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Thesis Proposal

American Society's Fear of Mortality: Reflections in Short Horror Fiction, 1950s-present

The core emotive elements of the most enduring American short horror stories of the past and present---particularly the incorporation of a fear of mortality, which perpetuates feelings of terror---have remained constant. According to scholar Noel Carroll, popular horror fiction in American society during the mid-twentieth century reflected the primary fear of death by propagating “feelings of instability, prompted by the recognition that the post-World War II order and its subtending culture was in turmoil”---immense worries over potential impending dangers that continued throughout subsequent decades, extending into the present (213). Additionally, Clive Bloom contends that in this timeframe, while popular horror stories increasingly became “dictated by contemporary events, psychology, and social realism,” a “closely restricted range of emotions” (155)---namely, those that inspire terror---have always been a singularly common result of such stories’ diverse accounts of fatality. Thus, it is the numerous manifestations of this salient fear---along with the organic reactions it entails---that seemingly underlie the greatest American horror stories of the past and present.

This thesis will trace constructions of the perception of mortality, in American society, that have emerged through several short horror stories---from the 1950s until recent times---to determine how this culture's expressions of the static fear, that of death, have historically changed across this progressive period. Bloom maintains that shifting “social attitudes” have always been mirrored in horror stories (16); I intend to further develop this notion by particularly focusing on the society’s changing “attitudes” toward death, as evident in the works of certain representative authors, and thereby demonstrate how some of the most renowned American

horror stories of the past and present embody different portrayals of this profound fear for the consistent goal of evoking the “classic” characteristics of terror.

The central fear of death is the genesis of many traditional elements of terror in horror fiction; Carroll theorizes that the appearance of terrors---such as American society’s increasing paranoia over the supernatural across the 50s and 60s, the dread of corporeal gore into the 70s and 80s, and psychological distress over unseen demons in the 90s and now---can represent horror cycles: certain “moments” within the tradition, which encompass a “specialty for fear” (207), are all rooted in the underlying fear of death, and are historically dictated by the main momentary anxieties of the particular society in which they originate. I will apply this explanation of horror cycles to my own historicist reading of selected stories in this 60-year span, to chronologically distinguish how the authors differently developed and presented the fear of mortality, to correspond with the context of a society whose apprehensions from one “cycle” to the next notably changed. To further underscore the historical correlation between constructs of death in the horror story and the specific social dynamics in which they were embedded, I will refer to the three aforementioned “moments” of social anxieties, locate two authors within each of these “moments” in the tradition, and explore the portrayals of mortality in at least one representative story from each author.

Firstly, citing the rising social anguish about the supernatural in post-World War II American society---which grew from new ideas of what sinister, mystical “otherworlds” could possibly entail---I will consider “The Lovely House” by Shirley Jackson, which, in the approximation of S. T. Joshi, “exquisitely haunts” when an eerie, ancient house “subsumes its occupants.” (195) Here, I will also look at two stories of Richard Matheson: “Blood Son” and “Prey,” both of which introduce the atmosphere of suburbia in reflecting the most recent social

perceptions of mortality. Both Jackson and Matheson have conventionally relied on what critic Kim Newman refers to as “setting a situation of tension” between the self and the supernatural, leaving the mortal with no choice but to react fearfully in order to survive (255).

Transitioning into the escalating dread of the macabre in the 70s and 80s, and how horror stories of this era constructed society’s fear of mortality, I will examine two works of Stephen King: “Trucks” and “The Monkey,” both of which represent the injustices of “inexplicable horrors” that reside at “the heart of the American experience,” and provide an insight into “the America of that time” (99), according to critic and author Whitney Strieber. Peter Straub, a contemporary of King’s, also rose to prominence during this period; Schweitzer asserts that Straub’s short stories first establish a realistic background, steeped in real history, before proceeding with horrific examinations of the “human experience” (3). I will look at Straub’s “The General’s Wife,” examining how it embodies the fear of death as a fundamental part of this experience.

Finally, while present social feelings surely incorporate those from the past, I will examine a single dominating source of “social stress” in modern times---terrors of psychological origin, with demons of the internal self as the menacing force---and how this perceived threat is represented in the present horror story’s reflection of society’s fear of mortality. For this step, I will look at Kelly Link’s “The Specialist’s Hat,” a story that is subtle yet powerful in its presentation of death through multiple layers of chilling psychological complexity. Finally, I will examine the appropriation on the fear of mortality in two stories of Glen Hirshberg: “Mr. Dark’s Carnival,” which combines visceral terror with psychological shock, and “Shipwreck Beach,” which is founded upon inner conflicts such as tormenting guilt, and the terrible consequences that can result from confronting intrinsic demons.

Chapter One will establish the taxonomy of “fear” and “terror,” outline the particular social atmosphere of supernatural anxiety in the mid-20th century, and explain how Jackson’s and Matheson’s works function as historical commentaries on the fear of mortality in their times. Chapter Two will continue in the vein of this historicist reading; looking at the terror of the macabre that largely influenced this second timeframe’s horror stories, I will trace the changing constructs of the fear of death in King and Straub, also highlighting how their works parallel with shifting social perceptions of the fear. Chapter Three will focus on reading of the contemporary horror stories of Link and Hirshberg as this society’s latest conceptualizations of the fear, fundamentally based on psychological terrors, and will illustrate how these stories enlighten us about how we continue to vividly invent this all-encompassing fear.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Bloom, Clive. *Horror Fiction: A Reader's Guide From Poe to King and Beyond*. New York: St.

Martin's, 1998. Clive Bloom posits that in the 20th century, a bevy of American authors "developed and perfected the horror/ghost story genre," and in the process, "moved" it into contemporary times and settings (5), while maintaining its connection to ever-changing "social attitudes." Furthermore, the progression of American horror literature in the 20th century continues to reveal a synthesis between the genre and culture, and a closer look at this provides a more extensive "understanding of the meaning, significance, and lure of these darkly fascinating works" (300). Bloom's text will be a significant source as I ground my investigation of American society's enduring connection with the horror story as an outlet to reflect the fear and perceptions of mortality.

Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror, Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge,

1990. Carroll outlines a framework for the underlying aesthetics of the genre -- particularly the emotive elements of terror -- that have been foundational in horror fiction. Based on this, he develops a "theory on horror" that methodically explains two crucial aspects of the genre: (1) the notion of fear as permeating and non-terminating, and (2) how socially-determined horror cycles contribute to the longevity of horror fiction. Specifically, his study of how these characteristics "shape" and "define" the genre, in addition to how they promote "what horror narratives and images are designed to elicit" (24) will be valuable not only for my analyses of the fear of death in all the stories I will be examining, but also as I classify the notions of "fear" and "terror" in Chapter One of my thesis. Also, Carroll analyzes the "progression" of the genre, with a primary focus on its existence in American society. This breakdown will be a further source as I

concentrate on outlining the society's changing views on the fear of death.

Hartwell, David G. *The Dark Descent*. New York, NY: Tor, 1997. This is a comprehensive anthology that contains many of the horror stories that I will be examining, including Matheson, Jackson, and King. Hartwell also provides seminal commentary on the contexts -- including historical and social -- that framed many American horror authors during both the 19th and 20th centuries, and how this is often reflected in their respective stories. Also, Hartwell notes, "All kinds of horror literature have benefited from the re-invention and incorporation of every conceivable element of the horrific effect" (3). Further, he states that every successive decade marks another dawn for a "renewed fashion for horror," and this, in turn, illustrates changing perceptions on fundamental representations within horror.

Jancovich, Mark. *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996. This book is a detailed account of American horror fiction in the 1950s, a decade which Jancovich cites as "central as a way of legitimizing past periods" (1). Major authors from this time period include Jackson and Matheson, both of whom Jancovich extensively references as huge definers within the genre. Jancovich notes Jackson's ability to recreate the formerly mundane in the context of heightening fear, as in *The Lottery* (294), and declares that it was Richard Matheson who "brought together the elements which would distinguish modern horror literature, and differentiate it from the horror writing of other periods" (130).

Joshi, S. T. *American Supernatural Tales*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Joshi's wide-ranging anthology covers stories by Jackson, Matheson, King, and Straub. In addition, Joshi offers enlightening analyses on the contextual connections between society, author, and

resulting horror story. Joshi also examines the role of history and specific events in the stories of several authors, such as Straub, who often utilized these contexts as he “meticulously etched the precise effects of the supernatural upon the sensitive consciousness of his fear-raddled protagonists” (14). Joshi also cites the “grip of irrational fear” (15) as a crucial feature of these authors’ stories, and one that inspires the very nature of horror.

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Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2007. Rendered in encyclopedia style, Joshi scrupulously outlines many of the very emblems of fear: monsters, vampires, ghosts, and villains, along with brief explanations of their origins in American horror, along with any subsequent, restructured alternate manifestations (or any aspects thereof). In my thesis, I will argue that such symbols represent the fear of mortality, and the authors’ inventions and recreations of these symbols of the fear have been continually changing. Joshi’s primarily historical viewpoint further supports my contention that these inevitable differences in horror constructs, across time, are the direct result of collective and individual changes in fearful perceptions of death, and what, in any given time, powerfully represents this fear.

Magistrale, Tony, and Michael A. Morrison. *A Dark Night's Dreaming: Contemporary American Horror Fiction*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1996. The authors characterize modern horror fiction as a genre that evolved from “ancientness” (1)---into, today, a form of fiction that now “emphasizes psychological terrors over physiological fears” (1). Furthermore, the authors present a detailed analysis of how horror fiction is at its most compelling when it is read within its contexts; a discussion on the changing

nature of the monster, the ghost, and the criminal sociopath; and an overview of the nature of American horror fiction today, with its domineering “psychological terrors.” In my study, Link and Hirshberg represent this new era; I will show that the psychological ills in their stories still serve to construct the ever-present, main fear of mortality, in reflection of how we regard the notion of death today.

Newman, Kim and Stephen Wones. *Horror: Another 100 Best Books*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006. This book features greatly insightful, critical essays on many American horror authors, including Jackson, Matheson, and King. The essays discuss the different aspects of horror, both short fiction and novel form, including the emotions that are a product of the incorporation of fear. Newman states that in the genre, certain “trends have come and gone, or lingered and burned out” (xix), but that, first and foremost, “horror is about what we’re afraid of” (xx). I intend to use these assessments to illustrate my own assertion that “what we’re afraid of” remains, more than anything, death. In addition, Newman and Wones provide biographical and historical backgrounds of these authors, among others, and examine how events which occurred in their times shaped them and ultimately, their writing.

Schweitzer, Darrell. *Discovering Modern Horror Fiction*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Wildside, 1999. This book is a collection of essays written by some of the most distinguished scholars in the field of horror fiction, as well as by some horror authors themselves. In his overview of contemporary horror fiction, Schweitzer states that “It does represent something distinct ... the field has taken a definite turn, since about World War II, toward domestic realism, bizarre psychology, non-traditional or modernistically refurbished supernaturalism, and explicit violence” (11). The essays subsequently examine the origins

of these recreated characteristics within the genre, referencing specific recent and past stories, and seek to identify any obviously similar historical links between contemporary horror stories, and those of the recent and distant past.

Seed, David. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Seed's compilation of scholarly essays includes an significant investigation on the different symbolic constructs within the horror genre. In "Modern Gothic," Marilyn Michaud compares the methods by which some prominent 20th century American horror authors "invoked the fear of degeneracy" (63), and how some of these writers, in particular, "located the fear of decay much closer to home" (63). Continued "seeds of terror," Michaud notes, can now be traced to apprehensions rooted in "nightmares of invasion, scientific overdevelopment, and nuclear apocalypse" (66), all of which, I will argue, still invoke the original fear, and are characterized by an unchanged range of terrors.

Wisker, Gina. *Horror Fiction: an Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2005. This book is a general study of the American horror genre, and as such, it provides an overview that includes a timeline of authors---comprising of "the best and the best known" (39)---and their stories; major thematic elements, which include "destabilizing our sense of security, defamiliarizing the familiar, and causing us to question what we see" (145); and an analysis of how the horror stories are "socially and culturally engaged" (251) and how this, in turn, provides us with "fundamental questions of what it means to be human" (252). In this thesis, I intend to illustrate how that one such "fundamental question" that arises in reading these horror stories revolves around the fear of death: how the notion of mortality is, and has been, grasped by humans in a particular society.