

The development stages of horror genre

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Literature is immense, it is many layered and multiply angled concept. It has a lot of fiction genres such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, romance, detective, adventure, suspense, and etc. Some of the genres are more popular, while some of them less popular among the readers. One of the popular genres of literature among readers is horror fiction. Horror fiction has always received powerful reactions from its readers. Besides Literature, horror has appeared in Art, Cinema and Games. Horror is an ancient genre, the main aim of which is to scare or frighten the reader. Its roots can be traced back to ancient traditions, myth and folklore. From ancient time people used various stories to scare each other, while sitting around the campfire. Up to nowadays adults or older children often use stories about mythical creatures to frighten bad children into good behavior. Here two questions arise: Why have people invented or thought up scary stories or tales since ancient time? What has influenced the minds of people?

The answer to these questions lies on the evaluation of civilization, historical events and human nature. In ancient times people were very superstitious, and during the middle Ages the religious system and hunting on the people, wrongly taken for witches, began. These situations add new story details to the plot of the horror tales. People began talking and writing about evil characters and personages that church and theology taught them. Those myths, legends and tales have survived up to now, facing some changes.

There has been a lot of debate on the problem of when the horror genre first appeared. Genres are historical concepts that are subject to change over time; Thomas Kent states that “The term genre may be understood to have two dimensions: one synchronic, the other diachronic. In one sense, a genre is a system of codifiable conventions, and in another sense, it is a continually changing cultural artifact” [6;15] Genres are not stable, they are always changing. Or as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, “A genre lives in the present but always remembers its past, its beginning”.[2;106] That’s why in order to define any genre first we should know its origins and historical development, as it might have faced various changes over the course of time. It is obvious that there is a single point of origin for any genre and any new genre gets its characteristic elements from already existing genres. As for the horror genre it was not until the second half of the 18th century that it was shaped into a distinctive genre in the form of English Gothic novel, with the publication of “The Castle of Otranto” by Horace Walpole in 1765. Indeed, the Gothic novel began to emerge at a time when the forces of industrialization were transforming the very structures of society ... Emergent capitalism led to a growing sense of isolation and alienation, as increasing mechanization divorced workers from the products of their labour ...”[9;2].

Literary critics have suggested many different points of origin of horror fiction and most have good reasons to support their claims. For example, a famous American horror writer, H.P. Lovecraft in his book “Supernatural Horror in

Literature” suggests that the genre dates back to pre-literate times and the stories told of monsters and horrors [7; 18], and if we see the genre as merely the expression of horror and fears of the supernatural, then there is some truth to that argument. Other critics, such as Noel Carroll, look to the Gothic as the most likely point of origin and he considers “The Castle of Otranto” as the first horror novel. “The immediate source of the horror genre was the English Gothic novel, the German Schauer-roman, and French roman noir. The general, though perhaps arguable, consensus is that the inaugural Gothic novel of relevance to the horror genre was Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto” in 1765. This novel carried on the resistance to neo-classical taste initiated by the preceding generation of graveyard poets.”[3; 4]. Typical distinguishing features of gothic writing are dark settings, threatening characters, and a frequent use of supernatural elements which are considered as one of its most important features. Supernatural phenomena are obvious in the presence of strange creatures, ghosts, dead wandering people, weird noises, sudden natural disturbances, dreams, and prophecies but have seldom been connected to the character’s confrontation with their unconscious. We may say that gothic fiction is a literature of nightmare. Among its conventions are found dream landscapes and figures of the subconscious imagination. Its fictional world gives form to amorphous fears and impulses common to all mankind, using an amalgam of materials, some torn from the author’s own subconscious mind and some stuff of myth, folklore, fairy tale, and romance. It conjures up beings - mad monks, vampires, and demons - and settings - forbidding cliffs and glowering buildings, stormy seas and the dizzying abyss - that have literary significance and the properties of dream symbolism as well. Gothic fiction gives shape to concepts of the place of evil in the human mind. Gothic fiction has been called escape literature, intended to inspire terror for terror’s sake. [8; 3ff]

The supernatural gothic was very important for the further evolution of the horror genre in which the existence and cruel operation of unnatural forces are described with a lot of details. Since supernatural elements are unknown and unfamiliar, they easily arouse anxiety, fear, and even result in terror. J.M.S. Tompkins states that “the authors work by sudden shocks, and when they deal with the supernatural, their favorite effect is to wrench the mind suddenly from skepticism to horror struck belief.” [10; 245]. “The Mysteries of Udolpho” written in 1794 by Ann Radcliffe and “The Monk”, first published anonymously in 1795 and later revealed as the work of Matthew Lewis, are great examples of supernatural gothic. E. A. Baker’s 1907 introduction to Lewis’ “The Monk” explains Anne Radcliffe’s impact on the scenes of Gothic texts as a whole: “Mrs. Radcliffe author of “The Mysteries of Udolpho” and “The Italian” discovered one thing of unique importance, the value of atmosphere: landscapes, ruins, characters, costumes, light and shade, are subdued by delicate touches to the right key of emotion; everything lulls the reader into the state of mind most harmonious with the incidents to be enacted[1; xi-xii)]. Carroll considers” The Monk” as the forerunner of horror genre. “The appearance of the demon and the gruesome impalement of the priest at the end of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* is

the real harbinger of the horror genre". [3;4] These works represent the transformation from gothic novels to horror. Violence and brutality so openly described in the contemporary works of horror were only outlined by a few drops of blood on the floor or a piece of cloth torn on the thorns of the bushes.

In the 19th century Mary Shelley and John William Polidori made a great contribution to the development of horror. Mary Shelley published "Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus" in 1817, the first novel with the introduction of the image of monster into literature. After two years, in 1819 John William Polidori wrote "The Vampire: A Tale", the first vampire tale in English language, and a year after, in 1820 Charles Maturin wrote "Melmoth the Wanderer". These works brought new dimensions of fear and they are regarded as marking stage of classic horror as well as being the source of influence and inspiration for the later horror writers. Though horror fiction continued to be written during the period between 1820s and 1870s, its importance weakened for English people as the realistic novels began appearing. During this period mostly short stories were written by such writers as William Mudford, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and James Hogg, in the later 1840s, the popular imagination was gripped by "Varney the Vampire: or, The Feast of Blood", a serial novel in 220 chapters by Thomas Prest, and "Wagner, the Wehr-wolf" by George William MacArthur. Generalizing about this period, Benjamin Franklin Fisher writes: The significant trend in horror tales of this period mirrored developments in the greater Victorian and American novels then emerging into a solidly artistic and serious genre. There was a shift from physical fright, expressed through numerous outward miseries and villainous actions to psychological fear. The inward turn in fiction emphasized motivations, not their overt terrifying consequences. The ghost-in-a-bedsheet gave way, as it did literally in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol", to the haunted psyche, a far more significant force in the "spooking" of helpless victims. [5;177].

Another prominent figure of this period Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was famous for his short stories as "In a glass darkly" and "Carmilla". In his stories he frequently placed the supernatural amidst the world of everyday life, where the persecution of ordinary, innocent victims, (rather than gothic overreachers) was closely observed and received the kind of psychological elaboration that would set the tone for much of the ensuing work in the genre. [3;6] While speaking about 19th century horror fiction we should not miss Robert Louis Stevenson's "The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" a novel about a doctor, called Jekyll, who created a monster in his own body and soul, while inventing so called elixir that turns his personality into another, Mr. Hyde (1887) and Bram Stoker's "Dracula or Undead"(1897).

To summarize this period we can say that the horror genre of 19th century was characterized by monsters, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, scientists like Frankenstein and doctor Jekyll who failed and became the victims of their own creations. As for the form of literary genre, short story prevailed in this stage of development. The works like "Frankenstein" and "The strange case of Dr. Jekyll

and Mr. Hyde” were written inspired by the nineteenth-century fear of scientific change and technology.

In the first half of the 20th century there were the following authors and their works, which excelled in horror field: W.W.Jacobs with a short story “The Monkey’s Paw”(1902), Montague Rhodes James with “Count Magnus”(1904) and “A ghost stories of an Antiquary”, Algernon Blackwood “The House on the Borderland”(1908).During two centuries horror as a genre was perfectly shaped. It completely separated from the gothic novel, though some authors still used its typical elements in order to brighten up their works. According to Gary William Crawford, in contrast to the cosmic (cosmic horror is mostly characterized by civilization coming from outer space, which conquered the Earth before humankind, it implies elements of science fiction and depicts emotions when a person finds out something he would rather not know about.) strain in the works of masters of the preceding generation the English horror story after World War I took a realist and psychological turn in the works of Walter De La Mare, L.P.Hartley, W.F.Harvey, R.H.Malden, A.N.L.Munby, L.T.C.Rolt, M.P.Dare, H.Russell Wakefield, Elizabeth Bowen, Mary Sinclair, and Cynthia Asquith. [4;279].

The horror of this period can be characterized with the increased fascination with the occult, spiritualism, and related beliefs at this time. Both supernatural horror and occult fiction found a large audience in the early 20th century Britain. “Ancient Sorceries” (1908), a short story by Algernon Blackwood is a beautiful example of horror of satanic possession. The protagonist of the story during his vacation visits an unknown village. After some days people disappear in mysterious ways when he tries to follow them, and sometimes he notices a movement that seems more catlike than human entire village is united in their worship of satanic forces, and their religion has given them animalistic qualities. Or “The Hungry Moon”(1986) is very much in this spirit, in which a remote English town conceals the existence of cavern-dwelling creatures and surviving druidic magic.

During the first part of the 20th century, all supernatural horror was referred to as “ghost stories” even if there were no ghosts involved at all.[11;9] The form was quite popular in England for many years. “The Ash-Tree” by M. R. James, which appeared in the collection “Ghost Stories of an Antiquary”(1904), only to a limited extent involves a ghost, actually being the story of a witch’s curse. The image of vampire lost its horrific power. The vampire was now a romantic figure and was as likely to be good as evil. However there were some authors who continued the vampire tradition.

As science and technology continued developing, in the second half of the 20th century the main objects of fear became the results of these technological progresses, new machines and robots were invented, cosmonauts and spacemen flied into space to examine the moon and other planets. Some people claimed to have seen unidentified flying object, (UFO) in different parts of the world. Thus there appeared the fear of unknown objects and aliens or alien race and these phenomena found its reflection in the literature of horror fiction. Now aliens

were used in place of the traditional demons and other monsters of the predecessors. "The Grey Ones" J. B. Priestley (1952) is a true example. The grey ones are not born but possess ordinary humans, displacing the original personality. They are not the people they appear, but have secret purpose to dull down the life and enslave the humanity. This theme was mostly used by American horror writers such as Lovecraft and Stephen King. At the same time, the works of this period offered relentless paranoia, showing ordinary people caught up in events they only dimly understand and forced to flee forces almost beyond their comprehension.

Summarizing the 20th century horror fiction Carroll theorizes that the appearance of terrors – such as society's increasing paranoia over the supernatural across the 50s and 60s, the dread of corporeal-gore into the 70s and 80s, and psychological distress over unseen demons in the 90s and now - can represent horror-cycles. [3;207]. James Herbert's famous horror novel "The Fog" represents the society's morality. The work starts with earthquake, in the result of which a deadly yellowish fog emerges out of the earth. Whoever comes in touch with the fog becomes insane. The insanity is not the same for everybody. It depends on personal morals and personality; the evil deeds of the characters differ from each other greatly.

Thus, in this period sizeable portion of horror works draws its conflict from psychological rather than supernatural sources. Even the supernatural works are less concerned with the nature of the threat than with the mental processes of the protagonists, their reactions to what is happening around them, and their ability or inability to deal with it.

So, in conclusion we can say that everything is changeable in life, as well in literature. The genres are not stable. The elements and traits of genres face many changes over the course of time, preserving some elements of the origin. And this phenomenon also happened to horror genre. Emerging from gothic novel the genre developed, updating and renewing its elements as the time passed.

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