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Sources of fear in American society: Representations in short horror fiction, 1950s-present

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SOURCES OF FEAR IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: REPRESENTATIONS

IN SHORT HORROR FICTION, 1950s—PRESENT

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

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San Bernardino

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by

Mona Moin Syed

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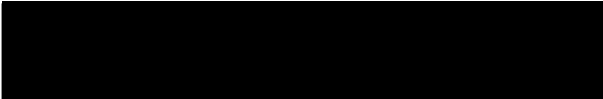Presented to the

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which short American horror fiction has always revolved around fundamental fears of mortality, and how these fears have shifted across the span of three specific timeframes. Using a historicist lens, this study also explores what the specific nature of mortality fears, as reflected in particular instances of short horror fiction, historically reveal about contemporaneous cultural attitudes toward end of life issues, loss, doubt, and grief. By highlighting how these core emotive elements of terror within the most enduring American short horror stories of the past and present are consistently rooted in the subtending fear of dying, this study also traces how the perceptions of mortality have dynamically changed in American society from the 1950s to present times in accordance with powerful historical events, varying cultural contexts, and compelling social issues.

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Taxonomies: Terror, Fear, and the Fear of Mortality

At the heart of any compelling horror story are its emotive elements—how the story evokes emotional responses from its readers. According to Fred Botting, the horror story "constitutes the limit of reason, sense, consciousness, and speech, the very emotions in which the human reaches its limits" (131). It is the creation of this highly charged atmosphere—one that suggests an "intrusion which arouses fear" (5), in the words of David Hartwell—that epitomizes the genre as a whole; with the short horror story, in particular, this sense of disturbance is concentrated and potent. Thus, the defining label of "horror" for this special brand of fiction extends far beyond the generalized categorization of a specific genre, based on content or form; it also denotes the nature of the transaction between text and reader: horror is *that which creates* a sense of intense fear. In turn, the manifestation of fear, an emotion that intrinsically defines the horrific encounter, reveals the

fundamental power of the great horror story: its potential to generate feelings of intense terror. As scholar John Hamilton notes, while "classic monsters, such as werewolves and zombies, can bring out these feelings, a horror story doesn't need such elements to create them … any story that creates emotions of fear and dread can be technically called 'horror'"(4). These "feelings," deep-seated apprehensions that play an inherent, central role in the most emotional component of the human experience, inevitably surface when certain anxieties—those "of which we cannot speak, located in the real and the nightmarish imaginary," as Clive Bloom notes (81)—are embodied in the horror story.

Preeminent English gothic novelist Ann Ward Radcliffe further defines the concept of *terror* as emotions which "expand the soul, and awaken the faculties to a high degree of life" (ix). In connection with this suggestion that the embodiment of terror in horror fiction greatly heightens the basic human senses, Carroll notes that such stories are "denominated *horrific* in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain *affect*" (14); this is what defines *horror* as a genre. Thus, a key purpose of the horror story is to elicit terror as a profound emotional response; this response, in turn,

corresponds to raised "mental states" such as

"abomination, revulsion, and disgust" (28). Moreover, in

his critically influential treatise, "Supernatural Horror

in Literature," H.P. Lovecraft, one of the masters of

early 20th century American horror fiction, posits that the

nature of fear—what he calls "a profound sense of dread"

(16) that is excited in the reader of horror fiction,

resulting from the emergence of a perceived menace—is the

origin of terror, "a composite of keen emotion and

imaginative provocation whose vitality must of necessity

endure as long as the human race itself" (11). The idea of

fear in the horror story, then, may be characterized by

two aspects: firstly, its ability to generate feelings of

terror; and secondly, its omnipresence as an idea at the

core of all these emotions of terror it produces, such as

those described by Carroll. Thus, terror is the emotional

response that is borne from the notion of fear, and it

always derived from it; the notion of fear itself can be

identified as the precise cognitive moment of realization

that a specific threat does exist.

Because of its instrumental role in dictating

humanity's sense of terror, fear, as an inspiration,

characterizes the very essence of the horror story.

Lovecraft further defined fear as being "The oldest and

strongest" concept understood by mankind (12), and suggested that the historical appeal of the short horror tale may be traced to the recognition of humankind's sense of fear. That fear as a human response is perpetuated by numerous stimuli—such as undermining our sense of security, invading our normalcy, threatening our stability, and jeopardizing our sense of self-control over individual destiny—further illustrates its universality, in addition to its vital function as what Lovecraft calls "a profound elementary principle, whose appeal … must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness" (69). Thus, since the sentiment of fear is the only means by which feelings of terror may be conjured, its embodiment is the single most essential and definitive aspect of the short horror story. This notion that fear defines the horror story is further underscored by the fact that, as Hartwell asserts, "we recognize its presence" (5) in these fictitious stories immediately, and relate to it in much the same manner as we acknowledge its familiar existence in our real lives.

Furthermore, these various aspects of fear in the horror story—all of which propagate the "closely restricted range of emotions" (Bloom 155) that represent feelings of terror—are rooted within a single, main fear,

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one that grounds all others and resides at the very core

of human existence: the fear of mortality. The

presentation of death in the short horror story often

abruptly induces feelings of dread, resulting from direct

confrontations with the potential·loss of life. The fear

of death is, additionally, the provenance of every other

incidence of terrifying emotion within the horror tale.

The grief of sudden and premature bereavement, unease over

the unknown, alarm over the pain of what Stephen King

terms a "bad end," and apprehension of the fantastic

otherworldly, for example, all originate from the basic

human fear of mortality. Famed English horror author

Robert Aickman paradoxically described the concept of

death as "the one thing certain and the thing most

uncertain" (qtd. in Crawford 23) in life: as the

overriding fear, it is ever-present, reluctantly

anticipated, and unavoidable, but it is also unwittingly

invented and reinvented by what Lovecraft deems "a certain

degree of imagination, and a capacity for detachment from

everyday life" (12). Thus, as the genesis of authentic

feelings of terror in the reader, and also a means by

which human rationale is explored, the embodiment of the

fear of mortality in any given instance of horror fiction

signifies a much more profound correlation between subject

and circumstance, content and context, and story and society.

Because of these historical connections, the horror story is revealed to represent a realistic account of how the idea of death was constructed at a specific time, by a specific culture. A prime example of this phenomenon can be seen by examining the horror story tradition in American society; through successive eras and changing populations, the continuous fear of death has always been reflected in the most prominent short horror stories across any given timeframe. This study, therefore, will trace these different constructions of the fear of mortality—from the 1950s until recent times—to determine how this culture's expressions of this constant fear have changed across this progressive period. The continued obsession in this society with what death entails, says scholar Tony Magistrale, exists on "a subtextual level .. [it] consistently reminds us of human vulnerability" (2). The extent of this susceptibility, which varies from individual to individual, is matched by the aptitude of the human imagination; traditionally, the depiction of death in the American short horror story capitalizes on awakening feelings of terror by utilizing a combination of both: defenseless against the inevitability of death, we

are inclined to envisage its occurrence in a magnificently horrific fashion, in accordance with our own current anxieties.

Thus, the superseding fear of mortality has always been a major concern for this society, with changing social concerns regarding death constantly reflected in the horror story. Correspondingly, the capability of a specific horror story to invoke feelings of terror—which is testimony to its effectiveness in portraying momentously relevant views on the fear of death—is closely tied to the particular context, of society and history, in which it was originally embedded. At the same time, many of these stories—now considered invaluable "classics" by many current readers, authors, critics, and scholars alike—continue to address the current American society's fearful fixation with understanding what death is, how it will appear, and what it will entail, and thus are not primarily characterized by timeframes. Clearly, then, while many of the social perceptions on fearing mortality have become antiquated and no longer inspire terror, others are timeless—and can be found in the horror story's manifestations of this salient fear throughout different periods of American history, both past and present.

Noel Carroll on "Horror Cycles"

Clive Bloom proposes that shifting "social attitudes" have always been mirrored in American horror stories (16). This is distinctly obvious with regard to the presentation of the fear of death in such stories: it is the "common thread of subject matter" (2) that connects the objectives of horror fiction from one era to the next, reflecting how the embodiment of the all-encompassing fear has essentially changed over the course of history. Citing this "common thread" which underlies the greatest American horror stories of the past and present, Noel Carroll, a leading scholar and author in the field of horror fiction, theorizes in his study of the genre, *The Philosophy of Horror*, about "horror cycles": certain "moments" within the tradition, which encompass a "specialty for fear" (207), are all entrenched in the staple fear of death, and are historically dictated by the main momentary anxieties of the particular society in which they originate. An examination of the link between the intervals of American society, and the stories located within their respectively unique, subtending horror cycles, then, will shed light on the shifting social views of the fear of death, as indicated by the short horror story.

The defining characteristics, and duration, of each

American horror cycle have customarily been based upon

specific historical circumstances. While all aspects of

society are subject to perpetual evolution, both subtle

and major changes are captured by consecutive horror

cycles—embedded in these historical situations—as they

successively narrate the alterations in the American

public's fear of mortality. Thus, in addition to

retrospectively functioning as a detailed catalog of how a

certain society dealt with the fear of death, Carroll

notes that horror cycles, which commonly emerge during

times of disconcerting social stresses, also become a

means—an outlet, of sorts—"through which the anxieties

of an era can be expressed" (207). Whenever these

momentary anxieties, stemming from the constant fear of

mortality, are altered—usually because of major traumatic

events which collectively affect society—a new horror

cycle is established, and it continues to incorporate and

assimilate general societal anxieties into its iconography

of the fear of death. That "horror tends to thrive

cyclically" (207), as Carroll observes, is also explained

by how horror cycles encapsulate changing fears of

mortality: by isolating the real, historical sources of

social stress and anxieties with which a cycle and its

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stories correlate, we can discern how, and why, certain

social perceptions of the fear of death may have ended in

one cycle, with vastly differing views commencing in the

next.

The 1950s and 1960s: Tracing the Fear of Mortality in mid-20th Century America

In late-nineteenth and early 20th century America,

many authors began to adapt typical conventions of the

Gothic horror narrative in their stories to illustrate

their society's unique preoccupations with death. This

demonstrated how the fear was, during this particular

time, largely influenced by the eerie past of dark,

rotting settings, crumbling haunted houses, lingering

monsters and villains, oppressed victims, and medieval

ghosts. These characteristics were based on what Fred

Botting describes as "an over-abundance of frenzy, untamed

by reason and unrestrained by conventions of simplicity,

realism, or probability" (3). In subsequent decades, the

perception of death as rooted in the grotesquerie of

ancient decay gradually shifted, and in the more

modernized landscape of the 1950s, there was a marked rise

in anguish about anything that infringed upon accepted

normalcy. This element, in addition to the subtending

notion that the familiarity and comfort of a "normal" life could possibly be destroyed by an unheeded creeping evil, underlies the horror cycle that emerged during this decade. Portrayals of mortality were thusly exhibited in, among other things, the great threat from any perceived incursion on established social realities; ideas of the unexplained occult which seemed bizarre and frightening to the general public; and the potentially sinister nature of that which was unexplained and unknown. All of these apprehensions share the common notion that social change could lead to dire consequences.

In this period, immediately following the immense trauma of World War II, a surging economic boom "fueled confidence in the American way of life" (Spielvogel 898). Morale was high: women continued to enter the workforce en masse, a trend that had begun during the war as many replaced male workers who were drafted into the military; a scarcity of consumer goods (898) in addition to less spending during the war resulted in increased personal savings, among families, after it ended; and the rapid growth of new labor unions led to an increase in wages across most common professions (898). Beginning in 1945 and until the early seventies (which, incidentally, marked the beginning of a new horror cycle), the average personal

income grew 3% per year, and the duration of this continued upswing would prove to be the most prolonged advance in American history (898). According to economist Arthur Laffer, the postwar era signified a "return to peace, renewed industrial might, and productivity" (63) that encompassed the entire the nation.

However, despite the fact that the end of the war coincided with a subsequent period of prosperity in American society (which had not been seen since before the onset of the Great Depression two decades prior), historian Jackson Spielvogel notes that since the U.S. was closely attuned to—and extensively involved with— international affairs, the developing "Cold War confrontations abroad had repercussions at home" (900). The dangers of Communism, as exemplified by the brutally oppressive regimes in the Soviet Union and those emerging in Southeast Asia (which were fostered and encouraged by the USSR), now became a major concern for Americans. In addition to the onset of the Cold War, the hostile annexation of China by Mao Zedong's Communist forces in the years after the World War II, along with Communist North Korea's attack of South Korea in the early 1950s "led to a fear that Communists had infiltrated the United States" (898). The supposed threat was so alarming to the

general population that President Truman's attorney general issued a public warning, stating that Communists were "everywhere—in factories, offices, butcher stores, on street corners, in private businesses. And each carries in himself the germ of death for society" (898). Additionally, Joseph McCarthy, a demagogic senator from Wisconsin, further manipulated the American public by crafting extreme exposés of alleged Communists; his targets ranged from celebrities to government officials in high positions. While McCarthy's crusade came to an end when, in the mid-1950s, he was censured by Congress for claiming several of the highest officers in the U.S. Army were, in actuality, "Communist conspirators" (901), the American people were already thoroughly overwrought with the idea of Communism eventually infecting their society, and systematically destroying their lives. For a nation that fundamentally believed in life in a free world, the postwar anticommunist hysteria—dubbed the "Red Scare"—was intense and powerful.

According to scholar Mark Jancovich, the horror cycle that began in this postwar 1950s American era "is central as a way of legitimizing" (1) the cycles that both preceded and succeeded it; the era's events had a great and lasting impact on the average American citizen, and

society as a whole. As illustrated by the Cold War crisis and the panic over Communism, the renewed worry over death—with the major threats now coming from the foreign outside world—was fixed in the idea that "others" could invade, eradicate, and conquer their society. This was, as prominent horror scholar and critic S.T. Joshi notes, a natural shift in the Cold War era when issues such as the Red Scare, which was soon followed by the threat of nuclear annihilation, were at the forefront of the collective American consciousness; as a result, the "entire society" (*Supernatural Tales* xviii) was forced to ponder the very real, deadly implications these situations could possibly have for themselves, their families, and ultimately, their nation.

Jancovich emphasizes the fact that in the context of these new anxieties that the people of 1950s America identified with, the decade's horror literature can be seen as "complex responses to the condition of postwar America" (2)—responses that were concerned with the internal changes within American life (3), which was now at mortal risk due to the "aggression" (3) of foreign threats. Moreover, when read in context, even the science fiction hybrid invasion narratives that became popular during this time reflect a similar perception of the same

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threat. Jancovich describes these tales of invasion as those which highlight the threat of "destructive forces from some previously unknown region" (10); analogously, these misgivings over possible "alien domination" (11) is precisely how the people of postwar American society regarded the spread of Communism. An example of this may be seen in Jack Finney's 1954 science-fiction horror hybrid novel, *The Body Snatchers*. The story is a typical invasion narrative; it tells the tale of horrific mutant seeds that sneak into sleeping people, replicate themselves into perfect physical duplicates, and then turn the real human victims into dust. Much of the terror of *The Body Snatchers* exists in the fear that not only could the loss of an individual's life occur silently and secretly, but additionally, that death could also come in the form of a being forced to exchange their own physical self for someone—or something—else. On a subtextual level, the story was largely viewed as an "allegory for the loss of personal autonomy in the Soviet Union" (Jancovich 56), with the useless, characterless alien replications functioning as a comparison to how the helpless inhabitants under stringent Communist rule were forced to robotically subsist, and then die under these unchanging dire conditions.

Though *The Body Snatchers* was clearly a metaphor for a genuine, pervading sentiment in postwar America, the killer in the story was manifested in something that seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary—seed pods—but were, in actuality, possessive of evil supernatural qualities. Apprehension of the supernatural — which Lovecraft identified as "unknown forces … the existence of the imaginary alongside our daily lives" (147)—had long been a source of anxiety in previous American horror cycles, but in the context of 1950s America, as Jancovich notes, the threat resurged in the form of "the demonic" (18) and reminded the population of their "inability to defy death" (12). As illustrated by *The Body Snatchers*, the notion that a malevolent supernatural force could somehow emerge from something common in everyday life— rather than from an anticipated "outside" source—was pivotal during this horror cycle, and it exemplifies what John Clute calls "the effectiveness with which the supernatural could be deployed in modern circumstances and surroundings" (45). In a departure from the otherworldly supernatural that frequently punctuated the prewar horror cycles—such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, and Poe's shrouded giants from distant lands (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*)—the supernatural element in much of

this era's horror fiction was concealed under the guise of familiarity. Thus, there was increased terror over the potential inability to distinguish supernatural characteristics from that which was the "safe," actual reality. As a result, the supernatural was newly viewed as an especially dangerous, hidden threat—one that could lead to a sudden and especially unforeseen death.

The Postwar Horror Cycle Commences; Shirley Jackson, "The Summer People"

It was within the horror cycle of this postwar American society that Shirley Jackson wrote some of her most famous short stories. Jackson scholar Bernice Murphy remarks that as one of the most prominent authors in 1950s America, Jackson was "fully engaged with the pressures and preoccupations" of the postwar society (1). In accordance with this, according to Hartwell, Jackson's best work balances the growing "obsession with the self-evident" (874) and its limitations, along with humanity's obvious bewilderment about the mysterious supernatural, particularly how it seems to suddenly emerge in an otherwise ordinary world. As a symbolic mirror that parallels the specific nature of the American people's fear of mortality during this time, Jackson's depictions

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manipulate this duality, which constitute the powerful

core of her stories. Jancovich notes that in Jackson's

setting, "a world of absolute reality and rationality is

itself problematic" (294), with the implication that life

in a system that actively enforces uncompromising,

unquestioned societal conformity (which Jackson abhorred),

with no other options—hallmarks of Communism—will surely

lead to evils that inevitably result in an unjustifiable,

disturbing loss of self-sovereignty, followed by an

unthinkable death. Furthermore, the blurred periphery

between the ordinary, "rational" world and the unexplained

supernatural which stealthily resides in this world is

also one of the defining characteristics of Jackson's most

overwhelming horror stories—such as her novel, *The

Haunting of Hill House*, and her short tale, "The Summer

People".

"The Summer People," which Jackson penned in 1953,

highlights these aspects of postwar stress in 1950s

America with regard to the dangers of communist-like

stringency, and the undetected possible intrusion of the

supernatural—all encompassed in the fear that death will

be the final consequence of these creeping threats.

Grounded in what Jancovich likens to "the conditions" of

total reality (295), its premise is simple: a retired

elderly couple, Janet Allison (from whose point of view the story is narrated) and Robert Allison, whom Jackson describes as "sanitary city people" (108) have vacationed each summer, for nearly the past two decades, at their small cottage, which is located in a beautiful but remote countryside. This particular summer, with their children long since grown and having no other substantial duties holding them to the city life of New York, they contentedly decide to remain at their cottage past Labor Day for this particular year—something they had never done before: "Each year they recognized that there was nothing to bring them back to New York, but it was not until this year that they overcame their traditional inertia enough to decide to stay at the cottage after Labor Day" (109).

In an ideal world, the interruption of their typical routine—their overcoming of the "traditional inertia" that has defined their lives for the last 17 years—is, presumably, a positive adjustment of course for the couple. It certainly does not seem to be a severe or unwarranted change, and especially not one that would concern any save the Allisons; indeed, as Jackson describes in detail the unfulfilling banality of their current lives—"In the winter, they told one another they

could stand their New York apartment while waiting for the
summer; in the summer, they told one another that the
winter was well worth while, waiting to get to the
country" (109)——the couple seems to be strangely deserving
of sympathy, and thus entitled to this simple, innocuous
decision that would benefit themselves: "There really
isn't anything to take us back to the city … We might as
well enjoy the country as long as possible" (109).

> Consequently, with much pleasure and a slight
> feeling of adventure, Mrs. Allison went into
> their village the day after Labor Day and told
> those natives with whom she had dealings, with
> a pretty air of breaking away from tradition,
> that she and her husband had decided had decided
> to stay at least a month longer at their
> cottage. (109)

However, it is immediately following this that the
Allisons' troubles begin, foreshadowed by the eerily
ominous responses of each of the "natives" with whom Janet
Allison shares the couple's plans: that it was unheard of
to stay at the lake after Labor Day. From here, Jackson
swiftly unravels a series of unfortunate events that
instigate a sense of growing alarm and dismay on the
part of the Allisons, culminating in the now-terrified

couple fearing the very real possibility of death. Jackson

had what Jancovich calls a "jaundiced view of conformity"

(293), which she viewed as potentially "dangerous and

cruel" (294); the Allisons thus represent admirable

resistance in their nonconformist pursuit. Since one of

the first aspects of Communism that Americans had learned

about during the Red Scare was its primary goal "to

create new types of human beings who would conform to the

blueprint of the world they confidently expected to

control" (Dodd 162)—and those who did not obey would

simply be eliminated—the uncomfortable implication in

"The Summer People" is that the Allisons will be

reprimanded, with possible death, for breaking away

from an accepted "law" of this horribly change-intolerant,

sleepy countryside town. As Jackson scholar Joan Wylie-

Hall notes, "[the Allisons] become victims of an

extraordinary communal effort to preserve a customary

way of life" (68); the fact that they have unsuspectingly

dared to shatter the conformity cycle guarantees their

demise.

According to Murphy, Jackson draws on the altered

relationship between the Allisons and the townsfolk to

dramatize the gulf that has always existed between them—

one that, heretofore, has not been quite so apparent,

before the Allisons make their presumably fatal

nonconformist mistake. Jackson departs from a typical

perception that rural townsfolk are always friendly;

instead, it is the "sanitary city people," the Allisons,

who constantly assure themselves of the virtues of the

odd "natives": "They're great people … so solid, and so

reasonable, and so *honest*," Janet Allison tells her

husband, who replies that it "makes you feel good,

knowing there are still towns like this" (111). Despite

the unwelcoming replies from the grocer, Mr. Babcock—who

tells Mrs. Allison that "Nobody ever stayed at the lake

past Labor Day before" (109), the general store owner,

Mr. Warpole—"Don't know about staying on up there at

the lake. Not past Labor Day" (110), and their closest

neighbor, Mr. Hall—"Surprised you're staying on" (111),

Janet attempts to justify the couple's decision, feeling

as though the townsfolk "deserved an explanation" (110).

Although the responses of the locals are confusing to

Janet Allison, the replies are, at best, disinterested;

none offer any insight as to why the natives are surprised

that the Allisons have decided to remain at the cottage,

nor do they explicitly suggest that it is a disagreeable

idea. Janet Allison promptly attributes these

"inconclusive conversations" (Wylie-Hall 68) to the

nature of typical, understandable differences in demeanor between country and city folk.

Though Mrs. Allison's initial conversations with the locals reveal nothing to her, Jackson layers them with implication. This is Jackson's subtle portrayal of a routine that has been transgressed, and by changing direction, the Allisons "have broken a rule and will be punished" (108), as Hartwell contends. Analogous to anti-communist America's fear of a loss of personal independence, Jackson illustrates a type of society where rejecting the notion of required submission can, indeed, lead to death. The individual self-determination to resist any conformity would otherwise be harmless, but when manifested within a society that is steeped in ritual and driven by scheduled practice, it can become potentially deadly. For nearly twenty years, the Allisons have maintained an idealized vision of small-town America, complete with an environment as beautiful as its inhabitants are friendly. According to scholar Rich Pascal, Jackson's depiction demonstrates how the people of this postwar society imagined the "true" America as "being rural and parochial … the image of a small country town basking in somnolent pastoral stability" (qtd. in Murphy 83), and the shattering of this myth—experienced

firsthand by the Allisons—is what triggers and builds their subsequent terror. They learn, in the harshest manner, that the townsfolk are unrelentingly programmed in their behavior; they also discover the subsequent consequences of deciding to pursue the slightest difference: the "natives" are revealed to be unfeeling, robotic, and bizarre. The kerosene man refuses to fill their cottage tank; Mr. Babcock declines to have anything delivered past Labor Day; Mr. Hall is wholly unwilling to help with provisions; and even the picturesque beauty of the landscape—the serenity of which the Allisons had previously always found comfort in—seems to become a threatening menace, as a violent storm ensues. The good feelings of comfort and familiarity fade, and the Allisons realize, in vain, that they are "dependent upon the good will of the local population" (Murphy 113)—a "good will" which has now proven to be false, ceasing to exist in characterless beings who have forgotten their humanity. Jackson paints a haunting portrait of a hopeless situation: existing by and adhering to inflexible, unnecessary rules—to the point of becoming grossly unsympathetic, as the townsfolk are discovered to be—will eventually obliterate what social psychologist Gary Rhodes notes is "the human touch" (295), and leads to total

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heartlessness. Once this has occurred, any attempts to transcend the corrupted cycle of routine—as the Allisons have—can lead to traumatic isolation, and then death.

Additionally, in giving credibility to the possibility of the supernatural in the realm of an established reality, Jackson is able to openly comment on another aspect of 1950s social fears: the idea that threatening paranormal forces—however subtle—can permeate society. Pascal notes that Jackson's stories, while typically adhering to the most basic forms of naturalistic realism, also contrariwise deploy "just enough traces of uncanniness to caution against complete skepticism about the intrusion of the paranormal into the domain of the ordinary" (82). In this particular story, as the Allisons become progressively isolated and panicked, Jackson parallels the couple's sense of fear with the increasing strangeness of their once familiar realm; as a result, the Allisons find that the recognizable has become unrecognizable. In an attempt to comprehend this now unfamiliar atmosphere, the couple begins to wonder about the possibility of unseen, anonymous forces beyond their control: "The car had been tampered with, you know. Even I could see that" (117) remarks Robert Allison to his wife, thinking about their suddenly-dead car—despite the fact

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he knows that aside from himself and his wife, no other humans have been anywhere near their cottage at that point. Mrs. Allison responds, quietly telling him that the phone wires had presumably been cut; Mr. Allison agrees. Whether the couple's assumptions here are correct is never clarified by Jackson; like the ultimate fate of the Allisons, the issue is left "troublingly unresolved" (75) according to scholar Elizabeth George, and thus the possibility that some supernatural force is now terrorizing the couple arises. Janet Allison becomes so overwhelmed by feelings of unexplained bizarreness that she begins to doubt the veracity of a letter from their son, Jerry, that has just arrived in the mail. In context of the situation his parents are now in, Jerry's repeated encouragement for his parents to stay in the country at their cottage is almost telepathically disturbing: "Since you two are both happy up there, it's a good idea for you to stay … don't bother about hurrying back" (116). Following the series of the Allisons' misfortunes, the story ends—chillingly inconclusive—with the couple's heightened awareness of their own mortality, however it may come. As the storm, which had been "in loving anticipation of the moment it would break over the summer cottage" (117) begins to rage, the couple "huddled

together in their summer cottage and waited" (117) for the potentially lethal fate that lies ahead.

The Horror Cycle Continues; Richard Matheson, "Prey"

Jackson's absorption of such contextually and historically relevant social fears regarding death in her stories continued to resonate in the early 1960s, as the Cold War intensified; her untimely death, at age 48, in 1965 coincided with the middle of a decade in which American society found itself, once again, largely in the throes of revived disorder and unrest. The "blatant realities" (Greenfield 1) of this decade—namely, the people's realization that the period of postwar prosperity was beginning to wane, and that the sense of comfort most Americans felt was rapidly fading in the wake of new tumultuous events and the confrontation of certain domestic issues, such as civil liberties, that had long been repressed—came to define the 1960s; the creeping sentiments of disconsolation over the threats that had forcefully emerged in the previous decade were multiplied, and the horror cycle continued to intensify. As historian Myron Greenfield notes, the '60s would turn out to be an emotionally conflicted decade that was

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marked by the echo of death throughout, from the assassination of President [John F.] Kennedy and images of his grieving young widow seared into the national consciousness, to the onset of bloody Vietnam, the war that shattered families and destroyed hope in its wake, paved with the souls of 58,000 American men and women … The sexual revolution that would lead to the era of permissiveness and AIDS … and all the rioting, rebelling, and mutiny in between … roads hardly diverged, for they would come together to lead us further into the dark and further into destruction, bedlam and confusion.(3)

Embedded in this tumultuous historical context, the population's worries over dying deepened, and the fear remained at the forefront of collective social awareness; according to Greenfield, the resurging upheaval and its pervading long-term consequences marked the onset of a renewed social angst, which was reflected in "the arts, poetry, and other literature" (94). The horror story continued to endure as both a channel for expressing the fear of death, and also as a means of articulating and confronting the fear in an alternate reality. The core of the postwar '50s anxieties—the loss of freedom and

familiarity, and the camouflaged threat of the supernatural—essentially remained, and the horror cycle continued. Many newer authors of this period, such as Richard Matheson (who was, incidentally, greatly influenced by Shirley Jackson and her works), sought to reflect how these threats continued to invoke the fear of death in the '60s American society, locating them in current social contexts.

According to Ed Gorman, during the late 1950s and early '60s, Matheson depicted the fear of death within the scope of "kitchen-table everyday" (qtd. in Jones, Newman, Straub 41) horror stories, which were accordingly "packed with cultural references that were grounded in the hopes and fears of the Cold War era in America" (41). This era reached its apex during the 1960s, with the continued momentum of Soviet power; the global nuclear threat; the assassinations of American leaders (President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.); the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement against racial discrimination and inequality; and the instigation of new international proxy wars, particularly the growing conflict in Vietnam, yet another product of the ongoing threat of Communism. By the late '60s, the U.S. leadership's involvement in Vietnam

was met with great opposition from Americans across all generations; anti-war peace protests, whose "theory and infrastructure" (Schuman 515) were extensively influenced by the preceding Civil Rights Movement, became commonplace. According to historian Howard Schuman, major reasons for the opposition included "moral, legal, and pragmatic arguments against U.S. intervention, and adverse reaction to the media portrayal of the devastation in Southeast Asia" (127). With a major racial equality movement reaching its successful conclusion, and a new anti-war protest just beginning, the growing call for tolerance and social understanding was still in its early infancy. Thus, as historian Raymond Ojserkis observes, while the majority of the American population began to reconsider the anti-communist rhetoric that had, thus far, justified the U.S. presence in Vietnam, apprehension over the perceived threat itself—"the risk of foreign attack" (133) on the U.'S. by "the Reds [Communists]" (134) if communistic totalitarianism was not defeated in its entirety—was still extremely powerful. Even among those who fervently opposed the war and shunned xenophobic tendencies, there was still a fear of death based on the potential threat of a foreign assault that was rooted in the idea that most foreigners still

represented that which was unknown, unusual, and unfamiliar.

This hesitancy is confirmed in "Prey," one of the final short stories Matheson wrote during this cycle before committing full-time to novels. It opens with Amelia, a single young woman, looking down at the ancient, ugly doll she has purchased for her boyfriend, Arthur, an anthropology teacher. Amelia is greatly fond of the doll, and considers it an invaluable historical artifact. The most obvious characteristic of the doll is its foreign nature; it is named "He Who Kills" after the Zuni hunter demon it is supposed to embody, and Amelia reads about the claim that the murderous spirit of a Zuni hunter is encased within the doll by a thin gold chain around its neck. After a tempestuous conversation with her mother, who causes Amelia to feel guilty for not spending enough time with her, she breaks her date with Arthur and retreats upstairs; upon returning, she finds that the doll is missing. After first laughing at her own fleeting thought—that the ugly doll had sprung to life—Amelia realizes that a small knife in her kitchen is nowhere to be found, after which the lights mysteriously flicker off. Now fully terrified, Amelia runs back into her living room, and is savagely attacked by "He Who Kills," who is,

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indeed, now a living foreign demon. The chain of events
that lead to the revelation that "He Who Kills" is alive
and intent on brutally murdering Amelia are all reflective
of another unchanged social notion—that the fear of death
is most powerfully emergent in the wake of disturbed
normalcy and new unfamiliarity: when Amelia returns
downstairs to find the doll gone, the muted sounds she
begins to hear, the missing kitchen knife, and the lights
turning off.

The supernatural aspect of "Prey" is its most
horrific characteristic, and incorporates the postwar
society's invention of that which defines evil: the
resurrected doll is unambiguously malevolent, is solely
intent on killing, and—most significantly with regard to
this unsettling late '60s era—it is driven by a purely
satanic spirit that happens to be foreign, one which
Amelia cannot defeat. In a chilling twist, as she attempts
to destroy the doll by shoving it into a blazing oven, the
demonic foreign spirit transfers to Amelia and possesses
her. It is here where Matheson enmeshes the evil of the
supernatural completely within the previously established,
"normal" reality. The boundary in between—which had been
represented by Amelia on one division, and the wicked
foreign doll on the other—is, once again, diminished. The

final scene of the story depicts Amelia, now an embodiment of the evil foreign Zuni spirit, calmly calling her mother and asking her to come over; after "dancing the joy of hunting, of the joy of the impending kill" (335), she sits, cross-legged, clutching a long carving knife in the darkness. The fear of death as reflected in "Prey" is thusly twofold: firstly, the idea of being brutally pursued and murdered by something foreign and strange; and secondly, the idea of the self being eliminated internally, as represented by how the evil foreign Zuni spirit has now captured Amelia. Physically, she exists as a shell, and in every other way, she has become "He Who Kills"—the foreign demon itself—as she waits for the prey, her unsuspecting mother, to arrive.

Matheson, "Crickets"

The tumultuous events of 1960s not only eroded any remaining optimism that had originated during the postwar high of the '50s, but as historian Arthur G. Neal states, they also "stunned the nation to the point of silence" (112) and left its people with an immensely heightened "sense of national vulnerability" (107). The sentiment "Anything is Possible" which had pervaded American society "until the end of the post-World War II Golden Age" (178)

took on an entirely new, negative connotation; as the American people worried over what dreadful, out of the ordinary tragedy would befall them next, "social order seemed to be breaking down" (108). Because of this renewed sense of instability, this time was alternately known as "Death in America" (Krauss 367) and the fear of dying was amplified to the point of national obsession; cultural historian Annette Doane remarks in her 1990 essay, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe" that the perception of death during this period was never situated in "the culminating experience of a life rich in continuity and meaning but, instead, pure discontinuity, disruption—pure chance or accident, the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Landy 280). In "Crickets," Matheson reflects both these aspects of the fear of death from this time: firstly, the notion that with regard to death, anything extraordinary, strange, and terrible is possible, even further extending to the most bizarre, previously unimagined intrusions of the supernatural; and secondly, the increasingly common perception that no matter what, death would always be unexpected, shocking, and disturbingly painful.

In "Crickets," the paranormal is masked, relocated into an entity—small, typical insects—that are seemingly

common and ordinary; eventually, however, they are revealed to be the murderous source of discontinuity and disruption, and the deadly result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The story opens with a conventional young couple, Hal and Jean Galloway (whose perspective Matheson chiefly focuses on throughout), enjoying a relaxing vacation at a lakeside hotel. Once the location has been established—along the shore of a beautiful lake, set within the wilderness of the woods beyond, the contented couple gazing at the reflection of the moon upon the serene water—Matheson introduces what will prove to be the Galloways' first source of uneasiness, an odd, "small man" who initially greets the young couple with "Do you hear them?" (290). Following a mutually awkward introduction, punctuated by the peculiarity of the strange man, John Morgan, and his unsettling references to the thousands of noisy crickets chirping around them, the three go back into the dining room at Morgan's urging. Only moments before, as the Galloways attended dinner, the room had been filled with lively people; now, it is like a "vast shadowy cavern. The only light came from the small lamp on their table which cast up formless shadows of them on the wall" (290).

Jean and her husband become increasingly uncomfortable in these previously ordinary surroundings— even the wine offered by the stranger "trickled in chilly drops down Jean's throat, making her shiver" (290), and she grows restive in his presence—as Morgan offers his story: he has deciphered the "code of the crickets," recording their "language" in a small black notebook. By this point, Jean is shuddering, feeling "as if she were a block of wood. The room seemed to shift balance around her, everything leaning toward her" (291). The implication is that although "there was nothing terrible about the words" (291) of Mr. Morgan, it was "the way he had spoken them" (291), coupled with the circumstances of the meeting—"the crickets … they're sending messages. *The names of the dead*" (292) that unnerve the Galloways. Following this incident, the couple confess to one another that they are afraid; dismissing Mr. Morgan as an eccentric, they cannot pinpoint exactly what has caused these unexpected feelings of apprehension, although the topic of death—and Mr. Morgan's insistence of the crickets' role in its happening—dominates their conversation. Jean tells her husband that she will "never be able to enjoy crickets for the rest of my life" (293). By fracturing the previously established reality and, like

Jackson, allowing the fear of death to steal through, Matheson renders that which was harmless and beautiful — the crickets and their place in nature, the contented ambience of the hotel and lake—now remote, and even appalling. In addition, the continuing sense of "impending doom of dangers ahead" (181) that historian Jonathan Kolkey refers to as a summation of the social atmosphere during this difficult era is represented by Matheson's young couple here, as they attempt to ignore that the constancy of their reality—and thus their sense of security—has been so unexpectedly intruded upon, while simultaneously becoming secretly terrified by the fact, dreading what this breach may lead to.

That the Galloways' fear of mortality is instigated by these subtle feelings of discomfort—which continue to crescendo (and worsen into full-blown terror) until, at the end of the story, the threat is realized, and death is its result—is supplemented by the seamless supernatural element of the story: the crickets themselves, once ordinary, now imbued with the spirit of dead humans. Matheson scatters them everywhere throughout the story: they are there at the beginning, when the couple is quietly standing by the lake, chirping outside their room as they sleep. Their presence further blurs Matheson's

line between real and paranormal, and it is not until Mr.

Morgan tells the Galloways that the crickets "are under

the command of the dead" (294) that the couple begin to

notice, and eventually become anxious of, the insects

themselves. The Galloways do not entirely dismiss this

idea as absurd, although the insinuation is that they

would have had they not met Mr. Morgan. When the crickets

finally gruesomely murder Mr. Morgan——"his skin raked

open, as if by a thousand tiny razor blades" (297)——the

couple horrifyingly realize, from his dying words, that

the crickets will soon return to claim them both as the

next victims. This——along with the "millions" of crickets

chirping outside——ends the story. This is emblematic of

how '60s America, burdened by repeated trauma of events

"that never should have occurred by the standards of what

is normal and natural within the social realm" (Neal 109),

became increasingly inclined to find potential death in

anything that had formerly been a simple, standard part of

everyday life——such as something as seemingly innocuous

and naturally pleasing as crickets, and their chorus of

chirping——however irrational the notion would have

previously seemed. Thus, this type of fear of mortality,

as reflected in the supernatural aspect of "Crickets," was

based on the paranoia of unanticipated disaster, coupled

with the feelings of human weakness that this decade so powerfully inspired.

Implications of the Postwar American Horror Cycle

Noel Carroll notes that "genuine fears can be generated by thoughts entertained as a result of the representational content of the fiction" (81). As the postwar horror cycle illustrates, the stories of this era were notably shaped by stressful events or situations which had a significant, long-lasting impact on the American people. The fear of mortality is clearly located at the core of the emotional responses to these circumstances, and, correspondingly, resonates in the stories of the time. By the end of the '60s, American society no longer exuded the confidence that had defined its atmosphere immediately following the end of World War II; the populace had become terrified of the potential external threats their nation faced. This new sense of vulnerability that had so completely permeated the society at the end of the postwar cycle became permanent, and this is fundamentally reflected in the succeeding horror cycle of the 1970s and 1980s.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FEAR OF MORTALITY WITHIN AMERICAN SOCIETY AS

REFLECTED IN SHORT HORROR FICTION OF

THE 1970s AND 1980s

The Dawn of a New Era and a New Horror Cycle

The aftereffects of the major watershed crises of

1960s America that would inevitably come to define the

collective anxieties of its people—violent assassinations

of leaders, ongoing civil rights and equality struggles,

and the intensification of the brutal conflict in Vietnam—

—continued to resonate throughout the next decade.

According to historian Christopher Lewis, the general

social atmosphere of 1970s America was subsequently marked

by "disillusion, cynicism, bitterness, and anger" (44).

Already dealing with domestic woes such as an impending

national Energy Crisis and a languishing economy, in

addition to international problems (namely the ever-

present international nuclear threat and the political

conflicts and military tensions afforded by the ongoing

Cold War), the Watergate scandal—which ultimately led to

the resignation of President Nixon in mid-1974—further

depleted Americans' trust in their delegated leadership

and its associated institutions. For the majority of the

populace, the 1970s became an time of realization that "the foundations of the American Dream had been shattered by years of decline and frustration" (Friedman 157); the long-term damage of the traumatic events of the '60s became apparent during this decade, one which historian William Henry Chafe describes as wrought with "confusion, frustration, and an overwhelming feeling that America had lost its direction … the 1970s became a microcosm of the unresolved conflicts within American society" (416-17).

In addition to the continuing apprehension over perceived foreign threats—partially symbolized by the overseas wars the U.S. was still critically embroiled in—Americans now faced many severe domestic troubles. During this time, there was sudden economic stagnation heralded by a growing recession, a rising incidence of poverty, and a fundamental decline in standards of living (Lewis 11). As these problems deepened, notes Lewis, there came "bitter divisions over America's fundamental cultural values" (11), which further intensified the strife originating from within society: "Intractable problems became apparent: stagflation, political paranoia, collective anxiety, widespread alienation, economic privation, inner-city decay, racism, and violence" (Friedman 157).

Many of these problems already existed before the 1970s, but seemed to many Americans to now be getting worse and more intractable. In the 1970s, we saw increasing divorce rates … forcing single women to work to support their families … we saw the breakdown of the family, and a rise in juvenile delinquency. We saw the increase in drug use throughout all levels of society … a jump in crime and violent crime … the liberal, white middle-class abandoning their churches and religions … the loss of millions and millions of well-paying factory jobs … we saw ten to fifteen percent inflation per year in the 1970s, and the real income of American workers fall, on average, two percent a year each year from 1973 to 1981. As a result of many of these changes, many were losing their faith in the American Dream, their society, their government, and their future. (Lewis. 13)

In response to the turmoil, sociologist Christopher Lasch declared that American society had completely lost its "commitment to shared values and moral purposefulness … the diminished status of American systems of authority— school, church, government, and [ultimately] the family

unit itself—left in its wake a culture of individuals

living in self-enclosed vacuums" (qtd. in Magistrale 2).

This type of isolation exposed an entirely new form of

human weakness, based on the idea that self-reliance was

impossible, and the only other option—dependency on

established public institutions, which had by now proven

to be untrustworthy and corrupted—would only be

detrimental to the common, honest citizen. This notion

was, according to Magistrale, reproduced at the heart of

this era's horror fiction.

It was during this time of fresh upheaval that a

markedly new horror cycle emerged, again inspired by the

agitation which promulgated from the decade's distressing

events; it was noticeably removed from preceding cycles,

notes Carroll, in that its stories exhibit "descriptions

and depictions of gore that go far beyond what one finds

in the tradition" (211). Magistrale explains this newfound

preoccupation with the macabre as a result of society

becoming "increasingly tolerant of its portrayal and

presentation" (7); by this time, the horror story not only

embodied the numerous current social issues in its

portrayal of the population's ideas on the "death of

civilization," but it also became a reflection of

individual self-destructiveness and the "inadequacies of

conceptual and ideological absolutes" (7). Thus, the

greater prevalence of the macabre in the context of a

frightening "reality flushed out into the open" (2)

characterizes much of the horror fiction from this period:

trappings of gore came to symbolize the American people's

increasing fixations with—and dread over—the idea of a

painful, horrific death.

Stephen King, "Trucks"

Authors who rose to prominence during this time, such

as Stephen King and Dennis Etchison, continued the rich

stylistic tradition of the horror story that had been

utilized by authors such as Jackson and Matheson before

them: depicting eruptions of the supernatural in

meticulously detailed, realistic settings, and the chaotic

effects of these intrusions on typical middle-class

citizens (Schweitzer 68). According to Edwin Casebeer,

King's grounding of the horrific in realism, along with

his effective character portrayals of the typical American

family, "opens up a subtext that addresses urgent

contemporary concerns" (qtd. in Magistrale 43). Like his

short stories, King's novels from this horror cycle also

"allegorically address current social dilemmas" (43): the

often corrupt nature of church and school (*Carrie* and

Rage), the dishonesty of government (*The Stand* and *The*

Long Walk), the cruel weirdness that manifests in small-

town America (*'Salem's Lot* and *It*), and the domestic

problems within the family (*The Shining* and *Cujo*) (43).

The fear of death encapsulated within King's portrayals is

paramount; most importantly, as James Hillman states, it

reflects American culture's growing fear of death as a

permanent ending of life, rather than as an unexplained

transformation (44), and that humanity is truly "without

resources before the imminence of our own deaths, and the

catastrophe of the deaths of those we love" (44). In

addition, as King himself noted, "I am not merely dealing

with the surreal and fantastic but, more importantly,

using the surreal and fantastic to examine the motivations

of people and the society and the institutions they

create" (Magistrale 45). King explores these issues—and

how they relate to the fear on death in this society—in

one of his earliest short stories, "Trucks".

"Trucks" was originally published in June 1973.

According to genre scholar Robert Weinberg, King's story

is a "twenty-first century David versus Goliath story,

with the outcome no longer so clear" (51). The underlying

fear of dying in "Trucks" is again established in the

protagonists' assumptions that they retain control over

"their" own world, only to discover that a strange,

unknown force has overtaken it; the characters' tyrannical

and murderous enslavement by the evil force—along with a

loss of contact with the formerly "real" world—is the

deadly result. The tale opens in the midst of King's

interweaving between reality and that which defies human

logic: at Conant's Truck Stop and Diner, situated along a

lonesome stretch of country roadside, massive trucks—

clearly unmanned—systematically arrive to gruesomely

murder any human that crosses their path. Interestingly,

before the basis of the threat is revealed, the unnamed

narrator of the story observes, in great detail, the

carnage that is now suddenly present outside of the truck

stop:

> At the entrance to the truck stop's turnaround,
>
> there was a blasted Cadillac. Its owner stared
>
> out of the star-shattered windshield like a
>
> gutted fish … Halfway across the lot from it lay
>
> the body of a girl in a pink dress. She had
>
> jumped from the Caddy when she saw it wasn't
>
> going to make it. She hit the ground running but
>
> never had a chance. She was the worst, even
>
> though she was face down. There were flies
>
> around her in clouds. (131)

The gruesome massacre continues when Snodgrass, a salesman

who seems to be "getting ready to do something crazy"

(130) as he witnesses the bloodshed, suddenly runs outside

in an apparent fit of insanity, and is promptly "drove up

and out, the way a punter kicks a football … silhouetted

against the hot afternoon sky like a crippled scarecrow"

(132). King's vivid illustrations of murder in the form

of bloody gore is emblematic of what historian Stacey

Olster notes is typical of social perceptions of what an

"apocalyptic reality" (16), in which humans become the

hunted, would entail. The depictions also a represent

a fundamental departure from the previous postwar

horror cycle, in that the degree of graphic violence is

considerably increased. According to Noel Carroll, this

change is evidenced by the "extreme gross fury visited

upon the human body as it is burst, blown up, broken,

and ripped apart" (211). In this manner, King's portrayal

of death as a painful, violent end is at the forefront

of "Trucks": it is, initially, the knowledge—and visual

sight—of such mortal suffering that unnerves the

characters sequestered in the diner; it consequently

drives them to react unpredictably and abnormally.

Snodgrass, for instance, with "fear scrawled on his

face" (131), is no longer capable of thinking coherently,

and this leads to his fatal escape attempt. In another

eerie example of how the terror over a painful, violent

death is powerful and controlling, the narrator of

the story—who keeps the small group together, is

determined to save all of their lives, and is otherwise

portrayed throughout the story to be a caring individual—

has a seemingly out-of-character reaction to Snodgrass'

impending death. He coldly ignores the pitiful cries

from outside, where Snodgrass now lies dying. Envisioning

Snodgrass' condition—"lying half in and half out of the

drainage ditch, back and legs broken, white, gasping face

turned up to the indifferent moon" (138)—he tells a

member of the group, a teenage girl who with her

boyfriend, Jerry, was terrorized by the trucks before

being cornered at the diner: "'Now if you woke him up,' I

said, jerking a thumb at the kid, 'he might hear

something. *He might go out there.* Would you like that?'"

(138). The origin of the deadly menace—the trucks

themselves—is not apparent until after the narrator,

looking through the diner window, describes the bloodbath,

and Snodgrass has become the next victim. A bloody, gory

death is the inevitable result of confronting the evil

trucks, and in attempting to evade the horrendous agony

of what King calls a "bad end," the terrified characters

realize that their lives now consist of a single, main goal: avoiding certain death.

The idea of a huge, ugly truck taking on a malevolent life of its own in King's parallel world was very compelling in the context of this specific timeframe. In addition to the escalating apprehensions of the American people about the uncertain implications of what "nuclear power" truly meant, in the early 1970s, there was also a growing sense of trepidation over the increasing roles that artificial intelligence and technology were playing in a national market where the most vital production standards based on safety—such as quality, durability, and reliability—were increasingly being ignored in favor of higher mass-production numbers, which, in turn, guaranteed lucrative monetary outcomes for individual production corporations. Thus, not only were many consumer goods—such as cars—flawed and defective, but they were also dangerous and potentially deadly. The immorality of high ranking officials and their corporations was, once again, the source of the threat; ironically, in the case of cars, this human corruption was discovered via the tainted products themselves. In 1972, a year before "Trucks" was published, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration responded to scandalous accusations

that General Motors—the largest automaker in the U.S.—
had intentionally disregarded notions of safety in the
manufacture of their vehicles, instead focusing on mass
production methods that would enable the greatest number
of automobiles to be produced in the least amount of time
(Salinger 66). The national outcry that followed the
report highlighted not only the mounting concern over the
increasing incidence of traffic fatalities, but it also
drew furious questions about the lack of ethical standards
that GM applied in its mechanical manufacturing practices.
It is precisely this indifferent amorality—manifested by
a robotic, automated assembly line that is developed by a
soulless corporation, and then left unchecked and
neglected, thusly producing potentially dangerous vehicles
that subsequently run rampant, on their own volition, in
the real world—that terrifies the narrator at the end of
"Trucks," as he endeavors to find solace in the fact that
the trucks cannot reproduce by themselves: "And if I close
my eyes I can see the production lines in Detroit and
Dearborn … new trucks being put together by blue-collars
who no longer even punch a clock but drop and are
replaced" (146). In the final scene of the story, the
narrator notices two airplanes overhead; he wishes he
could believe that the very people who constructed them

are now also controlling them, but finds that he cannot. The one-sided evil of the trucks, which is now most likely contained in machines everywhere in the world of "Trucks," is borne from the unprincipled, corrupted manner in which they have been produced; the narrator implies that humanity, now ruined, is responsible for its own demise.

According to Weinberg, the concept of demonic machinery unexplainably springing to life is "one of mankind's deepest fears" (53), one that is punctuated by the bothersome sentiment that humans are possibly "manufacturing their own successors" (53). A short exchange between the narrator of "Trucks" and a character in the diner (who is later executed by one of the trucks) reveals further how moral fears are reflected in the story. The trucker wonders if the murderous, uncontrollable trucks could be the result of freak nuclear testing, indicating the view that such risky human projects could lead to this new form of evil. The simplistic reason for the trucks' rage, however, is a motive that the narrator acknowledges and accepts: "'Maybe they're mad'" (134) Thus, the trucks assume the position of the "creatures of the earth" who seek vengeance "in protest of man's treatment of the planet" (Weinberg 52)— in this particular instance, against an American society

whose order had already been extensively damaged by wars, perilous ventures into science, severe internal conflicts, and the deceitful treachery of those holding positions of power.

In light of the Watergate scandal, which began in June 1972, "Trucks" also resonates on another profound level. The public outrage in the aftermath of Watergate extended toward the government as a whole, which was now largely viewed as corrupt, covert, and unconcerned about the best interests of its people. According to historian John McGeehan, the unraveling of the "cancer on the presidency" (225) led to the immediate erosion of public support, and ultimately, a sense of national skepticism that forever tarnished the population's outlook on their democratic institutions. For a country whose citizens were already beginning to sense that governmental aid for local, domestic troubles was limited at best, the revelations that the highest elected officials of the nation were surreptitiously and illegally guaranteeing their own self-interests was met with "shock and dismay" (230); the American people began to completely distrust their government, the manner in which it functioned, its role in their lives, and its true motives. In "Trucks," this idea is taken to the extreme: the corrupted vehicles,

wielding their newfound power, not only seek to kill

humans who attempt to defy them or flee their "rule," but

they also intend to dominate and enslave the rest of the

human race as well. After the trucks' Morse code message—

"Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed"

(139)—has been decoded, the narrator realizes that in

order to survive, the group must cede to the killer

vehicles' demands. The counterman reacts to the narrator's

suggestion that the group help fuel the trucks, with

disgust: "You want to be their slaves? That's what it'll

come to" (140). With the populace of 1970s America still

very nervously conscious of the brutally oppressive,

dictatorial communist regimes that presided over the

Eastern Bloc countries, in addition to the unprecedented,

shocking troubles they were now witnessing within their

own administration, this thematic element of "Trucks" is

exceedingly disturbing.

King, "The Monkey"

As the horror cycle continued, the emphasis on

physical violence escalated; John Clute argues that this

was a sign of American society's "increasing obsession

with the terror of violence, and of the pressures of the

late 20th century" (46). Additionally, as historian Graham

Thompson notes, the Reagan administration of the '80s encouraged citizens to view the '60s and '70s as periods which greatly damaged American society, a "bad past" from which "the U.S. had to rescue itself" (9). The tumult of the preceding decades also led to Americans' new desire to recreate the still-elusive "nuclear family." There was renewed emphasis on the importance of the "traditional family unit," along with a widespread belief that familial solidarity, if achieved, would have a harmonious bearing on American society as a whole. Thus, the fear of death that was especially prevalent during this time was often manifested in the terror that arose from "the family being torn apart" (Kellner 131), and was symbolized in horror films such as *Poltergeist* (1982). The fear of mortality coming from an altered natural world and its once-familiar surroundings was still predominant, as reflected by the decade's horror literature; however, the supernatural elements of many stories, such as Stephen King's "The Monkey," focus on an individual's "bad" past: a demon that returns to threaten his family, thereby reviving the fear in the most powerful way.

King wrote "The Monkey" at the beginning of this decade. Author Roberto Suro notes that during this time, the American family was still "being eulogized as a victim

of moral decay," and the increasing divorce rate that had
initially become apparent in the 70s continued to worsen.
In turn, the breakdown of the family unit resulted in a
flurry of newly prominent social ills during the 80s: a
continued rise in unemployment, a mounting number .of the
population finding themselves with still-declining
standards of living, and a rapid increase in casual drug
abuse were several of the most severe consequences. Subtly
referencing several of these issues as a vital component
in enriching the plot and characters of "The Monkey," King
realistically portrays the struggles, both internal and
external, of a typical, middle-class American family, and
thus "the emotional core drives the story" (Newman, Jones
73). This emotional core is founded on Hal Shelburn's
fight to keep his family together—and, thereby, keep
death away. Hal has been laid off from his job as a
software engineer in California, and—finding a lower
paying job—"$4,000 less a year, but it was work" (384)—
in a small Texas town, he moves his family, which consists
of his wife, Terry, and their two young sons, Dennis and
Petey, to the new city. In the middle of a family trip to
Hal's hometown along Crystal Lake in Maine, Dennis finds a
broken, clockwork monkey—seemingly an old-fashioned
child's toy—and Hal is immediately filled with terror,

knowing that this is the same "toy" he had thrown down a well nearly thirty years ago.

From the moment the monkey is introduced—in the first line of the story—and the extent of Hal's terror, on account of his reaction to the ugly toy, is revealed, the fear of losing his family defines Hal's subsequent demeanor; it particularly influences Hal's interaction with his children, whom he ultimately seeks to protect, and leads to his reawakened memory of his own childhood. The monkey, with its clashing brass cymbals, represents every misfortune that has befallen Hal: his own father's abandonment when he was a young child; the sequential deaths of his babysitter, his best friend, his brother Bill's best friend, and their mother; and now, his own failures as a father, which Hal believes it now seeks to take murderous advantage of. The fact that Hal has recently lost his job, and has had to uproot his family—who do not seem to be adjusting well to their new circumstances—as a result further aggravates this latest confrontation with the reappearing monkey; he feels he cannot adequately protect them from the promise of death that the monkey represents. As critic Christopher Golden notes, Hal knows the mere presence of the toy "threatens the well-being of his family" (320),

which is especially vulnerable and distressed at this particular time.

The way in which the monkey systematically assured the deaths of his loved ones so long ago—by simply beating its cymbals together, at any random moment, without even being prompted by its wind-up key—is interlaced with gory descriptions of the deaths; the horrific manner of each death, imagined by young Hal to be narrated by the monkey, with its vampire-teeth grin and "its murky amber eyes, filled with idiot glee" (384) to be telling him. The pain of dying is prominent in each of Hal's losses, just as the monkey had seemingly promised: his babysitter, Beulah, was gunned down by her boyfriend; his best friend, Johnny McCabe, fell from their treehouse and broke his neck; and Charlie Silverman, Bill's friend, run over by a drunk driver, who suffered a heart attack from "the sight of Charlie Silverman's brains drying on his pants" (396). The fear of a painful death is also central to Hal's own imagination of the monkey's disturbing taunts; for instance, though his mother died of a seemingly painless brain embolism in the middle of an afternoon at work—this time after Hal himself had turned the key in the monkey and, in terror, watched it clap its cymbals—Hal envisions the monkey describing her death as

brutal and terrifying: "What's that rising up into the sky like a big bloody bowling ball with eyes where the finger-holes should be? Is it your mother's head, Hal?" (394). Hal begins to believe that his own father had not, as he had previously assumed, abandoned the young family; instead, "Maybe the monkey got him" (401).

All of these childhood traumas suffered by Hal—which, because of the presence of the monkey, he could never dismiss as somehow coincidental—are now revived at the forefront of his awareness, along with his dread of impending loss. All of his previously suppressed feelings of terror are reignited by the reemergence of the evil monkey, which "isn't even sentient and aware of what it is" (400). Hal's recollection of his own fear of horrifically dying at the command of the monkey is blended anew with the same fear he now harbors for his children, rendering "The Monkey" as what Hartwell terms "generational haunting," with the evil toy representing "a moral symbol of some complexity" (382). Hal is more concerned with keeping his family safe from the monkey's wrath than he is with his own well-being, but he is also greatly frustrated, and terrified, by the fractures that are slowly threatening to pull them apart. His wife, Terry, has become addicted to valium; he is unable to

reassure her, because "there seemed to be no comfort in
him. There was too much terror. It would be better when
the monkey was gone again, gone for good" (392). Hal is
miserable; he sees no escape from the monkey, with its
"cymbals poised, grinning" (395), waiting to strike—
waiting to announce the horrific deaths of his children
and Terry.

Hal's "simple love" for his younger nine-year-old
son, Petey, is, in Hal's own summation, one of his
redemptive qualities; it is an emotion that is "bright and
strong and uncomplicated" (397) amidst the feelings of
overwhelming hostility and dread that the monkey has
inspired. In contrast, though Hal loves his 12-year-old
son, Dennis, he feels increasingly disconnected from him;
the young boy has become withdrawn, disrespectful,
rebellious, and unsettled since the family moved to Texas,
and his troubled parents suspect he is experimenting with
drugs. Hal feels guilty for resenting his older son: "He
seemed to have no control over the hostility he felt
toward Dennis, more and more often, but in the aftermath,
he felt demeaned and tacky……helpless" (388) Hal's
sentiments toward Dennis, which bother him considerably
already, are now another source of immense terror for him,
as he realizes they represent his worst fear: by drifting

away from Hal, Dennis will become the monkey's next
victim. After a fight between father and son, which,
ironically, ends in an instance of much-needed bonding
between both, Hal resolves to reconcile with Dennis.
Looking at the monkey afterward, however, its menacing
grin seems to speak to him: "You'll never be close to him
again, Hal. Never again. Never again" (389). In this mode,
the monkey symbolizes what Hal fears most, the same sense
of fear that defined him as a child: the loss of his loved
ones, as, firstly, the result of an unraveling family, and
then—heralded by the monkey and its clanging cymbals—in
the permanent form of their gruesome deaths. It is only
after Hal, with Petey's help, seemingly destroys the
monkey—drowning it in Crystal Lake—that his overriding
fears for his children are assuaged:

> He was terrified, but he felt a crazy kind of
> exhilaration through the terror. The monkey was
> gone for good this time. He knew it somehow.
> Whatever happened to him, the monkey would not
> be back to draw a shadow over Dennis's life, or
> Petey's … the fear had been too big to see
> anything else, if anything else had indeed been
> there. (407)

The story ends with Hal shuddering as he thinks of "things

that might be"––another child, on a trip to the lake with his father, inadvertently pulling the monkey back up––and then returning his thoughts to the present. Relieved, Hal focuses on the fact that the monkey––the evil embodiment of his worst fear––is now gone. Hal also realizes that his fear of losing his family has remained unchanged since he was a child: as long as the monkey, which represents death, is not in his presence, he is able to (at least momentarily) force his fear of his family's deaths out of his mind.

Dennis Etchison, "The Late Shift"

Another prominent horror author of this cycle was Dennis Etchison, who, in the analysis of Michael Stamm, revives the innermost fear by shifting the "ancient guises of vampire, werewolf, or succubus" into "the bodies or unseen presences of beings that belong unquestionably in the modern world"––beings that, in Etchison's stories, have adapted to that world better than humans have (54), thus furthering their quest to overtake it. One of his most significant stories from this timeframe, "The Late Shift," represents the fear of death in several ways, all of which are tied to a single source of social stress: the threat of endemic corruption across the fabric of society.

The apprehension over this threat—which had forcefully

emerged in the wake of Watergate in the early '70s—had

not since diminished. The fear of dying was rooted in the

idea that powerful, high-ranking officials within

supposedly reputed institutions were constantly seeking to

maximize monetary benefits for themselves—and would not

hesitate to eliminate any ordinary citizen who discovered

the treachery, or tried to stop it. Additionally, there

was great fear that such people "who try to expose the

corruption may even be *killed*, and the death camouflaged

as an accident" (Levinson 1163).

Etchison's "The Late Shift" was first published in

1980. Critic Michael Stamm states that the story

demonstrates Etchison's special talent for taking "the

conventional, the commonplace, and with the half-twist or

the application of some lens, to put them straight into

the realm of nightmare" (qtd. in Schweitzer 48). "The Late

Shift" is entirely about mortality, and how one character

specifically deals with the fear of it, from which he

finds he cannot escape. Etchison particularly highlights

not only the era's fear that death, in the form of

disguised murder, is sudden, agonizing, and painful, but

he also paints a grim portrait of the terrors that can

continue in the aftermath of one's death. Death itself, in

Etchison's depiction, is not only the horrific final instance of trauma one suffers through; instead, it is also the beginning of an entirely new form of evil, instigated by the corruptness of others.

In the story, this aftermath is controlled by "Them"——unknown, unscrupulous individuals who are in a position of control, and have somehow discovered how to turn death into a means of lucrative profit. The story opens with two friends returning from a midnight screening of a horror movie, and stopping by the market on their way home. Macklin and his friend, Whitey, recognize the odd night clerk as one of their old friends, Juano, who now looks awful——"like he was wearing makeup over a face that hadn't seen the light of day in ages" (374)——and is disconcertingly repetitive in his interactions, unable to respond coherently as Macklin and Whitey endeavor to have a conversation with him. Macklin feels "a cold draft blow through his chest" (375), as he walks out of the store and passes by Juano, and attempts to dismiss the sense of creeping fear that has resulted from the encounter. Later that evening, Whitey is involved in a car accident on his way home; Macklin rushes to the hospital, where he learns that while his friend's condition is serious, the operation that would be performed the following day

"wasn't critical" (379). Macklin's disturbed sense of
order—first, the bizarre encounter with Juano, and now,
his best friend's accident—deepen his feelings of
instability, and his fear of death begins to surface.

It is in the nuances of the interactions between
Macklin and the authorities—first the police, and then at
the hospital—where Etchison first establishes what
Weinberg refers to as the "seeds of fear" (240). Upon
arriving at the hospital, Macklin speaks to a police
officer, who tells him that Whitey had been "reeking of
alcohol"; however, Macklin knows that because of Whitey's
liver issues, this cannot be true. An "irritatingly
healthy-looking doctor" further corroborates "the official
story," of the accident, which Macklin finds increasingly
difficult to believe. An exchange he witnesses between an
impatient nurse and Whitey—who is groggy, but aware, and
badgering the nurse with questions on "What do you do with
the people who die in here?"—leaves Macklin disturbed to
the point that he "needed suddenly to be out of there"
(378). Before he leaves, Whitey tells him that "They" make
a living with death. The same afternoon, after Macklin
again contacts the hospital to inquire about Whitey, the
officials "remained predictably vague, no matter how he
put the questions" (378) whenever he presses for details

on his friend's condition. Receiving no answers from those who are supposed to be helpful, Macklin becomes greatly suspicious; his awareness is heightened, and his fear of mortality—now correlated with his dread of "Them"—intensifies.

Macklin's growing distrust at what "those in charge" (378) were telling him—or not telling—compels him to investigate on his own. After some prodding, the manager of the small market where the friends first spotted Juano tells Macklin that "They"—as high up as the district office—are involved in bringing these "messed up" (399) individuals, such as Juano, to work graveyard shifts for the owners of 24-hour businesses. Shaken, Macklin resolves to uncover exactly who "They" are. At this point in the story, it becomes apparent what "They" are doing: reanimating corpses for the sole purpose of staffing dead-end service jobs, with an excessive profit margin as the result. Macklin is promptly caught trailing "Them" in their blue van, is drugged and held prisoner with the unresponsive, mechanical zombies, and is about to be killed; in the end, he escapes to a phone booth, and finding no help from the police—who, like every other authority Macklin encounters, are also seemingly involved in the horrific plot—Macklin calls the hospital, only to

be told that Whitey had died. In a moment of terrible clarity, Macklin realizes that Whitey's appalling death itself—which was, it is now clear, orchestrated by "Them"—will not be his friend's final lot. As Macklin sits waiting in the phone booth, burning himself with matches, he looks outside and sees the blue van—which is waiting to claim him, next.

Thus, "The Late Shift" depicts corruption at all the layers of society in which its inhabitants have placed their greatest trust: the establishments of healthcare, law enforcement, and governmental agency. In addition, the story forcefully illustrates why many Americans during this time still feared exposing any form of corruption: it could cost them their lives, in addition to those of their loved ones. This, along with the fact that the evil manifests at such multiple levels and is, thus, inescapable, is what powerfully creates the fear of mortality. There is absolutely no help left, and no escape from a cruel and premature death, as evidenced by the final scene of the story, with "Them" lying in wait for Macklin. The zombies are not the monsters here; the humans are. According to historian Rodney Stich, the concern over widespread corruption post-Watergate was still lingering throughout the 1980s. The notion that such covert and

sinister operations could be seamlessly incorporated by

"Them" in society—suffering and murder made to look

accidental, and even then, no peace following death—

echoed the population's deepest worry of what "They"—

those who held power—could be capable of. Stamm notes

that even though the supernatural aspect of the story may

seem irrational, Etchison is able to create it

realistically by "playing with familiar places and people,

and observations that all of us have made at one time or

another" (52). Thus, the result is the recreation of the

archetypal fear, incarnated in "new shapes of darkness"

(52) that Etchison developed in response to this specific

source of anxiety that continued to haunt the American

people.

Implications of the 1970s—1980s American Horror Cycle

Noel Carroll notes that "as a consequence of the

Vietnam War and the parade of disillusionments that

followed in its trail, Americans … have been disabused of

their Dream" (214). The realization that the U.S. was

never likely to recapture the sense of Pax Americana of

preceding decades, in the immediate aftermath of World War

II, was now magnified by major conflicts the nation faced

at home and abroad. The turmoil that had "irreparably

shaken" (Carroll 214) American society during these two

decades marked, according to historian Tim Hames, "the

most turbulent period in U.S. history since the Civil War"

(23). In addition, as Hames further notes, by the 1980s,

"American confidence had sunk to unprecedented depths"

(23). The fear of dying, as reflected in the horror story

during this period, reveals the public's newfound sense of

profound suspicion of their own leaders, in addition to

the knowledge that the foreign threat still loomed large.

As the '90s commenced and the century drew to a close,

subsequent events further deepened the panic over

potential threats originating from within society, which—

as numerous traumatic events of the '70s and '80s had

demonstrated—was suddenly becoming terrifyingly common.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE FEAR OF MORTALITY IN

AMERICAN SOCIETY AT PRESENT AS ILLUSTRATED

BY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN HORROR FICTION

Psychological Stream: A Current Horror Cycle

The rapid decline and fall of the Soviet Union
in 1991 signaled the end of the Cold War, and apprehension
over the multiple threats once posed by such a powerful
foreign state faded. According to historian Stephen
Burman, the U.S., now led by the first Bush
administration, subsequently sought to "assert its pre-
eminence" by getting involved in the Mideast Gulf crisis,
"an ideal diversion from domestic weaknesses, and an
opportunity for America to establish for itself a
dominant, militaristic role in world affairs" (189).
Before the decade was over, the U.S. became involved in
military operations in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and
Yugoslavia, building a reputation as "arbitrator,
enforcer, and peace-keeper throughout the world" (5). The
"domestic weaknesses," however, consisted of increased
hostility which originated from within American society;
eventually, "violence became a way of life" (6). Cultural
historian Peggy Whitley further notes the numerous

domestic woes that collectively damaged the morale of the American people: in 1993, an eccentric cult leader in Waco, Texas, led most of his followers to a fiery death after federal agents raided their compound; the entire drama unfolded on national television, and was witnessed by millions. Two years later, a U.S. Army veteran bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in downtown Oklahoma City, killing 168 people; at the time, it was the single worst act of terrorism in the nation's history. "The Unabomber"—who turned out to be a genius recluse, living in a secluded cabin deep in the woods of western Montana—commenced on a mail-bomb killing spree, murdering three people and critically injuring 23 more between 1994 and 1996, terrorizing the country by eluding identification and capture. In the months between February 1996 and April 1999, there were fourteen instances of school shootings; the most horrific occurred on April 20, 1999, when 14 students and one teacher were killed, and 23 others were wounded at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (22).

Each of the individual perpetrators of these specific disasters were later described, by medical experts, as having had suffered from degenerative psychological conditions. According to psychiatrist Stuart Yudofsky,

each of these individuals exhibited "multiple fatal flaws of personality and character" (156) which ranged from paranoiac, antisocial, narcissistic, and schizotypal disorders. Also late in the decade, as U.S. troops returned home from the numerous overseas combat missions that the nation had become embroiled in, an increasing number of these veterans began to commit violent crimes at home. Unlike the veterans of World War II and Vietnam—who decades previously had returned to their society at a time when mental illness was largely ridiculed, and therefore usually did not seek any form of treatment for perceived psychological problems—the plight of the Gulf War veterans was largely met with sympathy. As sociologist Jacqueline Ismael notes, there was "fear of repeating the Vietnam experience" (245) from the onset of the Persian Gulf conflict, and this included the quality and effectiveness of care for returning troops; proper psychiatric treatment for veterans upon their return from combat became a priority. Thus, under the umbrella diagnosis of what became known as "Gulf War Syndrome," many troops were clinically diagnosed as suffering from severe mental disturbances, ranging from instances of post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression, to severe cases of schizophrenia and personality disorders.

The fact that the sources of so many chaotic events, among others, were traced as originating from within American society—perpetuated by seemingly ordinary citizens who successfully hid that they were "abnormal" (Fitzduff, Stout 88) and "were not overtly suffering from any mental illnesses" (89)—was greatly shocking and distressing to the general public (Ayers, Gould, Oshinsky 952). Additionally, in this timeframe—at the turn of the century—an increasing number of individual case studies (from the past and present) on psychiatric illness led to a greater incidence of specific diagnoses and treatment of such disorders; psychologist Susan Bacorn observes that this period became known as "The Decade of the Brain" because of the extensive examinations into the origins of abnormal human behavior (297). According to sociologists James McKenzie, R.R. Pringer, and James Kotecki, this newfound concern with mental conditions was a stark departure from previous "national ambivalence toward those suffering from mental disorders" (323), and from commonly-held ideas that "psychological instabilities of every variety were actually forms of malingering or imitation … [they] were deemed non-physical, fraudulent versions of illness and not the real thing" (167). Thus, as many of the decade's traumatic events shed light on the nature of

the most acute cases of mental disturbance, another result
of these incidents was the general public's newfound,
growing understanding—and fear—of the psychological
origins of grossly deviant behavior.

Curiosity regarding the psychology of the individual
mind, and how it operates, grew. Psychoanalyst Amihud
Gilead notes that throughout the 1990s, there was
widespread revived interest in Sigmund Freud's
psychoanalytical notions of, among others, "repressed
memories possessing the power to initiate excitations on
their own, rendering the pathogenic unconscious conscious"
(76); his concept of "repetition compulsion," when a
neurotic individual obsessively "repeats something
important from the past without recognizing the
repetition" of the destructive cycle (Weiner, Craighead
1455); and his explanation of "ego mechanisms of defense"
such as denial, delusions, and displacement, all of which
function as "manipulations of perception, intended to
self-protect from anxiety and fear" (McClure 32). J. Allen
Hobson notes that Freud's later works, which gained the
most widespread popularity in the U.S. toward the end of
the century, were, clearly, "psychoanalysis as
contributions to a new psychology of the unconscious mind
that might someday be explained neurologically but which

was, meanwhile, independent of brain science" (21). These works included Freud's 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," in which he broadened his analysis to include a discussion of "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (*Writings* 124), the source of which is often the secretly psychotic individual himself. Furthermore, in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud outlined a theory of what precisely defines the human mind: an unremitting struggle between sustaining a contented life, and the "death drive," which accounts for "the instinctual character of the compulsion to repeat" (qtd. in Ricoeur, Savage 319) destructive practices that lead to self-annihilation.

William Buskist further states that this brand of psychology, largely developed by Freud and rooted primarily in his philosophies, "garnered special attention in the 1990s" (450) through "media sources such as self-help books [which] reintroduced such notions as repressed memory and consciousness to the general public" (457). Additionally, the renewed interest extended to the works of Swiss psychiatrist and theorist Carl Gustav Jung, a contemporary of Freud. Jung's postulations regarding the "complementary and compensatory relationship between consciousness and the unconscious" (Miller 15),

particularly his argument that "the more the unconscious is pushed down, the greater its strength and the chances it will erupt into consciousness, with unpleasant results" (16), became synonymous with scrupulous new studies of the criminal mind. Thus, as "mass psychology as a psychosocial phenomenological approach" became increasingly common in late 20th century America (Landes 235), Jung's and Freud's longstanding principles of psychoanalysis, already the foundational basis for many new studies on abnormal behaviors that were being conducted within the psychiatric community, were increasingly brought to the attention of the general population at large.

The anxiety over "losing one's mind" (Landes 455) in this psychoanalytically contemplative society "introduced a new sense of vulnerability in American culture" (Spielvogel 266), more pronounced than ever before; it was strengthened by the idea that an individual's undetected inability to maintain psychological control could be just as dangerous as an external physical threat, and would inevitably lead to terrifying large-scale consequences. Furthermore, according to critic Harry Edwin Eiss, "today's horror fiction simply mirrors our modern understanding of human psychology" (46). The horror cycle of America at the turn of the century reflected this more

pronounced exploration of the psyche, and the manner in which it embodies the fear of dying: not only how the surfacing of personal intrinsic demons—those created by traumatic personal experiences, circumstances, and emotions, yet unknown even by the individual himself until the "moment of quick-trigger aggression" (Geen, Donnerstein 133)—can lead to the transformation of a normal person into a murderous psychopath, unleashed on an oblivious and unsuspecting public; but also how humans are driven to maintain their own frame of mind, shaped by social conventions of what philosopher Bernard Gert calls "practical rationality, by which ideal human agency is defined … for only crazy people would not think in accordance with reason" (42). The fear of death, then, is not only located in the idea of losing control over one's mind, but is also generated by "witnessing the aberrations of a diseased mind" (*Supernatural Tales* x), as Joshi notes. While several prominent authors from the past, such as Shirley Jackson, presented psychological terrors—and, as Magistrale explains, the examination of the psychomachia of the self "was anticipated by earlier psychological-suspense-horror novels, such as Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959)" (23)—the current cycle includes a much greater number of stories that are, according to

David Punter, concerned with delving into "landscapes of

the mind, distorted by the pressure of characters'

psychological obsessions" (33), and this indicates that

"metaphysical evil has been largely dethroned by notions

of psychological dysfunction" (34). Hugely successful

cinematic portrayals of psychologically disturbed

individuals—such as the fanatical, murderous Annie Wilkes

in Stephen King's *Misery* (1991), and the terrifying,

cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter in Thomas

Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)—further

illustrated the potential horror of psychoses. To a

greater extent than any previous horror cycle, the current

period is defined by an even more focused illustration of

the deadly consequences of an abnormal mind, and the

inability to evade such a secretly concealed intrinsic

threat.

Thus, in this era's horror fiction, the reflection of

the fear of mortality—as well as the individual's

conscious attempts to suppress or altogether deny the

fear—as part of an innate, detrimental psychological

struggle, manifests in numerous ways. Kelly Link's "The

Specialist's Hat" is a frightening psychological tale that

depicts the eerie ambiguity of death, its mysterious

aftermath, and how people and events from the past can

continue to haunt, inexplicably resonating in and altering

the minds of those from the present. The obscured

differentiation between that which is real and that which

is not is never clear from the perspective of an odd pair

of ten-year-old identical twin sisters, and this,.

according to Freud, is "the basis of nearly all uncanny

effects … when the distinctions between reality and

imagination are erased and the viewer can no longer

differentiate the fantasy from the actual physical form"

(qtd. in Nead 47). The twins' states of mind can further

be explained by another aspect of Freud's explanation of

what happens when one experiences the *uncanny*: "the past

reaches out to the present and draws it back" (47).

Likewise, in Glen Hirshberg's "Mr. Dark's Carnival,"

psychological degeneracy is the product of David Roemer's

unsettling, unexplained emotional connection to people and

events from the past, which Freud.cites as "a familiar

origin of the uncanny" (Falkenberg 39) and which Jung

contends "can haunt us at great historical or biographical

distances … a kind of collective unconscious, made up of

the souls of the dead, underlies the visible stratum of

our daily lives" (qtd. in Dillon 165). Another depiction

of a deadly psychological struggle defines Hirshberg's

"Shipwreck Beach," where Harry, a profoundly tormented

young man, suffers from an inability to come to terms with his past, which now overwhelmingly distresses him. Harry's torment is ultimately explained by yet another facet of Freud's explanation of the *uncanny*: it is often located in the memory of "the dead who haunt the living" (qtd. in Nead 47). His young cousin, Mimi, is equally tormented on account of, yet inexplicably drawn to, Harry; both suffer from their repressed memories and stifle their subconscious, conflicting emotions, two characteristics which Jung describes as self-preservation reactions to "past experiences which in themselves arouse fear, and are therefore felt to be unacceptable and are repressed" (qtd. in Papadopoulos 205). As David Hartwell notes, and as each of these stories exemplifies, the authors of this contemporary stream of horror "basically use the intrusion of abnormality to release repressed or unarticulated psychological states" (10). In each of these stories, the main terror lies in the fact that within the psychologically anguished mentality, volatility and instability define the state of mind; reality cannot be distinguished from the unknown, and the mental deterioration ultimately leads to a horrific death.

Kelly Link, "The Specialist's Hat"

Kelly Link's stories reveal how death can be a product of the complications of a psychologically disturbed mind. One such story, "The Specialist's Hat," first appeared in 1998. It centers around ten-year-old identical twin sisters, Samantha and Claire, and their experiences at Eight Chimneys, a vacant mansion that their father is writing a history on. Their father is neglectful; he is wholly absorbed in his writing, which includes a study of a crazy poet who once lived in the mansion. Told that the mansion is haunted, and seemingly intrigued by the dark history of its onetime inhabitants, Samantha and Claire pass their time by exploring their new home and creating their own diversions. Ultimately, their peculiar behavior not only causes their own murders, but it also highlights the profundity and consequences of their own psychological deviance.

Early in the story, it becomes clear that Samantha and Claire are obsessed with the notion of death. They are "half-orphans" (177), their mother having been dead "for exactly 282 days" (168). The girls play "Dead"—a special game they conjured that entails imagining limitless possibilities and abilities, because in the "Dead" realm, "you're not ever afraid" (167). The twins began playing

"Dead" a week after their mother's death. Contrastingly, the sisters view being "dead" as frightening and unpleasant—and they are sure that their mother is "dead." One of the most startling aspects of the sisters' behavior is that outwardly, they are seemingly indifferent toward the loss of their mother. In his extensive study of the nature of human expression, *Studies on Hysteria* (1907), Freud describes this type of behavior—in which the individual exhibits no evident reaction to a major personal trauma—as a severe self-defense mechanism of repression that is aimed at "suppressing the development of emotion … Ideas are repressed only because they are bound up with releases of emotions, which are not to come about" (28). This explains the girls' outwardly apathetic attitudes with regard to their mother and her death: while they know she is no longer living, it is an idea they refuse to dwell upon; instead, for themselves, they seek an alternative definition of the concept, one that is not traumatic (the "Dead" game).

Freud's explanation of repression as a means of avoiding emotional catharsis also sheds light on the seemingly minor, yet powerfully defining cues in the girls' behavior that indicates their underlying distress. While the girls consciously behave without any indication

of having endured a traumatic loss, it is clear from specific peculiarities of their actions that their mother's death has affected them. Samantha and Claire's compulsive mannerisms—their preoccupation with numbers, on which they are "writing a tragical history" (175) and which they utilize to keep track of the number of days their mother has been dead; the way they quickly memorize the extensive lecture that Mr. Coeslak, the mansion's caretaker, gives to the tourists; and their eerily analytical approach to visitors to the house, pondering the possibility that since they "will never see them again, maybe they aren't real" (171)—are marked by an obvious strangeness that is not otherwise justified by typical childhood precociousness.

The girls' repression of emotion for their mother correlates with this extreme overcompensation of abnormality in their behavior, and Freud cites this type of expression as a consequence of denial—where "the pain of loss, or the meaning of a loss, or the reality of a loss is kept out of the consciousness" (qtd. in Howarth, Leaman 150); it is another self-defense mechanism where "a person refuses to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception" (150). The girls' modes of denial and repression are further illuminated by the fact that they

coincide with several poignant moments in the story where it is clear that both Samantha and Claire—despite their persistent refusal to show any sort of emotion—are constantly thinking about their mother. In their concentrated observations of the tourists that visit Eight Chimneys, they concentrate on "the mothers" the most (169); in an especially revealing moment, emotionless Samantha momentarily "can't help wondering if it's her fault" (177) that their mother has died; the girls record their sacred history of numbers in their mother's address book; they quietly notice that their remote father never mentions their mother; and they base the most facet of the "Dead" game on their mother's age at her death: "To become Dead, they hold their breath while counting to 35, which is as high as their mother got, not counting a few days" (175).

The "Dead" game itself is not only the most significant demonstration of the girls' psychological defense mechanisms, but it is also a distinct example of what Freud describes as a "delusion of enormity" (qtd. in Resnik 66) that "is one way of denying finitude and anxiety over death" (66). It is also a means by which Claire and Samantha unconsciously maintain a natural "tendency to avoid a real awareness of death" (66) and,

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most significantly, it is their greatest coping mechanism. Thus, not only do Claire and Samantha refuse to think about their mother's death, they have taken the painful, distressing concept of death itself, and transformed it into a completely contrasting notion of their own creation—being "Dead." To be "Dead," instead, does not correspond to a disturbing cessation of organic life: in the formation of Samantha and Claire, it means acquiring unlimited power that is based on total fearlessness. The superiority (even in morphological terms) of being "Dead" over "dead" is an attractive and desirable concept for the young twins, and the farthest removed from the reality— especially the trauma, sadness, and pain—of what death, as the reality that prematurely ended their mother's life, truly signifies.

The girls are comforted by their ability to enter this "Dead" world, their personal recreation of "death," via their own minds. According to Freud, an "affective component in coping with the death of a loved one is rebellion" (qtd. in Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Beit-Hallahmi 60), and Samantha and Claire's deluded invention—one which is based on their self-defense reflexes of denial, repetition, and repression—allows them to reject the standard meaning of "death," instead personally animating

the concept on their own, reassuring themselves.

Ironically, it is within this fantasy state of being

"Dead" that Samantha and Claire, in their "let's pretend"

(171) mode, interact, laugh, and play like typical

children. This coincides with Freud's additional claim

that while such a coping mechanism inevitably "leads to

neurosis" (qtd. in Conte, Plutchik 222), it is,

oftentimes, provisionally "indispensable for [other

aspects of otherwise] normal psychic functioning" (222).

The mental disturbance of the children is even more

apparent as they interact with their odd babysitter, who

clearly exhibits psychological detachment as well. The

babysitter—who "hardly looks older than them" (171) in

the "Dead" influenced perception of the twins, confirms to

the girls that the "house is haunted" (168); she also

tells them that as a young girl, she once lived there. The

babysitter's conversations with Samantha and Claire reveal

that she is the long-lost daughter of the vanished poet

the twins' father has been writing about. She tells

Samantha and Claire about "the Specialist," an ambiguous

figure who took her father away after he dabbled in magic

(179), leads them to the attic, where they play with the

magic hat, and then gets the girls ready for bed, before

killing them. Interestingly, the babysitter interacts with

the twins only; their father and Mr. Coeslak do not

acknowledge her, and there is a possibility they cannot

even see her. It is clear that the supernatural aspect of

"The Specialist's Hat" is also rooted in Samantha and

Claire's distorted perception of reality: because the

story is narrated from their perspective, filtered through

their minds—which have been immeasurably affected by

their psychological issues—the atmosphere of Eight

Chimneys, with its dark history and bizarre former

occupants, emerges. Freud explains in "The Uncanny" that

"the minds of neurotics" can be consumed by their

imaginations to the point that "the distinction between

imagination and reality is effaced … something that we

have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in

reality" (*Writings* 221). Samantha and Claire's convoluted

psychological states have rendered them vulnerable, and

one of the most significant implications of the story is

that it is this susceptibility that not only provokes the

incursion of the supernatural, but it also leads to the

murders—by the babysitter, who is indistinguishable as

either a ghost or human—of both girls. The babysitter's

murder of Claire and Samantha, then, is the result of

their own disconnect from reality; their game of "Dead"

has made them not only oblivious, but in accordance with

"rule number three" (171) of the game, they have become unnaturally fearless as well. They are now permanently "Dead," which is, to the outside world, the same as being "dead," and the resulting sense of terror propagated by the story is twofold: firstly, as Samantha reflects, her soul is "stuck, indefinitely between ten and eleven years old, stuck with Claire and the babysitter" (181); and secondly, the realization that the girls have not only been woven into the haunted history of the house in a terrifying manner, but they have also been subsumed and destroyed by their "charmingly devilish" (Burner 8) psychological game—one which ultimately replaces the reality they have already become so increasingly oblivious to.

Glen Hirshberg, "Mr. Dark's Carnival"

"Mr. Dark's Carnival" typifies Noel Carroll's observation that horror fiction of the present is reflective of the population's "sense of paralysis, engendered not only by massive historical shocks, but by an unrelenting inability to come to terms with situations which persistently seem inconceivable and unbelievable" (214). Hirshberg wrote "Mr. Dark's Carnival" in 1999. According to critic Scott Gage, it exemplifies the manner

in which horror stories of this cycle locate the fear of death within characters' "psychological reactions to the past" which are the "terrifying byproducts of their [present] experiences" (5). For Professor David Roemer, the protagonist of the story, this horrific experience—which culminates in his own dreadful realization at the conclusion of the story, the type that Freud likens to "something which ought to have remained hidden [in the unconscious], but has come to light" (qtd. in Falkenberg 58)—is intertwined with his life's work, as not only an academic historian and researcher, but also as an expert on the supposed myths, folklore, and traditions of his small badlands Montana town.

Early in the story, it becomes apparent that the professor is clearly a pompous, confident skeptic, characteristics he himself acknowledges: "…it was time I got over myself" (101), he realizes, this time during yet another instance of an impolite interaction with the college's secretary. Despite his nonchalant dismissal of the tale of Albert Aloysius Dark—a bizarre judge who practiced his own corrupt form of justice on those who were brought before him, acting as both undisputed arbitrator and subsequent executioner—he is seemingly fascinated by the local legend, and accordingly lectures

his students on the subject, on Halloween of every year.

The "mystery-shrouded Carnival-to-end-all-Carnivals" (97),

which is supposed to entail "that supreme horrifying

experience" (98) that Dark's legacy is said to have

inspired, is central to Roemer's yearly lecture.

Initially, it appears that the professor enjoys the legend

of Judge Dark, the annual discussion on the Carnival, and

his love for Halloween as a colorful part of his

students'—and his own—imaginations. However, it soon

becomes clear that Roemer is obsessed with myth of the

Carnival that is named for the Judge, as well as the

history of the region that surrounds the legend. This is

the first suggestion that Roemer's devotion to the "myth"

of the Carnival represents his unconscious fear of it as a

possible reality. According to Freud, this type of

unconsciously obsessive behavior is indicative of

repetition compulsion, which he identifies as "the

compulsion of destiny" ("Beyond" 23):

> Repetition compulsion is man's avenue into
>
> personal destiny … man meets his destiny in his
>
> repetition compulsions. [There is] internal
>
> necessity … Etymology provides images of the
>
> ways in which the experience of necessity is
>
> described … Repetition compulsions, then, by

virtue of their relation to psychological

necessity, are the ways in which man is bound …

and fixated to personalized destiny. (qtd. in

Chapelle 117)

Freud also notes that this "personalized destiny" is also

guided by repressed fears that inevitably surface, after a

long period of lingering within the unconscious. In light

of this, the fact that Professor Roemer is, consciously,

an unashamed disbeliever in the Carnivals that are said to

have occurred, supposedly inspired by Mr. Dark, is

poignant; he claims to enjoy reiterating the legend of the

so-called Carnival as "the inspiration for all our

Halloween festivities" (96), and takes pleasure every year

in listening to his students' "variations on the legend"

(98). It is because of the professor's unequivocal outward

rejection of Mr. Dark's Carnival as a reality that he is

able to enjoy it as a good "myth," teasing his students by

asking them "the most alarming, the most discomfiting

question of all. Is it possible that Mr. Dark's Carnival …

never really existed?" (96). Interestingly, Jung states in

his study of emotion (and autobiography), *Memories,*

Dreams, Reflections (1963) that the intricate layers of

the human psyche often reveal that unexplained attraction,

such as to a certain place, event, or a specific

repetitive compulsion, is an "immediate consequence" of a repressed fear (160) of death. Furthermore, there is a "simultaneous attraction and fear to the realm of death" (12) embedded in within the psyche that explains humans' curiosity with "the mysteries of death … the leaving of life" (12), fueled by the active imagination. Thus, in Roemer's case, his persistent lighthearted dismissal of the Halloween legend that he is so engrossed in is another indication of the unconscious, repressed fear he unknowingly harbors.

This particular year, conversely, Roemer's self-confident attitude is seemingly shaken when he receives word that Brian Tidrow—a former student—has committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a rifle. After initially learning of Tidrow's fate, Roemer's reaction to the news of the suicide is one of disgust and annoyance: "… he had finally committed the supreme act of havoc wreaking he'd been threatening for years. He would get no reaction from me, ever" (96). At first, the professor implores Robin, the secretary, to find his girlfriend, Kate, who was involved with Tidrow in the past; his primary concern is for her. However, as Roemer resumes lecturing his students, his remembrance of Tidrow begins to haunt him incessantly, startling even himself.

Gradually becoming preoccupied with thoughts of Tidrow,

"the brightest graduate student I'd ever taught, and

almost certainly the one I had enjoyed least" (96) Roemer

finds it increasingly difficult to focus on the Mr. Dark

lesson, as well as his students: "'I started to smile,

thought of Brian Tidrow with his great-grandfather's

Winchester rifle gripped in his teeth, and shuddered"

(97). As Roemer consciously reiterates in his mind that he

will not offer Tidrow any additional posthumous respect

"simply because he'd finally had the stupidity—he'd

probably have called it guts—to go and do it" (97), he

finds that, instead, he is "unable to shake the picture

I'd formed of Brian Tidrow's last moments on Earth" (98).

For Roemer, the unanticipated preoccupation with Tidrow's

death, coupled with the lecture on Judge Dark and the

Carnival, provokes anxiety; Freud's notion of "omnipotence

of thoughts" defines Roemer's unconsciously altered state

of mind, and what Tidrow's suicide will ultimately

represent to him:

> Our primitive forefathers once believed these
>
> [unusual] possibilities were realities, and
>
> were convinced that they actually happened.
>
> Nowadays we no longer believe them, we have
>
> surmounted these modes of thought; but

[unconsciously] we do not feel quite sure of our

new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within

us, ready to seize upon any confirmation.

(*Writings* 224)

The disturbance of Tidrow's suicide forces Roemer to

ponder the notion of death, and thereby provokes his

feelings of uncanniness, which will ultimately reflect the

unconscious doubt of his own self-assured beliefs

regarding the impossibility of Mr. Dark's Carnival. The

suicide affects Roemer mentally, and for reasons he does

not understand, he is no longer able to contentedly finish

his lecture on Mr. Dark and the legend of the Carnivals, a

lesson which had always been his "favorite moment of the

teaching year" (99). He then proceeds to rush through the

remainder of the discussion on Mr. Dark's Carnival with

his students, presenting them with his own "myth-

destroying points"—all grounded in the rationale of

accepted reality—"in mere minutes" (98). This is another

indication that Roemer is truly not completely convinced

that the legend of Mr. Dark's Carnival is a mere myth:

Freud argues in "The Uncanny" that "anyone who has

completely and finally rid himself of unconscious

animistic beliefs will be insensible to the uncanny …

[nothing] will disconcert him" (*Writings* 224). Such an

individual who did not believe in that which could otherwise "give rise to anxiety" (249) would remain unaffected; Roemer, now upset and intent on dismissing his class, is clearly troubled.

The intersection between what the professor immediately accepts as reality—Brian Tidrow's suicide—and that which he labels as myth—Mr. Dark's Carnival—leaves him ill at ease. Roemer's internal conflict lies in his inability to find any enjoyment now in the legend of Mr. Dark and Halloween itself: Brian Tidrow's gruesome death will eventually force Roemer, who represents what Freud calls "the superiority of rational minds, able to detect the sober truth" (*Writings* 206) to recount the "myth" in this new context, although the professor himself does not realize, yet, that his current preoccupation with his former student's death is already somehow challenging his heretofore defiant claim that Mr. Dark's Carnival is nothing more than a fictitious tale, a colorful example of the folklore of the badlands. Freud notes that with regard to the fear of dying and the uncanniness that summons the fear, "there is no question … of any intellectual uncertainty … and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree" (206). Roemer, as a rational scholar, deconstructed Mr. Dark's

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Carnival as a fictitious (and thus enjoyable) myth—a

conclusion he formerly reached as an accomplished

historian who relied only on "primary sources" (93).

However, his vision of the legend is now interspersed with

constant, unanticipated memories of Tidrow; though he

attempts to force the thoughts out of his mind, they

continue to linger, to his own discomfort.

According to Gina Wisker, this sort of repressed

psychological confusion, rooted mainly in "man's attitude

toward death" (231) is explained by Freud's explanation of

the *uncanny* as "how disturbance operates in us … the

familiar becomes strange and the strange more familiar"

(231). After Roemer finds and attends the Carnival itself-

—which, among other things, causes his repressed fear to

surface and enables him to finally see that Kate is dead—

he is forced to reevaluate the myth as a devastatingly

familiar reality: all the dire history he has studied

about the judge and his brand of vigilante justice in the

small town suddenly comes to life in the present, and

Kate's immersion into this history makes Roemer's

realization of the truth intensely personal. Jung notes

that this sort of intertwining—in Roemer's case, the

parallels between the resurfacing of the oppressive, dark

history that has become his life's work, and his own

repressed fear that this history is not solely confined to the past, and will come to haunt him—represents

> disturbing realities that have been lost to us
> consciously, but are stored collectively in the
> collective unconscious. The fears associated
> with these archetypes have prevented us from
> acknowledging things about the past that we
> should be able to recognize … the fears lurking
> in the collective unconscious affect all
> humanity. (qtd. in Dorey 8)

It is only after acknowledging the "disturbing realities" that Roemer realizes Kate is dead, having been murdered by Tidrow. Furthermore, Freud notes that it is not until "something actually happens in our lives that seems to confirm old, discarded beliefs" (*Writings* 224) that unconsciously repressed fears powerfully surface. Kate's death is the final catalyst that leads to the surfacing of Roemer's ultimate fear: the "myth" which he had once enjoyed as an urban legend is, for him, an inescapable truth that he is forced to confront—first as a skeptic, now as a terrified believer.

Roemer realizing the truth about Kate, and Mr. Dark's Carnival, occurs at the very end of the story, after he navigates the Carnival; until then, the professor clings

to his long-held, comforting perception of the Carnival:
that it exists only as a myth. Subsequently, Roemer's
arrival at the Carnival with Kate, his separation from her
at its entrance, and all that happens once he is inside
becomes what Robert Price calls is an "odyssey of self-
discovery destined to culminate in a shattering
revelation" (12). Roemer does not comprehend this at
first: during his journey through the Carnival house,
despite the fact that "the pranks get personal" (13) by
illustrating the history and legends of the badlands that
he is so well-versed in (such as the stacks of buffalo
skeletons on the prairie, and the hooded figure of Judge
Dark that begins to chase after the professor and one of
his students, Tricia, inside the house)—he maintains his
self-comforting perception that "this was all a hoax, the
best ever perpetuated, at least on me. God, even Brian
Tidrow could be a hoax, I thought" (126) and dismisses a
fleeting thought that "I'd just met Judge Albert Aloysius
Dark … huddled away on the plains, plotting yearly
appearances with selected friends" (126) as wholly
ridiculous. Despite the fact that all that he has just
witnessed profoundly resonates with him on a personal
level, Roemer continues to repress his fear that the
"myth" of Mr. Dark's Carnival is indeed genuine.

Jung relates this continued unconscious denial to the notion that fear "can prevent us from moving forward with our understanding of the world. It can prevent change, it can stifle observation" (qtd. in Dorey 8), but that in order to "face the dark reality" (9), it must be confronted. Before Roemer's moment of confrontation—which occurs right after he flees through the exit of the Carnival house—he is in the final throes of denial, joyously reflecting on how well this particular Carnival captured the essence of the "myth":

> The whole damn thing had been more than worth
> it. I couldn't wait to grab Kate, hold her,
> laugh with her. I couldn't wait to start digging
> around town for wood-purchasing and electricity
> records in the hopes of tracking down the
> creators of all this … More than anything else,
> though, I felt grateful. All my life, I'd
> considered myself a sort of library phantom,
> haunting the graveyards and record morgues of my
> own history without ever, somehow, materializing
> inside it. But I was soaking in it, now,
> shivering in the relentless, terrifying rush of
> it … I wanted to go on being this kind of scared
> forever. Except that I really didn't want the

Judge-Thing to catch us. (136)

Roemer's final attempt to justify the night's events by

"tracking down the creators" of the elaborate Carnival,

along with his euphoria at experiencing what he still

wants to believe is the ultimate recreation of a

historical myth is short-lived when he looks back and sees

Kate has taken her permanent position within the house,

and he finally realizes that

> the plains weren't empty after all, not the way
>
> we'd thought all these years. In fact, they are
>
> overflowing, overrun with Native Americans,
>
> homesteaders, dancing girls, ranchers, Chinese,
>
> buffalo. All the murdered, restless dead. (138)

Roemer is forced to realize that his final endeavor,

still, to rationalize his experience is merely a defensive

mechanism, a "rule, further enforced by fear—a fear that

can be confessed neither to oneself nor to others, a fear

of insidious truths, of dangerous knowledge, of

disagreeable verifications" (Jung, *Essays* 202). Roemer's

most significantly realized truth—in addition to his

conscious awareness that the myth is real—is that Kate

has now joined this group of the "murdered, restless

dead," and it is only after Roemer accepts this that he

"could finally see the hole Brian Tidrow must have blown

in her stomach, just as she walked in his door, in the seconds before he'd shot his own head off" (139). According to Magistrale, the notion of psychological repression that is at the core of many contemporary American horror stories initially becomes obvious as a character attempts to "escape from the imminent reality of such terrors by denying their existence, and by clinging to perpetual disbelief" (2) because subconsciously, he or she fears that acknowledging the possibility of that which seems illogical will, in actuality, reveal the dreadful truth. In addition, Freud posits that this newfound yet unwelcome reality "is the truth of a personal history within a concrete situation … [it is] the true meaning one is to reach through the obscure maze of fantasies" (qtd. in Ricoeur, Savage 371). This is exactly how Roemer deals with Mr. Dark's Carnival: initially, he denies its authenticity completely, yet he is obsessed with the supposed myth and its history. This obsession personally binds him to the myth, and turns out to have a much greater significance, beyond the idea of a scholar who is devoted to his work: it is Roemer's way of reassuring himself that history is an unchanging part of the past, and that the Carnival—something so disturbing, something which represents death in the most terrifying and gruesome

of ways—is just a legend. The circumstances surrounding Kate's death, everything that leads to Roemer's discovery of it, and his conclusion that those who were violently killed in the past will always haunt the present further represents what Magistrale deems "reality flushed out into the open" (2), a reality that only moments ago seemed impossible to Roemer. His traumatic realization of Kate's fate is unavoidable, and it is Roemer's psychological shift, his terrifying, newfound awareness—which has now replaced his previous self-defense mechanisms against feelings of fear—that enables him to confront his worst repressed fear: that the horrors once represented by Judge Dark do and will continue in the badlands, and have ultimately permeated Roemer's life in a deeply personal and tragic manner.

Hirshberg, "Shipwreck Beach"

Hirshberg's "Shipwreck Beach" was first published in 2003. In the summation of Ramsey Campbell, it is essentially about "young people out on some edge" (5); as the tale unfolds, this edge proves to be both psychological and, ultimately, corporeal—a deadly combination for Harry. It is an unsettling account, narrated by his cousin, Amelia ("Mimi"), of Harry's

psychological degeneration and consequently tragic fate.
As the story opens, Mimi is landing in Lanai, Hawaii, to
visit Harry. It is immediately apparent that she is upset
with her cousin, yet somehow paradoxically drawn to him:
"I'd wanted to come, after all … because Harry had begged
me. And now here I was. Damn him" (45). The beautiful
island, deemed "paradise" by its inhabitants, as Harry's
chosen abode is somehow disconcerting to Mimi only because
it seems to be perfect for him: "Petrified waves, I
thought. That's all this place was. The last land. The
farthest Harry could run" (46). Harry is seemingly
overjoyed to see his cousin; her reaction to him, on the
contrary, is one of barely contained fury. Mimi recounts
how Harry's constant misbehavior has continued for years,
ever since he was a child, and how he greatly upset his
parents; they eventually sent him to live with Mimi and
his aunt, where his misconduct continued, and ultimately
led to a man's violent death. As the story progresses, it
becomes clear that years of this constant deviance—and in
particular, the man's death, a turning point that hastens
Harry's mental deterioration—has irrevocably rendered him
a profoundly disturbed young man.

Mimi recalls what her mother always told her—that
Harry was "Calculated … you just knew that boy would say

absolutely anything to anybody. Do absolutely anything to
get what he wanted" (48), and this possibility upsets
Mimi: "What made me so furious, every time, was the
nagging, inescapable possibility that she was right" (48).
As Barzak notes, Mimi "loves her cousin, yet is compelled
to frustration with him" (2). Still, while the rest of
their family rejects Harry as a delinquent who is
incapable of telling the truth, Mimi senses that there is
a compelling underlying explanation for his behavior.
Although she is outwardly furious with her cousin, Mimi
simultaneously maintains a deep love for Harry that is
grounded in her sympathetic feelings for him. In his
study of human nature, *Analysis of the Ego* (1922), Freud
notes that "sympathy can only be rooted in understanding"
(qtd. in Huish 327) and that this understanding is based,
to a considerable extent, on the sympathizer's
longstanding emotional identification with the one whom
she sympathizes with. Mimi, having witnessed her entire
family constantly reject Harry, has nevertheless been
inexplicably drawn to him since she was a child—and
she does not understand why. Furthermore, while Mimi
also does not realize until later that, with regard to
Harry, "I was all he had" (69), Freud's postulation
explains her continued devotion to her cousin, which

stems from their emotional connection that was somehow established when Mimi was only six years old.

Harry's history of abnormal behavior, which includes pathological lying, extreme recklessness that has caused a man's death, and careless irresponsibility has led Mimi's mother, and presumably other members of Harry's family, to conclude that he is simply malicious, "oblivious to anyone but himself" (49). His continued waywardness is, certainly, apparent in his interaction with Mimi. For instance, he tells Mimi he has become a teacher at a local school and has bought a truck, when in reality, he is the school's gardener and the truck is on loan from its principal, Mrs. Jones. Neither falsehood serves a purpose other than to cover Harry momentarily, and Mimi, upset, notes that her cousin's "lying gave me that particular prickly feeling" (62). According to Freud, such compulsive lying is one of the preliminary signs of a disturbed mind that is not only attempting to alter reality, but is also utilizing another mechanism through which repression is reinforced. Harry is clearly struggling to repress memories and guilt that underlie his torment, and when Mimi narrates the story of how he caused a man's death, it becomes obvious that this incident is what hastens his psychological decline.

The prelude to the stranger's death illustrates one major psychological issue that defines Harry, and which is the foundation for his mental deviation: his drive to rationalize his harmful behavior. Freud named rationalization as another coping mechanism, one that serves not only to "defend oneself from painful truths, experiences and self-definitions proffered by the superego" (qtd in Fleming, Zyglidopoulos 38), but also one that enables an individual to temporarily repress feelings of immense guilt and self-doubt. Harry rationalizes allowing a drunk, underage teen to drive his car—which promptly hit and killed the stranger—by explaining to Mimi that, as long as the young boy and "his band of goons" were "wasting time talking to him, they weren't bothering anyone else" (56). Mimi is enraged when she sees that Harry continues this destructive pattern of rationalizing the irrational by killing a harmless tropical moth because one of his young "students" was afraid of it. Mimi later realizes that from the beginning, even under seemingly harmless circumstances, Harry has always sought to rationalize his compulsive lying and unethical behavior:

> And he wanted one more thing, and that was what
> caused him to wreak such havoc all his life, and

was also the reason I loved him. He wanted—

desperately, hopelessly—to make whoever

was around him happy, at all times. He bought

Randy Lynne beer because Randy Lynne wanted it.

He told my mother he loved her because he

thought my mother needed to hear it. He told me

he was alright because he knew I'd come for

reassurance. He killed the moth in Puhi's Den to

keep it from tormenting Teddy the Lava King.

(89)

This string of incidents recounted by Mimi further

illustrates that Harry's damaging cycle of rationalization

also leads to his repetition compulsion: by continually

rationalizing his dishonest behavior in his own mind, he

is inclined to persist in it. This, in turn, reveals his

narcissism, which Freud cited as "the third principle of

motivation" (qtd. in Fischer 135) that is often a cause of

repetitive-compulsive conduct. Because it satisfies his

own ego, Harry is focused solely on pleasing any

individual with whom he is presently interacting—and

consciously exhibits a total disregard for "the external

world" (199). The stranger's death, for Harry, is what

Freud labeled as the ultimate "traumatic experience,

operating as a 'primary' influence, [which] disrupts the

usual symbolic matrix upon which repression depends"
(Cohen 148). Because of this disruption's initiation,
Harry is eventually no longer able to restrain his
traumatic feelings of guilt via his ego's instinctual
self-defense mechanisms, which—until now—has prevented
the eruption of his impending neurosis, a measure which
Freud likens to "tricking the id" (Cottle 45).

It is under this pretense that Mimi recognizes, for
the first time, "something brand new" (54) in Harry's
demeanor: his self-hatred. Following the stranger's death,
Harry's failure to identify the man—and thereby more
effectively deal with his guilt—haunts him intrinsically.
He constantly dreams of the dead man's potential children,
an example of a phenomena Freud calls an "anxiety dream,"
which "is the product of a conflict … a cause of anxiety
for the ego" (Freud, *Outline* 170-1). Harry's anguish,
coupled with his increasing difficulty in repressing his
feelings of guilt, lead him to isolate himself on the
beautiful Hawaiian island and identify with the grandiose
shipwreck he excitedly tells Mimi about. In his analysis
of human tendencies in self-identification, Freud posits
that "the inanimate world," including objects, are
connected with humans' unconscious understanding of death,
and this, in turn, "evokes an urge to identify" with such

objects because they represent personal "anxieties of the past" (qtd. in Figlio 76) that are inescapable. The shipwreck, with uncanny accuracy, represents Harry's psyche perfectly: aimlessly floating, irreparably damaged, devoid of life except the eerie, mournful wails that seemingly originate from its ruins. Harry shows the site to Mimi—acknowledging that throughout his life, she has been the only one who sought to understand him—and she responds by pleading with her cousin that "You can still prove me right" (77). Soon after, however, Mimi realizes that Harry is too far gone, and that "I couldn't help him anymore" (86). She implores him to "be in your life" (86) before leaving him to be subsumed by the wreck, never to be seen again. Mimi, in her retrospective perception of Harry's life, contemplates that "we go where our ghosts lead us … We have no choice, and there are no escape routes" (90). Harry's odyssey of psychological deterioration ultimately leads to what Freud calls the dangerous "emergence of repression" (qtd. in Erwin 478), and the moment his feelings of anguish surface completely——and he becomes consciously aware of them—they overwhelm Harry to the point of claiming his life.

In addition to being the cause of his own slow, torturous demise, another alarming aspect of Harry's

psychological decline is in how it adversely affects Mimi.

Her anger at Harry is matched only by her inexplicable

draw toward him, and eventually, she realizes that—

despite her rage—this is because she is the only one who

truly loves him. Mimi often compensates for her sadness at

Harry's self-destruction by exhibiting extreme anger at

his error in judgment. This anger, which defines Mimi's

demeanor in general and at the same time startles her—in

one instance, for example, furious at Harry for brutally

killing the moth at Puhi's Den, she finds herself

"blinking furiously as tears I hadn't expected and didn't

understand flooded my eyes" (66)—is not limited to her

attitude toward Harry. She also continuously exhibits

substantial anger and resentment when speaking of her

mother; and even in her short interaction with Ryan and

Teddy, the children from Harry's school whom the cousins

encounter at Puhi's Den, she is unfriendly. Mimi's

behavior exemplifies Freud's notion of displaced

aggression, "instances in which individuals aggress

against persons other than their provokers" (Baron,

Richardson 24), and which is a direct "consequence of

frustration" (Andrews, Bonta 132). Ironically, it is

Mimi's anger and frustration that illustrate her

passionate drive to truly understand and help Harry,

in stark contrast to the rest of their unsympathetic family.

After Harry vanishes, Mimi is still not free of him; in fact, after years of love, resentment, sympathy, anger, and frustration over her disturbed cousin, she is seemingly unwilling to let him go. Mimi returns to the island several years later, finding work as a teacher at the same school where Harry was a gardener. In what appears to be a bizarre tribute and remembrance of Harry, "Every Sunday, regular as church, I make my way to Shipwreck Beach, and I spread a tarp across the driftwood, and I watch the ship ride its reef to forever and make no sound whatsoever" (88). Mimi's boss, the school's principal, views her behavior as "a little unhealthy" (88). Her mother, still bitter toward Harry, tells her "He was nothing … You're too smart, Amelia, too powerful a person to drown in Harry's whirlpool" (89). In his 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud that while the "normal" mourning processes enable regeneration, adjustment, and healing to the point that "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (qtd. in Rickard 41). However, when such a process continues without any semblance of progression—thereby not allowing for the "work of mourning to be completed" (41), as Mimi demonstrates—this

may be an indication that the process has become "blocked, and leads to a paralyzing and stagnant melancholy, a refusal or inability to complete the process of detachment from the one lost" (59). Mimi's quiet, ritualized tribute to Harry illustrates her unexplainable, continued commitment to him even in death; most importantly—as her mother and the principal note—it signifies the potentially disturbing, negative impact Harry continues to have on her own psychological well-being. One of the most terrifying aspects, then, of "Shipwreck Beach"—in addition to the portrayal of Harry's unstoppable psychological deterioration—is Mimi's firsthand witnessing of his haunting, her absolute helplessness and inability to save her cousin, and the very real possibility that her memory of Harry has, and will continue to damage her own psyche for the rest of her life.

Conclusion

As Noel Carroll notes, American horror fiction has always articulated the "widespread anxiety of times of stress" (214), which are further defined by the emergence of horror cycles. As the respective stories of these three horror cycles illustrate, the dominant fear of mortality—

arising from the "unnerving disarray" of "incredible events" (212) that have constantly impacted American society—has historically been their foundation. These events, which across the course of history conveyed threats of both external and internal origin, continually altered the public's perception of dying; the cyclical horror stories are thus a historical account, a retrospective record of these changes. Additionally, Clive Bloom contends that a "closely restricted range of emotions" (155)—namely, those that inspire terror—have always been a singularly common result of these stories' depictions of the fear of dying, intimately tied to real momentary social anxieties. The numerous manifestations of this salient fear—along with the organic reactions they entail—have always been embodied within the most powerful, historically and socially relevant American horror stories of the past and present.

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