic English class works when it

comes to student engagement. I would like to see that through, and in the future possibly even

pilot a "Literature and Film through Horror" class, but as of yet, that is a future opportunity just

awaiting to be taken.

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