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### The Handling of Horror: A Guideline to Literary Horror Devices

The word “horror” contains several meanings that are dependent on the situation in which the word presents itself to the reader. It can mean shocking or terrifying, to shake and shudder in fear, and it can mean dislike, dismay, or disgust (Oxford). It is the disliking that is generally the basis for the literary form of the horror genre. Horror stories often reveal that which is unwanted – real or otherwise. Literary horror, therefore, makes a good platform in which to present political, social, and religious issues to an audience in a form that conveys a bolder and deeper meaning. Horror is typically pulled from human minds by way of the allotment of things we cannot understand, combined in fashion with the things we cannot help but understand. Horror is that which we hope never to encounter in our reality, or a reality that we hope to leave behind and forget. John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Handling of the Undead*, and Mariana Enriquez’s *Things We Lost in the Fire* both create narratives from a mixture of the disliked, the unknown, and the unwanted. These texts make use of four specific literary components to explore that which might not otherwise be explainable: mythos, setting, characterization, and resolution (which contains a mix of meaning, solutions, and results to the horror at hand).

Mythos is akin in many ways to religion, and religion provides not only the mythological background but can also be a part of the resolution. After all, religions and ancient narratives both contain long-standing myths, mysteries, and narratives in multitudes that have varied

greatly over time and place. Religions, like mythos, are often spaces where many of the unanswerable things found in horror reside. Horror and religious narratives have an ancient and tandem relationship. Religion has often been used as a method of containment in dark narratives to answer and provide comfort (or resolutions) for the horrors that cannot be understood or otherwise defeated in the real world. Both Lindqvist's and Enriquez's texts rely on deeply ingrained and primitive feelings that humans have carried long since the days of *Beowulf* and dark fables told by firelight in rural hamlets. What is unique to the modern texts, however, is that both utilize the religious tool in vastly different ways.

For Enriquez, religion itself is both the tool and the catalyst of horror. In "The Dirty Kid," we see the worst presumptions of religion at play – the sacrifice of children to unknown gods or demons (Enriquez loc. 391). Throughout the narrative there is a suspenseful build up as they mention shrines to saints and the undead like San la Muerte – saint of death (Enriquez loc. 143). When the protagonist confronts the mother at the end, the horror climaxes as she shouts declaratively "I gave them to *him!*" (Enriquez loc. 391) Implies that the drug addicted woman became so desperate or greedy that she sacrificed her children's lives to an unknown entity, creating a horrifying image in any culture. Lindqvist creates a narrative where elder wisdom and religion provide the solution to the unknown. *Handling the Undead* also mocks modern and Christian interpretations by suggesting that the grandmother protagonist Elvy's desperate interpretation of the Fisher as Mary, prevents her from removing the horror from the world (Lindqvist p. 259). Only her granddaughter, Flora, who seems to understand what the Fisher really is, comes to some solution (Lindqvist p. 506). The Fisher itself with its hooks for nails draws comparisons to the Naglfar – a Nordic nail ship that transported the dead to the afterlife. The authors also use religion as a method of explaining ideal morality and karma (Phillips 9-26).

Religion often assists in creating a moral message in horror narratives. Enriquez crafts a moral commentary on the fallout of the Argentinian struggle and history that resulted following the aftermath of the country's Dirty War. In "The Inn," its displayed through the ghostly encounter the two female protagonists, Florencia and Rocio, experience hiding in the inn, when a parade of ghostly violent soldiers crashes in to the former military barracks. The passage is only a single paragraph, but is all that is needed to allude to the oppressive and horrifying existence of what once was, "...someone started pounding on the shutters with something metal and the two girls embraced in the darkness, screaming, and now in addition to the noise of the motors and the pounding on the windows, were the running steps of many feet thudding around the Inn, and the cries of men ... many men shouting" (Enriquez loc. 549). Lindqvist uses his narrative as a what-if to explore issues of ageism and the living's notions of death and the beyond, and how the living themselves handle encountering the loss of a loved one. Most notable in the story is the response and morality of Mahler, a news reporter, and one of the main protagonists. He is constantly punished as though affected by divine retribution or bad karma. He is painted as a horrible father, overweight, a nosy journalist, drunk, overemotional, and lacking in the faith of the community (Phillips 9-26). The worst is that he digs up his grandson Elias's corpse. When he is confronted by the drowned zombie, his daughter, Anna, comments that unlike Elias, the drowned man has "been alone" creating an angry and savage creature (Lindqvist p. 528) There is an implied message that perhaps it is not death we have to worry about, but our feelings on that death.

The two narratives further respond to these moral and religious messages via the setting and characters that each story contains. The settings provide commentary on the historical, cultural, religious, and governmental components of both the countries in question – Sweden and

Argentina, and the characterization of the protagonists yields important messages about the community or societal expectations found within the narratives. *Things We Lost in the Fire* is completely reliant on the setting, both because of the political rhetoric within its pages as well as the deep Hispanic roots of culture and religion that the stories employ. Magical realism is a cornerstone of Hispanic literature and horror tropes (Phillips 9-16). This can be seen in several of Enriquez's stories, including "The Dirty Kid," with its shrines, the strange skull Vera in "No Flesh Over Our Bones," and the strange processions and rituals in "Things We Lost in the Fire." She also makes heavy use of allusions to specifically reference the historical events and current ecological issues relevant to Argentina in some of her stories as well, such as the police corruption and pollution in "Under the Black Water" (Enriquez loc. 2021). *Handling* also relies on setting, less so for the country itself and more on the type of culture and government presented in the text. *Handling* provides a lot of paratext through the interviews, articles, and criticisms within the novel to help define a specific setting and government entity that responds alongside the characters experiencing the story (Lindqvist p. 18, 113, 170, 237). The community is the setting in this case.

Setting is also crafted and commented on in terms of the home. Both stories reveal the ideal of a nuclear family setting and its failings. Many works of horror have long revolved around home and the community. Whether it's the extreme and pagan like town of Shelley Jackson's "The Lottery," or the mead hall of Heorot in *Beowulf*, familial relationships and the houses where people reside are often great sources of horror. The idea of transforming the obscure or everyday into evil incarnate – the uncanny, is a traditional device used by many writers to produce cracks in the fabric of reality to form tension in the story (Phillips 9-16). This tension often exists because we cannot always distinguish reality from the unreal in the

narratives. This causes a disjunct in the home and setting to create the horror itself, but that tension or horror is also reliant on what is familiar to everyone's perception – their mythos, their societal and cultural standards, and their understanding of home and family.

An individual's understanding of the world around them and their interaction with it comes down to characterization. Characterization can be direct or indirect. In *Things We Lost in the Fire*, both are utilized – personalities are revealed in the way the stories describe the characters, the descriptions of the situations or horrors presented to them, or how the other characters comment about each other. In “End of Terms” this is seen in the opening passage to describe Marcela, “She was one of those girls who don't talk much, who don't stand out for being too smart or too dumb and who have those forgettable faces. Faces you see every day in the same place, but that you might not even recognize if you ever saw them out of context” (Enriquez loc. 1531). The use of indirect characterization is seen in how a character's thoughts, speech, or actions are played out. The latter is a powerful tool used to make specific moral statements in both novels. How characters react to the horrors of the undead, the unknowing, and the mythological provides us with the most information about these characters' realities. In “The Dirty Kid,” our protagonist reveals her characterization in how she thinks when the child refuses to react in the manner she expects. She attempts to give into cute poverty tropes, but when the child doesn't obey her template she suddenly begins to despise the child, feeling bitter (Phillips 9-16). She enjoys “slumming it to a certain degree of authenticity” – but when the “rubric of the religious sacrifice shows her the reality of it all,” the narrator's hypocrisy is revealed (Phillips 9-16).

Often characterization helps foreshadow the resolution to the story. Resolution is again a mix of meaning, solutions, and results to the horror at hand. The meaning might be the moral

parable contained within the story that serves as a warning of some kind. It can also be a solution to the problem at hand – a method of how the characters handle the horror. Finally, it can be the results of the horror itself. This might be death, loss, insanity, a rekindling of family structures or religious devotion, and more. Horror is, at the end, either handled and contained somehow, or it is left to carry on and continue its destructive path. How the ending and resolution is unfolded is often done with a noticeable climax.

Enriquez varies her climax and resolutions with each story. Sometimes there is a soft and slow build up, until the horror strikes at the characters ruining them for good, or leaving them safe and free to learn from the horror, like when she is waiting for the boy's head to roll down the stairs in the final lines of "The Dirty Kid" (Enriquez loc. 391). Other times its sudden and impactful and leaves the character little time to respond and contain what has happened so that the horror and its aftermath can be resolved, like when Eva suddenly attacks and kills Magnus' rabbit (Lindqvist p. 460). Lindqvist's overall plot has a rather slow and long buildup that suddenly pops when the story cannot hold onto anything anymore. In *Handling*, just as quickly as the problem arrived, it is removed and dealt with in a gory and aggressive way.

What is similar to most horror pieces and these novels, is the culmination of a climax through the use of violence. While this is not necessary in every horror story, it is common. The violence in *Handling* is intentionally withdrawn till the end. Throughout the novel the characters make several comments on the atypical tropes that typically play out in zombie movies and books, and their absence of them in this experience. So, when the violence finally does appear, it is an overwhelming and gruesome act that the characters are unsure how to respond to, such as when Flora is at the facility and the group of boys suddenly appear and cause chaos and destruction (Lindqvist p. 509-511). In *Things We Lost* we see a reoccurring theme of violence at

the climax of most of the short stories when the characters' sense of reality crashes with the mythological.

These literary horror devices are not applicable to international versions of the genre alone. Horror, like many emotions, is something that translates well from one to another. The fear of the unknown, of death, and religious retribution is a common theme to both the novels examined here. What helps enhance the fear created is the setting of the story, the characterization of both the protagonists and the creatures they encounter, and how the story climaxes or comes to a resolution. Behind these components is an existing mythos that influences all three. A slight change to any one of these devices would result in a very different story and outcome. This is because horror is personal and intimate, what is terrifying to one, might be the daily life of another. Therefore, while the horror is translatable, its effects may not be. The application of the horror devices in these stories, *Handling of the Undead* and *Things We Lost in the Fire* has thus resulted in two unique stories, each with specific moral messages and commentaries reliant on the details provided. The horror genre is an overreaching branch on the literary tree encompassing many things such as mystery stories, apocalyptic narratives, survival epics, and more. Just as the four elements needed to produce a horror story are seen in these two stories, so too will they likely be found in those subgenres, supporting an idea that horror is not simply gore and violence, it has a function and a meaning relevant to many stories worldwide.

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