Gothic Horror:

A Reflection of Societal Fears

1. Introduction and Rationale

All stories reflect the societies they were written in. Horror in particular has a long history of reflecting societal fears, from its origins in folklore to the horror stories written today. Gothic Horror is no exception. Many of the classic Gothic Horror stories are concerned with deceit, emotional distress, perceived waning morality in the new generations, sexuality--particularly immoral sexualities such as homosexuality or women’s sexuality--isolation, and power. Gothic Horror was at its most popular around the Victorian era, which was an era that saw great societal and technological changes. The ruling class was changing from being dominated by the aristocracy to being dominated by the bourgeoisie, industrialization was spreading, and societal morals were becoming (slightly) more progressive. Additionally, the Victorian era was a period marked by a fascination with death, largely due to the state of medicine at the time--progress had been made since the days of the four humors, but germ theory had yet to be discovered and concepts such as sterilization did not yet exist. Death was everywhere, and the horror genre was ripe for popularity.

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker was published in 1897 and follows Dracula as he arrives in London and preys on the local population. Dracula becomes obsessed with Mina and attempts to turn her into a vampire. Because Mina is such a virtuous and pure woman, she is saved from Dracula and survives. In contrast, her friend Lucy--a vicious and promiscuous woman--falls prey to Dracula and becomes a vampire. This story can be understood as a parable on the dangers of young women becoming promiscuous and immoral, as well as provides a blueprint in Mina for how young women ought to act.

Similarly, *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer is a story about abstinence. Stephenie Meyer is a Mormon, and that fact shines through when reading *Twilight*, especially whenever discussions on sex, sexuality, or sexual desires arise. Bella is often begging Edward to have sex with her, and he repeated refuses on the grounds that he is afraid of his own power and does not wish to hurt her. In the final book of the series, *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and Edward marry with the explicit reason that they are marrying to have sex. This is very clearly an endorsement of abstinence until marriage.

I choose this topic for a few reasons. The first is that Gothic Horror is one of my favorite genres and I anticipated I would greatly enjoy focusing on the topic. Another reason is because I believe that through the analysis of horror we can better understand what our society fears and why. Understanding this provides a solid ground from which students can understand the messages they are receiving from society and why certain things are regarded as dangerous or immoral. It can also lead students to questioning and challenging societal fears, especially when they are based around ever changing morals, such as the now diminishing fear of homosexuality. I also choose this topic because horror provides a safe space to explore anxieties and fears, which can be especially essential for high school students who do not fully understand themselves and the world around them. In addition, horror in general and Gothic Horror in particular are genres that are often overlooked in the classroom. By exposing students to a genre they might be otherwise unfamiliar with, students may discover a love for the genre that they would not otherwise discover.

Gothic Horror connects with YA in a few ways. This first is that there are some Gothic Horror YA books that bridge the gap between the two genres. There are also a lot of YA books that, while not necessarily being Gothic Horror, embody a lot of the elements of the genre. This embodiment can range from having a similar atmosphere, focusing on similar issues and themes, and incorporating similar motifs--such as the various monsters--into the novels. In the case of *Dracula* and *Twilight*, similar themes are advanced and vampires--both as the monster and as what they represent--are present in both.

1. Texts in Use

Manga:

*Manga Classics: Dracula* by Virginia Nitouhei and Stacy King

A manga retelling of *Dracula*

Comics:  
*Stoker’s Dracula* by Roy Thomas and Dick Giordan

A comic retelling of *Dracula*

Classics:

Dracula by Bram Stoker

The classic vampire novel that gave the world Dracula and established many of the vampire stereotypes still in use.

*Carmilla* by Sheridan LeFanu

Written 25 years before Dracula, *Carmilla* is the story of a lesban vampire who preys on an unsuspecting young woman.

*The Vampyre* by John William Polidori

The first piece of English vampire literature, *The Vampyre* is about a mortal man who is enthralled by a mysterious gentleman.

*Yellow Wallpape*r by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

A short story of a woman who is driven mad over her powerlessness.

*Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson

Widely considered one of the best ghost stories, *Haunting of Hill House* follows four characters as they spend a summer at Hill House.

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison

The story of a former slave haunted by her past.

*The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde

The story of a man who retains his youth while his portrait ages for him.

*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

A cautionary tale of using science to play God.

*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier

The story of a woman who marries a wealthy widower, only to live in the shadow of his first wife, the titular Rebecca.

*The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole

Considered the first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* is a homoerotic story of a haunted castle.

Edgar Allen Poe

*The Fall of The House of Usher*

A short story about the final two members of the Usher family--a sick sister and a controlling brother--and their descent into madness.

*The Masque of The Red Death*

A short story about a prince holding a masquerade ball in the midst of a plague.

YA (romance focused):

*Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer

The hit teen romance novel between human Bella and vampire Edward.

*Vampire Diaries* by L.J. Smith

Predating *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries* follows Ellena and her relationship with the vampiric brothers Stefan and Damon, who vie for her love.

*Vampire Academy* by Richelle Mead

Published after *Twilight*, *Vampire Academy* is the story of a vampiric girl attending the titular academy and her forbidden love with her mentor. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause

Predating *Twilight*, this is the story of Zoe, a teen girl whose mother is dying of cancer. Zoe copes with her grief by falling in love with a vampire and eventually coming to terms with her own mortality. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Evernight* by Claudia Gray

Published after *Twilight*, this is the story of a teen half-vampire who attends a boarding school for vampires. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Carmilla* (YA) by Kim Turrisi

A novel adaptation of the YouTube web series “Carmilla”, itself based on the novel by Sheridan LeFanu.

YA (action focused):

*Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld

Published the same year as *Twilight*, this is the story of a parasitic outbreak which turns people into cannibalistic vampires. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Marked* by Kristin Cast and P. C. Cast

Published after *Twilight*, this is the story of a teen girl who is marked as a vampire and must attend a vampire boarding school as a result. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*In the Forests of the Night* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes

Published before *Twilight*, this is the story of a three hundred year old vampire who must confront her past.

*Thirst* by Christopher Pike

Published before *Twilight*, this is the story of a 5 thousand year old vampire whose progenitor is back to haunt her.

*Coldest Girl in Coldtown* by Holly Black

Written after *Twilight*, this is the story of a girl who believes she has become a vampire and must escape to Coldtown, a quarantine zone for vampires. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Eye Killers: A Novel* by A.A. Carr

A thousand year old vampire abducts a Navajo teen girl to be his new bride. A mix of typical vampire folklore and traditional Navajo beliefs. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

YA (without vampires):

*Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

This novel transports a traditional gothic setup--a mysterious fiancé, a countryside mansion, and decaying wealth--to Mexico. (Summary taken from back cover of novel)

*Anna Dressed in Blood* by Kendare Blake

A ghost hunter comes across the ghost of a murdered 1950s teen who kills all she comes across yet spares his life. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*White Smoke* by Tiffany D. Jackson

Moving from California to the Midwest, Marigold finds a haunted house and ghosts from her past--both metaphorical and literal. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Insanity* by Susan Vaught

This novel follows Forest as she works the graveyard shift at a mental institution. One night, she sees the ghost of one of the patient's dead husband, and Forest's sense of reality slips. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Something Upstairs* by Avi

A 12 year old boy finds the ghost of a murdered slave in his attic. He must help the ghost reckon with his past. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*Dorian Gray* by John Garavaglia

A YA retelling of Oscar Wilde’s classic *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with Dorian Grey as a high school junior. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*This Dark Endeavor* by Kenneth Oppel

A YA prequel to *Frankenstein*, focusing on Victor Frankenstein’s teenage years. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*The Fall* by Bethany Griffin

A YA retelling of *The Fall of the House of Usher* with Madeline Usher, the sick sister in the original, as the protagonist. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

*The Masque of the Red Death* by Bethany Griffin

A YA retelling of *The Masque of the Red Death* following Araby Worth as she forgets her worries of the plague in the Debauchery Club. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

1. Introducing the Unit

To introduce the unit, I would first have students write a short reflective statement about what they already know about vampires and *Dracula* (the character and the novel). I would then play them “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” by Bauhaus and ask them to analyze the lyrics, particularly the two verses:

Bela Lugosi's dead

The bats have left the bell tower

The victims have been bled

Red velvet lines the black box

………………………………….

The virginal brides file past his tomb

Strewn with time's dead flowers

Bereft in deathly bloom

Alone in a darkened room

The count

I would ask students to relate these lines to what they already know about vampires and *Dracula*.

Next, I would show students clips from the pilot episode of Netflix’s *Castlevania*, focusing on the persecution of Lisa Tepes. Specifically, Lisa is accused of being a witch for practicing science and modern medicine--things the church does not understand--and is subsequently burned for her perceived transgression. I would prompt the students to consider how stories about witches are a manifestation of a misunderstanding of science and how the persecution of Lisa in *Castlevania* reflects that.

I would then do a four corners activity similar to the one I observed at Independence High School. I would present students with statements about teen sexuality (such as “should you wait untill marriage to have sex?” and “does having sex devalue women”?) and have students organize themselves based on whether they strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, or strongly disagree with the statements.

Finally, I would introduce the students to *Manga Classics: Dracula: (one-shot)* by Virginia Nitouhei and *Stoker’s Dracula* by Roy Thomas. They are a manga and comic retelling of *Dracula*, respectively. I would have the students choose one of the two to read and would use them to reinforce *Dracula* while reading by having students reflect on how accurately the manga/comic adapted the novel.

1. Working Through the Text

To reinforce *Dracula*, I would pair it with *Twilight*. Ideally, I would have students read *Dracula* in class and *Twilight* at home. I would make sure to stress to students how both *Dracula* and *Twilight* reflect societal fears of young women’s sexuality. As they read, I would ask students to reflect on how the two books portray the sexuality of their characters and what those portrayals convey about wider societal values and fears surrounding sexuality.

One main activity I would have students do while reading would be to journal. I would have students plot the differences and similarities between *Dracula* and *Twilight*, primarily through asking students to keep a running list of what Mina and Bella would think of each other and how their characters compare. I would also ask students to write reflections on each chapter as if they were reading this when it first came out and had no pre-existing cultural knowledge of *Dracula*. Finally, I would ask students to keep notes on how the manga/comic version of *Dracula* that they read compares to the novel.

Another activity that I would do, which I observed used at Independence High School, is to have students keep a character chart as they read of all the different characters and their defining character traits. In addition to this, I would have students keep a list of possible brown bag items for each of the two books.

Two final activities I could do are to have students write headlines for various events in the two books and have students do sensory writing of various scenes in the books. Both of these activities would serve to check in with student comprehension of the novels, and the more artistic students could have the option to draw/paint a scene in place of writing headlines. The sensory writing activity would challenge the students to go back and identify small details they might have otherwise missed.

1. Working Beyond the Text

There are a large number of books that would complement this unit wonderfully. I would provide students with a list of YA/Classics pairs and stand-alone YA vampire novels and ask students to choose one pair and one stand-alone novel.

The YA/Classic pairs I have created are:

*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurie w/ *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

*Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson w/ *White Smoke* by Tiffany D. Jackson

*Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu w/ *Carmilla* by Kim Turrisi

*The Vampyre* by John William Polidori w/ *Eye Killers* by A.A. Carr

*Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman w/ *Insanity* by Susan Vaught

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison w/ *Something Upstairs* by Avi

*Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole w/ *Anna Dressed In Blood* by Kendare Blake

*The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde w/ *Dorian Gray* by John Garavaglia

*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelleyw/ *This Dark Endeavor* by Kenneth Oppel

Edgar Allen Poe

*Fall of House of Usher* w/ *The Fall* by Bethany Griffin

*The Masque of The Red Death* w/ *The Masque of the Red Death* by Bethany Griffin

The stand-alone YA vampire novels I have selected are:

*Vampire Diaries* by L.J. Smith

*Vampire Academy* by Richelle Mead

*Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause

*Evernight* by Claudia Gray

*Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld

*Marked* by Kristin Cast and P. C. Cast

*In the Forests of the Night* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes

*Thirst* by Christopher Pike

*Coldest Girl in Coldtown* by Holly Black

For the YA/Classic pairs, I would ask students to compare and contrast the two novels they read with particular focus on what the societal fear is and how it manifests. Students could either write an essay or make a presentation on their analysis.

For the stand-alone vampire YA novel, I would ask students to compare and contrast the novel with *Twilight*, paying attention to whether the novel came out before or after *Twilight* and whether the novel is concerned with the same issue (young women’s sexuality) as *Twilight*. I would ask the students to consider whether the novel is romance or action focused and how that focus creates differences or similarities with *Twilight*.

1. Concluding the Unit

To conclude the unit, I would assign a final project similar to the Sherlock Project I observed at Gunn High School. I would give students four options and have them choose one to do. The four options I would give are:

1. Write your own horror story concerned with a societal fear of your choosing.
2. Research the history of vampires starting with their folklore origins and trace their development through time.
3. Write a review for *Dracula* as if you were a contemporary reviewer
4. Watch two *Dracula* films of your choosing and analyze the differences in how the two films adapt the novel. Which is the more accurate adaptation and why?

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