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Horror, Romanticism, and the Canon

I have heard it said from multiple sources that every human emotion is actually rooted in one of two actual emotions: love and fear. Everything else is some twisted combination of the two, and while we dedicate much of our lives focusing on love and the benefits of love and how human beings need love, not nearly as much thought seems to be put into fear past the definition, namely that it is a negative evolutionary response to perceived danger. And yet being afraid fascinates us. People go on roller coasters to frighten themselves and get themselves high on adrenaline. People watch and make scary movies. People concoct absolute horrors, things they'd never want to see or encounter in real life, and then write them down and sell them as fiction. People simultaneously love and hate fear.

The intent of this unit is to give students a familiarity with some of the shorter American canonical works, both early American and more recent stuff, and help them understand and better appreciate the nature of horror. I would also like to introduce them to the Romantic era of the 18th century, an era defined by the aesthetic value of experiencing strong emotion, including emotions that hadn't been explored of emphasized in fiction before such as awe, fear, and suspense— horror in a nutshell. Aside from being entertaining, horror can give intimate glimpses into the human psyche: what do we fear? Why do we fear it? Why do some things frighten some people, and not others? Are our fears logical, or illogical? What are the levels of fear-- the creepy-crawlies versus terror, for example-- and what causes those differences? What do a person's fears say about his/her personality? And so on. I would also like to show students the different aspects of horror, such as the varying subgenres and strands of horror found in all genres of literature,

There are many connections between the early-to-middle American literature and the horror genre. Early American fiction often has a supernatural element, a supernatural element that is usually --

but not always-- religious in nature. Gothic fiction also tends to have a vague element of the supernatural (either real or imagined in the minds of the characters). Both play off the fear of the supernatural in cases where the supernatural is present, either in the mind of the reader or of the characters themselves. Both genres deal with isolation and often take place in secluded areas or small towns that are, as a whole, isolated from outside help, usually cut off by seemingly-malevolent nature (be it the weather or the terrain).

My unit will have roughly two main topics (Early/Mid-American Literature and the Romantic Period, and horror), the unit will be split into two main parts, the first being pseudo-puritanical fiction and religious horror (as religious horror is in and of itself a major component in early American fiction) and the second part will be focusing on horror and gothic literature. To help connect the genres, I will have students read Lois Lowry's *Messenger* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, as *Messenger* shares many colonial aspects of early American literature (the forest presented as a place of danger and mystery, the malevolent figure Trader who makes Faustian pacts with the Villagers, isolationism, etc.) and Coraline is a horror/fantasy story with gothic, especially southern gothic, elements (such as decay under a glamour of beauty, insanity, the grotesque, eerie architecture, and death), despite not taking place in the US. (Neil Gaiman is not an American author, but he does live in the US, and his book fits nicely enough with *Rose for Emily* and *Fall of the House of Usher* that I'm going to let it slide.)

Instead of having one long canonical work, I will have several short stories considered to be part of the canon that best exemplify their respective genres. All our canonical reading will be done in class, either out of the textbook or off a printout of the short stories that I will have made. Each student will be assigned a paragraph to read aloud, going in order. After the reading, we will discuss the stories, pointing out tropes, themes, common elements the story may share with others we've heard (both in class and out of), and what new elements the story brings to the table.

While *Coraline* and *Messenger* will be required reading, students will also have one other contemporary book (chosen off a list I will give them) that they will read. A paper will be due on this self-chosen book at the end of the unit. While the canonical works will be read in class, *Coraline* and *Messenger*, as well as the student's chosen book, will all be read at home.

Students will have three major papers due during the unit. All three papers will have "free topics," in that students are allowed to explore any aspect of the story (or stories, if they choose more than one) they wish, though I will pass out a handout with a list of tentative subjects for those who don't have their own clear paper ideas. The third paper, however, requires that at least of the books used is the student's chosen book. (For example, comparing/contrasting a canonical work against either another canonical, or one of the YA books, or even a YA book verses another YA book).

Required reading List

The Devil and Tom Walker, Washington Irving
The Devil and Daniel Webster by Stephen Vincent Benét
Legend of Sleepy Hollor, Washington irving
The Minister's Black Veil, Nathanial Hawthorne
Young Goodman Brown, Nathanial Hawthorne
Messenger, Lois Lowry
The Yellow Wallaper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Masque of the Red Death, Edgar Allen Poe
Fall of the House of Usher, Edgar Allen Poe
Rose for Emily, William Faulkner
Coraline, Neil Gaiman

As well as poetry by Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Additional books students can choose from:

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeline L'Engle

> After Meg Murry's father goes missing while working on a top secret government science project, an odd stranger named Mrs. Whatsit visits the Murry household to see Meg's brilliant little brother Charles Wallace. Soon, with the help of Mrs. Whatsit and her friends Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which, Meg, Charles Wallace, and Meg's schoolmate Calvin are travelling across the universe trying to thwart an interdimensional evil entity and save their father. This book, though ultimately uplifting, has many traits of both religious horror and cosmic horror.

Graveyard Book, Neil Gaiman

When Nobody Owens' parents die, he winds up in a graveyard and is adopted by the dead and undead there. The graveyard is the safest place for him, as the people who killed his family are still out there searching for him, but the living can't stay with the dead forever, and Bod will eventually have to grow up. This story is sort of like a Gothic *Jungle Book.*

I am Legend, Richard Matheson

What is widely regarded as the first zombie apocalypse story despite predating the word "zombie" by twenty-eight years. This story follows Robert Neville, the last human being alive, as he spends his days killing the vampire-like undead that infest his town and struggling to retain his sanity. This story is a mixture of psychological horror and survival horror.

Neverwhere, Neil Gaiman

After saving the life of what he assumes to be a peculiar homeless girl, Richard Mayhew suddenly finds himself completely invisible to everyone around him. His friends, coworkers, and fiancé have completely forgotten his existence, and the only place he can go is to London Below, a secret, literally underground world where the supernatural is natural, and the girl he saved is on a mission from the angel Islington to find the people who killed her family. Richard's only chance at getting his old life back is to join Door and her companions as they brave the wilds of the underground. This story has elements of both Gothic horror and religious horror.

Everything's Eventual, Stephen King

Everything's Eventual is a short story collection featuring horror stories that range the horror subgenres, including insane waiters going on killing sprees, secret organizations assassinating people via unwitting supernaturally gifted individuals, a person conscious through their own autopsy, and more.

Good Omens, Terry Pratchett & Neil Gaiman

Good Omens is an apocalyptic comedy novel revolving around the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley as they work together against both Heaven and Hell to prevent the end of the world. Other characters include Adam, the eleven year old antichrist who was accidentally switched at birth and grows up with a completely normal human family, the Them, Adam's group of best friends, Anathema Device, a granola-loving witch with a book of oddly-specific prophesies, and Newton Pulsifer, an apprentice witch-finder with a knack for accidentally blowing up electronics. This book is a highly entertaining read, and though it is a comedy, it plays off all of the religious horror story elements, up to and including the title itself, which is a parody of *The Omen.*

Z for Zachariah, Robert O'Brien

A post apocalyptic novel taking place after world war three. Sixteen-year-old Ann Burden believes she is the last person alive on Earth, safe in a valley untouched by the nuclear fall out, until a man named John Loomis finds her valley. Unfortunately, Loomis isn't what he appears to be, and things quickly deteriorate. This is a survival horror with shades of suspense.

Frankenstein, Mary Shelly

The story of Frankenstein and his monster. Everyone ought to know this one.

Plus any other appropriate book with my blessing.

Some, but not all, of the planned exercises.

Plans for *The Devil and Tom Walker*

1. Play Charles Daniel's band's *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* as students enter the classroom. Hand out papers.
2. Have students read aloud the story. I will read the first couple paragraphs and then ask for volunteers. If there are no volunteers, pick the person who looks like they're disinterested. This will make them wake up. Encourage class to stop if there is a word they don't know or don't know how to pronounce and to ask about it.
   -- Stop students occasionally to point out important or reoccurring themes. Example: when the devil, upon meeting Tom, casually mentions Captain Kidd's treasure if he made "the usual concession" (referring to a Faustian pact).
   -- While students are reading, write on the board "Satire," "Irony," and "Hypocrisy."
2. When the reading is complete, start by asking students general questions about the story, such as what they thought about the characters of Tom, the Devil, and Mrs. Walker, and if they caught the comedic and satirical aspects of the story (like Tom Walker's attitude towards his wife, the reference to Captain Kidd's "honest piracy" versus Tom's dishonest bank managing, etc.). Write down student's answers that relate to the three themes on the board. Discuss irony.
3. Have students write a reaction paper-- at least half a page, preferably more—to the story, anything about the story at all. Did they dislike Tom? Dislike the Devil? Did they enjoy the humor? Were they offended somehow at the portrayal of the church or the devil? Did they think the story was boring, or did they think it was interesting? Assure them that they can be completely honest (but no foul language). This paper is worth participation points.

Plans for *The Devil and Daniel Webster*

1. Play Elvis Presley's *Devil in Disguise* while handing out the story.
2. Start the class by explaining that this story was based off the one we read yesterday, and that this author's style of storytelling is called "spinning a yarn." Explain how spinning a yarn usually involves a story being told as though a talkative old man sitting on a porch is telling the story to his grandkids, in a sort of slow, winding way that emulates verbally the act of literally spinning yarn. Have them take note of the differences in storytelling styles.
3. Read the story.

4. Ask students general questions again to prompt discussion. What were some of the similarities to the last story they noticed (prompt the devil-as-a-banker similarity if they don't catch onto it)? Did they find humor in this one (such as the portrayal of New Hampshire men, or that Daniel Webster's horses were named Constitution and Constellation)? Did they find it ironic that a lawyer was a good guy (albeit against another lawyer). Point out the reference to Hawthorne, and how Nathaniel Hawthorne (who we will be reading next) is related to him.
5. Have students write another reflection paper, this time specifically comparing and contrasting the differences between stories. Some good topics are tone, pacing, and character.
6. If there is time, show the Simpson's Treehouse of Horror clip that parodies this story ("The Devil and Homer Simpson").

Plans for *Young Goodman Brown*

1. Have *Chasing the Devil Out of Earth* playing as students walk in.
2. Assure the class that this is the last Devil story, I promise.
3. Before reading the story, introduce Nathaniel Hawthorne via powerpoint. Explain how he is the writer of, among other things, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Crucible*, and how he is related to the Hawthorne who played the judge in *Devil and Daniel Webster*. Explain how Hawthorne actually felt so much guilt/shame for what his ancestor had done that he actually wrote *The Crucible* as an apology.
4. Read the story.
5. Discuss story, specifically symbolism. Explain what a symbol is, and what common symbols represent (they should know this by now though from previous teachers).
6. Have students write down all the symbols they can identify in the story and what they mean, then, as a class, write the symbols and meanings on the board.
7. Ask students whether or not they thought the events in the wood really happened, or if Brown was dreaming it all. Do they think his reaction and his character change were warranted if it was real? If it was a dream?
8. Have students write (either in class or for homework) a short fiction piece either from the point of view of any other character in the story (what do these characters think of Goodman Brown? From their POV, can we tell if it was real or not?), or an alternate ending to the story.

Introducing Horror

1. When introducing Horror I will show the class the Simpson's reading of Edgar Allen Poe's The Raven before discussing with the class their conceptions of what horror is and what they think makes something horrifying. I will write these answers on the board. After the discussion, I will hand out the horror genre sheets and explain to them how, until this point, we had been in the realm of religious horror (as that's what Americans during the time periods presented were especially afraid of), and how now we will be moving onto the other genres.
2. Discuss the importance of suspense, pacing, subtlety, foreshadowing, and danger in horror, and the suspension of disbelief needed in all fiction, not just horror.

3. Before they leave class, everyone has to write a paragraph either about a time they were frightened in real life or by a book/movie/television show/other medium, and why they think that frightened them.

Plans for the Minister's Black Veil:

I will be wearing a black veil for at least the first part of class, if not the entire class (depends both on the students, how hot it is, and whether or not I can do it without laughing).

1. Have the class read the story aloud, paragraph by paragraph so that everyone gets a chance to read.
2. Class Discussion: the symbol of the veil and what it represents. Secrecy? Death? Guilt? Freedom from the self? Protection from the outside world? Compare wedding veils and veils worn by some women in other cultures to the veil. Explore why the townsfolk found it to be so threatening. Discuss themes shared between this story and the other stories.
3. If there's time in class, have students write a creative short that either explains the veil, is a prequel story showing to what the Hooper's life was like before donning the veil, or shows what drove him to wear the veil. If there's no time in class, assign as homework.

The Yellow Wallpaper

1. Acquire many, many sheets of that thin, yellow paper that comes in rolls and is measured by the foot, and cover all the walls in class before students come in. Scoot desks and chairs and other obstacles away from the wall. While students are entering the classroom, casually walk around the perimeter of the room, gaining speed as more and more students enter until the bell rings and everyone is in class.
2. Have everyone read the story as usual.
3. Question the motivations of the characters. How many students think that the husband and doctor were genuinely looking out for the narrator's wellbeing? How many think it was an issue of control? How many think outright malice? What would the students have done in that situation?
4. Discuss insanity and insanity's role in horror.
5. Instead of a reflection paper, have all the students go up to the wallpaper and draw a scary face on it. (Anyone who draws anything inappropriate will get into really big trouble!)

Messenger* and *Coraline

Intermittently between story-reading classes, students will be forced to talk about messenger (and later, *Coraline*). These class periods will be dedicated to talking about the themes and tropes found in *Messenger*, and discussing the characters' personalities, motivations, and actions. Are they all well rounded characters, or do they feel flat? What would the students do in that situation? How are the characters and their actions significant to the story? Do the students relate to the characters at all? Sympathize or empathize with them? The desks will be arranged in a circle and the students will have to mention parts of the book they liked (or disliked), and why they did or did not like those parts.

Regular reflection papers will be due to ensure students are reading at home and thinking about what they've read.

What is Horror? (Informational handout for students)

Horror is a genre of fiction whose purpose is to frighten its audience. It includes everything from bloody, gory slasher films, to psychological suspense thrillers. It can be the subtle and eerie, the creepy, the macabre, and it can be those cheap-o scare-chords they play in movies to make you jump. Horror is a very large genre, often overlapping with speculative fiction and the supernatural.

Popular subgenres of horror include:

Cosmic Horror: Paints a picture of human insignificance dwarfed by a cold, uncaring universe which will never even notice how casually it destroys us. (Lovecraftian stories and most of Stephen King's work usually fit here).

Psychological Horror: Uses in-depth explorations of human mental anguish to horrify. Suspenseful stories, serial killers like Hannibal, and stories involving someone slowly going insane go here.

Religious Horror: Uses the unknowns and symbolism of organized religion, including tales of the apocalypse, Satan, The Antichrist, and cults, to scare viewers, and desecrates what is considered comforting and holy in order to shock them.

Sci Fi Horror: The purpose of this genre is to use horror to show how scientific knowledge can be used for evil ends, how cutting edge research can go horribly wrong, how crippling a lack of knowledge can be. (Works where robots and clones turn on their creators or science experiments gone awry fall under this category).

Splatter Horror: Horror that uses the fragility of the human body to scare. (This is where all the gory movies come in).

Survival Horror: Plays on fears of nature, re-casting its human protagonists as prey and victim of creatures or forces more numerous and powerful than they are. The central focus is on stripping away the protections of the modern, "civilized" world, leaving the protagonists at the mercy of some natural or pseudo-natural force like disease, zombies, aliens, wild animals, etc.

Gothic Horror: The oldest subgenre of horror, having started in the American Romantic period, and is the birthplace of all other genres, as many of the early science fiction, romance, and mystery writers were heavily inspired by gothic works. It was named after the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages because, during the 18^{th} and 19^{th} centuries, Gothic architecture was seen as simultaneously melancholy, sinister, unsettling, and kinda cool. Many early Gothic horror stories are set during the actual medieval era inside gothic castles and cathedrals just because people liked the atmosphere so much.

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HORROR AND ROMANTICISM

Unit of Study Project by Helina Martinez

MY OBJECTIVES

- Give students a working knowledge of the Romantic period (most of the 1800s) including notable writers and works of the time.

- Give students a better understanding and appreciation of horror and its many subgenres.

- Have students reflect on the nature of fear. (What do they fear? Are they reasonable fears? Why do people enjoy being afraid and create works specifically to scare others?)

WHY HORROR AND ROMANTICISM?

- Many great American writers from the Canon rose during the Romantic period (Edgar Allen Poe, Nathanial Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Emily Dickinson, etc.)

- Since the work of the Romantic Period is focused around intense emotion, many of the stories from that period have strong horror elements.

- Horror is a key component of many works. Gothic horror, specifically, is considered to be the parent genre behind all other genre-fiction. For example, it inspired Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, which is commonly regarded to be the first Science Fiction story.

METHOD

- Instead of a single long canonical work, I will have students read many shorter works, all in class and out loud (with each student reading a paragraph). The reading will be followed by discussion about the piece, and a relevant activity.

- Students will read Lois Lowry's *Messenger* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* at home, on their own, with regular reflection papers on the books due in class. There will be class days dedicated solely to each book and the student progress.

- Students will also have one other outside book chosen from a list I will give them. If a student has an idea for a book not on the list, I'll approve it if it's appropriate.

EXAMPLE PLAN

Plans for introducing Horror

- When introducing Horror I will show the class the Simpson's reading of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven* before discussing with the class their conceptions of what horror is and what they think makes something horrifying. I will write these answers on the board. After the discussion, I will hand out the horror genre sheets and explain to them how, until this point, we had been in the realm of religious horror (as that's what Americans during the time periods presented were especially afraid of), and how now we will be moving onto the other genres.
- Discuss the importance of suspense, pacing, subtlety, foreshadowing, and danger in horror, and the suspension of disbelief needed in all fiction, not just horror.
- Before they leave class, everyone has to write a paragraph either about a time they were frightened in real life or by a book/movie/television show/other medium, and why they think that frightened them.

EXAMPLE PLAN

Plans for the Minister's Black Veil:

- I will wear a black veil for at least the first part of class, if not the entire class.
- Have the class read the story aloud, paragraph by paragraph so that everyone gets a chance to read.
- Class Discussion: the symbol of the veil and what it represents. Secrecy? Death? Guilt? Freedom from the self? Protection from the outside world? Compare wedding veils and veils worn by some women in other cultures to the veil. Explore why the townsfolk found it to be so threatening. Discuss themes shared between this story and the other stories.
- If there's time in class, have students write a creative short. The short can be a story explaining what the veil is, or one that shows Hooper's life before the veil, or one that shows what drove him to wear the veil.

REQUIRED READING LIST

- *The Devil and Tom Walker*, Washington Irving
- *The Devil and Daniel Webster* by Stephen Vincent Benét
- *Legend of Sleepy Hollor, Washington irving*
- *The Minister's Black Veil,* Nathanial Hawthorne
- *Young Goodman Brown*, Nathanial Hawthorne
- *Messenger*, Lois Lowry
- *The Yellow Wallpaper,* Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- *Masque of the Red Death*, Edgar Allen Poe
- *Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allen Poe
- *Rose for Emily,* William Faulkner
- *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman

OPTIONAL BOOKS

- *A Wrinkle in Time,* Madeline L'Engle
- *Graveyard Book*, Neil Gaiman
- *I am Legend,* Richard Matheson
- *Neverwhere,* Neil Gaiman
- *Everything's Eventual*, Stephen King
- *Good Omens,* Terry Pratchett & Neil Gaiman
- *Z for Zachariah,* Robert O'Brien
- *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly