

Terror versus Horror

TERROR AND HORROR

Gothic fiction arouses—and is intended to arouse—terror and horror in the reader. On this point there is agreement, but here agreement ends and a host of questions arise.

- How, exactly, do terror and horror differ? Is one a physical response, like revulsion, and the other a mental response? Is one a response to the other (e.g., horror causes terror)? Is one a response to an immediate or present danger and the other to a danger further away? Is one a response to what we see or hear and the other to what we imagine or think? Does one sensationalize? Does either involve fear or hatred? Is one a response to a threat from within, from the unconscious, for instance, and the other a response to a threat from outside, like other people or society?
- Do terror and horror arouse the same kind of pleasure as we read Gothic tales? Alternatively, if we don't feel pleasure, what do we feel? and is what we feel the same for both terror and horror?
- Is there ambivalence in our horror or our terror? For example, are we both attracted to and repelled by one or both? Are a desire to experience horror/terror and a fear of experiencing them why we read Gothic fiction? (Remember: our motives and responses are often complex and involve conflicting emotions and desires; Aristotle identifies pity and terror as part of the audience's response to tragedy.)
- Is one response of a higher order than the other?
- Is it significant that we call the genre of Gothic films *horror movies* rather than *terror movies*?

In defining these words, think about what causes you to be horrified, what causes you to be terrified, and how each state feels and how they differ and are similar. The distinctions writers on this subject have made may also help you clarify your thinking.

Linda Bayer-Berenbaum: “Both involve fear and repulsion, but terror is more immediate, more emotional, and less intellectual. You may be horrified by what your friend tells you but terrified by what you see yourself. . . . Terror is more potent and stimulating and thus the more Gothic emotion.”

Terry Heller: “Terror is the fear that harm will come to oneself. Horror is the emotion one feels in anticipating and witnessing harm coming to others for whom one cares.”

Stephen King: “I’ll try to terrify you first, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll horrify you, and if I can’t make it there, I’ll try to gross you out. I’m not proud.”

Peter Penzold: “I consider as pure tales of horror all those stories whose main motifs inspire physical repulsion, as opposed to what Blackwood calls ‘spiritual terror’. The feeling these [horror] tales produce is one of loathing and disgust, rather than true terror and awe.”

Robert L. Platzner: “Terror is not merely a syndrome of delusions. . . but rather the subjective mirroring of an objective state. Reality is alien, menacing, whether the footsteps heard upon the secret passageway be real or imaginary. It is the discovery that evil is constitutive of reality, that it can never be reduced to a hallucinatory fantasy or to a form of social pathology that renders the Gothic Romance so ultimately sinister—even lurid.”

Ann Radcliffe: “Terror and Horror are so far opposite that the first

expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them And where lies the difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity that accompany the first, respecting the dreading evil?”

Barton Levi St. Armand modifies Radcliffe’s definition by making terror and horror “annihilating” emotions and distinguishing between the way they annihilate: “Terror expands the soul outward; it leads us to or engulfs us in the sublime, the immense, the cosmic. We are, as it were, lost in the ocean of fear or plunged directly into it, drowning of our dread. What we lose is the sense of self. That feeling of ‘awe’ which traditionally accompanies intimations of the sublime, links terror with experiences that are basically religious in nature, like those annihilating confrontations with the numinous that Otto explores in *The Idea of the Holy*. . . . horror is equally annihilating, but from a dramatically different direction. Horror overtakes the soul from the inside; consciousness shrinks or withers from within, and the self is not flung into the exterior ocean of awe but sinks in its own bloodstream, choked by the alien salts of its inescapable prevertebrate heritage.”

Philip Van Doren Stern: “Horror and fear, although of the same family and often mistaken for each other, are not identical. Unlike fear, which can be of long duration, horror is necessarily climactic in effect. The mind can stand only so much, then its protecting agencies quickly come to their rescue and benumb the nerves. Thus it will be seen that horror transcends fear and is even more powerful. The word has been used too loosely. There is no horror, for instance, about a corpse, no matter how unpleasant it may look. Nothing substantial can be truly horrible; it may, by some odd quirk of association, inspire horror, but horror itself can be found only within ourselves. It is rooted in the imagination rather than in anything in the external world.”

G. Richard Thompson: “The Gothic romance seeks to create an

atmosphere of dread by combining terror with horror and mystery. *Terror* suggests the frenzy of physical and mental fear of pain, dismemberment, and death. *Horror* suggests the perception of something evil or morally repellent. *Mystery* suggests something beyond this, the perception of a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence—often morally incomprehensible—and thereby productive of a nameless apprehension that may be called religious dread in the face of the wholly other. When in Gothic literature this sense of mystery is joined with terror or horror, the effects of each expand beyond ordinary fear or repugnance.”

Devendra P. Varma: “Terror creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread, a certain superstitions shudder at the other world. Horror resorts to a ruder presentation of the macabre: by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting, against a far more terrible background of spiritual gloom and despair. Horror appeals to sheer dread and repulsion, by brooding upon the gloomy and the sinister, and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural.”

Dennis Wheatly: "Terror is a response to physical danger only, horror is fear of the supernatural."

Note: My ulterior motive (yes, I have one) in listing these contradictory statements is to emphasize that there is no right answer to the questions raised at the beginning of the handout. There must be, however, clearly thought out definitions for key words like *horror* and *terror*, and they must be defined, explicitly or implicitly, when you use them in your papers. And you should be prepared to define them in class discussions if you are asked to clarify your usage.

Revised: August 25, 2008

Source URL: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/terror_horror.html
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/eng1403>

© Dr. Lilia Melani
Used by permission.

Saylor.org
Page 5 of 5