Survey of Contemporary Horror

Fiction

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Signed

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Introduction

What scares you? Fear manifests in many different ways for every being on this earth. However diverse these horrific episodes may be, there is one universal element common to every human experience: We all have fears. One avenue through which we can explore, identify and even vicariously experience our most primal fears is through horror fiction. H.P. Lovecraft said:

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as literary form (www.quotationspage.com).

Coupled with Lovecraft’s fear of the unknown is the fear of any threat to our fragile mortality, fear of anything that may potentially cause physical harm to our being. This is a phobia innate to every person. The most precious and frail endowment of human existence is our ability to sustain and promote our humanity. When this gift is threatened in any way, shape or form, a fear is created. There are several ways through which we can more concretely define these fears, subcategories to the dread of any danger to our delicate subsistence.

For example, fear of the unexplained. This phobia can be defined as dread of that which we cannot rationalize with existing or obtainable evidence. Another is the fear of the unseen. This phobia could be described as fright of something that is intangible or concealed. This fear arises from the fact that we cannot calculate the level of danger presented by the unseen menace. Next is the fear of the supernatural. This fear is broad to say the least, but
specifically refers to that which we are unable to associate with existing earthly forms and rational concrete explanations. Last is the fear of helplessness. This phobia is characterized by the feeling of anxious autonomy, by encountering a threatening situation that we are unable to control or placate; therefore, jeopardizing our ultimate safety. Each of these phobias can be identified as a subcategory of the fear of personal physical harm. These are the most primal and universal categories of human fear. Through horror fiction, we are able to access and explore the intricate design behind these fears.

Horror fiction and art have a deep rooted presence in our history and contemporary culture. By examining the horrific art forms and fiction in our past and recognizing the ways in which these elements of our culture have progressed over time, we can not only learn more about the progression of our phobias as a society, but also about our own fears. Following a comprehensive overview of horror through history, an examination of several prominent contemporary horror fiction authors and their most influential works will reveal how different genres of horror fiction exemplify our most primal human fears by playing on the aforementioned categories of terror.

**A Brief History of Horror**

"Horror Fiction is, broadly, fiction in any medium intended to scare, unsettle or horrify the reader. Historically the source of terror experienced throughout horror fiction manifests from the exposure to all things evil, unexplained and bizarre. Elements of terror can be found in horror fiction as early as Greek tragedy" (wikipedia).
One of the earliest examples of horror fiction comes from Dante Alighieri’s *The Inferno*, written in the early 14\(^{th}\) century, which chronicles the poet’s journey through Hell. This work provided some of the most elaborate and subsequently prominent descriptions of Hell. Alighieri successfully exposed the fundamental religion, based terror, or supernatural fear, of burning in the tar pits of Hell for all of eternity (tabula, 1).

Moving into the next century, the legend of Dracula is born. One of the most sinister, seductive and horrifying villains of horror fiction originates in, where else, Transylvania. In the late 15\(^{th}\) century, Vladislav Basarab gained the crown of Wallacia and subsequently the infamous nickname Dracula, meaning “Son of the Dragon.” His cruelty, obsession with slaughter and unnecessary execution created the legend upon which the fictional, bloodsucking Dracula was forged (tabula, 1).

Between the 15\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) centuries, the production of horrific literature and art increased. Hieronymous Bosch was producing works of art that displayed the gruesome horrors of Hell. In Paris, in 1485, Guyot Marchant published the first edition of *Danse Macabre* or “Dance of Death,” which depicts the ominous arrival of a personified Death. In the 1580’s theatre emerged as the premier portrayer of terror. Works by playwrights such as Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare displayed scenes of horrid death and tragedy, steering horror onto the stage and into the 17\(^{th}\) century (tabula, 2).

The 18\(^{th}\) century was truly a hotbed for the creation of the horror novel in its truest form. Terror continued to gain more presence in the works of writers and became a common element in storytelling. It is clear that horror fiction, as a popular and recognized genre, begins with the Gothic novel, which “exploded into popularity in the late 18\(^{th}\) and early 19\(^{th}\) centuries” (tabula, 2).
Most horror historians believe that Horace Walpole's novel *Castle of Otranto*, published in 1765, was the first true Gothic, or horror, novel. Gothic fiction is described as “a literature of decay...the matter of the Gothic tale use a great structure of succumbing, crumbling and sinking into all perversions of the architectural, human, vegetable and animal” (tabula, 20). In the same year, Ann Radcliff published *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which remained the most popular piece of Gothic fiction until the early 19th century. “Radcliff introduced the poetical landscape into the modern novel, and her popularity was immense” (tabula, 21).

In 1800, Johann Ludwig Tieck’s *Wake Not the Dead* became the first known English vampire story when it was translated from German. In June of 1816, the horror fiction genre was truly revolutionized when a group of friends, including Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley and Dr. John Polidori, convened at a villa by Lake Geneva for a summer vacation. “From this meeting both the vampire sub-genre and science fiction itself are created in English” (tabula, 22).

In 1818 Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was published. This novel proved to not only create the sub-genre of science fiction, but also influenced the “popular image of the monster” in subsequent horror fiction and art. Following the successful release of *Frankenstein*, Dr. Polidori, another member of the Lake Geneva group, published *The Vampire* in 1819. This novel was considered “the first vampire tale of any substance in the English language” (tabula, 23). “Soon the literary world was populated with a new cast of characters including madmen, sadists, vampires, monsters, and werewolves lurking in dark woods, secluded castles or haunted houses” (tabula, 23).

In 1833, an inventive macabre writer, by the name Edgar Allan Poe, emerged onto the literature scene. Poe became famous by writing tales of terror and intrigue the likes of which the
world had never experienced. He is considered to be the father of the modern detective novel and remains one of the most influential writers of his time (tabula, 24).

During the 1880's, France experienced a literature movement known as “L’esprit Décadent.” The forerunning authors of this literary revolution included Charles Baudelaire, Joris Karl Huysmans and Guy de Maupassant. Collectively these writers produced some of the finest works of European macabre in history (tabula, 25).

To finish off the horror fiction publications of the 19th century were works by Abraham ‘Bram’ Stoker and Henry James. Stoker’s work Dracula or The Un-Dead remains one of the most frightening and wildly popular vampire tales of all time. This novel was a great source of inspiration for many other vampire tales and subsequent films created throughout the 20th century. Henry James’ novella The Turning of the Screw was considered “the favorite ghost story of people who didn’t like ghost stories,” and successfully introduced the contemporary popular horror theme of “the evil child tale” (tabula, 26).

During the 20th century there was a significant increase in the production of horror fiction and art, including movies, plays, short monthly publications and numerous novels. In 1907, The Listener was published. This book of short stories by Algernon Blackwood contained his best regarded work entitled The Willows. Blackwood was only one of a number of successful authors belonging to “The Order of the Golden Dawn,” an occult society created in 1888, whose most famous member was Aleister Crowley. This publication and society were important because they represented most of the macabre fiction originating in the U.K. at the time, and was the last flourishing collection of English horror fiction until the late 1980’s when Clive Barker and James Herbert emerged as popular horror writers (tabula, 27).
In 1911, Gaston Leroux wrote *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, a play that introduced the world to the "sympathy for the Devil" plot with the insane, deformed antagonist/love interest of the heroine (tabula, 28). The 1920's and 30's ushered in a new era for horror art. Radio shows and horror films emerged as the more popular horrific experience with films like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, *The Wolfman*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *House of Wax* (tabula, 29).

The 1950's brought the reemergence of horror in its written form. In 1959, Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* was “perhaps the most critically respected genre novel of the last 50 years and influenced just about everybody... for she is perhaps the opposite of the archetypical horror author – both popular and critically acclaimed during her life” (tabula, 37). Along with Jackson, Robert Bloch surfaced as a talented horror writer with his 1959 novel *Psycho*. Bloch’s immense success with this novel awarded him the first ever World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement in 1975.

Throughout the 60's, horror took to the silver screen and television in a way that had never been done in the past. The movie version of Bloch’s *Psycho* was directed by Alfred Hitchcock and received subsequent success. In 1964 the American public was introduced to *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*. These two unconventional TV families represented the first depiction of macabre programming on television (tabula, 39). Horror was really starting to grab a hold on pop culture and showed no signs of loosening its grip.

The year 1967 marks the starting point of our in-depth analysis of contemporary horror fiction. This year ushered in a new kind of terror, one that had never been seen before. Ira Levin’s novel, *Rosemary’s Baby*, displayed “a more introspective form of horror fiction, building on the paranoia of the 1950’s – fear of self and invader within society.” In Rosemary’s case, that invader was the Devil and his earthly minions (tabula, 41).
In the 1970's, the horror novel became a dominant form. Unlike the more prevalent short stories, sparse novels and novellas of the genres past, this new crop of horror fiction was in a class of its own. No other novel of the 1970's more poignantly captured the essence of this new era than William Peter Blatty's novel, *The Exorcist* (tabula, 56). This novel was disturbingly horrific and tapped into a new audience: people of faith.

In 1974, the world was introduced to an author who would become “one of the most widely read modern authors.” That author was Stephen King. With the 1974 release of his novel *Carrie*, King established himself as a brilliantly shrewd and meticulous author. Other novels included: *Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Stand* (1978), *It* (1986), and *The Shining* (1977). King also had considerable success with his short fiction and several novellas. His writing is described as having “a sharp eye for detail and character” (tabula, 56).


Movies such as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *Alien*, and other popular slasher films oversaturated the late 70’s with over the top cartoon-like horror, subsequently detracting from the substantial credibility attained by authors such as King and Rice (tabula, 58). However, by 1981 Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* introduced one of the most infamous villains in contemporary horror fiction: Dr. Hannibal Lector. This notable work successfully revitalized public reverence for the genre of horror fiction.
In 1984 there was a re-emergence of British horror fiction with Clive Barker’s release of *The Books of Blood*. This collection of short stories is said to be “the first mainstream success of the most prominent and important figures over the next decade, fueling controversy about the limits horror should abide by” (tabula, 60). Moving into the 90’s, this period of horror fiction…

…seemed to be a decade of compromise and self consciousness. It split into increasingly self-contained factions – the vampire genre, young-adult novels, the production-line sequel machine, the indulgent nostalgia market, and even the extreme end of the business seemed to draw in on itself…Indeed, what the 1990’s did offer was the chance to redefine the genre – present, real, straight-edged, vehemence, coupled with an intelligence and knowledge to explore consequences, unbounded by conventions. (tabula, 62)

Two authors who epitomized this new-found desire to defy previous horror conventions were Bret Easton Ellis and Poppy Z. Brite. Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* (1991) portrays the chaotic life of the 1980s through the eyes of a psychotic murderer (tabula, 63). In 1992, Brite published her first novel *Lost Souls*, which redefined the vampire sub-genre of horror fiction. Brite continued to produce stunning works including several collections of short stories, novellas and multiple novels that cover the horror spectrum.

For the purpose of this analysis, I will focus on several prominent contemporary horror writers, including: Stephen King, Poppy Z. Brite, Anne Rice, Ira Levin, Bret Easton Ellis, Thomas Harris and William Peter Blatty. Each of these authors has significantly contributed to the gamut of contemporary horror fiction by utilizing the categories of fear mentioned in the introduction to create works of terror that delve into our nightmares and extract our deepest fears. Stephen King is a horror and science fiction legend, not to mention one of the most popular and
critically acclaimed authors in the world. Poppy Z. Brite is a voice for the new generation of horror fiction. She continues to push the boundaries of decency and tolerance with her readers, but never seems to disappoint them. Anne Rice remains the most successful female horror fiction writer of all time. Her brand of lusty fiction is by far the most influential, not to mention popular, series in the vampire genre.

Ira Levin’s work presented a significantly deeper and more subtle illustration of fear when compared to most horror fiction of his time, especially *Rosemary’s Baby*. His bloody-chilling brand of fiction successfully captured the fear associated with satanic manipulation. Bret Easton Ellis shocked audiences with a new brand of serial killer: cold, apathetic and completely deranged, in *American Psycho*. Thomas Harris delivered one of the most compelling and popular psychological thriller series with the release of *Red Dragon, The Silence of the Lamb* and *Hannibal*. Finally, William Peter Blatty’s cult classic *The Exorcist* will go down in history as the most chilling tale of demonic possession. Each of the aforementioned authors contributed to the collective spectrum of horror fiction. Each employed one or more of the abovementioned categories of fear. The following sections will provide an in-depth look at the lives and most significant work done by each writer. This collection of macabre fiction, that slices the delicate underbelly of the leviathan that is fear, spills the ethereal secrets of our psyche for all to devour.

**The Haunted House**

Dark narrow hallways, mysterious noises, bodiless voices, ghosts and ghouls are elements that rule this genre. The haunted house genre has captivated and horrified readers
since the genesis of horror fiction. The effectiveness of this genre resides in its ability to employ fear of the unexplained, the supernatural and helplessness. The following section will examine the life and work of two authors, Stephen King and Poppy Z. Brite, who exemplify, with deft acuteness, the many rooms, inhabitants and terrible powers of the haunted house.

**Stephen King and The Shining**

Stephen Edwin King was born on September 21, 1947, in Portland, Oregon. He was raised by his mother, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, from the age of two. As a young boy, King wrote short stories based on popular movies and sold them to fellow students, much to the chagrin of his teachers. Another outlet through which King was able to channel his creativity as a child was his older brother’s newspaper, *Dave’s Rags*. King was a frequent contributor to his brother’s local publication, but his love for horror and science fiction came from a different source. As a teenager, King discovered his father’s old book collection at his aunt’s house. This collection was filled with mainly horror and science fiction novels. From this discovery, King cultivated his love for these genres (www.biography.com).

In the late sixties, King attended the University of Maine at Orono, Maine. Here he studied English and published a column in the student newspaper. Along with writing, King held odd jobs to pay the bills and even met his future wife, Tabitha Spruce; they married in 1971. After graduating, King taught English at Hampden Academy in Maine and started a family with his new wife. To make ends meet, King began to write short stories that were published in several magazines (www.biography.com).
As time went on, King’s writing progressed and he began to write novels. His first endeavor was a novel titled *Carrie* (1974). Shortly after the publication and subsequent success of *Carrie*, King’s mother died of cancer and King’s previous battle with alcoholism exploded into a full-scale addiction. With the help of his family, King sought help in the late 1980’s for drug and alcohol abuse. He has since remained sober (www.biography.com).


Stephen King’s third published novel, *The Shining* is the chilling story of a family caught in the grip of a hotel possessed and haunted by its tumultuously bloody past. The novel begins with the introduction of the Torrance family: Jack, Wendy, and their 5-year-old son, Danny. Jack is a recovering alcoholic who was recently fired from his stable teaching position after losing his temper with a student, an episode attributed to his drinking problem. Jack now struggles to make ends meet, haunted by his past success as well as transgressions. He loves his family dearly and hopes his newest endeavor will restore the order and harmony lost during his temperamental alcoholic past.

Alcohol-free and optimistic, Jack accepts a caretaking job at a large hotel in Colorado, the Overlook, which will close for the upcoming winter. Jack wishes to finish his play in progress and hopes to gain some much-needed family time with his somewhat resentful wife and son. Wendy is an excellent wife and mother. She stands by Jack at his worst, but still worries that his old habits may die hard. She worries endlessly about her young son, Danny. He is quiet,
introspective and seems to possess a strange gift for predicting future events along with maintaining a strong sensitivity to the supernatural.

When the Torrances arrive at the Overlook, they are stunned by the hotel’s grandiose presence and beautiful scenery. Everything seems perfect. When they enter the hotel they are given a short tour of the kitchen by Dick Halloran, another telepathic, who notices Danny’s gift immediately. Halloran takes Danny aside and warns him that he may see or hear some things while he is in the hotel, but not to be scared or pay attention. Halloran also tells Danny that his gift is shared by other people as well, Halloran being one, and that it is not something of which he should be afraid.

Once the Torrances become comfortable in the hotel, strange things begin to occur. Danny begins to hear the voice of his imaginary friend, Tony, see horrific, bloody apparitions and even has a seizure. Worried, Jack and Wendy take him to a local doctor who blames Danny’s over-expressive imagination and concludes there is nothing physically wrong with him. When they return to the hotel the oddities continue. Jack discovers an old scrapbook in the hotel’s basement revealing its mysteriously morbid past. Danny is attacked by wasps that materialize out of thin air, which puts Wendy’s anxiety out of control.

The hotel seems to be possessed by a supernatural, evil life force that is trying to manipulate the minds of its three inhabitants. We learn that Danny has had multiple premonitions concerning the hotel’s danger to his family, but keeps his fears to himself because he recognizes his father’s job as important to the continuation of a stable family life.

Danny then begins to see ghosts and horrific visions of the hotel’s pasts. Remembering what Halloran told him, Danny tries to ignore what he sees and hears. The hotel seems to be trying to possess the young boy. Desperate though they may be, the hotel’s attempts
at manipulating Danny proved repeatedly unsuccessful. Frustrated at its unsuccessful attempts at possessing Danny, the hotel turns to Jack.

Jack is struggling to make productive progress on his play, which could determine his professional and financial career future. Increasingly frustrated, unstable and without a drink in sight, Jack becomes the perfect target for the hotel’s diabolical collective consciousness. The hotel slowly takes over Jack’s psyche, brainwashing him into thinking that he must kill Danny and Wendy. Jack’s will is finally demolished and he falls victim to the hotel’s manipulation and loses all sense of sanity. He attempts to murder his family with a large roque mallet, the same one Danny had seen in a premonition months earlier. As Jack moves in for the kill, Wendy and Danny are saved by Danny’s clairvoyant friend, Halloran, the cook from the Overlook who spoke with Danny at the beginning of the novel.

Danny, Wendy and Halloran all escape relatively unscathed while Jack is left inside the hotel. He is killed when the unattended boiler explodes. He has now been both mentally and physically destroyed by this haunting place that tried to claim the sanity and lives of his entire family.

In this novel, King plays on fear of the unexplained and supernatural. For example, Danny’s gift of clairvoyant sight is unexplained and therefore feared by his parents and confounded physicians. It presents somewhat of a threat to Danny’s safety, due to his frequent fainting spells and subsequent hallucinations. Furthermore, the hotel’s powerful, supernatural rage is a source of ultimate terror for its inhabitants. Ghosts, visions and voices stir the family’s psyches into battered versions of their former selves, so much so, that Jack completely loses his sanity and attempts to slaughter his innocent family. This novel exemplifies the fear of the
unexplained and supernatural in order to create a terrifying haunted house story that will never be forgotten (King, 1-447).

**Poppy Z. Brite and Drawing Blood**

Poppy Z. Brite, was born on May 25, 1967, in New Orleans, Louisiana. She began her career as a Gothic novelist at a early age, and published her first novel, Lost Souls (1992) at the tender age of twenty-five. This novel was an extended version of one of Brite’s short stories, *The Seeds of Lost Souls* (1999). The following year, Brite followed with *Drawing Blood*, which received positive reviews by horror fiction critics.

Brite continued to create brilliant works of horror fiction during the following decade and came to be known as the new, better Anne Rice. Her work spans the horror spectrum, from tales of bloodsucking vampires and severely disaffected youths to haunted houses and cannibalistic serial killers. In 1996, Brite published her only work of non-fiction: *Courtney Love: The Unauthorized Biography*.

Throughout the 1990’s, Brite published several collections of short stories, such as: *Wormwood* (1993), *Are You Loathsome Tonight* (1998), *Wrong Things* (2001) and *The Devil You Know* (2003). Following the release of *The Devil You Know*, she took a slight departure from writing strictly horror fiction and softened her style to write a series of mystery novels. She released *Liquor* in 2004, which detailed the life of two New Orleans restaurateurs. *Liquor* turned out to be the first book in a trilogy of mystery novels about restaurant life in New Orleans. The following year Brite released *Prime*, and finished the series with *Soul Kitchen* in 2006. As
diverse and extensive as her work may seem, one thing is clear: Brite explores every facet of fear and horror in her works of fiction (www.poppyzbrite.com).

Brite’s second novel, *Drawing Blood*, poignantly integrates murder, sex, psychotropic drug use, rock music and a wickedly haunted house. This rollercoaster of a novel is unconventional, to say the least, but provides the unforgettably terrifying story of the haunted McGee house in Missing Mile, North Carolina.

The story begins with a brief look into the life of five-year-old Trevor McGee, son of Bobby McGee, a famous comic book artist, and Rosena Parks McGee, brother to two-year-old Didi. The McGee family is traveling through rural North Carolina when their car breaks down. Stranded and broke, the family of four decides to make their home in the nearby town of Missing Mile.

The patriarch of the McGee family, Bobby, was once a famous comic book artist, but has recently succumbed to depression and alcoholism. Bobby’s increasingly destructive behavior has ruined his career and is threatening the stability of his family. After settling in the town, Bobby’s depression reaches new heights. One night, after downing a bottle of booze, Bobby slaughters Rosena and Didi with a hammer, but leaves Trevor inexplicably unscathed. Bobby then commits suicide, leaving Trevor alone and lost in a world that will never accept him.

The novel picks up twenty years later with Trevor traveling back to the house where his life came crashing down with the swing of a hammer. Trevor hopes that if he can return to the place where his family was slaughtered, he may be able to answer the one question that has plagued him his entire life: Why did I live?

Interwoven with Trevor’s story is the story of Zachary Bosch, a twenty-something, notorious computer hacker from New Orleans. Zach has recently discovered that he is wanted
for his involvement with many illegal hacking activities, and the authorities are on their way. Zach hits the road and heads north, not knowing where he will end up, or even if he will survive the next forty-eight hours. Ironically, Zach ends up in Missing Mile, North Carolina - Trevor’s destination as well.

In a strange twist of fate, the men meet at the house of the McGee family murders. Trevor and Zach subsequently develop a deep friendship, which eventually becomes intimate. As they spend more time together in Trevor’s childhood house, their bond grows. The house also begins to cultivate a more visually sinister personality of its own, and forces a wickedly terrifying bond to the lives of its two inhabitants. Not only does the house produce horrifying visions and nightmares for its two incumbents, but the more terrifying the house becomes the more Trevor and Zach learn about each other and the reasons and motivations behind Bobby’s horrendous breakdown.

Brite’s novel plays on many of the same fears that King used in The Shining. For example, Trevor has never understood his father’s reasons for leaving him alive. He fears all human contact, until he meets Zach, fears the house and most of all fears himself, because he is convinced that he will succumb to Bobby’s murderous tendencies (like father, like son). Because of all the unanswered questions in Trevor’s past, he fears his future, and everyone in it. In addition to the fear of the unknown, Brite employs fear of the supernatural. The house is one of the most vibrant and expressive characters in the novel. After only one night in the house, Trevor’s beloved sketchbook is ripped to pieces, Zach sees the terrifying vision of his decaying flesh in the bathroom mirror, and Trevor sees a vision of his father hanging from the shower curtain rod, strangled. In addition to these frightening incidents, Trevor also experiences the fear of helplessness due to the fact that he feels unable to resist the control of the house. It makes
him feel crazy, deranged, and capable of repeating its bloody history. Brite’s novel exquisitely utilizes these fears to create a haunted house worthy of its horrifying reputation (Brite, 1-403).

The Bloodsucker

Immortal, capable of ultimate seduction, with razor-sharp teeth and an insatiable hunger for human blood: The Vampire. The vampire genre has mesmerized and disgusted readers beginning with Dr. John Polidori’s 1819 publication, The Vampire. The success of this genre exists in its utilization of fear of the supernatural and fear of helplessness. The following section will examine the life and work of two authors, Anne Rice and, again, Poppy Z. Brite, who illustrate the intoxicating mélange of qualities and powers that comprise the seductively terrifying vampire.

Anne Rice and Interview with the Vampire

Anne Rice was born October 4, 1941. She spent most of her early years in New Orleans, Louisiana until her family moved to North Texas. In Richardson, Texas, Rice lived out her adolescence and met her future husband Stan at the age of sixteen. Rice attended Texas Woman’s University for a few years, but moved to California with Stan, and never returned to Texas. After settling in San Francisco Rice and Stan had a daughter, who died of leukemia at the age of six. In 1978, Rice had a son, Christopher, who later became a novelist like his mother.

In 1976, Rice released her first novel, Interview with the Vampire. This novel was this first in a lengthy series produced by Rice called The Vampire Chronicles. Other novels in this series include 1985’s The Vampire Lestat and 1988’s The Queen of the Damned. Rice has
produced dozens of successful works of horror fiction and remains the queen of the vampire novel (www.biography.com).

Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* is a deeply descriptive story of the somewhat human side of vampires. The novel is narrated by Louis, a two-hundred-year-old vampire. Louis tells his life story to a young reporter. Louis’ story begins with the death of his brother, and his subsequent depression. Shortly after the death of his brother, Louis is attacked by the vampire Lestat, who turns Louis into a vampire and becomes his only companion as a new member of the undead.

Although Louis’ utter apathy for life in general prevents him from lamenting his newfound life too much, he cannot reconcile his human attachment to life and therefore refuses to take human life in order to survive.

These two miserable creatures of the night coexist for some time, until one day Lestat decides to create a family for them by turning a young girl, Claudia, into a vampire. From here the story becomes a lurid adventure of betrayal, murder and heartbreak.

After they live as a family for many years, Louis and Claudia leave Lestat and venture for Europe. They travel for many years in search of others of their kind, but their attempts are in vain until they reach Paris. Here they discover a coven of vampires posing as actors, who act like vampires. The leader of this vampire troupe is Armand, a very old and manipulative vampire. After spending time with Louis, Armand strives to convince him to leave Claudia and travel the world with him. However tempting this offer may be to Louis, he refuses.

Shortly thereafter, Lestat miraculously arrives in Paris. He solicits the help of Armand to kill Claudia, so that he may regain Louis as his companion. Armand agrees, but when
Louis learns of the betrayal, his love for Armand is tarnished. After spending many years traveling with Armand, the companions part ways and all are left to their own devices.

At the end of the novel, as Louis finishes his tale, the young reporter expresses a deep desire to become a vampire. Louis is only too obliged to grant him his wish!

Rice’s novel uses the fear of the supernatural and fear of helplessness to convey its subtle dreadfulness. The seductive strength of each vampire’s immortality is equally fascinating and terrible. Their ability to defy death while dealing it so unmercifully creates a monster the likes of which readers have never encountered. The reader is simultaneously helpless to defend against the bloodsucking murderer and unable to rationally comprehend the vampire’s power due to their supernatural powers. In the following novel Brite plays on the same fears in order to create a similar effect (Rice, 1-342).

**Poppy Z. Brite and *Lost Souls***

Brite’s debut novel, *Lost Souls*, is, in true Brite style, an unconventional take on the typical vampire novel. The story begins in New Orleans, where Twig, Molochai and Zillah roam the dingy streets of the quarter in search of debauchery and mischievous entertainment. They are vampires, but not the night-dwelling Draculas portrayed in past novels. The three troublemakers, led by the charismatically beautiful Zillah, unknowingly enter a bar owned by a vampire named Christian, who is centuries older than the three vivacious vagabonds.

While in Christian’s bar, Zillah spots a young girl sitting alone. Her name is Jessy and her only wish is to become a vampire. Unfortunately, Jessy will never get her wish. Zillah sleeps with Jessy that night and then leaves her in the care of Christian, the bar owner. Nine months later, Jessy dies giving birth to her vampire son named Nothing.
In an attempt to provide Nothing with the most normal life possible, Christian turns him over to a couple in the Maryland suburbs, where he is raised as a normal boy. Fifteen years later, Nothing is an adolescent boy who has never felt that he belonged in the world of his parents and peers. Frustrated and alone, Nothing runs away from home, seeking solace on the open road. Ironically, he is picked up by the ever-traveling trio of Twig, Molochai and Zillah, his father. Nothing has no idea that the leader of this wayward brotherhood is his biological father.

The four vampires end up in the town of Missing Mile, North Carolina. This is the home of Steve and Ghost, the two members of the popular underground Gothic rock band Lost Souls. They are Nothing’s reason for persuading his road companions to come to Missing Mile. Nothing feels a strange affinity with the two members of the band, even though he has only heard them on tape. His greatest hope is that he may meet Steve and Ghost, that they will feel the same way and that he can live in comfort with them forever.

Whatever high hopes Nothing may have had concerning a blissful life in Missing Mile are dashed when Zillah, Twig and Molochai begin to wreak havoc on the small town.

The town’s only bar, The Sacred Yew, is host to all forms of Gothic entertainment and welcomes the wayward youth of North Carolina. The bartender is, ironically, Christian, the very same New Orleans bar owner from so many years ago. Christian is lonely and desperately longs for companionship from those like him. He hopes that Zillah, Twig and Molochai will be his saving grace, but once Christian learns of Nothing’s presence, everything changes.

From here, the chaos begins. Nothing learns that Zillah is his father, and that Christian abandoned him to a life of undesired normalcy after he killed his mother at birth. The
novel culminates in a passionate brawl, back in New Orleans, fueled by years of love, longing, lust and blood.

Although Brite and Rice utilize similar categories of fear in order to achieve their desired horrific effects, Brite seems to play on the helplessness of her characters as well. The character Nothing, in *Lost Souls*, feels helpless, scared and alone in a world that feels alien to him. He is then pummeled with supernatural fear when he is introduced into a world he never knew existed. He realizes that the cure to his helplessness lies in the arms of an even more terrifying world: the world of vampires (Brite, 1-355).

**Satanic Manipulation**

The demonic, the possessed, the occult: evil incarnate. The horror associated with the power of religious evil has maintained an almost taboo placement in the genre of horror fiction and art. Because of its roots in strong religious beliefs, the genre of satanic horror maintains its fear-invoking powers through the ability to shock and appall people of faith. This genre utilizes fear of the supernatural, the unexplained and fear of helplessness. The subsequent segment will examine the life and work of two authors, Ira Levin and William Peter Blatty, who demonstrate the horrifying power of hell on earth.
Ira Levin and *Rosemary's Baby*

Ira Levin was born in New York City on August 27, 1929. Levin attended New York University in the 1940’s, where he studied English and philosophy. After graduating, Levin did work writing training films and scripts for television. At the age of 22, he wrote his first novel, *A Kiss Before Dying* (1952).

Along with novel writing, Levin wrote several plays and also dabbled in songwriting. In 1956, Levin adapted the Mac Hyman novel, *No Time for Sergeants*, into a play. This adaptation was so popular that it later became a film that launched the career of Andy Griffith. Another popular Levin play that was later adapted to the screen is *Deathtrap*. This play was phenomenally successful and still holds the record for the longest running comedy-thriller on Broadway. Along with *Deathtrap*, five of his other novels were made into films, including: *A Kiss Before Death* (1952), *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), *The Stepford Wives* (1972), *Sliver* (1991) and his most famous novel, *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) (www.intercoursewiththedead.com).

*Rosemary's Baby* is the unsettling tale of a young woman's satanically tainted pregnancy. Rosemary Woodhouse and her husband, Guy, live in New York City. Guy is an aspiring actor who struggles to acquire lucrative acting jobs while trying to start a family. Rosemary is a gentle and innocent country girl from Nebraska desperately trying to acclimate herself as housewife in the fast-paced atmosphere of the city.

The couple desperately desires a child, but on the night they plan to conceive Rosemary falls violently ill. She becomes dizzy and subsequently passes out. When she
regains consciousness, she relays the horrific nightmare she had to Guy. Rosemary dreams that she was raped by an unseen deeply evil form. In an eerie twist of fate, Rosemary becomes pregnant shortly after this horrifying experience. Another strange coincidence benefits Guy’s career. He receives a prestigious part in a popular play when the original actor suddenly and mysteriously goes blind.

As Rosemary’s pregnancy progresses, her health deteriorates. She experiences strange, inexplicable, excruciating pains in her abdomen and instead of gaining weight she nearly becomes emaciated. As his pregnant wife becomes increasingly sick, Guy’s career flourishes. He is desired for numerous roles and eventually lands a part on a popular television sitcom.

Baffled by her frighteningly abnormal pregnancy, Rosemary seeks solace in an old friend who points an accusatory finger at Rosemary’s eccentric and overly friendly neighbors. Strangely enough, Rosemary’s friend falls into a coma and dies shortly after speaking with her. Rosemary is left with only speculative clues and ideas. Following the advice of her recently deceased friend, Rosemary comes to suspect that her very odd neighbors are involved in a satanic cult with evil plans for the unborn child. She becomes increasingly more suspicious that her husband is involved. She believes that Guy’s recent professional success is a result of his involvement with this evil organization.

Rosemary’s distress only increases as more disturbing evidence is revealed. She finally becomes convinced that her neighbors intend to use her child as a satanic sacrifice - or worse, that she carries the son of Satan. Although Guy and her neighbors persistently deny these accusations, Rosemary is resolute in her feelings of dread and betrayal. However paranoid and delusional she may have appeared throughout the novel, the novel’s conclusion
reveals that she was almost exactly correct. This novel’s appeal resides in its subtlety. Levin was able to captivate and equally horrify his audience without using violence or blood. The awareness of the ever-present evil is enough to make one’s blood run cold.

Levin’s novel plays primarily on Rosemary’s fear. She cannot understand or explain the reasons behind her intense fear and paranoia, nor can she justify the motives behind her eccentric neighbor’s behavior. She feels helpless to control her pregnancy and her baby’s safety. Only when she realizes the truly sinister plot on the life of her unborn child does the supernatural aspect of her fear emerge. The Devil has his eye on her womb, with evil plans in store. Levin aptly captures the fear of the helpless Rosemary in his novel, and as we will see in Blatty’s novel, evil comes in many forms and assails without mercy (Levin, 1-320).

**William Peter Blatty and *The Exorcist***

William Peter Blatty was born in New York City on January 7, 1928, to Lebanese parents. He was subsequently raised by his single mother, a deeply religious Catholic woman. After a tumultuous childhood including multiple moves, Blatty attended Georgetown University to study English.

His first work of fiction, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*, was a satire that dealt with Blatty’s time in Lebanon when he worked for the United States Information Agency. His next few works were rather minor and received little recognition or critical acclaim. These works included: *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home* (1963), *I, Billy Shakespeare* (1965), and *Twinkle, Twinkle, “Killer” Kane* (1966).
In the 1960’s Blatty collaborated with director Blake Edwards to write several films including, *A Shot in the Dark* (1964), *Gunn* (1967), and *Darling Lili* (1970). After becoming somewhat tired of screenwriting, Blatty returned to novel writing and created his most popular and critically acclaimed novel, *The Exorcist*. Because of the overwhelming success of the novel, Blatty once again returned to screenwriting to collaborate with director William Friedkin for the making of the film version of the novel. This time Blatty’s attempt at screenwriting paid off. The movie, *The Exorcist*, became an instant success and to this day remains a horror classic.

In 1978 Blatty wrote, directed and produced *The Ninth Configuration*, which was based on his 1966 novel, *Twinkle, Twinkle “Killer” Kane*. Although the film’s success was poor upon its release, it has since gained a large cult following. In an attempt to revamp the popularity and success of the original *The Exorcist*, Blatty wrote a sequel titled *Legion*. Although the novel did not gain as much popularity as the original, it was made into a movie titled, *The Exorcist III*. Although this was the sequel to the original *The Exorcist* novel, a second had been made without the involvement of Blatty and therefore the third film completely disregarded the second (movie2.nytimes.com).

William Peter Blatty’s novel, *The Exorcist*, was published in 1971. Blatty’s inspiration for his novel was derived from an apparently real exorcism performed in 1949 on a 13-year-old named boy named Robbie in Cottage City, Maryland.

The novel, however, follows the exorcism of a young girl, Regan MacNeil. The novel begins with the story of an elderly priest, Father Merrin. In an attempt to discover the origins and collect evidence of demon worship, Merrin travels to the Middle East. During his
journey, Merrin discovers an ancient statue. This discovery seems to trigger the manifestation and release of an unknown evil force.

Back in the United States, in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., to be exact, we are introduced to Regan MacNeil, a young girl who lives with her mother, Chris, a famous actress. One day, Regan falls suddenly and inexplicably ill. Her mother makes every attempt to discover the source of her daughter's illness, but her search is in vain. Regan is experiencing both extreme physical and psychological alterations and symptoms. When an extensive series of medical tests fails to identify the source of Regan's illness, her mother resorts to a priest.

Father Damien Karras is brought in to examine the girl and soon becomes convinced that the cause of Regan's suffering is demonic possession. Somewhat unsure of his own abilities, Father Karras seeks outside assistance. A local Bishop appoints Father Merrin to perform the exorcism on young Regan with the assistance of Father Karras. These two exorcists could not be more different. Father Karras is physically strong and stable but struggles with his fading faith, guilt-ridden conscience and deep personal insecurities. Father Merrin has failing health, but maintains an unwavering faith in his religion as well as a genuine confidence in his abilities as a priest and as an exorcist. As opposite as these two men are, they join forces to help Regan rid her soul of its Satanic incumbent. In the end, their efforts are successful and young Regan is restored.

In contrast to Levin's novel, the protagonist in *The Exorcist* emerges triumphant. Throughout the novel, Blatty employs the same categories of fear that Levin uses in his novel: The fear of the supernatural and fear of helplessness. The priests fear the evil presence in Regan's home and the demonic possession of her young fragile body. Her
mother feels equally helpless to help her daughter and fears for her life. The supernatural, satanic possession cannot be explained or understood. The priests can only hope to destroy its power over the teenager. Regan has no control over her situation and is therefore placed in the most hopeless position of terror. In the end, the shock and fear of the possession is relinquished, but the evil presence lingers. The fear will always remain (Blatty, 1-385).

The Serial Killer

The most realistic and tangible category of fear resides in the serial killer genre of horror fiction. Nearly every night on the news, in any given city, there are reports of another murder. With a killer on the loose, no one is safe. The horror associated with the realization that at any moment a masked man could come busting out of your closet, or grab your unsuspecting leg from under your bed, is one of the most realistic horror scenarios we face. The serial killer genre plays on the fear of the unseen and fear of helplessness. The next section will scrutinize the life and work of three authors, Bret Easton Ellis, Thomas Harris and Poppy Z. Brite, who, with their work, illustrate the paralyzing terror of discovering the mass murderer truly exists, and is coming for you.

Bret Easton Ellis and American Psycho

Bret Easton Ellis was born in Los Angeles, California, on March 7, 1964. He was raised in the San Fernando Valley by his mother, Dale Ellis, after his parents divorced in 1982. He attended The Buckley School as a boy before moving on to college. At Bennington College in Vermont he studied music, which quickly transformed Ellis into an
aspiring musician. However passionate Ellis may have been about music, his life as a musician was far from successful. He performed with a small band in the 1980’s called The Parents, and held part-time positions in several others.

In 1985, Ellis finished his first novel, *Less Than Zero*. For his debut, Ellis achieved astounding success. It seems Ellis was not born to be the next Bono, but a successful writer. After the great success of *Less Than Zero*, Ellis moved to New York. In 1987, Ellis released his second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, which was adapted in a successful film in 2002. In 1991, Ellis released *American Psycho*. This novel was met with mixed reviews. The explicit violence and unabashed brutality in the novel raised many eyebrows and protests from publishers and activist groups.

After some publishing difficulties, Ellis finally found a publishing company that would accept his novel: Vintage. Following its publication, *American Psycho* developed a substantial cult following and was subsequently made into a film in 2002. This novel remains one of the most controversial horror fiction novels of the 1990’s (www.ncteumericancollection.org).

Set in 1980’s Manhattan, Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* follows roughly two years in the life of Patrick Bateman. This first person narrative is filled with the gruesome details of Bateman’s life as a supposed serial killer. Bateman is a rich, 26-year-old Wall Street banker, a stereotypical yuppie. Once we are thoroughly introduced to our narrator, Ellis proceeds to lead the reader down the road of horrific slaughter. Bateman’s method, or motivation, for killing seems completely random throughout the novel. His victims include people he knew well, such as his ex-girlfriend, Bethany, and his colleague, Paul Owen.
The bulk of Bateman’s victims includes people he has never met before. For example, he slaughters a prostitute and a call girl. He arbitrarily blinds a beggar and murders several homeless people. His list of victims goes on and includes random people on the street, a delivery man and even animals such as dogs and rats. His killing is blind and merciless.

Bateman experiences a supreme sadistic pleasure with each slaughter. He tortures and kills his victims in a variety of ways ranging from guns to knives to power tools and even rats. He engages in cannibalism, violence sex and necrophilia. His brand of horror is unrelenting and unstoppable. He is by far the worst kind of serial killer.

The only thing this man seems to value or love is himself and cheesy 80s pop music. Bateman embodies the ideal of the modern identity crisis. He is consumed with outwardly portraying an image that confirms his valid place in society. He strives hard to have the right suit and the fashionable business card that his internal, hidden alter ego is a manifestation of his complete polar opposite. It is no wonder that by the end of the novel Bateman’s reliability as a narrator is severely challenged and the reader learns that every murderous image and story of torture was merely a mental manifestation of the sick and deranged psyche of Patrick Bateman.

In this novel, Ellis capitalizes on the over-the-top, gruesome, mental manifestations of the sick and disturbed character of Patrick Bateman. Ellis’ character epitomizes the unseen terrors of everyone’s nightmares: unmerciful, unrelenting and completely sadistic (Ellis, 1-399).
In 1940, Thomas Harris was born in Jackson, Tennessee. He grew up in Rich, Mississippi, with his parents. He later attended Baylor University in Waco, Texas. While attending Baylor, Harris studied English and worked as a reporter for a local newspaper, where he covered police-related stories. After graduating from Baylor in 1964, Harris moved to New York, where he worked for the Associated Press. In 1972, an incident at the Munich Olympics in which eleven Israeli athletes were killed inspired Harris’ novel *Black Sunday*, which was published in 1975 and subsequently adapted to film.

In 1981, Harris began a trilogy that would prove to be the most successful writing endeavor of his entire career. This trilogy begins with the novel *Red Dragon*, which introduced the infamous psychiatrist/serial killer, Hannibal Lector. The sequel to *Red Dragon* was the wildly popular *The Silence of the Lambs*, which was published in 1988. Not only was this novel commercially successful, but the 1991 film adaptation earned world-wide popularity. The final novel in the trilogy, *Hannibal*, was published in 1999. This novel was also adapted to film in 2001, and acquired even more commercial success than its predecessor. Over the past thirty years, Harris has written novels that are not only horrific masterpieces, but which also became cinematic delights (www.olemiss.com).

Thomas Harris’ *Red Dragon* centers on the character Hannibal Lector, psychiatrist and serial killer. *Red Dragon* focuses on the characters of Will Graham and another serial killer, Francis Dolarhyde. This intricate and detailed novel begins with the retired FBI agent,
Will Graham. Graham retired after nearly being killed by Lector, an encounter that led to Lector's capture and subsequent incarceration.

Graham is lured from retirement to assist in the capture of a serial killer known as "The Tooth Fairy," a man who has already killed two families and eluded capture. Because of Lector's extensive knowledge regarding the psyche of the serial killer of the serial killer's psyche as well as that of a psychiatrist and a convicted killer, Graham turns to Lector for assistance in capturing this latest sadistic culprit. "The Tooth Fairy," is in fact, Francis Dolarhyde, a loner and employee at Chromalux Film and Video Services.

His next victim, after the two families, is a man named Freddie Lounds, a tabloid reporter from *The National Tattler*. Lounds had written several patronizing stories about Graham while he covered the Lector case and returns to his critical, condescending reporting when Graham reemerges onto the scene for *The Tooth Fairy* case. Enraged by comments made by Lounds, Dolarhyde brutally murders him.

In the midst of his murderous behavior, Dolarhyde falls in love with Reba McClane, a blind co-worker. As their relationship progresses, he becomes increasingly conflicted between his homicidal tendencies and his desire to lead a normal life with Reba. We learn that Dolarhyde's murderous counterpart manifests in a creature he calls, "The Great Red Dragon," named after the famous William Blake painting.

Graham continues to search for Dolarhyde with the help of Lector; however, Graham begins to realize that Lector is manipulating not only himself but Dolarhyde as well. Through an intricate code, Lector sends Dolarhyde Graham's address. Fearing for the life of his family, Graham now becomes obsessed with the case. He gains enough evidence to confirm
Dolarhyde’s workplace and moves in; however, Dolarhyde suspects he is about to be caught and burns down his house, faking his own death.

Thinking that Dolarhyde is dead, Graham returns to his home and family, but Dolarhyde is right on his trail. He attacks Graham and his family in their home. As he is about to kill them, Graham’s wife strikes him with a large fishing pole, imbedding a large metal hook in his cheek and successfully kills him before he can strike.

Harris uses the same technique as Ellis in his novel. However, in this novel we are exposed to two different killers, who present equally conflicting threats. Dr. Hannibal Lector is the incarcerated genius who dines on his victims after the kill. His intelligence and unwavering sadistic nature make him a villain to be reckoned with. The other killer is the less conspicuous Frances Dolarhyde, who harbors much deeper, disturbed motivations for his killings. He is meticulous, brutal and mysteriously hard to catch. These killers each represent an equally chilling depiction of the perfect serial killer. They are clever, remorseless and unseen: truly terrifying (Harris, 1-368).

**Poppy Z. Brite, Mussolini and the Axeman’s Jazz**

This story follows the antics of New Orleans’ only verified serial killer in 1918. The first part of this story follows a day in the life of a prominent government official, the day in which he and his wife are assassinated in the Middle East.

In New Orleans, 1918, in the Vieux Carre district, Joseph D’Antonio, former detective of the New Orleans police department is reeling from his recent dishonorable discharge. One night, like many others, he drinks himself into a stupor, but on this night he
Clark 34

discovers a ghost in his room. The assassinated government official from the first part of the story, Archduke Ferdinand, is standing in his room.

The assassinated archduke tells D’Antonio that he has been sent to see him in order to expedite the subsequent assassination of another man associated with the ancient “brotherhood of man,” an organization that thrives on immortality and strives to silently rule the world. Two of the men in this order, Cagliostro and Mussolini, are the most dangerous. The archduke asks that D’Antonio murder Cagliostro, the leader, in order to prevent World War II. D’Antonio refuses to help and the archduke promptly disappears.

Cagliostro was the puppeteer of Mussolini, the Italian dictator. Cagliostro believed that if he could make Mussolini rise to ultimate power he could help prevent the uprising of another tyrant, which he prophesied would come from somewhere near Austria or Germany. Later the same night the archduke returns to D’Antonio. This time upon his repeated refusal the archduke possesses him. Determined to act as a puppeteer in order to carry out his murderous plans, the possessed D’Antonio’s first victim is an innocent grocer suspected to be Cagliostro. The archduke used an axe and hence was known as the Axeman.

The next axe murder was another grocer, Romano, and again, the wrong man. After the second murder, the Archduke leaves D’Antonio’s body and does not return for another year. When he does, the murders continue. This demonic duo finally finds the real Cagliostro. When the axe man attempts to kill him, he is unsuccessful. Cagliostro is far too powerful and shoots him first before the axe can fall. Cagliostro then flees to Egypt, but sends a letter to the police leading them to believe that the axe man is still at large.

Brite’s short story integrates the elements of fear utilized by Ellis and Harris, but she also incorporates the fear of the supernatural. The serial killer in her story is possessed by a
ghost. This addition makes her killer all the more horrific because he is unbound by the physical elements of our world. His ethereal power makes him a larger and more terrifying threat. Altogether, these three authors have created thrilling illustrations of our most horrible nightmares in the form of tangible humans capable of awful acts of terror (Brite, 155-178).

Conclusion

In closing, fear is part of human existence. When you walk into your dark, empty home at night and hear a strange noise, fear makes your hair stand on end and entices the gooseflesh on your arms. Fear causes the tight spiral of anxious dread to uncoil in your belly when you realize someone is following close behind. Fear creates visions of monsters ominously lurking in the night. This primal sense, that subtly shadows our every thought, is what makes us human: it is the fear of death. Although we are all subconsciously aware of our own mortality, it is only when the fragile composition of our physical self is threatened that terror rears its ugly head.

Fear of the unexplained, the unseen, the supernatural and fear of the hopelessness to prevent the manifestations of our darkest nightmares all stem from the fear of death. Throughout history, writers and artists have employed their skills towards the endeavor of somehow capturing and illustrating horror in its truest form. By probing the literature of these craftsmen of terror, and the modes through which they employ the abovementioned categories of fear, we can more fully access and investigate the obscure, complex workings of our most primal phobias. However, no matter how hard we may try to unlock the ethereal
secrets of our mind’s most horrific manifestations, we will never elude the terrors that hunt us in the night. *Fear*, it is our sixth sense.
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