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„Horror fiction as a body genre”  
lesson for *The Literary Fantastic* BA lecture course

Jelen tananyag a Szegedi Tudományegyetemen  
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THE LITERARY FANTASTIC (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)

## Horror Fiction as a Body Genre

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Olvasási idő: 60 perc

**AIMS:** The chapter offers an introduction to horror fiction explaining its historical evolution, subgenres, key leitmotifs and most significant theoretisations, commenting on the psychic effects and calculated corporeal reactions it provokes as a so-called “body genre.”

**TOPICS to be discussed:**

- Defining horror as a slippery subgenre of speculative fiction
- Horror as “pleasure derived from objects of terror” and “a paradox of the heart”
- The literary historical origins of horror
- Typologies of horror
- Theoretical approaches to horror: psychoanalytical, cultural critical, cognitive narratological, theological, archetypal, etc.
- Subgenres: cosmic, supernatural, eco-, (new) weird, slasher splatterpunk, psychological, suspense, erotic romance, comic pastiche
- Monsters in horror: names without things and things without names
- Technologies of destabilization: mirrors, doubles, hauntings, split self, shattered body
- Psychological confusion: the uncanny, fear of the unknown, taboo-breaking
- Horror as a body genre: calculated corporeal reaction, dread and desire of the abject

**RECOMMENDED READINGS:**

E.T.A. Hoffman. “The Sandman” (1816),  
E.A. Poe. “The Fall of the House Usher” (1839),  
H.P. Lovecraft. “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926),  
Joyce Carol Oates. “Where are you going, where have you been” (1966),  
Angela Carter. “The Lady of the House of Love” (1975),  
China Miéville. “The Ball Room” (2005),  
Tananarive Due. “Patient Zero” (2010)

Linda Williams. [“Film Bodies”](#) in *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991)  
HP Lovecraft. [„Supernatural Horror in Literature”](#)



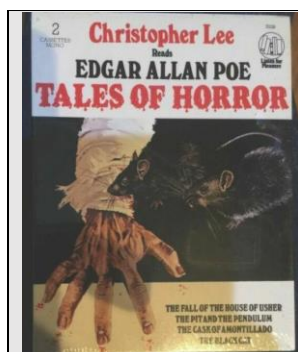
## Defining horror fiction as a speculative fictional subgenre

- A capacity to startle, scare, frighten readers by inducing a feel of shock, dread, repulsion
- Etymology of term: latin “horrere” = tremble, shudder → refers to bodily reaction incited by work → corporeal involvement of audience → “a body genre”
- Describes an affect: provokes terror, pity, despair: psychic confusion coupled with cognitive dissonance
- Our world is assaulted by the presence of the monstrous
- Recognition of a threat to one’s world, culture, identity, and body
- A sense that there is something inherently monstrous and wrong in the invasive presence (see Wrongness in fantasy fiction!)
- A sense of obscene, transgressive impurity that endangers the safe limit between normal self and abnormal other
- the purity of the Soul, the integrity of the body, the order of the State, the fertility of the Land are threatened
- the strongest fear = the fear of the Unknown
- Eerie, weird, frightening atmosphere
- Metaphor for collective anxieties of societies, but also physical experience of dread
- Slippery genre: Because of fuzziness of fantasy subgenres: dark fantasy, weird fiction, gothic fiction, splatterpunk do have horroristic features
- horror may overlap with a variety of genres like sci-fi or psychological thriller, combining external and internal terror, a fear of the collapse of the mind and a collapse of the world as we know it

See: [„Horror” in Clute & Grant: Encyclopedia of Fantasy \(1977\)](#)

## The origins of horror

- ancient myths and folk literature with supernatural elements: NOTE: influence of oral tradition in trope of contamination by retelling the story (eg. *The Ring*)
- pre-Romantic 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic fiction (Horace Walpole: *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein* (1818))
- dark Romantic tales: E.T.A Hoffman: “The Sandman” (1816): psychological symbolism
- E.A.Poe’s tales of mystery and macabre, detective fiction: introduces gothic tropes: fear of becoming mad, haunted psyche, double, degeneration, taboos, perversion, death drive
- 19<sup>th</sup> century monsters: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, HG Wells’s *Invisible Man*, Jane C Loudon’s *The Mummy*, Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*
- Victorian sensation novel, sensational journalism (Jack the Ripper)
- Howard P Lovecraft: Cosmic horror, supernatural dread, weird fiction



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## Theoretical Approaches to Horror Fiction

- PARADOX: Anna Laetitia Barbauld's essay "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" (1773) calls the paradox of horror "a paradox of the heart"
- PSYCHOANALYSIS: Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" introduces the troubling notion of the uncanny (a return of the repressed, a feeling of inexplicable dread, the sudden recognition of something unfamiliar as familiar (*déjà vu*) or something familiar as unfamiliar (*jamais vu*)) in connection with E.T.A. Hoffman's tale "The Sandman", horror is connected to unspeakable trauma, to the abjection of the subject (Julia Kristeva)
- SOCIO-CULTURAL CRITICISM: Rosemary Jackson claims in her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* that horror like any fantasy genre outlines in a fictional form the collective social anxieties of a specific cultural-historical era (eg. Dracula: represents the fear of syphilis, Frankenstein: the fear of the corruptive nature of emerging sciences, Godzilla: radiation fears, zombies: the anxieties caused by consumerization)
- CORPOREAL NARRATOLOGICAL CRITICISM: Linda Williams' notion of "body genres" introduced in her "Anatomy of film bodies" introduces a typology based on the calculated corporeal reactions of the audience: pornography: sexual excitement/ sentimental melodrama: tear jerker weepie/ horror: fright, chills, shivers; biological nature of genre (Jack Morgan)
- AFFECTIVE NARRATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: Noël Carroll defines horror in terms of emotional reactions, affects triggered in the audience by the monstrous Unknown, fusing fear, repulsion, and anxiety
- JUNGIAN ARCHETYPAL READING: the monster, the final girl, the madman are stock characters, taboo breaking is a leitmotif of horror fiction that fit the patterns of archaic, universal symbols derived from our collective unconscious as suggested by Gustav Jung's psychology
- THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: Supernatural horror allows readers to dwell in a mysterious, awe-inspiring feeling akin with spiritual religious experience increasingly rare in our disenchanting culture. The encounter with the supernatural Other evokes the feel of the Sublime. See: Rudolf Otto's notions of the numinous and *mysterium tremendum* introduced in his *The Idea of the Holy*, See: Georges Bataille: excess of ecstasy borders on horrendous



Read

[Emily Carroll's horror comic "His Face All Red"](#)

**mirroring-effect:** Emotional responses of audience parallel those of positive chs. Spectators' physical reactions repeat the ones on screen: screams, shivers, nausea

## Typologies of Horror

### 1. Lived/imagined experience

#### **Art horror**

safe fears, pleasurable thrills via sublimation through fictionalization:

early examples include: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Inferno*

#### **Natural horror**

lived traumatic experience too disturbing to cope with, diminishes sense of self, causes feeling of utter helplessness, hence often repressed, akin with the unspeakable: natural disasters, Nazi atrocities, genocide, terrorism

### 2. Ann Radcliffe's "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826)

#### **Terror**

the feeling of dread, anticipation, anxiety that *precedes* the horrifying experience, characterized by obscurity, indeterminacy, uncertainty: may lead to the sublime, "expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life"

#### **Horror**

the feeling of revulsion that *follows* the horrifying experience, shock after an awful realization of monstrosity, unambiguous display of atrocity: „freezes” the senses

### 3. Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990)

#### **Supernatural explained**

seemingly supernatural occurrences are followed by the revelation that every uncanny event can be traced back to natural causes EG: Radcliffe *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

#### **Supernatural accepted**

supernatural, malefic forces and demonic creatures loosed upon unsuspecting victims visually arresting settings (ruined abbeys, monasteries, feudal castles, dark corridors, dense woods)  
EG: Charles Maturin: *Melmoth the Wanderer*

### 4. Montague Summers' *The Gothic Quest. A History of the Gothic Novel* (1938)

“**historical gothic**”: no suggestion of the supernatural, just a tale set in the imaginary past

“**equivocal gothic**”: “psychologically disturbed” characters render the narrative events ambiguous: unreliable narrator, ambiguity

“**supernatural gothic**”: other worlds creatures, phenomena, illogic invades consensus reality

„I recognize terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. [“revulsion,” the gag-reflex, a bottom-level, cheap gimmick] I'm not proud.”  
[Stephen King. \*Danse Macabre\*](#)

## Monsters in horror fiction

✚ **Monsters in fairy tales:** are accepted as part of the everyday world and might engender fear BUT there is no trace of wonder, surprise or amazement, because they are part of the fairy-tale world, do not violate any laws governing fantastic reality, are not unnatural

**Monsters in the world of horror:** Our basic assumptions about the world we inhabit are questioned; a sudden eruption of the supernatural into our world causes crisis. Monsters are abnormal, “disturbances of the natural order,” a monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world ↔ in fairy tales it is an ordinary creature in an extraordinary world.

✚ **Emotional reactions triggered** by monster: Fear, revulsion, awe, uncertainty (unclean, filthy creatures, unnameable impossibilities (Lovecraft: “*It was a octopus, centipede, spider kind o’ thing ...*”).

✚ **A Thing Without a Name** (Stephen King’s *It*, John Carpenter’s *The Thing*)

✚ **A Name without a Thing**

**Jabberwock** (Lewis Carroll): Mock-mythical being, a nonsense patchwork of numerous incompatible, half-recognizable elements, combines features of a dragon, a griffin, a dinosaur, an insect, a rodent, the Lambton worm, all dressed in a petit-bourgeois checkered waistcoat. Reflects Victorian interest in archeological excavations, in Darwinian theory of evolution. Tenniel’s illustration does not help in making sense of the creature either, equally ambiguous.

**Cthulhu** (H.P. Lovecraft) a fictional cosmic entity with a difficult name that the human vocal apparatus cannot reproduce because of the syllables of the alien language, with an octopus like head, scaly body, prodigious claws, wings. A giant human/octopus/dragon hybrid, a malevolent entity hibernated in an underwater city, a constant source of subconscious anxiety, an object of pagan worship.

✚ **Belief vs. Imagination:** We do not actually believe in the existence of the horrific beings, but we can be frightened by the *concept* of such fictive beings.

✚ **Impurity: a major feature of monsters** (see: anthropologist Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*). Represents bordercrossing, transgression, violations of cultural categories separating the self from the other, a danger of “incomplete representatives of their class,” formless (dirt), disintegration.

✚ **Monsters: interstitial creatures,** belong to more categories at the same time.

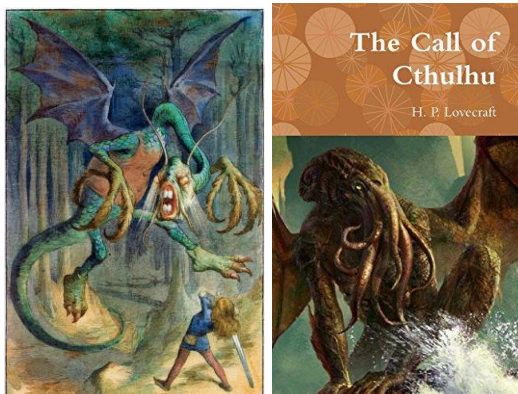
→ Living+dead (zombies, mummies, ghosts, vampires)

→ Me+ Not-me (*Doppelgängers*, doubles)

→ In/complete + form/less (severed hand or head, disintegrating zombies)

→ Inanimate+animate (living dolls/toys, haunted houses)

→ Unclassifiable mutant, incompatible species (H.G. Wells *Dr. Moreau’s Island*, shapeshifters, self-cloners)



**Hero's traumatic confrontation with indescribable, undefinable, impossible monstrosity:**

“It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime—yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, *it was the unnameable!*” (HP Lovecraft, *The Unnamable*, 1925)

“He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary-looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way. No, sir; I can make no hand of it; I can't describe him. And it's not want of memory; for I declare I can see him this moment.” (RL Stevenson: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886)

→ The monster represents a threat to physical well-being & mental health → a “**cognitive threat**” → cliché ending of many horror narratives: the character maddened, deranged or traumatized beyond recovery after the encounter with the monster. (Dr. Lanyon in *The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* dies after witnessing the transformation in front of his eyes.)

**Evolutionary psychological explanation** for the need for horror tales in a modern world: In civilization life is calmed down, crime is repressed, in advanced postindustrialist Western world the excitement of living on the edge is missing, the tension between hunter and hunted disappears. → this gap is filled by the controlled thrill of a rollercoaster/horror

„So we told each other stories through the long, dark nights...when the fires burned low, we did our best to scare the daylight out of each other. The rush of adrenaline feels good. Our hearts pound, our breath quickens, and we can imagine ourselves on the edge. Yet we also appreciate the insightful aspects of horror. Sometimes a story intends to shock and disgust, but the best horror intends to rattle our cages and shake us out of our complacency. It makes us think, forces us to confront ideas we might rather ignore, and challenges preconceptions of all kinds. Horror reminds us that the world is not always as safe as it seems, which exercises our mental muscles and reminds us to keep a little healthy caution close at hand.” (Elizabeth Barrette: "Elements of Aversion")

**Horror is a speculative genre** that confronts with the ideas we "might rather ignore ... [to challenge] preconceptions of all kinds."

Its origin: [Hamlet's musings about the skull of Yorick](#) and the inevitable mortality of human being → in horror fiction the confrontation with the disgusting is a metaphor for the sociohistorical anxieties, yearnings, prohibitions, problems the artist's generation is facing.

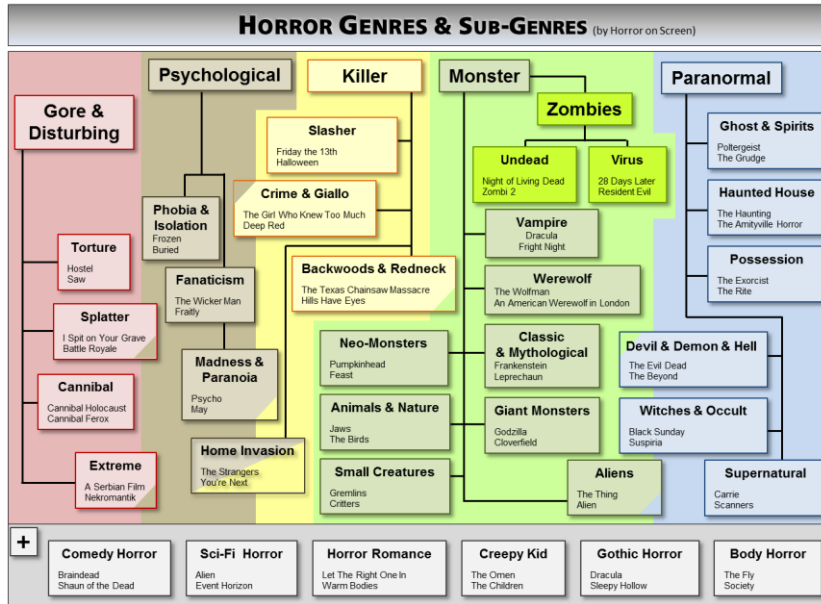


## HORROR IN CINEMA

- **Following the First World War** horror invades the cinema
  - ✚ German Expressionism: F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).
  - ✚ 1931 *annus mirabilis*: Universal Studios: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931) *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) → archetypal horror monsters (the monster without name, the vampire, the werewolf) Mythic look created by Hollywood make-up artists.
- 1950s sci-fi/horror films, menace from outer space
- Hammer Films of the 1960s
- **Alfred Hitchcock**: master of horror/psychological thriller movies
  - ✚ *Psycho*, *Birds*, *Manderley*
  - ✚ **mystery**: intellectual process ↔ **SUSPENSE**: sensual, emotional process, pleasurable thrills plays with spectators' anticipations to create tension based on a sustained uncertainty that provokes imagination, no fact just a feel, a sense of impending doom – any film made scarier through anticipated/imagined fears, when horrors are never exhibited only implied,
    - ✚ strategy also used because of Production Code Administration Approval reasons
    - ✚ suspense: we know there is a bomb, but the character does not
    - ✚ literary devices of suspense: red herrings, plot twists, cliffhangers (keep us hooked to read/watch more – gives „on-edge” feeling: narrative tension caused by hope+fear → paranoid thrillers, puzzling mental games of sociopaths
- **found footage films**: to create effect of veracity, demon is terrifying because it is never revealed, *Blair Witch Project*
- **feminist approaches to horror fiction**:
  - ✚ **final girl** (the one last, usually pure, virginal woman who stays alive to confront the killer, the one left to tell the story (*Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*))
  - ✚ **monstrous maternal entity** (*Alien*)
  - ✚ revengeful madwoman **femme fatale**, **black widow** (*Basic Instinct*)
- **serial killer narratives**: psychopath's personality, deeds, motivations compel us to read such fictions, focus neither on detective nor on victim (*Hannibal Lecter*)
- **slasher film**: psychopath serial killer stalking, murdering a sequence of victims in a graphically violent manner, often w a bladed tool, a knife, machete, axe, scythe, or chainsaw (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) graphic, gory details like in **splatterpunk** literature: hyperintensive horror with no limits, → Go way beyond mere suggestiveness: terror+nausea (survivalist fiction that reflects moral chaos of our times)
- **Blockbusters films** *The Exorcist* or *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) →an expansion of horror audience (movie sector +reading public too).
- **Horror imagery in mainstream popular culture**: Count Chocula cereals, gorey candies, Monster High Dolls, guro kawaii trend (cute grotesque skulls with ribbons)







### List of recommended readings

Anna Laetitia Barbauld. "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror," 1773.  
 Linda Badley. *Writing Horror and the Body*. Westport: Greenwood, 1996.  
 Noel Carroll. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. NY: Routledge, 1990.  
 Brigid Cherry. *Horror*: NY: Routledge, 2009.  
 Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous Feminine*. New York: Routledge, 1993.  
 Matt Hills. *The Pleasures of Horror*. NY: Continuum, 2005.  
 Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. NY: Columbia, 1982.  
 Gina Wisker. *Horror Fiction: An Introduction*. NY: Continuum, 2005.  
 Csetényi Korinna. *The Metafictional Narrativization of the Traumatized Body in Stephen King's Horror Fiction*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, SZTE, 2015.  
 Csetényi Korinna. "Mad Scientists & Mutated Beasts in Contemporary Natural Horror Film." *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*. Ed. Anna Kérchy. Americana E-Books, 2018. 158-172.  
 Douglas E Winter. *The Art of Darkness*. New English Library, 1989.

### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- Why is horror called a body genre?
- What are some psychological reasons of our attraction to horror/monsters?
- What are the Gothic origins of horror?
- What are some subgenres of horror fiction?
- What kinds of monster appear in horror fiction?
- What kinds of anxieties are fictionalized in horror fiction?
- What are some horror traits of the fantastic novels we discussed in class? (Dracula, Coraline, Harry Potter, EA Poe, etc)