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The Epistemology of the Horror Story

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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Jan. - Mar., 1982, Vol. 95, No. 375 (Jan. - Mar., 1982), pp. 33-50

Published by: American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/540021>

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The Epistemology of the Horror Story

NOWHERE ARE NARRATIVE'S IMAGES of unfolding, of hesitation, of the step and the key more thematically profound and more clearly worked on the level of effect than in the horror story. Because the horror story is adaptable to narrative techniques of face to face communication, the printed text, the cinema, and the simulated events of the amusement park, we might suspect that this form operates by a manipulation of narrativity itself, that its common effect works through the possibilities offered by information unfolding in time. The narrative structure of the horror story exaggerates and displays the sequentiality of all narrative structures; hence its adaptability to the monologic narrative voice, to the phenomenon of one page after another, to the sequential shots of the film, and to the temporality of directed travel through the landscape of the "house of horrors." The horror story form thus spans both preindustrial and postindustrial modes of fiction making and provides an important example of the ways in which folklore and literature share a repertoire of narrative devices.

Narrative Time

In any narrative, by definition, the syntactical sequence establishes an expectation of temporal sequencing.¹ We may extend this statement by saying that narrative modes extend temporally in such a way that closure is the focus of attention. In the horror story the expectations and tensions of receiving information sequentially are heightened and exaggerated in such a way that each addition of narrative information will not only affect the status of information given previously, it will affect the status of the listener himself. The listener's welfare becomes increasingly implicated as the narrative sequence proceeds. Unlike other narrative forms, where we can distinguish between the reader's time (the time of the reader/audience's perceiving of the narrative) and the narrative, or sign time (which is part of the fictional world),² in the horror

story audience time and narrative time collapse into each other as the storyteller proceeds.

A hesitation in the narrative must be marked by the audience. There is no possibility of "skipping ahead" of the rattling of chains, or the wandering discourse of the letter—the audience is taken step by step through the text. To read or hear the ending of the tale first would be to cancel out the experience of it. There is little difference here between the structure of a text's temporality and the structure of the Fun or Horror House, where the victim is committed to experience the full range of horrors presented and cannot simply jump out of the boat and swim back to the admissions gate or forward to the water chute that offers closure. We can also see at work here the analogy often drawn between the maze and the detective story, both structures which torment the reader with a variety of possibilities, only one of which is true. In these forms the audience must allow itself to be taken in by the text; there is no possibility of a transcendent position. Even the past—what the reader/listener has put behind him as he proceeds in the narrative—is made vulnerable to a hidden set of referents. Not even experience can be taken for granted or assumed to be irreversible.

Narrative Type

At the same time that the horror story presents us with a distinct form of narrative sequentiality, it presents us with an anomaly of narrative status. In looking at the varieties of narrative, we might distinguish between those narratives which stand in a metonymic relation to the world of everyday life and those narratives which stand in a metaphoric relation to that world.

In the first type of narrative, the "true story," patterns of signification are borrowed from the discourse of everyday life. Assumptions concerning consequence, causality, and, therefore, significance in that world are transferred to the world of the story. Such a story need not "really" be realistic, for to stand in the place where one could determine that "really" a priori would preclude one from understanding its operation. It is enough that the reality of the story is a matter of convention; indeed, the real is at least in part an accomplishment of the translations of experience offered in narrative itself. The narrative here serves an ideological function, articulating the general case or rule, fitting the special case into the prevailing social order by means of "it happens all the time" and "wouldn't you know," and thereby smoothing the culturally manufactured suture between individual and collective, and singular and general experience.

In contrast, those narratives which assert their fictive status, bracketing

their contents from the world of everyday life, come to stand in a metaphoric relation to the "real," a relation which can be a matter either of paralleling or skewing the conventions of that reality. In the true story the audience stands in the place of the narrator; there is a tacit assumption that audience and narrator can "stand in each other's shoes." The narrative is performed with an artful minimalization of artifice, and it is important that the narrator opens the text to the audience's statements of collaboration and confirmation. The best example of this type of realism is the personal experience narrative, which celebrates the idiosyncracies of personal experience at the same time that it calls forth examples of similar experiences from its audience. But in fictive versions of experience the audience stands as a necessary other, outside the events and telling of the story. The artifice of the storyteller, his control of the mode of production of the story, holds the audience within the story's world. And it is clear that this world is not the everyday lifeworld which would otherwise surround the listener. Thus, while there is turn-taking in the telling of fictional stories, there is little interruption and collaboration.

Contrary to this distinction between "true" and "made up" stories, the horror story takes place in a peculiar place between the real and the fictive; hence its proper assignment to "legend" in oral form. Yet, while the horror story is placed in historical time and told as if it were believed to be true, it often makes these claims ironically, "in frame only." We can see the horror story as an abomination of generic properties in several ways. First, it articulates a world that is neither true nor false, which thereby must be a metaphorical or fictive world. But, at the same time, its metanarrative devices continually assert it to be a "true story." The oral horror story begins formulaically, "This didn't happen to me, but it happened to my sister's friend," "I read this in the newspaper," or "My mother told me about a house that used to stand, when she was a girl, at the corner of. . . ." These are all devices which initiate the hearer into the world of the real, which map the story onto the landscape or social relations of the reader/listener's everyday lifeworld.³ And, like the true experience narrative, the horror story appears in sessions organized by turn-taking in the first person voice. But since these framing statements and contextual markers are clearly formulaic (to both audience and folklorist alike), they are not accepted as being on the same footing as such statements made within other narrative genres.

In the horror story the boundary between the real and the fictive, the interpretations of experience by the audience and the characters, is continually drawn and effaced. Both the story and its context of telling dissolve into a uniformity of effect. Hence, the "didn't really happen" of the fiction is transformed into a "really happened," a fear which is "real," yet which has no ac-

tual referent. Todorov suggests, as a criterion of the fantastic in general, that the reader will reject an allegorical or poetic interpretation of the narrative events; the referents of the story will not be dissolved into a systematic articulation of a hidden set of signs. In an allegorical tale, the puzzling elements of the story can be explained away by their significance; the literal succumbs to the device. For example, the talking animals of La Fontaine do not alarm us because they serve as embodiments not of themselves, but of a moral. But in the fantastic, “the figure and the supernatural are present in the same level and their relation is functional, not ‘etymological.’” Todorov adds that often “the fantastic realizes the literal sense of a *figurative* expression” (Todorov 1973:79). While the fable transforms the literal into the metaphorical, into mere meaning, the fantastic deflates the metaphorical, pointing to the objective status of language itself. The fable’s closure always points to the abstraction of the moral, and this abstraction exists only in language. We are not expected to attend to ants and grasshoppers, but rather to “Winter finds out what summer lays by.” In contrast, the fantastic unsettles the abstract powers of language. Hence that earliest of horror stories, “The Three Wishes,” in which the third wish must be used to undo the harm worked by the first two. Here all language flattens into an equality of significance; framing cannot rescue or preserve the status of the discourse as “only discourse.”

A primary quality of all fictions is their reversibility, their potential for being “only a fiction,” “only kidding.” Thus, taken back to their origins, they have the capacity to be repeated and engaged in again. And yet, this capacity for reversibility may be seen to stand in contrast to the tension of temporal sequencing. To assume that the text does not have consequence in the world of the everyday, that its outcomes will not in turn affect the shape of the real, is a necessary fiction by which we gain free access to the fiction itself.

Within the tale world, the succeeding elements stand in a contingent and irreversible relation to one another. Yet the horror story presents a repetition that is cumulative. Rather than canceling the significance of the original event by displacing it, the horror story increases that event’s significance, multiplying its effect with each repetition. It articulates a paradox of reversibility and irreversibility in the given social shape of death. For while death is irreversible in the nonfictive world, in the horror story it may threaten an infinity of reversibility; it becomes the finale which is not final, whose limits are determined by its narrative possibilities. Thus, many oral horror stories begin with an account of how the narrator had to walk through a graveyard or through the house of a person who has died, experiences which may lead to the specific incidents of the story time in which a dead person comes to life and recounts a

grievance (and story within the story) that has placed him or her between the worlds of the living and the dead. This switch between narrator and character further confuses the position of the audience. The narrator has become a listener and the story eerily begins to tell itself. Those who were speaking are now silenced and those who were silent and inanimate now have voices and motion. In some stories it is the failed closure of death which pulls the ghost into the story's setting. For a literary example, we can turn to Poe's "The Case of M. Valdemar." Valdemar's pitiful "For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—*I say to you that I am dead!*" (Poe 1927:419) articulates such a peculiar limbo between this world and another. The world of everyday life becomes plotted by the world of the dead. The otherworld is not a playful possibility to be manipulated by the real, as it often is in utopian fiction; rather, it is the absent and controlling hand that guides the present situation.

The Hidden Sign

Thus, the horror story may be framed simultaneously as a true story and as a fiction, and within its field of possibilities the reversibility and irreversibility of events are tested. The conclusions to events, both physical and rational, are tampered with, and the sequentiality of those same events is continually split into parallels. The hidden threads of the narrative are alternately revealed and concealed in a pattern that itself reaches a climax and resolution. And because of the anti-allegorical nature of this paralleling, the audience is caught within webs of significance whose threads are equally and successively alluring. The horror story threatens us with a situation where our assumed patterns of significance and insignificance are skewed, or where the sign appears only as form. The sign's referent is clouded in an ambiguity which we cannot decipher, and interpretation is deferred until the narrative's resolution.

Often the sign appears as a signal whose referent belongs to another world. For example, in M. R. James's classic story, "Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You my Lad," the hero, Parkins, discovers a whistle engraved with mysterious legends and, blowing it, awakens a supernatural creature, "a horrible, an intensely horrible face of *crumpled linen*. What expression he read upon it he could not or would not tell, but that the fear of it went nigh to maddening him is certain" (1912:222–223). In other James stories a scrapbook, a mezzotint, and a stained glass window lead their interpreters into the same precarious situation of awakening a long-sleeping supernatural power. The "what happens" of these stories is the unfolding of the referent; the narrative

thread is literally a thread of the reader's procedures for interpretation. To "get at the meaning of this" is to get to the end of the tale, where the pieces of signification finally fit together.

To go the wrong way is to defer the end of the story. The narrator often plays upon this by establishing a tension between the range of possibilities for interpretation and the brief span of time available for their resolution: before midnight, before the villain returns or the magic power dissolves, one must arrive at the correct interpretation and proceed. The novels of Horace Walpole and Ann Ward Radcliffe play with this type of teasing through the voices of servants whose stories are convolutions of narrative. Such novels provide literary transcriptions of oral storytelling devices in such a way as to exaggerate them. Jaquez's account to Manfred of how he and Diego saw the foot and leg of the giant shade of Alfonso in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is a set of embedded interpolations:

"I was going to tell your highness, that since the calamitous misfortune of my young lord, God rest his precious soul! Not one of us, your highness's faithful servants—indeed we are, my lord, though poor men—I say, not one of us has dared to set a foot about the castle, but two together; so, Diego and I . . ." [Walpole 1966:41].

Similarly, in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, Annette continually exasperates Emily by her leisurely translations of what is going on. One of the most interesting examples of Annette's storytelling style appears in Chapter V of Volume II where she recounts the history of the mysterious Laurentini:

"This castle, you must know, ma'amselle, is very old, and very strong, and has stood out many sieges, as they say. Now it was not Signor Montoni's always, nor his father's; no; but, by some law or other, it was to come to the Signor, if the lady died unmarried."

"What lady?" said Emily.

"I am not come to that yet," replied Annette, "it is the lady I am going to tell you about, ma'amselle: but, as I was saying, this lady lived in the castle, and had everything very grand about her, as you may suppose, ma'amselle. . . ."

When, a page later, Emily asks her to get to "the substance of her tale," Annette says, "All in good time, ma'am; all this I heard before at Venice, but what is to come I never heard till to-day" (Radcliffe 1970:236–237).⁴ In addition to transcriptions of such devices, Radcliffe's (the narrator's) own meta-narrative comments produce in places a strategy of hesitation: "The hints which had been thrown out to Valancourt, concerning Montoni's character and condition, were too true; but it was now left to time and occasion, to unfold the circumstances, both of what had, and of what had not been hinted,

and to time and occasion we commit them'' (1970:190). Here the reader is trapped by a mesh of the literal; the sequentiality of the narrative has been determined before the reader's arrival on the scene (cf. Doležel 1976:210–211). The narrative's fixed phrase form ironically approximates the extemporaneousness of free-phrase forms without permitting the interruptions that usually are permissible in free-phrase discourse: we think for a moment that we are confronted with conversation but then discover that we cannot talk back to the page.

The Audience as Victim

Comments such as Radcliffe's underscore the position of the audience as victim: the audience rarely knows more than the victim of the story. This victimization of the reader is particularly clear in those scenes in the written horror story where the reader is presented with a letter to be read at the same moment, within the same temporality, as it is read by the character. Here the technique of the letter is even more effective than it is in horror movies, for usually in watching the film we are aware of the context of reading, aware that the shadow cast on the page belongs to the character. But on this page the shadow is our own: we have taken the victim's place. Furthermore, the reality of the letter is before us, laid bare by our direct apprehension of it. Mary Shelley's presentation of Walton's letters to his sister at the beginning of *Frankenstein* puts us in the position of eavesdroppers who can verify with our own eyes and our own ears the veracity of the story, making it all the more credible when we read the recorded words of Frankenstein himself, "Remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman. The Sun does not more certainly shine in the heavens than that which I now affirm is true" (Shelley 1965:51).

In oral stories the direct quote and the sound effect serve this function, for there is nothing that intrinsically marks their effects as merely fictive. The power of horror stories told in dormitories is often supplemented by a "plant" outside of or in the room who might slowly creak open a door, slam down a window, scream, or make some other surprising sound at a climactic moment in the narration. Even without such planning, the "natural" sounds that surround the tale become suspect as being under the spell of the tale's causality: consider the tale told by the campfire at the edge of the woods and its capacity for incorporating owl hoots, snake slithers, and wolf howls. A literary example of this effect is the horrible scene in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the sounds described in the "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning ironically come to life as the sounds of the "dead" lady Madeline,

who has arrived to haunt her brother: “And now—tonight—Ethelred—ha! ha! the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault” (1927:286). Through these effects the temporality of the tale’s context becomes mapped upon the temporality of the tale’s contents. We might consider this to be a form of onomatopoeia on the level of structure; the discourse is turned into what it represents. On a simpler level consider that for a young child a scary story can be constructed around the saying of the initial bilabial plosive sound “buo,” “bu,” or “boo,” later transformed into its own utterer, The Bogeyman (Widdowson 1971:106).

Context and Theme

These relations between content and sound in the horror story bring us to the predominant feature of the horror story’s context—its liminality. The hesitation experienced by the reader or audience in this type of story is one of being in between interpretations, in between states of being. The written tale preys upon the solitude of reading, while the oral tale most often takes place in situations of ambiguity: after “lights out” in the dormitory, around the fire, in the dark of the slumber party, in the cabin at summer camp. Their nature as a holiday genre may not mark these stories as lighthearted so much as it marks them as being appropriate to a suspension of the normal order of things. They constitute an adolescent genre in the sense that they stand between the pure fantasy and the true experience narrative. Their concern with the boundaries between nature and culture, between the known and the amorphous, are the concerns of an adolescence which is perpetual.⁵ It is not so much that the story has become a function of its context—the gloom of rainy evenings by Lake Geneva, the hotel abandoned in an off-season, or the tent of a Boy Scout camp—but rather that the context is subsumed under the influence of the story. The context is accomplished—given a horrible life—by the story. Hence the eerie power of narrative gestures like, “It was a night like this one,” or “She was a young girl, about your size and about your age.”

The ambiguous status of these stories on the levels of genre and context is further supplemented by the ambiguity of their content. Here the relation between fear and knowing within a liminal context is underscored. Just as Victor Turner, in his study of Ndembu initiation rites, concluded that the monstrosity of liminal sacra is meant not so much to frighten initiates as to teach them the proper shape of things (1967:105), so the 19th century notion of the

sublime encompassed a fictional terror that results in transcendence and knowing. Radcliffe writes in *The Mysteries of Udolfo*,

As she passed through the chambers that led to this, she found herself somewhat agitated; its connection with the late lady of the castle, and the conversation of Annette, together with the circumstance of the veil, throwing a mystery over the subject, that excited a faint degree of terror. But a terror of this nature, as it occupies and expands the mind, and elevates it to high expectation, is purely sublime, and leads us, by a kind of fascination, to seek even the object, from which we appear to shrink [1970:248].

Whether oral or written, the horror story often depicts scenes of those ambiguous suburbs between nature and culture, or between categories of the natural: the dungeon (part basement, part cave), the swamp (part land, part water), the woods (part garden, part wilderness), and, perhaps most significantly, the haunted house, a powerful example of the domestic ceded to nature. Lotman has suggested that

the cultural function of the tension between the inner (closed) and the outer (open) spaces is clearly revealed in the structure of houses (and other buildings). In making a house, men partition off a part of space which—in contrast with the outer space—is perceived as culturally assimilated and regulated. However, this initial opposition acquires cultural significance only against a background of continual breaches in the opposite direction [1975:7].

Hence the horror of the house gone back to nature, or simply the shutters of a house in sympathetic movement with a storm.

The primary referent of fear in the story further displays this quality of liminality—a “creature” between the animal and the human or the human and the machine. As studies in the anthropology of classification have told us, even the fear of blood may be translated into an epistemological dilemma, for, as a bodily excretion, blood presents us with a paradox of a part of ourselves found outside of ourselves, violating the boundary of our notion of the self (Leach 1972:206–220). It is both the ambivalence and ambiguity of the object which make it fearful. In the group of “scary stories” collected by Mary Knapp and Herbert Knapp for their anthology of American children’s folklore, one story centers on the fright of a little girl who finds that it is not her collie who has been licking her hand all night, but rather someone who has killed the dog and left a note saying, “Humans can lick too, you know.” In others, young lovers barely escape from a man with a hook instead of an arm and babysitters bake babies instead of turkeys or discover little boys trying to climb stairs with their legs cut off (1976:243–244). The dog-man, the mechanical-man, the cannibal, and the mutation all present modes of exploring

the boundaries between the human and the other, between nature and culture. It is not accidental that these are also the themes of the carnival sideshow or freak show. For younger children more simple gory stories—the jar of mayonnaise that turns out to be a jar of pus, the potato chips that are leprosy scales (Knapp and Knapp 1976:246–247)—or games where grapes and spaghetti are passed in the dark and transformed by narrative into eyeballs and brains are enough to articulate the relations between identity and difference, between the self and what lies outside the self.

As another example of ambiguity on the level of theme, images of decay in the horror story present the sites of the known reshaped into the no-longer definable. There is Poe's M. Valdemar crumbling before the hands of the narrator, or Hawthorne's Rappacini's daughter, waiting to disassemble like an over-ripe fruit at the touch of her lover. The ruin acquires this same significance as a form of threatening ambiguity. In *Nightmare Abbey*, we find Peacock, through the voice of Mr. Glowry, poking fun at the 19th century craze for decay: "You will see many fine old ruins, Mr. Cypress: crumbling pillars, and mossy walls—many a one-legged Venus and headless Minerva—many a Neptune buried in sand—many a perforated Bacchus doing duty as a water-pipe—many reminiscences of the ancient world, which I hope was better worth living in than the modern" (Peacock 1964:65). While metonymy works in humor by allowing the part to point distinctly to the boundaries of the whole, in the horror narrative metonymy points to an indistinct boundary. Hence the referent of the apparent part is cloaked in an amorphousness which is terrifying: the shadow on the wall, the hand appearing from behind a curtain, the footsteps on the stair, the broken lock. The part has become monstrous and suppressed the whole to which it should belong. The success of "The Monkey's Paw" as both an oral and written tale depends upon this fear of separation. Or we might consider the giant Alfonso, whom we see only in pieces until the epiphany of *The Castle of Otranto*, and the horrible elbow which the narrator uncovers in the basement of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shunned House." The frightening metonymy of the disembodied voice is particularly effective in oral tales like "The Babysitter," where a girl learns that the murderer who has telephoned her is upstairs, on the extension phone in her charge's bedroom.

In addition to this horror worked by metonymy, the horror story often is effective through a kind of thematic inversion in which the familiar is transformed into its opposite. The monstrous child, in contemporary popular films like *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *Carrie*, the child whose qualities are exaggerated inversions of our cultural notions of childhood, frightens in this manner. Here we can also place the strange play between celibacy and lust at

work in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, and, more tamely, in the anticatholicism of Radcliffe's *The Italian*. The order of religious tenets is inverted and then exaggerated in characters like Lewis's Ambrosio and Matilda, and Radcliffe's Schedoni and cruel abbess. In these examples the character's sexuality is often overdetermined as well. Ambrosio kills his mother and rapes his sister, while Schedoni attempts to assassinate his daughter in her sleep. Kinship relations are inverted into an overwhelming system of signification which denies our assumptions of name and operation. We may add to this overdetermination the phenomena of the "supernumerary love" and the double. Todorov remarks that along with incest and homosexuality, the supernumerary love represents a transformation of desire, an unnatural skewing of social relationships. "The *l'amour à trois* is the most common" of these forms, he concludes, and can be related to the prevailing polysemy of the image in the fantastic (1973:131-132).

The appearance of the double as a polysemy of the self is particularly invidious in these stories, since repetition in this genre has the effect of cumulative suspense. One repetition is sufficient to imply an infinity of repetitions that cancels out, or kills, the status of the original, for the original's status in the temporal sequence is undermined by our constant attention to, and horror of, the process of multiplication. In this lies the basis of the admonition, "If you see yourself looking at yourself in the mirror, you will die." We are frightened increasingly and anew by each doubling of the image until, like Poe's William Wilson, we find it unbearable.

The Knowing Voice

In contrast to the ambiguity of genre, context, and content at work in the horror story stands the authority of the narrative voice. I have already noted the story's preface of credulity and the force it achieves through a concrete, apprehensible articulation of its status. The "I" of the narrator transcends both the story's content and its context of telling; it thus produces an illusion of detachment from these two scenes of activity. With the shift in consciousness that moved reality from the collective to the individual in the 18th century, we see the real appearing in the sensual and the sensible, that which can be touched "first hand" rather than that which necessarily recurs through history (Watt 1957:9-34). The narrator holds an absolute, if not cruel, authority over the reader, controlling the flow and juncture of the narrative sequence, manipulating the appearance and disappearance of images. As the manager of the theater of fright, the authorial voice not only forces the reader

to undergo the narrative step by step, it also controls the size and depth of such steps. We derive our confidence in the reliability of the "I" from its invitation to change places, its articulation of itself as an ordinary human voice, a voice telling a true experience narrative like any other such narrative we might encounter in our everyday lives. Because of this confidence we are particularly vulnerable to the narrator as culprit, like those of Poe's "Tell Tale Heart" or "The Black Cat," or Agatha Christie's narrator in *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd*? This device is more easily worked in the written tale because of the distance the mode of production places between narrator and reader. The "I" in such stories is often the voice of a scientist or scholar, a servant of reason presenting us with the unrealizable and thereby reframing it as the real.⁶ Antiquarians and folklorists, those who awaken ambiguous objects into the inappropriate context of the present, are particularly likely to be victimized. It is the narrator's eighty-year-old antiquarian uncle, Dr. Elihu Whipple, who is evaporated by the vampirelike monster of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shunned House." And M. R. James's stories, originally written as Christmas entertainments to be performed aloud for academic friends, present us with one antiquarian after another who places himself in a supernatural predicament by waking an object from its past life and thereby setting into motion some long-sleeping set of horrible consequences.

The tension between the calmness and reason of the distanced narrative voice and the wild and terrifying possibilities of the events it describes mounts as the audience "draws closer" and proceeds through the narrative sequence. The voice presents a paradoxical mixture of speech acts, for it is both a report and a warning. As a report it survives the events it describes, and as a warning it precedes a future set of horrible possibilities. The voice itself becomes an image evoking fear. Like those traces of the supernatural, the ephemeral signs of warning that appear within the narrative, the voice of the narrator is increasingly both ambiguous and omnipresent, trapping us between the past and the future in a present of unknowable consequence. Hence, as the narrative proceeds, the reporting voice is subsumed more and more by the force of the warning, and the warning, like the command and the promise, is a speech act that does what it says. Again, we see the peculiar juncture of truth and fiction that the horror story articulates dissolve into its effects; the audience is affected both sensibly and truly by the events that the fiction relates. It is not simply a matter of the listener sympathizing or identifying with the victim; rather, by means of a complex narrative process, the listener is transformed into the victim. It is as if in stripping the victim of his dramatic mask, the listener has uncovered, to his horror, his own face.

Parody

To further articulate the structure and elements of the horror story, we might examine its parodies. In parody either the syntagmatic or paradigmatic axis of the text will be laid bare by its juxtaposition with an alternative axis in a new context. First, let us consider two oral parodies of the horror story from children's folklore. In "The Golden Arm," the audience is told of a boy who steals a golden arm from a grave. Later that same night, he is asleep upstairs in his bed when he hears a voice saying, "Who stole my golden arm? *Whoooo* stole my golden arm?" The narrator repeats the ghost's complaint in increasingly loud and eerie tones as the ghost climbs each step of the stairs, each step bringing him nearer to the victim's bed. Just as the ghost reaches the bed and screams "*Whoooo* stole my golden arm?" in the most frightening voice thus far, the narrator jumps at his listeners, yelling "YOU DID!" In "The Viper," children in a cabin at camp are told that several years ago, on a night like this one, some campers were sitting in this very cabin when they heard the wind rustling around the windows and a voice moaning, "Here comes the viper." The narrator describes the voice's progress as it gradually approaches the cabin door, again making his voice louder and eerier with each step. "Suddenly they heard a knock on the door and the bravest of the campers threw it open, shouting 'Who's there?' And there stood a little man with a bucket and cloth who said, 'It's de vindow viper. I've come to vipe your vindows.' "

Both of these stories graphically demonstrate the procedure by which the authorial voice of the narrator transforms the audience into the victim. The voice of the frightening figure in each case is not simply described; rather, it is articulated, brought to life, through quotation, and its approach is paralleled by the narrator's voice approaching the personal space of the audience. In their starkness these two stories build the scaffoldings of a tantalizing epiphany; they are all *approach*, and the parody results from the sudden appropriation of the narrative sequence by an inappropriate or trivial closure. In "The Golden Arm," the closing is at the same time a metanarrative comment on the procedure of turning the reader into a victim, breaking frame and thereby dissolving into the inconsequential and the surrounding context. In "The Viper," the substitution of a benign and everyday being within the paradigmatic slot of the monster results in upsetting the appropriate force of the sequence of events.

It is the transformation of closure that makes these narratives parodies of the horror story. The parody has reframed the effect of the horror story; the audience's fear still stands effected, but it is made vulnerable to the narrator's

reinterpretation. Here we see the juncture between the horror story and the prank. Both result in tangible effects, the tangible consequences of fear or a manipulated environment, and both depend for this final effect upon an unknowing reader or audience whose experience of the form is properly sequential and cumulative. Hence, both pranks and horror stories depend upon the continual acquisition of new audiences, new victims, in order to survive. This is the profound force of the vampire story, for the narrative experience of such a story is paralleled on the level of its content: the unknowing victim is turned into an authorial villain who in turn corrupts new audiences.

Similarly, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* appropriate the paradigmatic elements of the gothic horror story and reframe them within a mundane syntagmatic axis of events: the mysterious chest turns out to be an ordinary linen hamper; the evil widower a bourgeois gentleman; the mysterious bedroom merely a bedroom; and the marriage of the star-crossed lovers simply a union of common sense and convenience. In Henry's rapid and predictable "prediction" of Catherine's fall into a gothic plot (Austen 1906:203–206), the mysterious and unfolding deliberation of the horror story is undermined. The humor here is analogous to the effect deriving from an acceleration of adventure movie footage. Instead of waiting at the edge of his seat, the reader steps out into a position of transcendence. And instead of sympathizing with the characters, the reader stands at a laughable distance from them.

In his satirical poem, "The Age: A Poem, Moral, Political, and Metaphysical, with Illustrative Annotations," C. J. Pitt outlines a formula for how one may transform a sentimental novel into a romance: "Where you find a castle, put an house; a cavern, a bower; a groan, a sigh; a giant, a father; a bloodstained dagger, a fan" (Bleiler 1966:xvi). Hence, by alternating paradigmatic sets the same syntagmatic series is transformed into either a realistic or fantastic narrative. It is only outside of the world of the frightening narrative, in the clear light of day, that the outline of those elements can be articulated and revealed in all their silliness. Hence Solomon Gildrig's parody of the gothic style in "The Miniature" efficiently exposes the elements of that style and their possible combinations. Like Henry, he is clearly and glibly articulating what the narrative itself is at pains to conceal—the hidden machinations by which it is set into motion:

The first circumstance must of course be a storm, with plenty of vivid flashes, distant rumbling, with a small portion of a lonely moor. Here our prose must be somewhat *delirious*, till we conduct it, together with its hero, safe to the walls of a half-ruined castle. There our author must not forget his *dried-up moats and mouldering arches*; and let him be sure to cover his turrets

with a *good coating of moss and ivy*; if an owl can be procured at any price, the mixture will be greatly improved. A clanking of chains must next succeed, with a most dismal groan, re-echoing through the vaulted passage. Here DON BERNARDO, DON SEBASTIAN, or DON what you will, must start up, dash through thick and thin, till he tumbles down, extinguishes his lamp, and leaves himself and the reader in all the mazes of mysterious confusion. . . .

Grildrig concludes, “such is the ridiculous absurdity with which the age is fed, being puzzled with such flimsy intricacy, for the most part free from all meaning, whether good or bad; mature in dullness and confirmed in full stupidity” (Grildrig 1804–05:17–21). Significantly, these parodies attach themselves to the genre and not to the individual work and take the form of metanarrative comments rather than further narration. Here the device that is laid bare is not so much the element or its place in sequence, but the way in which a set of elements is combined and presented within a particular shape of context. Against Grildrig’s “receipt” is placed the true consequence of the horror story: its effect upon the reader. Within the horror story our attention is drawn to lived experience, an experience of particulars and their significance. The groan, the cavern, the giant, and the bloodstained dagger reverberate as symbols of an absent set of consequences; all point beyond themselves to the reader’s position within the impending chain of events.

Fatal Errors

The elements of the horror story appear to us within a darkened theater of signs; their referents remain concealed by the contingent steps of the narrative. Only through time is their significance unfolded. The listener is caught in an articulated range of false possibilities until he is redeemed by closure. Above all, then, the horror story may be seen as being about interpretation. The conventions of genre which lend us structured expectations with which to approach the fiction are undermined; we do not know whether the tale is a true experience narrative or “merely” a fiction, whether its time and space are to be placed in the past, the future, or even the possible. Meanwhile, as we are deliberating these problems, the tale has appropriated the immediate context of our situation as reader or listeners. The signs within the story present us with enigmas of significance: do the mysterious glances of the maid, the black kettle in the corner, the tears in the drapes, the catch on the window, somehow count? Are they being articulated in a process of backgrounding and foregrounding that is somehow meant to reveal a pattern of significance? We are haunted by Poe’s intrepid Dupin, who points out to his friend that the Prefect’s error in failing to find the purloined letter has been to disregard the

self-evident (1927:148–149). While the audience is occupied in attending to the details of the victim's plight, the narrator successfully snares the context of the tale and transforms the audience into the victim. The larger pattern of significance becomes the recounting of the narrative itself and its real consequences in the situation at hand.

Not only are these problems of interpretation worked on the level of tangible and inanimate objects come to life through their relationship to the narrative series of events, we also are presented with dilemmas regarding the interpretation, the "reading," of character. Assassins are transformed into long-lost fathers, collie dogs into murderers, babysitters into cannibals, abbesses into sadistic tyrants, rescuers and villains alike into childhood sweethearts. The metaphors of the self are transformed into their literal referents or inverted into opposing and exaggerated ones. An initial field of possibilities is articulated and then played according to an absent set of directions. And when a set of directions is given to the victim, following it without examining larger patterns of significance or properly assessing the character of the instructor results in the resurrection of a vampire or monster like those of John Polidori's and Lord Byron's invention.

What is at risk in these stories is our good faith in our ability to know the world by means of a socially given system of interpretation. Our hierarchies of relevance, our assumptions of the social, and our faith in the reliability of the self and its potential for apprehending the real are all suspended, put into brackets. While the discourse of everyday life continually reassures us that we can stand in each other's shoes, that the collaborative gestures of conversation signal a fit between our system of significance and the systems of others, the horror story ruptures this mutuality and envelops us within a teasing confusion of signs. In any supermarket Gothic, the cover presents us with a single light, blazing from the high window of a castle, that pulls us into the dreary steps of the narrative. More likely than not, it will go out just as we reach the top of the stairs.

Notes

I am grateful to my students in children's folklore and literature classes at Temple University for examples of oral "scary story" devices and themes. I would also like to thank Harold Closson, who first explained to me how to tell "The Viper."

¹ Here we might contrast lyric aesthetic modes, which emphasize repetition and simultaneity, with narrative modes, which emphasize sequentiality.

² Doležel (1976:209–217) has presented a discussion of the differences between authorial time, reader's time, the story time, the time of the storytelling act, and the time of the text's representation. While Doležel contends that "there are no direct correlatives of these two forms (authorial and reader's time)"

in the structures of narrative time, the horror story does, in fact, map reader's time onto the time of the narrative. The experience of horror depends upon the reader's confusion of his or her own temporal context with that of the representation.

³ In the stories collected by Danielle Marie Roemer in her study of scary story legends, one narrator said, "Well, this happened to my grandmother," and then added, "Well, that's the way you're supposed to tell it" (1972:48).

⁴ The servant's exasperating narrative style may be a topos of the early novel in general. For example, Honour and Partridge in Fielding's *Tom Jones* often employ this technique of suspense.

⁵ Here we might remember that Mary Shelley was nineteen when she wrote *Frankenstein* and that the text arose from the dares of a story session, a session that echoes "The Fall of the House of Usher" in its juxtaposition of real and imagined horrors:

One evening, while Byron was reciting lines from Coleridge's "Christabel," Shelley suddenly shrieked and ran from the room. The others followed him and found him near collapse, leaning against a fireplace. Polidori administered ether, which was considered a restorative in small doses, and Shelley then told of envisioning a woman, perhaps Mary Shelley, with eyes instead of nipples. Mary Shelley, too, shared the mood. As she lay half-asleep at night, the conversation of the previous day about Darwin's experiments in creating life, the possibility of revivification of the dead by electricity, and the impiety of it all swirled through her head. She dreamed the central situation of her *Frankenstein*. She awoke, and recognizing that what had terrified her might terrify others, began to write the novel [Bleiler 1966: xxxiv].

⁶ H. P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" has a typical beginning of this type:

I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the antarctic—with its vast fossil hunt and its wholesale boring and melting of the ancient ice caps. And I am all the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain. . . . It is an unfortunate fact that relatively obscure men like myself and my associates, connected with a small university, have little chance of making an impression where matters of a wildly bizarre or highly controversial nature are concerned [1973:1–2].

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