

Essay about the horror-genre

Introduction

For as long as there has been communication, there have been horror-stories. Ancient Neanderthal cave paintings show depictions of men fleeing in terror from monsters. Egyptian hieroglyphs portray the death god Rah eating babies. Mothers have always used horror-stories to scare children from roaming around after the sun sets: “Don’t go into the woods after dark, lest the Jabberwocky take you!” Teenage boys with questionable motives have told stories of men with rotting skin and scissor hands to force their female friends into needing their able comfort. Yet despite the fact that horror-stories have existed since we could speak, the horror-genre is widely believed to have dawned with the poet Edgar Allen Poe in the 1840’s. Poe’s two most famous horror-stories are “The-Tell-Tale-Heart” and “The Raven”. Conversely, should you happen to read some of Poe’s works you would probably not even be mildly distressed. The reason for this is that the horror-genre is one of the fastest and most drastically evolving genres. Glancing at a horror-text/film from today you would be hard pressed to find similarities with Poe’s works in any kind of way, shape or form. Should you take a look between the lines, however, you will find that the “essence” of the horror-genre remains.

The Evolution of the horror-genre.

“From late in the 18th c. until the present day – in short, for some two hundred years – the horror story (which is perhaps a mode rather than an identifiable genre) in its many and various forms has been a diachronic feature of British and American literature [...]” – J.A. Cuddon

This quote summarises this chapter very well. As such this chapter could be called an explanation of the quote, namely the part in parenthesis.

When Edgar Poe first wrote “The-Tell-Tale-Heart” his intent was to incorporate a good portion of terror into a well-written story along with a lot of depth for the more analytical reader. Fast forward 160 years and watch a movie like “Drag me to Hell” or “Paranormal Activity” and it would be fair to say that genre has become shallow if not completely dried up. What happened in-between? Not long after Edgar Poe wrote his two famous horror-stories, did doctors from around the world start exploring the human mind. This resulted in an increased understanding of what was scary for the Average Joe. Consequentially the genre became more mainstream. All at the same time, another obvious thing happened: Our ability to create convincing animated monsters and special effects became vastly improved. Couple that fact with the newfound knowledge about the human mind and our threshold for what was scary, disgusting or shocking was pushed a very long way. Horror texts had to follow this new development of the genre and as such, they also started featuring painstakingly detailed gory murders and the like, as seen in American Psycho. Around the year 2000, the genre had to reach it’s eventual climax. Obviously there is a point where you could not make a decent movie or piece of literature with the increasingly high amount of gore required to startle the average viewer. However, the horror-genre did not die at this point, it simply split into two different branches:

The “Retro” branch

This new type of horror-movies pays tribute to the original way the horror genre was displayed. The monster is very underplayed and there is little-to-no gore. This branch will often force the viewer to use his/her own imagination to construct the scares. To help the viewer, this type of horror will often be portrayed in a home-like environment, with houses that look suspiciously like your own. This makes it a lot easier to relate to and as a result, to imagine. This branch also often has the nasty things happen to seemingly random people giving the viewer a very “It could happen to me next” feel. The aim for this branch is to make you unable to sleep for as long as possible, not to give you huge shocks while watching the movie or reading the text. “Paranormal Activity” is a perfect example of this branch.

The Post-modern branch

This branch retains a lot of the more recent elements of the horror-genre. Often featuring very gory scenes and other general nastiness. However, the twist from the gore-fest that was the horror-genre before the twist is that this genre incorporates a lot of elements from other genres, mainly the funny, ironic elements from comedies. These two highly contrasting elements together will give a very scare-rich environment as the viewer/reader more often than not lets his/her guard down when something funny or ironic happens. "Drag me to Hell" is a perfect example of a movie of this branch.

Continuous elements of the horror-genre

Despite the seemingly large difference between an early horror-poem like "The Raven" and for example "Drag me to Hell", the horror genre actually has a lot of common denominators. For one thing, all horror-genre texts or films share the fact they almost inevitably have a monster, a Madonna and very often a whore as well.

The Monster

The monster does not necessarily mean a literal monster (though it often does) it simply means the "bad thing" or the phenomena which scare us. In "The Raven" the monster is as underplayed as it can be, being the narrator's past which is manifested by a talking raven. Later on, the monster becomes very literal or at least very obvious: Like in "American psycho" (Patrick Bateman) or in "Drag me to Hell" (The Lamia)

The Madonna and the Whore

The Madonna is a modern woman, usually beautiful, who is in some way suffering because of the monster. She appears in the horror-genre in varying degrees and is sometimes the whore as well; She represents the ideal woman of her time. In many ways, the whore is the opposite of the Madonna; she represents something (or everything) that is wrong with the woman of her time. She will also often engage in sexual activities in one way or another. She is therefore often very easily identifiable.

Besides the monster, the Madonna and the whore, a few other common denominators occur. Freudian terms are always fairly easily applied to this genre's characters, especially of late due to how caricatured horror characters often are. A last denominator is that as shallow as it might seem, the horror-genre pieces often have a morale of some sort, ranging from extremely obvious to a very underplayed *hint* of a morale.

Conclusion

“The horror story [...] is part of a long process by which people have tried to come to terms with and find adequate descriptions and symbols for deeply rooted, primitive and powerful forces, energies and fears which are related to death, afterlife, punishment, darkness, evil, violence and destruction.” – J.A. Cuddon

J.A. Cuddon calls the horror story a part of a process, however, that is not entirely true, for a process has to end at some point and I do not think that the horror-genre will ever die. That is because we as a race have a curiosity towards the forbidden things in life. We get this curiosity sated by watching horror-movies or reading horror-texts; through them we test our fears and explore the darkest recesses of our minds. As Stephen King once wrote *“We have to keep the ‘gators fed”*, by this he meant that if we did not have horror movies and texts to sate our need for the forbidden, we would find other often dangerous ways to sate it. For that reason, the horror-genre will live for as long as we can communicate with each other.