

外教社原版文学入门丛书

# 恐怖小说

## HORROR FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

Gina Wisker 著

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HORROR FICTION:  
AN INTRODUCTION

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Gina Walker 著

藏书章

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赠书

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# Horror Fiction: An Introduction



GINA WISKER

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## What Is Horror Fiction?

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'I'm giving serious thought to eating your wife.' (Harris, *Hannibal* 226)

So Dr Hannibal Lecter, connoisseur, cannibal, torments Commendatore Pazzi (a 'patsy') with two threats, both of possession, sexual and bodily, just prior to disembowelling and stringing him up from one of Florence's historical seats of religion and art. In one of Michael Arnzen's short stories, the protagonist's young daughter, playing among the plastic balls in the fast food café, suddenly emerges with the first of many human skulls ('Diving In', 2004), tossed as casually as the 'stars' tennis balls' (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* [Act V, Scene 4]). Impossible? Unlikely? Look at the newspapers and the TV headlines. Horror is both an everyday occurrence—terrorism, the cannibal next door, torture—and a way of dramatising our hidden fears and desires through fantasy that takes the everyday that few steps further.

It's in black-jacketed books and lurid movie posters. It's in police reports from murder sites and tearful recollections from battlefields. It's in our nightmares. It's in our secret ambitions. (Barker, *A-Z of Horror* 16)

This chapter establishes the characteristics of the genre of horror fiction, its social, cultural, and fantasy elements. It looks at the appeal of the genre—the entertainment of shock and repulsion, facing up to what we fear, the enjoyment of being terrified, the humour of horror, the need to stake the vampire, shut the coffin, close down the horror and restore order, manage the nightmare, the death, reassure ourselves, however temporarily, that we can indeed



keep out the night, tame and understand the alien and Other, and defy death. It makes a case for its appeal to different readers/audiences, over time. So:

Horror constitutes the limit of reason, sense, consciousness and speech, the very emotion in which the human reaches its limit. Horror is thus ambivalently human. (Botting, *The Gothic* 131)

But is there any common thread of subject matter that connects all these manifestations? Maybe. Perhaps the body and its vulnerability. Perhaps the mind and its brittleness. Perhaps love and its absence. (Barker, *A-Z of Horror* 16)

Clive Barker highlights horror's rich potion of the violent eruptions of the ordinary and those of the nightmare. Horror is located in both the real and the nightmarish imaginary, and an important ingredient in its success is the ability to entertain, terrify, problematize, and provoke politicized, philosophical engaged thought. Important also is its embodying that of which we cannot speak, our deep-seated longings and terrors, and then, once they have been embodied, acted out, they are managed. Order is restored (if only temporarily).

H. P. Lovecraft, an earlier master of horror and expert on the psychology of fear, takes us further into the 'weird' (his term) in his definitions of the ways in which horror of the weird tale homes in on our ancestors' primitive fear of the dark, the unknown, the inexplicable, the uncanny and supernatural. He speaks of:

the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form. Against it are discharged all the shafts of a materialistic sophistication which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of a naively inspired idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to "uplift" the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism. (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 12)

Horror, nurtured in the fears we have of pain and death, and in our dark fears of the unknown, is a taste acquired by those with sufficient imagination to see beyond, beneath, and through what we take for granted as normal and familiar, to the sources of their other

'real', our imaginations and the 'imaginary' of culture, and our psychological, emotional, and intuitive elements of experience.

The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from everyday life. (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 12)

Since 'pain and the menace of death' are more vividly remembered than pleasure, and formalized religion has captured the pleasant, beneficial elements of the unknown, so the 'darker and more maleficent side of cosmic mystery' figures in the tales of folklore and the supernatural, weird tales, and horror, depicting 'peril and evil possibilities' (Lovecraft 14).

## Horror Elements—Appeal in Different Genres

When I was five I saw *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I saw it again about nine times. Kirk Douglas, dashing American sailor, jauntily sings a sea shanty celebrating life at sea while behind him and fully within our gaze emerges a terrifying sea monster. Captain Nemo's submarine, an art deco mechanical sea beast, then a figment of Verne's futuristic imagination, is no monster but an elegant place of escape for Nemo/no one/nameless, who steers a course beneath the sea, meting out justice against his enemies, including illegitimate, materialistic, cruel governments holding people in slavery. Undersea, the submarine is grand, embellished, and Gothic in its location and splendour, and the role of Nemo and his sub is dark but moral, exposing the steamy underside of politics and power. This is the politicized side of Gothic horror. The other monster of the deep, the gigantic octopus that battles with the sub, its motives without human intellect or justice, its aim pure destruction (to eat?), is the unknown; emerging from one of the two truly unknown Gothic places—down there (the sea floor) as opposed to up and out there (space)—it revives our terror of the Other. Both the sub and the octopus are the predecessors of the monster shark in Peter Benchley/Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*; Mother, the pod-laying, body-invading bug-based alien in the *Alien* films; and the medusa/hydra, toothed, snaky terror that devours unwitting passengers, looters,

ship breakers, and hapless crew in *Deep Rising* (1998). And this Jules Verne classic, not usually defined as horror, launches us into most of horror's categories, aims, intentions, effects, successes, formulae, and forms.

Horror is pretty much everywhere. Horror is entertaining and educational. Horror is contradictory, paradoxical; it combines opposites, destabilises, and challenges, but often does so in order to restore order, however order is culturally constituted at that particular time and place. It is social, cultural, political, psychological, emotional, spiritual, supernatural, natural, and part of the human condition:

Horror constitutes the limit of reason, sense, consciousness and speech, the very emotion in which the human reaches its limit. Horror is thus ambivalently human. (Botting, *The Gothic*, 131)

Clive Barker finds it in the daily monstrousness of politics, terror, violence, Fascism, murder, rape, and most particularly in the seemingly safest places:

As soon as we begin to delve into the nature of horror, or attempt to list its manifestations in our culture, the sheer scale of the beast becomes apparent. Horror is everywhere. It's in fairy tales and the evening headlines, it's in street corner gossip and the incontrovertible facts of history. It's in playground ditties (*Ring-a ring o' roses* is a sweet little plague song), it's on the altar, bleeding for our sins ('Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do'). (Barker, *A-Z of Horror* 15)

Horror, sourced in primitive fears, possesses our imaginations and reappears throughout our histories.

No amount of rationalism, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood. (Barker 12)

Lovecraft identified a history to weird tales and horror in the United States:

*Supernatural Horror in Literature* is in a sense the collective of a movement in the history of popular literature in the United States. The field of weird fiction, as exemplified in the magazine *Weird Tales* (and its less successful rivals, *Ghost Stories*, *Tales of Magic and Mystery*), paralleled and even slightly preceded the development of its mechanistic sister, science-fiction. The readers of *Weird Tales* had a feeling of fraternity and community, a feeling of participating in a development. (Bleiler, ed., *Supernatural Horror in Literature* vii)

## Representation

Horror is in everyday reality, but it is also a genre, a construction, and a representation of what terrifies and disgusts, what we fear and secretly desire. Herein lies the difference, subtle and necessary to define, especially when discussing reception and the links between imaginative projects, embodiments, and literal actions, between the real and our projection from it, construction of it, and representation and interpretation of it in genre fictions. An event can be horrific and our response one of horror, recognizing in acts of terrorism and torture, characteristics of the monstrous, vile, violent, dehumanizing elements that the genre itself uses, manages, dramatises, and represents in order both to entertain and to comment. But horror fiction is a genre and a construction, projection, and representation. Its elements have meanings, their roots in popular consciousness and the popular unconscious, their representation in popular fictional forms from fairy tale and parable (Grimm, Perrault) to full-blown Hollywood blockbuster (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Jaws*). Horror fiction draws attention to itself by being fiction, whether in written, visual, or film text. Horror fiction tends to gain its effects from its imaginative strategies—pace, characterization, narrative, settings, perspectives, and so on, and both its tone and appeal lie along an axis from the very realistic to the supernatural, fantastic, and weird. As Linda Holland-Toll puts it:

Horror fiction will be handily defined as any text which has extreme or supernatural elements, induces (as its primary

intention and/or effect) strong feelings of terror, horror or revulsion in the reader, and generates a significant degree of unresolved disease within society. (Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball and Apple Pie* 6)

It generates just enough 'disease' (dis-ease) that it cannot merely be glossed over and returned to 'business as usual'. Horror tells us fundamental truths about what we fear, what we desire, and the dangers of complacency.

## Reading Horror

But can horror fiction be taken seriously? We are reminded here of the African-American journalist and writer of vampire mythic fictions, Tananarive Due, who feared that she would not be respected if she wrote horror—presumably the supernatural horror, the vampire rather than the average massacre. As readers, we are likely to locate ourselves along a continuum of response to horror, some more troubled, provoked, and finally, perhaps, reassured by the documentary realism, others by the supernatural, fantastic, the weird. For many, fictions that uneasily straddle the documentary real and the fantastic are the most troublesome, lacking resolution:

fiction which cannot be marginalized, pre-defined as fantastic and thus easily resolved and categorized, is much more threatening than a fiction which actually occupies the margins, which is clearly demarcated by the fantastic. (Holland-Toll 6)

One of the most crucial questions we need to ask when considering horror is how we read it—and here enter the issues of censorship; the role of popular culture in our society; readership and reading practices that are informed, critical, or uncritical; taking the actions on the screen (perhaps literally) as a blueprint for violent action; or judging and interpreting what is recognised as an imaginative lesson.

In learning and teaching terms, the main issue of horror's functions and the kinds of reading or viewing practice related to it is a crucial 'threshold' concept. If the reading and viewing public take it

all at face value alone, horror can be entertaining, maybe scary, dangerous, and destabilising, perhaps a recipe for monstrous actions. But it cannot really be thought provoking in terms of questioning those essential philosophical and political concerns, such as what is defined as real, whether there is a shared real, what the self is/selves are and how they are constructed, freedom and power, relationships between imposed and internalised order, censorship, free speech, independence, anarchy, dictatorship and tyranny. In the recognition of the representational nature of horror, the significance, the symbolism, the conceptual, meaningful element underlying and informing it, lies the crucial element of both intentionality and reading practice (see chapter 3, 'Reading Horror Writing').

When I was young, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* troubled and fascinated me. So, too, did the other horror film I saw as a child, *The Fly*, where it seems science could accidentally turn an intelligent human being into a disgusting insect. Body horror and mad scientists combine in one film focusing on identity and questioning issues about what is good, what is evil. The abject, the disgusting, and our right to destroy the evil in us, whether extruding or invading, are all explored in this groundbreaking film (originally 1958, remade in 1986 with Jeff Goldblum as Seth Brundle).

## Gothic Roots of Horror

One clue to the disease and disturbance, the closeness of horror to the real but its appearance as fantastic, can be found in its origins in the Gothic as well as in the expression of everyday monstrosities. Horror has its roots in the Gothic, historically both an entertaining form—Gothic romances—and a culturally and psychologically disturbing form—socially engaged; a location for exposing undersides, alternatives, and contradictions; and an outlet for paradoxical forces and disturbances of the safety of the routine, the normal. Gothic destabilises, offers and dramatises alternatives that can be terrifying but which tend also to shine a powerful light into the cracks and fissures of what we smugly take for granted or that which is imposed upon us as natural, to be obeyed. It provides personal, emotional, psychic, and energetic release.

A branch of Gothic writing, horror uses many of its formulae but is more likely to use violence, terror, and bodily harm than the Gothic. Both are disturbing, pointing out paradoxes and contradictions, hypocrisies and deceits, sometimes to thrill, sometimes to teach us not to be complacent and too comfortable—to entertain and act as a social critique. Both Gothic and horror use settings of dungeons, attics, corridors, and terrifying and unpleasant threatening spaces. Horror disturbs our sense of what is comforting and normal.

Horror embodies what is paradoxically both desired and feared, dramatising that which is normally unthinkable, unnamable, indefinable, and repressed. The Gothic also looks at such dualisms and dichotomous responses, but horror is more likely to dwell 'on the connections between violence and sexuality' (Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 361) and on punishing the fatally attractive; it is 'closely interlocked with the rather belated spread of Freudian theory' (Punter 348):

Horror is evoked by encounters with objects and actions that are not so much threatening as taboo: what is least allowable in oneself, what is symbolically least palatable or recognizable, may be the most horrible. Horror appears when fear comes a little too close to home. (Botting, *The Gothic* 124)

Freud's 'The Uncanny' (1919) is a key piece exploring such issues. Freud influenced psychoanalytic readings of fantastic and horror literature, showing ways in which they engage with and enact the uncanny or '*unheimlich*', the intrusion of the unfamiliar when the familiar is expected (see chapter 6, 'Key Terms'). In using 'the uncanny', horror exposes and enacts dread and apprehension. It concentrates on making the homely frightening and revealing what is concealed and unexpected: alternative versions of self, relationships, and family, energies that might burst out or intrude on and threaten everyday life. What results is a projection of something repressed, embodied in a demon spirit, ghost, monster, or disruptive energies, hence those films of houses that start to explode (*Poltergeist*) because they are built over desecrated graves, and children possessed by demons (*The Exorcist*, *The Omen*).

Horror names and dramatises that which is otherwise unthinkable, unnamable, indefinable, and repressed. Split selves, false identities, erupting bodies, unsafe spaces, and hospital or scientific operations and experiments that go horribly wrong (*Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Fly*, *Kingdom Hospital*) are all terrors explored and dramatised in horror. Frequently, domestic settings and the nurturing relationships within the family are locations for horror in women's writing in particular. Mark Jancovich defines the role of conventional horror and its pleasures:

It is claimed that the pleasure offered by the genre is based on the process of narrative closure in which the horrifying or monstrous is destroyed or contained. The structures of horror narratives are said to set out from a situation of order, move through a period of disorder caused by the eruption of horrifying or monstrous forces, and finally reach a point of closure and completion in which disruptive, monstrous elements are contained or destroyed and the original order is re-established. (Jancovich, *Horror* 9)

## Horror Is Political

Horror explores the fissures that open in our everyday lives and destabilizes our complacency about norms and rules. Much conventional horror has always been conservative, of course, and merely entertaining. However, the radical edge of horror began appearing as early as the horror comic campaigns of the 1950s. Then, the destabilization of norms on which horror (particularly *Tales from the Crypt*) focused was claimed by both the writers of this radical (left-wing) horror and the oppressive political censors, who recognised its dangerous edge and so clamped down on it, designating it as merely disgusting rather than politically and ideologically challenging and anarchic.

The comfortable dismissal of horror as merely entertainment or silly, scary monsters avoids its well-established, politicized role as exposé of social and cultural deceits and discomforts, deriving from the Gothic. Conventionally, Gothic finally shuts down these disturbances and restores order. Horror, drawing from the impulse and forms of the Gothic, but its more violent and psychologically,



physically disturbing and invasive, destructive relation, acts as a vehicle for us to face up to and face down what we avoid, repress, ignore, or can see no escape from. However, just like Nemo and his submarine, the objects and subjects of horror are not always what they appear to be and are very often socially, politically, and culturally transgressive and challenging. Restoring order, which is itself dubious and questionable, destructive, and illegitimate (oppressive gender roles, slavery, imperialism, capitalism, etc.), is not always the aim of the radical horror writer. Here emerges one of the problems of horror, which links it to the political and the horror comics scare of the 1950s (see Martin Barker's *A Haunt of Fears*, 1984). Challenges to the cultural, gendered, social, political, emotional, etc. status quo destabilise, but sometimes this instability is a vehicle for imaginative change, equality, rewriting forms and relations of power, and reimagining otherwise. Would it be necessary to close down a horror scenario if it exposed the comfortable collusion with the daily investment in oppression and lies? Many radical horror writers have refused such closure, not merely so that there can be a sequel to sell the novels and fill the cinemas but to make a point about our continued need to take less for granted, and to question and challenge some of the seamier sides of everyday life.

In the late 1950s, American-originated (U.K.-imported) horror comics, notably *Tales from the Crypt* among others, were banned in Great Britain following a moral panic originating in the fears of teachers and parents that stories of demonic knife sharpeners and shop owners, monstrous neighbourhood and family behaviours, were not merely terrifying the nation's children but warping their imaginations. These comics were seen as morally dangerous by those in power, operating a kind of political domestic and Christian censorship. The comics were burned, their readers seen as perverse. Martin Barker, identifying the source of the threat of the comics in the tempting and liberating of the imagination in its darkest spaces, aligns the anti-horror comic campaign with the McCarthy witch hunts. There is to some extent a political radicalism in horror comics, which were seen as a moral terror to be suppressed.

William Friedkin's movie *The Exorcist* (1973) provides another case in point. Not merely did it send thousands from the cinema ter-