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Horror as a Mirror

“Horror is the natural reaction to the last 5,000 years of history.”

- Robert Anton Wilson

Gothic literature rose as a powerful literary movement, throughout the late 18th and early 19th century, around the world in both American and Europe. The American Gothic, in particular, is a reactionary movement that followed transcendentalism’s call to nature and refined living. American Gothic themes played on supernatural elements, fear, and suspense. The horrors and terrors expressed and explored in often dreary, ominous settings, were deeply rooted in the soil of American land; with the genocide coming from the push west, slavery of Africans, and a history of injustice toward the Native Americans.

The historical background of injustice on our soil is still pervasive in our culture today, and it is brought to mind, for example, when considering ancient burial grounds or locations of past war. These places are often understood as still having a pervasive energy to them that is neither quiet nor dead. Through this understanding, society can feel that it is paying a respect to the lives lost through political injustice; however, exploring the idea of horror as a mirror exposes more of our unwillingness to truly come to terms with the history our nation was built upon. This mirror image, then, appears as more of a photographic double-exposure, in which our modern society is in the foreground, and our past still haunts us like ghosts in the background of the image:

Unquestionably, all around the literature of terror there is background- historical, social, cultural, psychological, religious – which is a *sine qua non* condition for understanding the genre . . . it may be called *ontological*: it views horror literature in so far as this genre endeavors to express what we are, what we are not, and what we may be. (Aguirre, 2-3)

Through this double-exposure, we confront ourselves, our histories, and our futures. Horror works as an unconscious, cultural device that preys upon our mistakes and historic atrocities, and uses them to make one's skin crawl and hair raise with discomfort. This discomfort is telling, as it directly reveals a society collectively haunted by their past and ongoing cruelties.

In his cultural commentary, "Reasons to Believe in Ghosts in America," Nathan Heller accounts his experience on a ghost tour in Savannah, Georgia. Noting himself as a skeptic of these spooky superstitions, he recalls the experience of his guide telling the tale of Calhoun Square:

People walking here, across the centuries, had reported feeling shadows pass through them, a tightness or a great weight on their chests. The other spooky thing that we should know about Calhoun Square, he said, was that it had been a burial ground for slaves—some people estimated that a thousand bodies rested deep beneath the grass, but no one really knew for sure, because the graves were mass and unmarked. (Heller, par. 3)

This pervasive, collective fear and perceived haunting of Calhoun Square fits directly into the idea of horror as a mirror. Residents in this town are aware of the atrocities committed on the land, and as a result collect an eerie feeling, left over energy, from years past. This perception processes as fearful information, almost mimicking the effects of an anxiety attack. He goes on to interrogate the significance of this: "Is it possible, instead, that haunting is real—as real as the feeling in your throat when you pass the chair where your mother always used to sit—and that Americans are bad at confronting the physical fact of our pasts?" (Heller, par. 6) The "horror as a mirror" approach would tend to agree with Heller, in this case, as Americans are viewing hauntings as an inevitable second exposure of a single instance, rather than as being a part of the

whole constantly. Rather than directly confronting the “physical facts of our pasts,” the genre of horror has exposed the layers we have attempted to hide.

Edgar Allen Poe is a prolific author in history and the American gothic movement, often being cited as the “father of horror.” However, other prominent early writers of the American Gothic were writing at the same time, including Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Each viewed both past and present through their own mirrors, and thus presented similar yet distinctly varied works of horror.

In September of 1839, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” presented the reader with a dual-reading of a house and a family, another double-exposure of sorts. On one hand, it is a story about lineage, madness, and illness. On another hand, however, it can be read as a religious commentary on their relationship, which would have been sinful to Christianity. There is a direct break in their family line, and the house portrays that with a literal crack going up the walls:

Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn. (Poe, 2)

This fissure becomes an immediate discomfort, and can be read as a double-exposure, as the glitch that Roderick experiences in his psychology is paralleled by the literal crack in the house. This crack is opening up to expose their greatest secrets and, then, fears. As sensory objects are processed by the characters, we see the nature of malady and the splitting of a mind:

“Oh wither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid for my haste? Have I not heard her footsteps on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!” – here he sprang furiously to his feet and

shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul – “Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!” (Poe, 10)

This image of a woman coming back from the dead is immensely powerful and frightening. The why, however, lies in our traditions in murder and death. In our wildest daydreams, if all of the individuals that we have wronged, to death, came back to avenge themselves, we would finally have to atone for our own sins, as a nation. For Roderick, we see a splitting in his sensory information; he is claiming he has heard his sister for many days, and was too fearful to confront what he had done.

Poe was also well-known for his poetry, which still employed the same thematic aspects of his fiction. In 1849, “Annabel Lee” explored the beauty and death of a woman named Annabel Lee. The speaker is heteronormatively read as masculine, as that would have been expected of the time.

Ironically, we cannot hear women’s own words in these stories, and we must grant the male voice poetic license. But in the end, the woman comes back with a vengeance and does have the final say—even if that is accomplished through mute performance, mime, or dramatic gesture instead of actual speaking. (Elbert, 24)

In “The Fall of the House of Usher”, Madeline literally comes back from the dead to enact revenge on her brother, though she is never permitted to speak. Her character stays silent, and readers are meant to fear her, deeply. However, Roderick’s own fear of his undead sister’s rage is a parallel for the systematic mistreatment of real women before her. In Poe’s poem, Annabel Lee is dead from the very beginning, yet she is still subject to, and has not escaped, the projection of male desire. “And this maiden she lived with no other thought / than to love and be

loved by me” (5-6). The reader, here must remember who the speaker is, and who has the power to tell her story.

In both Poe’s work and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter,” rampant themes of women, mistreatment, and death point to a historical undercurrent of injustice toward women. Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” gives Hester Prynne a letter “A” to both cling to and speak through. However, the reader is experiencing these things through the male gaze. The use of horror, in the American Gothic, adds a layer to these women’s stories that uncovers a deeply rooted mistreatment and pulsing anger. This pulsing anger transforms the energy of their settings, in which to give a powerful ability to strike fear into the other characters, and into the reader.

Women’s histories are not the only tools that horror uses mirrors to speak through. In 1820, Washington Irving offered readers “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which exposed an entire town to a collective fear of a fearful legend of a headless man on horseback. This headless man is consistently referred to as “The Hessian,” which is a direct nod to the Dutch massacre. Painting this figure as an evil, headless man of supernatural quality, and then naming him a “Hessian,” invokes a poignancy that complicates the history and enhances the fear.

The dominant spirit that haunts this enchanted region is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannonball in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War, and who is ever seen by the countryfolk, hurrying along in the gloom of the night as if on the wings of the wind. (Irving, 1)

This idea of the headless horseman draws back to Nathan Heller’s commentary on sacred battlegrounds and unmarked, mass graves. Washington Irving, in this, is literally using the

complicated history of the war in which to give the reader a supernatural fear of confrontation with the horseman. Boundaries exist along the edges of town, and should keep you safe, but if you step too far away from your blinders, you are exposed and in danger. The headless horseman can be read, simply, as a spirit that has been wronged and wishes to move on, but needs his head in which to do so. The horseman never terrorizes the town unless they come into his territory. However, due to the trauma of losing his head by means of a cannonball, he is stuck between the mirror of horror and reality. We must face him, as Ichabod does, to know him.

Moreover, women are also used by Irving in which to add to the eerie setting. The image of a wailing woman in white calls to mind larger effects of feminine anger and pain:

. . .Gossiping over former times, and drawing out long stories about ghosts and apparitions, mourning cries and wailings, seen and heard in the neighborhood. Some mention was made of the woman in white, who haunted the dark glen at Raven Rock, and was often heard to shriek on winter nights before a storm, having perished there in the snow. (Irving, 7)

Combining this with Ichabod's distinctions of "a being that causes more perplexity to mortal man than ghosts, goblins, and the whole race of witches put together, and that was – a woman" (Irving, 3) complicates our reading of Ichabod, and adds to the discomfort toward the gender as a whole. Again, the wailing woman, and women who are more complexly frightening than ghosts, make a case for a supernatural quality or ability in which to seduce, corrupt, or harm men with. This makes one think back to the Salem Witch Trials, and how women's power was literally used against them for religious and political gain.

Painting fear with a broader, gender-neutral brush, in 1833, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents "The Ocean," which speaks of a deeply-rooted and buried threat of isolation. Beneath the weight of the actions of our nation, the reader can lift the veil and almost feel the tension of

another presence in the poem. We can almost hear the dead rolling over in their graves. “The earth has guilt, the earth has care / Unquiet are its graves. . .” (Hawthorne, 13-14) This plurality to our experience of being out on the ocean, where there is vastness and isolation, truly strikes a deep fear into the minds of the reader, as we are directly facing the energy of “the young, the bright, the fair” (Hawthorne, 8) that had their voices snatched away from them. This idea echoes in Poe’s work, as well, through Madeline.

Fear is a complex issue, in that we are rarely truly afraid of the thing that we fear. Human beings simply project their deeper fears on to tangible things. A fear of heights has very little to do with the heights, and much more to do with the fall, the inevitable terror of the waiting between you and the ground. Within horror as a literary genre, these things can also be interrogated in the same way. A fear of ghosts, witches, or other supernatural forces takes on something we can grasp, and then twists it within our subconscious to expose the depths of one’s mind. Within those depths, historical trauma still resides, quietly. Science holds this idea as well, as epigenetic studies have displayed that ancestral trauma is passed down through the bloodlines, and the effects can still live in the bodies and minds of those that come even many generations later:

Epigenetics explains the transgenerational transmission of behaviors, experiences, and traumas, experienced by the ancestors, result in heritable epigenetic changes that can be passed to the progeny of the ancestor for as many as for generations or more. (Jelinek, 78)

This study goes on to argue that African American, Native American, and Holocaust ancestries display heightened levels of cortisol (a stress hormone), and that those get passed down, systematically. This happens on both ends of the spectrum, both victim and abuser. These early

expression of the American Gothic, subconsciously, plays upon the atrocities faced by indigenous peoples, women, slaves, and war. As Robin Williams' character in "One Hour Photo" says, "The things we fear the most, have already happened to us."

Through Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne, horror works to expose the glitch in characters, setting, and themes. It is within these glitches that we find tiny cracks in our timeline, much like the crack through the House of Usher. Within these cracks we find a history of blood-shed, and we can almost hear it still flowing, alive and pulsating, to the rhythm of a story. These parallels of two worlds living side-by-side, made possible through real-world grief and trauma, are persistent reminders for us to look in the mirror with unclouded eyes, and see the injustices standing right behind us; press your hand to the glass, and locate the two-way gap between it and your reflection.

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