

**CROSSING THE THRESHOLD: A STUDY OF HORROR IN
THE FICTION OF HAWTHORNE, POE, JAMES
AND STEPHEN KING**

THESIS

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*We grow accustomed to the Dark-
When Light is put away-
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Good bye-*

*A Moment- We uncertain step
For newness of the night-
Then- fit our Vision to the Dark-
And meet the Road- erect-*

*And so of larger- Darkness-
Those Evenings of the Brain-
When not a Moon disclose a sign-
Or Star- come out- within-*

*The Bravest- grope a little-
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead-
But as they learn to see-*

*Either the Darkness alters-
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight-
And Life steps almost straight.*

-Poem # 428 by Emily Dickinson (1862).

INTRODUCTION

DEFINING HORROR AS A GENRE

In his essay “Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition,” Clive Bloom tackles the difficulty of achieving a singular, encapsulating definition of horror. According to Bloom, the genre of horror literature is outside one distinct definition. Horror is:

a multiplicity of apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing—gothic tale, ghost tale, terror romance, gothic horror [...]; it becomes clear that while ‘horror’ and ‘gothic’ are often (if not usually) interchangeable, there are, of course, gothic tales that are not horror fiction and horror tales that are not gothic. (155)

Indeed, providing an encompassing definition for horror is a daunting task. While many critics, scholars, and fans of the genre agree with Bloom that horror and gothic may be used interchangeably, and that the two cannot be completely divorced, there is a distinct separation between the two.

For the purposes of this study, the term “gothic” will be used when referencing landscape, scenery, and atmosphere. This reference is necessary because horror, historically, has emerged from gothic techniques. Horror, on the other hand, will be used to refer to the emotional aspects of the characters, especially in regards to character psychology that materializes from gothic atmospheres.

Also, in this study, I will use a working definition of horror that has five distinct properties responsible for constructing character psychology. For the most part, these five traits shape contemporary horror fiction, but they are also found in many classic horror tales. First, there must exist some form of evil that positively or negatively influences characters and, at the same time, alters their inner and external realities. Second, there must be overt or tacit hints of supernatural elements that are unexpected, unpredicted, or uncontrollable. Third, some form of peril must exist either physically or psychologically that will impact the outcome of the story. Fourth, more often than not, a tragic ending occurs in the form of death, destruction, or new understanding that leaves a character, in some way, stronger under the influence of evil or madness. Fifth, the scenery, landscape, atmosphere or architecture usually reflects inner psychological realms of the characters within the stories.

Although I will deal with all of these properties in some manner while examining horror, the last property binds this study into cohesive and unified argument. The true nature of horror literature, classical and contemporary, relies on most of these characteristics to drive the narrative and construct character psychology. And, in most cases, at least three of the five are found in every horror story.

Though other studies include various definitions for horror, this study emphasizes one other key ingredient that shapes horror: characters inevitably choose evil over good. The characters under scrutiny in this study are analogous to the hero and his journey, where a conflict is designed to overcome a great evil. However, contrary to the traditional hero quest, the true nature of the hero in the horror story is not to conquer evil, but to understand and succumb to it. From this new understanding of evil, characters are

compelled to journey into the deepest, darkest contours of the mind.

In examining the limited dialogue on the horror genre, it is challenging to uncover scholarly criticism that addresses these components as a working dynamic. Looking to scholarly criticism alone to define horror proves disappointing since traditional views regarding the genre are usually underdeveloped and tangential. These limited views on horror have done little to address the complexities of the genre, much less promote horror as a worthy literary form.

What is certain is that horror fiction derives from the previously stated properties, textual devices, and conventional literary forms. This opens the door for horror to be analyzed through various critical lenses, even though critics have failed to take advantage of the numerous and beneficial offerings of the genre.

Overcoming Obstacles as a Legitimate Genre: The Critical Neglect of Horror

The genre of American horror literature has been attacked, belittled, and disparaged over recent years by some critics who argue it lacks importance and merit. Horror literature has had tremendous difficulty finding space within standard pedagogy or the literary canon even though it has numerous proponents. Despite its popularity and plentiful untapped resources for critical analysis, it is scarcely mentioned or included in the scholarly world as a viable, researchable genre. The only acceptable debate or discussion of horror, classical and contemporary, is usually veiled under gothic conventions.

Some would argue that one reason behind this apparent exclusion is that horror literature is, to some extent, a victim of textism—a discriminatory evaluation system in which a particular literature is relegated to a so-called subliterary genre, regardless of its

individual merits, and is automatically defined as inferior, separate, and unequal (qtd in Barr 429). I do not wish to suggest that scholarly discussion in general completely excludes or ignores horror. I do suggest, however, that many critics assume what E. Micheal Jones asserts: “Horror is a lot like the weather; it is both familiar and incomprehensible” (258).

Critical analysis pertaining to the genre is often written by lifelong literary horror fans who feel the genre is discriminated against. The major proponents of horror who give credibility to the genre and introduce the merits of horror are, in fact, usually horror authors. Popular literary scholarship on horror focuses primarily on canonized classics, *Frankenstein* (1818), *Dracula* (1897), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), etc., but fails largely to incorporate or tackle texts outside of the accepted canon.

Most critics also overlook the argument that some of America’s most popular anthologized and canonized authors dipped their pens in the ink of horror. Instead, they recognize Edgar Allan Poe as the “Gothic” master of the short story, or they extol him for the creation of the “detective” story. Likewise, critics assiduously place Nathaniel Hawthorne’s horror tales of evil, corruption, and “unpardonable sins” as endnotes to his Puritan themes and *romance* novels. Henry James’s morbid tale of horror, *The Turn of the Screw*, and the magnificent, ever-changing psychology within the text is, without hesitancy, referred to as something *other* than horror by most critical interpreters.

To many, labeling these authors as authors of “horror” relegates their fiction to an inferior status, and critics and scholars alike are careful not to associate canonized classics with the genre of horror.

However, analyzing the correlation these authors have with horror offers insightful and intriguing discourse that challenges previous notions of the genre. My mission is not only to incorporate into this thesis canonized horror classics, but also to go beyond conventional horror texts to analyze their relationship to contemporary horror. To do this, however, it is important to first address, and then dispel, one of the existing, preconceived and popular notions regarding horror as a genre.

The Reoccurring Monster

Literary scholars, textists, and critics alike, often overlook a text or author labeled “horror” because of one watchword: monster. As Noel Carroll states in his study *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart*,

What appears to distinguish the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as fairy tales, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. (52)

This approximation is disturbing and limiting to those who appreciate and promote horror. The genre of horror fiction offers much more than the monster anomaly, though most critical analysis usually begins with identifying this central character.

Though monsters, in some form, do appear throughout many horror texts, the emphasis on monsters is the most common and the most incorrect qualification for the genre. In his study, Carroll identifies not only the plot structure of the horror novel but also horror in general in terms of the monster and its relation to the text. Carroll’s “complex discovery plot” involves four essential movements or functions. They are the onset, where the monster’s presence is established for the audience, the discovery, where

an individual or group learns of the monster, the confirmation, where the discoverers or believers of the monster must convince others of its existence and the moral danger at hand, and the confrontation, where “humanity marches out to meet its monster” in the form of some debacle (99-102).

The underlying motifs, themes, and symbols, according to Carroll, are all secondary products of horror fiction compared to the central focus, the monster. Dispelling notions such as this is a daunting task because the general consensus would agree with Carroll. Movies such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Hellraiser* all have their respective stereotypical, unstoppable, supernatural stalker-killer that follows Carroll’s plot structure. And one cannot forget the excruciating possession of Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist* as she is transformed from an innocent cookie-cutter angelic child to a demonic venom-spitting, spider-walking murderer.

The popular cinematic qualities of the horror genre have done a great deal to emphasize the monster in film as the focal point of the genre, giving some support to Carroll’s other assertions regarding horror’s strength and staying power:

[H]orror has become a staple across contemporary art forms, popular and otherwise, spawning vampires, trolls, gremlins, zombies, werewolves, demonically possessed children, space monsters of all sizes, ghosts, and other unnameable concoctions. (51)

In concordance with Carroll, Deborah Notkin states that horror “has never been so prevalent nor so overt as it is today.” But, according to Notkin, there is something telling about horror that transcends the showpiece monster. She continues:

In a sense, its visibility weakens its powers [...]. Today's media-wise audience knows that the werewolf's slavering jaws are a triumph of the make-up artist, that the screaming maiden is being paid Equity scale and the gore is not blood but catsup. Vampires have become an erotic cliché; ghosts and witches are figures of fun in TV sitcoms and children's comic books. Late night horror movies are practically comic relief from the grim reality of the 11:00 o'clock news. Yet, rather than relaxing in the pleasure of having archetypal fears reduced to the false, the funny and the familiar, our society seems engaged in a desperate search for some sort of horror fantasy at which we cannot laugh. (149)

According to Notkin, such horror in real life exists everywhere. As Charles Grant estimates, "it [horror] helps us face death by showing us vicariously what's on 'the other side'; it enables us to handle fear without the attendant real dangers" (164). The real and pervasive threat of horror is that the monster is not part of the external world; it is a part of our own nature.

Beyond the Monster

It is difficult to overcome the obstacles of divorcing horror from the monster often found in horror, but it is a critical and necessary step. In contrast to Carroll, it is more reasonable to suggest most monsters may belong to horror, but horror does not belong to monsters alone. The tradition and history of the horror story far exceed this limiting notion. As Douglas Winter asserts, horror fiction is a "means of escape, sublimating the very real and often overpowering horrors of everyday life in favor of surreal, exotic and visionary experience" (3). Furthermore, Winter claims that "horror fiction has a cognitive value, helping us to understand ourselves and our existential

situation [...], its essential element is the clash between prosaic everyday life and a mysterious, irrational, and potentially supernatural universe” (5).

Victor Sage argues in *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* that the horror genre (and its supernatural elements) is “not a literary genre, in the narrow sense, at all. It is a cultural response, which implies a broad series of relationships with the whole of the culture in which it is produced” (qtd in Ingebretsen xv). Whatever the need for horror literature in a culture, authors who deal with horror fiction understand the implications and need of amalgamating external reality with the introspective imagination. Observing how a horror tale addresses and exhibits this amalgamation is more beneficial than focusing attention on the stereotypes so often discussed within the genre. As H.P. Lovecraft states, “the charm of the tale is in the telling” (90).

Horror literature is much more than abominable creatures hell-bent on revenge and murderous rampages. It is much more than an adrenaline rush or campfire story; it is much more than blood, gore, and over-the-top violence offered through cinema. Horror literature often attempts to go beyond the realm of the tangible and empirical world, while reaching out to the unexplainable as it fosters the imagination. The horror genre, much like other genres, has evolved from the textual roots of history, feeding off the public demand for a good tale or story while responding, as Winter asserts, to social and psychological atmospheres of the human condition. Through horror’s various stages, it always has had a cogent popularity—today is no exception.

According to Clive Barker, “There are apparently two books in every American household—one of them is the Bible and the other one is probably Stephen King” (qtd in Ingebretsen xi). Indeed, horror literature has survived a great mutation since the stories

of Irving, Radcliffe, Hawthorne, Poe, and James, but the influence of these authors and their stories remains apparent and consistent in the contemporary horror tale, among other expanding genres such as science fiction and fantasy. It seems we need the elements of horror in our lives and literature: “In the tale of horror, we can breach our foremost taboos, allow ourselves to lose control, experience the same emotions—terror, revulsion, helplessness, that besiege us daily” (Winter 4). Stephen King summarizes that “[h]orror appeals to us because it says, in a symbolic way, things we would be afraid to say right out and straight, with the bark on; it offers us a chance to exercise emotions which society demands we keep closely at hand” (43).

Building on these ideas, this thesis emphasizes the important and critical nexus between classic horror and contemporary horror through a comparative analysis of selected tales that do not incorporate a stereotypical monster but do demonstrate the five properties that constitute horror. If classical and contemporary horror genres are not appreciated for their value and contribution to the literary world, it is fitting to uncover and disclose some of the elements, metamorphosis, and history supporting the genre to argue the importance of incorporating horror fiction into the critical and scholarly world. While demonstrating these aspects of horror, this thesis illuminates the importance of horror fiction’s ability to address the nefarious and evil side of humanity, of complex character psychology, of tabooed thoughts and ideas, and of aberrant behavior that would otherwise remain repressed.

Moving beyond the horror monster, this thesis also concentrates most specifically on a substantial and critical link between Hawthorne, Poe, James, and Stephen King: the image of the *threshold*. Analyzing and juxtaposing three of the most popular nineteenth-

century horror stories, Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) against Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), this thesis focuses on numerous ideas: the threshold image and its function in creating binary oppositions and character psychology, the creation of alternating and alternative plot structure and setting, and the inherent uncanny qualities exhibited within the tale of horror. Also, this thesis examines the five properties of horror to illustrate how this image progressively evolves. The metaphorical or literal placement of the threshold in the horror tale manipulates character psychology and, subsequently, it alters the reading of the tale. Authors such as Hawthorne, Poe, James, and King utilize the image of the threshold in such a discreet manner that the threshold seems little more than another literal dark and gloomy passageway in an opulent and rich setting. However, they implement threshold imagery in their fiction to signify something much greater.

The image of the threshold manifests in their fiction as a gateway to truth and self-identity, often reflecting repressed urges to overturn reason and sanity for madness and insanity. Often, the evil and horrific world in the horror text is a truthful and insightful world, and it is privileged over the rational, limited, and mundane world. This is evident with Hawthorne's Goodman Brown as he leaves Faith behind to seek out evil, succumbing to the realities of an alternative world. It is true with Poe's Roderick Usher and his evil and horrific world of twisted psychology. Likewise, James's governess chooses to surrender her own sanity and benevolence and believe in evil and the apparitions that haunt Bly, compelling her to commit unspeakable atrocities.

In Stephen King's *The Shining*, the antagonist, Jack Torrance, represents the modern day Young Goodman Brown, leaving his safe haven in search of individual identity. Along the way, Torrance confronts his own psychological demons of isolation that so closely resemble Usher's, and after the threshold is crossed and the supernatural is revealed, Torrance invokes qualities of James's governess, along with her emotional and psychological breakdown. Torrance, much like Brown, Usher, and the governess, reveals madness and horror are inevitable and immutable parts of humanity.

Within the dimensions of horror and the threshold image, these authors create paradoxes that question morality and psychology while they exhibit the supernatural world as a part of a dangerous yet necessary reality. They write from the perspective of a fallen human world, and their characters commence on voyages to moral comprehension of this world in terms of pervasive evil on the other side of the threshold. The individual, and the individual psyche, is not immune to the lure and majestic qualities of evil. Rather, individual characters succumb to the imaginative realm where evil dominates, where its attractiveness propels them to leave their safe-havens. Characters cannot control their darkest impulses to cross the threshold into the forbidden world of evil and knowledge.

In concordance with Elissa Greenwald's assertion that "the imaginative realm and actuality are related to each other not as opposites but as mutually reflecting entities that enable each other to be more clearly known" (17), horror authors such as Hawthorne, Poe, James, and King deliberately ensure that their characters will cross the threshold into the evil imaginative world to find truth. This world reflects the darker desires of humanity and underscores the truth of reality. Usually the external fictional world

prepares their characters for independence, and the nightmare invoked by the evil of the tale brings about self-knowledge or awareness. Their protagonists often discern that they have within themselves, or within their new world, the ability and capacity for making ethical choices. However, the ethical choice is based on a functional knowledge of evil and the supernatural. These choices and decisions either enhance or thwart the power of evil not only in the characters but also in their new environments after the threshold is presented.

The Threshold Image and the Uncanny in Horror

When we think of horror, we usually think of a dichotomy of two opposing forces acting and reacting against each other, creating a frictional force. On one hand is the rational world filled with natural, tangible elements. On the other hand, there are elements of the natural world combined with an irrational world filled with evil, dread, or the supernatural and sublime. Often the threshold image invoked by the horror author is the vehicle used to catapult the characters from the rational world into the realm of the unknown where natural rules and ideals are implemented, then shattered, only to be replaced by an alternative set of rules and ideals.

On one side of the threshold, familiarity, order, and benevolence reigns. On the other side of the threshold, an unknown yet uncannily familiar world filled with disorder, disdain, and terror emerges. The boundary between these fictional worlds is separated by a threshold, or neutral territory. When a character crosses the threshold in a horror tale, the rules of the narrative and conservative character psychology are often overturned. Michel Serres touches upon the function of the threshold to create the opposing forces at work in horror:

A door opens or closes a threshold which is held to be such because at this spot a law is overturned; on one side a certain rule, on the other begins a new law, so that the door rests on its hinges as a neutral line where the two rules of law balance and cancel each other...The singular site is part of neither this world nor the other or else it belongs to both. (qtd in Maclean 273)

The threshold in the horror story drives the characters and the narrative to a point of realization—that some form of evil does exist, that madness is a part of human reasoning, and that the imagination which invites terror, horror, and the supernatural is an inherent part of intuitive, human psychology. The normal, tangible world is transcended, and often replaced, when a character crosses the threshold.

A study of the threshold image and its function within these works will dispel some of the pesky preconceived notions of what horror literature is supposed to be, rather than what it is: a fiction constructed from reality and imagination that showcases and explores evil and tabooed lands, one that appeals to the rational world while simultaneously invoking the supernatural and uncanny world. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that “[u]nderneath this reality in which we live and have our being, another and altogether different reality lies concealed” (qtd in Winter 209). Horror fiction, then and now, operates on a very similar notion.

Moving from Hawthorne’s dream vision of horror, to Poe’s psychological horror, to James’s horror novella of the supernatural and psychological, we arrive at the contemporary horror novel, King’s *The Shining*, which fully illustrates each aspect of horror’s journey from inchoate form to mature consummation. As we move from the short story, to the novella, and finally to the novel, we see that threshold imagery is a

vital component to the history, construction, evolution, and evaluation of American horror literature.

CHAPTER I

We cross that boundary on our way into the world of meaning, whereas horror affects us when the boundaries of that world are breached and we find we are on the verge of leaving it. There is operative in horror the same kind of intimation that is operative in wonder.

Jerome A. Miller

HAWTHORNE'S HORROR: "Young Goodman Brown," the Threshold of Dreams, and the Acceptance of Evil

In order to intelligently discuss Nathaniel Hawthorne as one of the earliest American horror writers who drastically influenced the genre, one must first acknowledge and understand two things: Hawthorne is rarely categorized as a horror writer, and he is usually referred to as either an allegorist or a regionalist writer. Though Hawthorne is traditionally analyzed through these lenses, this chapter moves beyond traditional views concerning Hawthorne to analyze him as one of America's premier horror writers who helped shape and develop the genre. A better understanding of Hawthorne's tales and how they operate in terms of plot, setting, and psychological characterization will help identify and recognize concepts of horror literature discussed in later chapters, especially how horror has evolved through the use of the reoccurring technique of the threshold.

This chapter includes three parts: Hawthorne's tacit concept and philosophy of the threshold image, its multiple functions in the tale "Young Goodman Brown," and a direct comparison of the tale to aspects of Stephen King's *The Shining*.

In “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne’s concept of the threshold is useful for several reasons. Because Hawthorne has influenced many contemporary and classic horror authors, and because many of his techniques, especially the dream motif, echo throughout the genre of horror, his fiction is an appropriate start for analysis of the evolution of the horror genre and the threshold image. More important, Hawthorne’s initial treatment of evil as an ineradicable force in human duality and psychology continues to reemerge as a hallmark of the horror genre.

In *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David S. Reynolds addresses Hawthorne’s need to explore these evil human conditions, or “tabooed and psychological areas,” in nineteenth-century American thought. Reynolds considers Hawthorne an “immoral” or “dark reformer,” one who was “largely responsible for transforming a culture of morality into a culture of ambiguity” (59). Hawthorne’s propensity to privilege evil and the supernatural in his fiction is often neglected because most critics, like Reynolds, have focused solely on the ambiguity in his work.

However, if we look beyond the ambiguity apparent in Hawthorne’s fiction to his unambiguous, ubiquitous treatment of evil, we see that Hawthorne, like other authors of horror, exploits the nefarious nature of the human mind to ascertain some greater truth or understanding as he moves out of ambiguity to shape character psychology. Because many of Hawthorne’s characters are constructed from external temptations that reflect inner psychological evils, critics view Hawthorne as the one author who is solely “responsible for much of American literature’s tradition in dividedness, subversiveness, darkness, and demoralization” (Reynolds 8). Stemming from Hawthorne’s paradigms of

the threshold and innate evil, along with his dream landscapes that mirror character psychology, horror evolved to incorporate the imaginary as a very real force in the tangible world.

Hawthorne's Threshold

Long before Nathaniel Hawthorne gave his definition of the Romance in "The Custom House," "[...] a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (1850), he had already implemented this idea in many of his previous tales and sketches. For instance, in "The Haunted Mind" (1835), his infamous dream-sketch, Hawthorne makes several references that invoke the dichotomies of actual and imaginary, realism and romance, and the blurring of both.

The commingling of the imaginary and actual, and the disorientation that results from the dream-wake cycle, emerges as one of Hawthorne's hallmarks. Though "The Haunted Mind" does not offer a definitive resolution that amalgamates the imaginary and actual, the text describes a territory between such opposites: "You have found an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present" (105).

Hawthorne, as Rita K. Gollin asserts, uses this dichotomy of the dream-wake cycle, and the intermediate space, as a vehicle to construct character psychology in many of his tales:

Through dreams and their threshold, reverie, he would enter the interior life and encounter its demons in fictions asserting that the adventure is crucial to human

understanding [...]. [H]e used dreams as encounters that simultaneously horrify the dreamer and inform him about his own motives and desires. (1)

Most of Hawthorne's dream settings and motifs involve characters that explore and excavate the darker sides of their personalities or surroundings. As the dreamer moves out of the tangible, empirical world to an imaginary realm, evil becomes a dominating force and the supernatural permeates the scene.

As Hawthorne began to blend the psychological evils of the mind and the supernatural into his version of romance, tales, and sketches, an eerie, horrific quality emerged in his fiction. Ben P. Indick addresses Hawthorne's reliance on the romantic tradition and supernaturalism in "King and the Literary Tradition of Horror and the Supernatural": "It was the dawning era of Romanticism which gave birth to the supernatural story as we know it: an anti-rationalism accepting essentially unknowable and hidden aspects of nature" (172). Hawthorne, undoubtedly, incorporates these influential impulses in his dream settings, and here the unknowable and hidden aspects of nature are explored by his characters rather than neglected.

In many of Hawthorne's horror-laden atmospheres, the influence of evil and the supernatural upon evolving character psychology is demonstrated. Gollin asserts that Hawthorne "figured the imagination as a mirror, which can concentrate sight and insight: it may reveal physical truths [...]; it may provide confrontation with private truths" (40). Because Hawthorne's dream tales deal specifically with the imaginative atmospheres and settings, as well as the protagonist's state of mind, his tales "subordinate plot to psychological and moral truth" (115). "Young Goodman Brown" is a contrived journey

that “must also be read as a journey into the self, into the interior world of dreams” (123).

She continues:

Brown’s journey is real whether or not it was dreamed: it conveys the tormenting knowledge all men confront in dreams, knowledge that produces the fiends of the haunted mind. Whether he has dreamed or really participated in evil rites, Goodman Brown has confronted evil as one—though only one—inevitable fact of life. The burden of his midnight vision is that evil exists [...]. (128)

For Hawthorne, the crux of his dream fiction involves the reflection of character psychology through the external environment while simultaneously providing a divide that separates the two, allowing his characters, or his narrator, to waver from one state of mind to another. This form of horror that Hawthorne adopted is not only incorporated into his romantic fiction, but also it is utilized by many contemporary horror authors who provide two opposing realms intermingling within the characters’ psychology and the external environment. The divisions in the dream landscape are often mirrored in the psyche of the character (protagonist or victim) within the American horror tale, and Hawthorne was the first to use this technique.

This dichotomy of opposites, encapsulated and bounded by an intermediate space, is most prominent in Hawthorne’s psychological dream-visions. Hawthorne’s psychological tales incorporate the dream motif and the image of the threshold to provide a landscape where characters may enter or leave realms of the imaginary or real, thereby examining or searching for evil to fulfill their desires. With this structure, Hawthorne privileges the evil imaginary world over the tangible real world while he

directly asserts that horror is an inevitable part of everyday life. Lovecraft, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, observes Hawthorne's sense of evil within these realms: "Evil, a very real force to Hawthorne, appears on every hand as a lurking and conquering adversary" (61).

The pith of Hawthorne's inchoate form of horror in "Young Goodman Brown" is Brown's need to choose innate evil over goodness by crossing the threshold. Brown confronts and accepts evil because evil is ingrained in all aspects of his surroundings, and the influential impulses of evil within his mind are too great to defeat. Using Brown's quest for forbidden and tabooed knowledge, Hawthorne demonstrates that the individual must willingly capitulate to inherent betrayal, deception, and evil. Through Brown's journey and subsequent introspective evaluation, Hawthorne acknowledges that unsullied evil exists deep within the psyche of the individual and the external environment. Like many contemporary horror writers, Hawthorne uses this pervasive force of evil "to plunge into the underside of consciousness" (Chase 3). While presenting evil as a subtle powerful and controlling force, the threshold imagery in Hawthorne's tale constructs ambiguity of language, of motive, and of landscape and setting; then, as with many horror tales, evil emerges, danger is confronted, character psychology is significantly altered, and tragedy occurs.

Claudia Johnson focuses on the psychological dimensions apparent in Hawthorne's tales as they are constructed from landscapes in the subconscious mind and external environment. According to Johnson, the productive tension driving most of Hawthorne's tales and sketches is created from a "dark night of the soul that every person

had to undergo in the underworld, or hell, of the self.” This tension is most apparent in “Young Goodman Brown” where the dreamer knows helplessness and evil, the nightmare of the soul, and the horror of the mind (26).

Young Goodman Brown must break the monotony of his own existence, filled with initial false visions of Faith, benevolence, and the constructs of society around him via the church and the faith-based persons in the village. Brown’s own perception of life and environment is distorted by the mirage of innate piety and goodness, only one side of humanity, in Hawthorne’s estimation, that must coexist with the fruition of evil.

“Young Goodman Brown”

In much of Hawthorne’s fiction, emphasis is placed on setting early on to create a sense of tension or transformation. Patricia Carlson states in *Hawthorne’s Functional Settings* that “most of Hawthorne’s fiction begins either with two contrasted locales or with a focus upon a particular single location” (13). By implementing two contrasted locales in the first line of “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne provides a catalyst for the rest of the tale: “Young Goodman Brown came forth, at sunset, into the street of Salem village, but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife” (133).

This initial line engages three main areas of focus in the tale: the threshold creates two opposing worlds filled with various landscapes and scenery; it subverts, undermines, and divides the benevolent spirit of Goodman Brown while privileging and reinforcing the necessity of choosing evil over good; and, it creates ambiguity in the language of the tale to suggest that evil is defeated when, in actuality, it is the victor.

Hawthorne presents Brown as a character who makes a choice to leave behind predetermined religious notions, embrace nonconformity, and allow his subconscious desire to reign over his benevolence. Of course, he makes this choice without much hesitation, and this act is an important factor to consider while observing the remainder of the story. As Terence J. Matheson points out, Faith gives the impression she knows why Brown must leave her: “She is plainly aware that his journey, far from being routine and normal, involves danger and perhaps evil as well” (137).

Despite her admonitions, Brown has already made an irreversible decision: he will depart on his journey. This act, as Matheson estimates, “certainly says a great deal about the kind of man we are dealing with [...]. He knows his purpose is ‘evil’ and that he is a ‘wretch’ to leave her ‘on such an errand’” (138). Once again, this admission does not stop his determination to leave. His perception and belief in faith—religious, domestic, and marital—is wholly insufficient.

After Goodman Brown crosses the threshold, we have two apparent worlds that contrast each other and collide to form the setting. One is of goodness, consisting of domestic and marital stability in the form of Faith while Salem represents Brown’s simplistic naivety. The other is of evil, consisting of the supernatural forest, the evil entity Brown encounters on his chosen journey, and Brown’s own potential for psychological transformation. However, as Carlson correctly points out, in “the author’s system of moral order, the relationship of good and evil is much more complex than this black-and-white paradigm by which Brown seeks to regulate his life” (128).

The first indication we have that Hawthorne is constructing character psychology

is Brown's conscious decision to leave Faith and Salem behind, crossing over the threshold early in the tale to seek out his own evil purpose. This initial action, the choice to seek out evil, is one of the underlying concepts often neglected in the tale. In this setting, Hawthorne inverts the concepts of good and evil, and it is up to the reader to discover the meanings delicately placed behind the tale's ambiguity.

After Brown gives his wife Faith a parting kiss, he crosses the threshold into the first setting where Hawthorne gives descriptions in keeping with the Gothic tradition: "He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees in the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind" (134). Already, Hawthorne has given an imaginary environment of the forest that is personified as an enveloping and dark presence. As it encloses Brown from behind, we get further description of loneliness and solitude: "the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that, with lonely footsteps, he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude" (134). Hawthorne assimilates the forest and its Gothic properties with loneliness and psychological self-exploration. The forest symbolizes not only the imaginative, supernatural realm, but also Brown's impulse, psychologically, to seek out evil.

As Goodman Brown encounters the shape of a man, usually considered the Devil in scholarly discussion, Hawthorne continues juxtaposing Gothic scenery with Brown's relation to his new acquaintance. There is a "deep dusk in the forest" and the new acquaintance "bear[s] a considerable resemblance" to Brown (134-135). Though we are informed they could pass as father and son, we can infer that they are to some degree

separate. Brown is on the verge of psychologically possessing the same characteristics as his new companion, but he reverts back to his reliance on Faith and the tradition of his Puritan ancestors. Brown, “having kept [his] covenant” by meeting with the shape, fulfills what he discerns as an obligation to his journey, and he intends on returning to the initial realm of his departure. But Hawthorne begins to give clues to the manifesting psychological transformation of Brown’s acceptance of evil in terms of the scene.

Though Brown cries out “Too far, too far!” as he continues to go deeper into the forest and his subconscious mind, the narrator reaffirms this suspicion by stating that Brown “unconsciously” resumed his walk. And though Brown, once again, gives a defense of his Christian heritage, he subconsciously continues to state that he intends to go further, thereby accepting the evil of his companion, of the forest, of his own mind, and of the imaginary realm he is a part of: “And I shall be the first of the name Brown, that ever took this path, and kept—” (135). We see with heightened awareness that Brown will deviate from history.

As the tale progresses, and Brown’s perception of the benevolent world crumbles around him, he continues to succumb to the engulfing influence of his companion and the forest, or his own subconscious desires to be guided by the influence of evil. Gradually, everyone affiliated with the village, those who personify good in Brown’s idealistic moral perception, are shown as tainted with evil as they appear, one by one, in the forest. Carlson contends that “the presentation of these persons builds in a crescendo of emotional tension for Brown as his idealism is threatened and finally destroyed” (129). The ambiguity of good and evil becomes more problematic and terrifying for Brown as

the village population gravitates into the forest, and each one is shown to be distrusted. Brown cannot trust his own identity because Goody Cloyse, representing his morality, spiritualism, and catechism, is proven to be susceptible to the power of evil. This not only shows the progressive decay of Brown's previous acceptance of reality, but it also reinforces his continued journey into the depths of his subconscious desires for truth based on evil influences.

Faith's appearance in the forest represents the final breakdown in the division of good and evil, village and the forest. Faith in goodness alone can no longer be trusted in any sense. At this point, the inversion of the forest and the village, of good and evil, and the merger of the real with the imaginary comes to a crux in the mind of Brown, a concept often overlooked by many critics, though Hawthorne gives us a clue to this acceptance and privileging of evil in the language of the tale.

Many critics believe Brown reverts back to his Christian principles at this point to overcome the influence of evil. One passage is usually brought forth to support this reading. Brown states: "With heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil" (140). This statement is usually taken to mean heaven and Faith (both in religion and as his wife) will help him overcome the presence of evil he encounters. However, the tale has already demonstrated that Brown's previous notions of reality have been shattered. Because Brown is cognizant of his evil purpose after crossing the threshold, and because his previous perception of goodness is supplanted by external evils, this lends support for considering alternate meanings in the language and the tale.

Faith, here, I believe, refers to the underworld, the realm of evil and the devil, or Brown's newfound psychological state and understanding. Perhaps it represents all of

the above. This inversion leads to observing heaven as the true evil force while Faith, Brown's newly acquired vision of privileging and accepting evil, becomes the good force in his subconscious mind. This notion is further supported later in the tale when Brown shouts out for his former vision of Faith in a "voice of agony and desperation." He concludes: "My Faith is gone! [...] There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil! For to thee is this world given" (141). Soon after, Hawthorne juxtaposes Brown's psychological transformation with the external atmosphere: "The road grew wilder and drearier, and more faintly traced, and vanished at length, leaving him in the heart of the dark wilderness, still rushing onward, with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil" (142).

As the congregation meets in the "communion" of their race, Brown's dark companion informs him that he is "undeceived" and that "Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness" (146). Furthermore, we see that this transformation takes place when Brown cries out: "Faith! Faith! [...] Look up to Heaven and resist the Wicked One" (146). If Brown looks to heaven, not hell, to resist the "Wicked One," an inference can be made that the final acceptance of evil in Brown's psychology has taken place. If Hawthorne leaves any doubt, he describes Brown's mad dash through the haunted forest, becoming "the chief horror of the scene" in the midst of the gathering worshipers (142).

When Brown awakes in the morning, he makes his journey out of the forest back into the village, crossing the threshold with a new understanding of goodness and evil. Though Carlson feels that the ambiguity apparent in the tale "is more than Goodman Brown can assimilate into his childishly simplistic view of life" (131), it seems more

feasible to suggest Brown fully comes to terms with his choice to seek out evil and to understand the true power of evil in his own psyche and society. Due to the corresponding scenic elements separated by the image of the threshold and then their unification, along with the acceptance of evil's domination over good and the rejection of Brown's previous notion of humanity and society, one can assume Hawthorne intentionally inverted the concepts of good and evil to create a new reality for Brown.

The question of whether or not Brown dreams this experience becomes far less important than the transformation of his psychological state and the inversion of good and evil in the tale. Brown sees evil as a power that not only forces him to question his own morality and identity, but also to judge the very existence of benevolence and God. Hawthorne, Derek Maus points out, "removes the mask of piety from his characters to show that the real devil is the one lurking within each individual" (81). Though Carlson sees Brown's remaining life as one full of isolation, frustration, and gloom due to his new discovery and his inability to assimilate back into society with this new perception, it seems Hawthorne deliberately implies another meaning. If, indeed, the townspeople and Faith are not what they seem, but individuals who are corrupted by the mirage and deceit of goodness, they would have no cause to carve any hopeful verse upon his tomb-stone. Goodman Brown's dying hour is gloom not because he fails in his task to seek out and accept evil, but rather because he is tortured by the oppression of false benevolence that permeates throughout his teachers and peers. The nature of Brown's eventual death, the "gloom" of his "dying hour," is due to isolation and alienation because he does not have an outlet for his new reality or evil impulse. Opposed to Brown, as we will see, when characters are allowed to act on their new realities and evil psychologies, the horror story

flourishes. Although Hawthorne's treatment of psychology through the threshold image in "Young Goodman Brown" is the touchstone for the horror story, it is certainly the most limited.

Stephen King's *The Shining*: Echoes of Hawthorne

The psychological manifestations of evil in "Young Goodman Brown," along with Hawthorne's tacit philosophy of the threshold image, are mirrored in one of Stephen King's most popular novels, *The Shining*. Though "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Shining* are separated by more than a century of fiction and technique in the horror genre, one should not overlook the powerful similarities these two works share, most notably the function of the threshold, the emphasis of pervasive evil, and the presence of psychological turmoil.

King, the most popular author in contemporary horror, owes much to Hawthorne's technique of creating scenic and atmospheric ambiguity and duality in his fiction that can directly address and mirror evil in the human psyche. However, unlike Hawthorne, King allows his characters not only to attain evil but to act on their impulses. Indick argues that King "has absorbed and utilized those qualities which characterize the different types of stories in the horror genre. In his own distinctive style are mirrored the major traditions he has inherited" (171). However, though Indick broadly outlines the gothic elements that have influenced King (e.g. the vampire tale, the ghost story, etc.), he pays scant attention to Hawthorne's version of the romantic tradition of the nineteenth century and his emphasis on the actual, imaginary, and the neutral territory that blends or distinguishes the two. Indick also overlooks Hawthorne's emphasis and privileging of

supernatural and psychological evil within his tales and this influence on King and his fiction.

Tony Magistrale, in his essay “Toward Defining an American Gothic: Stephen King and the Romance Tradition,” points to King’s reliance on gothic settings and atmospheric techniques used by many previous nineteenth-century writers, most notably Hawthorne. King, like Hawthorne, “employs physical settings as a mirror to a character’s psychology” (101). Furthermore, Magistrale points to evil as the driving force behind King’s characters:

King writes fiction from the perspective of a fallen human world, and his characters commence their voyage to a moral comprehension of this world only at the very point they become profoundly aware of the pervasive existence of evil.
(104)

This evil materializes in King’s fiction as supernatural entities or psychological exploration, and they are often mirrored in atmospheric and scenic settings. Moreover, like Hawthorne’s work, King’s horror fiction exhibits evil as a necessary part of the human condition, another world or realm that must be entered to come to a complete understanding of truth where no individual is immune from the lure of darkness. In his essay “Stephen King’s American Gothic,” Gary William Crawford states that King “has placed his horrors in contemporary settings and has depicted the struggle of an American culture to face the horrors within it [...] he has shown the nightmare of our idealistic civilization” (45).

Before comparing particular elements of *The Shining* in terms of the threshold image to Hawthorne and “Young Goodman Brown,” a brief summary of King’s novel

will help to examine and analyze this idea. Although I will be dealing with one aspect of King's novel in this chapter, other chapters of the novel will be analyzed throughout the thesis, culminating in a final chapter dedicated exclusively to *The Shining*.

The Shining, as Fritz Leiber states, is "a supernatural novel about the power of evil, in which the forces of good are mostly outmatched" (104). The central and pivotal character, Jack Torrance, is hired as the caretaker for the snowbound Overlook Hotel through the winter season in Colorado. Torrance takes his family, his wife Wendy and his son Danny, to the hotel with him in hopes of rehabilitating himself from alcoholism while attempting to finish a novel. As the harsh weather increases and the family is isolated in the hotel, supernatural elements within the hotel emerge. The hotel has its own history of death, destruction, murder, and evil. Eventually, the cursed past of the hotel becomes a metaphor for Jack's mind trapped in a downward spiral of insanity and evil. Throughout the novel, Torrance struggles with numerous manifestations of destructive psychological turmoil: alcoholism, temperamental outbursts, and physical violence. Jack's isolation, guilt, and psychological frailty, along with the supernatural evil of the hotel, merge to lead him to a decision: he must "correct" (murder) his family.

Within the structure of this plot, King adopts several of the atmospheric techniques and scenic settings utilized by Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown." The Overlook hotel, much like Hawthorne's symbolic forest, is a place where Jack Torrance can repress his psychological safe haven of false benevolence and guilt in search of his own evil purpose. Behind many doors of the Overlook, a pervasive evil exists that mirrors Jack's underlying desires as he succumbs to his vision and choice of evil and chaos. Like Goodman Brown, Jack begins his voyage toward truth and the acceptance of

evil as a real and influential force as he crosses the threshold into the Overlook Hotel and explores many of the forbidden rooms within its walls. The entities and scenes within these rooms not only represent the supernatural elements of Overlook, but also illuminate the deeper psychological explorations of evil and horror in Jack's mind.

King, like Hawthorne, shows that the descent into the forbidden realms of the Overlook is a descent into the innate evil of humanity and Jack's psychology. As Douglas Winter states concerning *The Shining*: "The 'universal forces' in collision are portrayed with Christian dualism—good and evil, matter and spirit—and when these incompatible realms impinge upon the hotel, something leaks through" (50). What leaks through is Jack's new acceptance of evil.

In Chapter 35 of *The Shining*, "The Lobby," Jack attempts to rationalize Danny's experience of the supernatural in the hotel: "I'm trying to help him find the difference between something real and something that was only an hallucination" (293). Jack, however, struggles to discern between the two in his own mind. Later, Jack crosses the threshold of Colorado Lounge into a world of supernatural opulence, companionship, and history. Standing in the dining room just outside of the batwing doors leading to the lounge, Jack's reality changes: "He pushed the batwings open and stepped through" (343). What has been an empty room filled with empty liquor bottles and silence suddenly becomes vivacious. After Jack converses with Lloyd, the bartender, and he imbibes several drinks, he finds himself dancing with a beautiful woman while he listens to the energetic conversations surrounding him. Jack's former world of isolation and guilt from alcoholism is replaced with manifestations of personal desires. In Freudian terms, Jack is King's example of the struggle between the instinctive desires of the id and

the conscious superego that, as protective husband and father, slowly deteriorates. When Jack meets the former caretaker of the Overlook, Grady, his predecessor who savagely butchered his family in the hotel, the novel demonstrates the full effect of the threshold image.

Much like Goodman Brown's progression into the forest and his last chance to resist the acceptance of evil before he continues on his quest, Jack has one last epiphany of the reality he is about to leave behind: "He suddenly felt closed in and claustrophobic; he wanted to get out. He wanted the Overlook back the way it had been...free of these unwanted guests" (350). But King introduces Grady as a figure that closely resembles the devil in Hawthorne's forest. Much to Jack's dismay, Grady informs him of what he has always rejected: "*You're* the caretaker, sir, [...] You've *always* been the caretaker. I should know, sir. I've always been here" (351). Here, King presents Jack's rejection of his personal history and his neglect of innate evil as the false reality whereas Grady's and the Overlook's supernatural influence of evil is the real truth that has been veiled. When Jack realizes that this evil is truth, he undergoes an experience much like that of Goodman Brown as he returns to the village aware of his new reality. After the guests, bartender, and décor of the lounge disappear, Jack "*crossed* to the Colorado Lounge and shoved *through* the batwing doors" (357). Furthermore, Jack echoes the pain of Goodman Brown's new reality based on the existence and pervasiveness of evil:

Loneliness surged over him suddenly and completely. He cried out with sudden wretchedness and honestly wished he were dead. His wife and son were upstairs with the door locked against him. The others had all left. The party was over.

(357)

Here, King exploits Hawthorne's vision of evil. Unlike Goodman Brown's gloomy and isolated death years after confronting and accepting his own evil impulses, King takes Torrances's volatile, psychological manifestation of evil and uses it as a liberating power. With his knowledge of evil, Torrance attempts to eradicate his family and history, thereby fulfilling his darkest desires while destroying all forms of false benevolence in his life. The party scene at the Overlook, complete with historical secrets from ghosts long past, mirrors the inhabitants of Salem in "Young Goodman Brown": the communion in the Overlook echoes the devil's worshipers in the forest. Within this atmosphere, Jack Torrance becomes the chief horror of the scene, but his journey to self-discovery and evil is not limited to the imagination and repression of the mind. Rather, the reoccurring "chant" of "Unmask! Unmask!" (355) begins to reverberate throughout King's novel. King peels off Jack's mask of history and repressed subconscious desire to supersede the passive, miserable nature of Goodman Brown after evil is accepted. Although the party at the Overlook disperses much in the same fashion as the Salem villagers in the forest, Jack Torrance has the temerity to follow, with fidelity, the preaching of Hawthorne's devil:

By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin, ye shall scent out all places—whether in church, bed-chamber, street, field, or forest—where crime has been committed, and shall exult to behold the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty blood-spot. Far more than this! It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts, and which inexhaustibly supplies more evil impulses than human power [...]. (145-146)

Jack Torrance picks up where Hawthorne's Brown leaves off in the horror story. However, along the way, King also utilizes the threshold imagery found in Poe and James to further develop horror in his novel. Using the dream motif of Hawthorne's horror as a foundation for psychological transformation, King extrapolates Poe and James's emphasis of creating tangible thresholds outside of the imagination into his own horror fiction.

CHAPTER II

“[...] the taunting, maddening locked door with some great secret behind it [...]”
The Shining 170

“Dream and reality had joined together without a seam”
The Shining 426

A HOUSE DIVIDED: Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and the Threshold of Psychological Horror

In his in-depth biography and analysis of Edgar Allan Poe, Kenneth Silverman points to Poe’s reliance on the Gothic tradition to create a variety of motifs: physical decay and premature burial; the depiction of garishly lit dwellings, particularly mansions and castles, that exhibit the nightmarish and fanciful; “the use of mirrors, interior décor, and external landscape to reflect psychological states” (112). Using these motifs, Silverman argues, Poe “creates the definitive tale of horror” (149).

In many of his tales, Poe utilizes these motifs to create threshold images situated around the use of external landscapes and architecture to reflect inner psychological states. Removing the threshold image from the dream motif of Hawthorne, and placing it into the structured house of Usher, gives us another small, yet valuable, account of the evolution of the horror genre.

Like Hawthorne’s threshold imagery, the threshold imagery in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” operates to create ambiguity in character psychology, atmospheric setting, and language; simultaneously, it offers evil as a malleable,

unflagging force of knowledge that destroys Usher's previous concepts of reality. In Poe's twisted settings, two realms, those consisting of evil and good, are found on opposing sides of the threshold, and Poe, like Hawthorne, consistently privileges evil in his tales. As Daniel Hoffman points out in his study:

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is a terrifying tale of the protagonist's journey into the darkest, most hidden regions of himself; and, the fearful tableau therein enacted is a fable of his destiny dredged up from the regions of his deepest, most archaic dreams. (297)

However, in opposition to Hoffman's remarks concerning Poe's dreams, there exists a marked difference between Poe's threshold imagery and Hawthorne's threshold imagery. In “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne presents his protagonist's evil journey into the forest through the dream vision motif. Because Hawthorne's dream-like settings often negate the realistic qualities of his tales, the validity of events and characters within those tales are, at times, discarded.

Poe, on the other hand, moves the atmospheric setting and the image of threshold out of the dream vision and into a tangible structure, the decaying house of Usher. We question less the validity of Poe's narrator as he tells the tale, whereas Hawthorne's narrator is more susceptible to unreliability because the dream itself is unreliable. In Poe's case, we rely on the narrator more because he is an active participant in the Usher's twisted world, and he is merely reporting as a detached witness, an outside observer, to the occurrences around him.

This chapter addresses three main concepts: Poe's implementation and concept of the threshold image, its multiple uses in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and a comparison of the threshold images in Poe's tale to the threshold images in Stephen King's *The Shining*. Examining the threshold image in Poe's story gives us further insight into the elements of the contemporary horror story through an elevated psychological lens.

Beyond Hawthorne's vision of horror through opposing landscapes and atmospheric settings in the dream motif, Poe offers another usage of the threshold in his landscapes and atmospheres. This tangible setting not only adds to the validity of the tale, but also it provides another element used in contemporary horror, a realistic setting with supernatural phenomena and ambiguous psychological motives. Poe uses the threshold image, the landscape, and the setting to reflect and mirror the inner turmoil of his characters: Roderick Usher, his twin sister, and the narrator of the tale.

In *The Haunted Dusk*, J. Gerald Kennedy gives one of the most useful descriptions of Poe's work and its effect in creating horror. He states:

The tales of Edgar Allan Poe display an elaborate repertoire of supernatural motifs, so well adapted to the evocation of horror that one might suppose the frisson to be their exclusive object [...] his tales reveal the complex function of the supernatural, which typically introduces the predicament that his protagonists must overcome, escape, explain away, or surrender to. (39)

Much like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, many of Poe's protagonists are presented with a situation where evil persists and, at times, the "predicaments" they face guide

them to a new reality where previous perceptions are shattered and then replaced. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narrator must overcome the twisted and warped reality of Usher to maintain his own sanity and reality.

On the other hand, Usher surrenders to the evil supernatural forces around him to achieve wholeness. Usher’s surrender to the evil forces around him drives the tale into the realm of horror, and it is Poe’s intention, I believe, for Usher to accept, then adopt, the horror of his mind to find truth within the walls of his house. The house of Usher, and its many rooms and chambers, mirrors Usher’s state of mind. In his article “Toward Defining an American Gothic,” Tony Magistrale addresses this issue:

In Poe’s tales of fantasy and terror, confined atmospheric environments are representative of the narrator’s or main character’s circumscribed state of mind [...] the Usher mansion is emblematic of Roderick Usher’s mental status: both its interior apartments and external façade exists in a state of chaos and disintegration. (100)

On one side of the threshold is the narrator’s version of the tale. On the other side of the threshold, Usher reveals madness and evil not only as a realistic force in a tangible world, but also as a driving force on the conscious state of mind. This driving force of evil and madness then is transferred from Usher to the narrator.

In his study, Hoffman observes the narrator as the central point of emphasis: “We must understand ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ as a dream of the narrator’s in which he leaves behind him the waking physical world and journeys toward [...] his inner and spiritual self” (299). However, neither the narrator’s journey nor his

singular perception should be the point of emphasis. Rather, the central crux of the story is Usher's psychological dilemma and his attempt to uncover or discover his true nature, regardless of its fatal result. Usher, like Brown, seeks out evil to find personal truth, and then he projects his nightmarish vision onto the landscape and atmosphere around him.

In Usher's realm, the commingling of opposites, good and evil, male and female, real and imaginary, creates complex ambiguity. However, as Usher explores the thresholds of his mind and his surroundings, his psychological state moves out of ambiguity to a complete acceptance of and surrender to evil. Though Kennedy argues that Usher's house, its passageways, and its dark secrets seem to "pose the implicit threat of fatal enclosure" (43), the threat of fatal enclosure does more to liberate Usher's mind than to confine it.

In his horror fiction, Poe usually deals with paranoia rooted in personal psychology, physical or mental enfeeblement, obsession, fantasy, and the search for parallel realities. By crossing over the threshold of his house and mind, Usher (and to a lesser extent, the narrator), like Goodman Brown, finds that real truth is buried deep within the nature of evil as he excavates the dark impulses of his subconscious. But unlike Hawthorne's dream landscape and vision, Poe adds to the element of horror by producing a concrete setting that represents an uncanny familiarity with which we may identify. Though some critics, like Richard Wilbur, feel the events in "Usher" are "dream[s] of the narrator's, in which he leaves behind him the waking, physical world and journeys inward [...] toward his spiritual self" (59), the tale belongs in the

realm of reality and the many facets of Usher's personality. Like Hawthorne and his Goodman Brown, Poe also illustrates that evil and madness will reveal truth for his character, and this new understanding will end in tragedy, one of the principal properties of the horror tale.

Like Hawthorne's first sentence in "Young Goodman Brown," the opening paragraph of "The Fall of the House of Usher" introduces a threshold, in this case a division between perception and landscape. The narrator recounts an experience of approaching the Usher house for which he cannot account by rational means, but for which he insists there is a natural explanation. The narrator's perception of his surroundings begins to be blurred and distorted and he questions the imaginative faculties of his mind. As he approaches the House of Usher, a sense of "insufferable gloom" pervades his spirit. The narrator continues:

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges [...] with an utter depression of the soul [...]. (263)

The narrator compares this feeling of encountering the house with an "after-dream" of a reveler on opium. The oppressive force of the of the landscape and house affects the narrator physically, and he resorts back to the limitations of his perceived reality:

I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which

have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. (263)

The scene, to the narrator, becomes “a ridiculous fancy” that he feels has grown in his mind. However, the scene still persists outside of his limited view. The narrator enters a part of the world that contradicts any previous experience that has taught him the mind interacts with and dominates the world (Heller 128). Though the narrator attempts to turn from the horror of the scene and his building anxiety, “the landscape in which he finds himself seems to have an opposing force, a sentient will that imposes itself upon him” (Heller 128). This foreshadowing leads into two issues of the tale: one is how the house represents Usher’s wavering state of mind; the other is to what extent Madeline represents Usher’s reality and his acceptance of madness. Though many critics argue that the central emphasis of the tale is the narrator’s descent into madness, Usher’s acceptance of evil, in the form of the resurrected Madeline, is the true crux of the story. Only after we come to understand Usher is both his house and Madeline can we see the image of the threshold at work.

The Use of the Narrator

Hoffman summarizes Poe’s story as one concerned primarily with Roderick, his twin or double, Madeline, and the autonomy of the unconscious. “The Fall of the House of Usher” is a “love story in which incest, murder, and necrophilia are inescapable. To love one’s twin sister is but a double displacement for the ultimate narcissism, self-love, and the ultimate incestuous desire, possession of one’s mother’s body” (311). Although Hoffman’s analysis is correct to find Roderick as the central

focus of the tale, I believe he drastically overlooks the emphasis Poe places on Usher's house and the scenic atmospheres of the tale. The scenic atmospheres in the house mirror and reflect Usher's inner psychologies in order to present the doubling of Madeline and the expression of Usher's various mental states. In *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David Reynolds addresses this issue:

The house 'is' Roderick Usher, who 'is' his sister. None can exist without the other. Throughout the story, there is a complete interpenetration between the physical and the spiritual, between the psychological and the visionary. All the images mirror and amplify each other, from the dreary day to vacant, eyelike windows to the narrator's depressed spirits to Usher's pallid skin and growing agitation. (236)

The opening of "The Fall of the House of Usher" sets up an opposition between the narrator's experience of something supernatural and his insistence and reliance on this experience as something that has a plausible explanation according to psychological laws. Although the narrator clearly prefers a rational explanation for the atmosphere around him, he is made to hesitate between the natural and supernatural. As Heller points out, "parallel to this conflict is a subtle opposition that will grow increasingly important as the story progresses" (129). This opposition is an important factor in observing the rest of the tale.

The opening paragraph, as Heller states, exhibits as much about the narrator as the house. They are placed in opposition to each other as antagonists, as representatives of two differing views of the world (129). The narrator, undoubtedly,

represents the reality of a sane mind that resists what he considers imaginary. The house, therefore, is revealed as something *other* than the narrator's perception of reality. As the story unfurls, these oppositions, or differing views of the world, become enveloped in a number of dichotomies, all of which are subject to the problem of what is real and what is imaginary. If later we are to take Usher as the house as well as Madeline, and illustrate him as the intentional focus of the story, the opening of the story itself proves valuable. Because the narrator often views the landscape, scenery, and atmosphere with a hesitant or skeptical eye as an *outside* visitor, he will eventually attempt to escape the horror instead of succumbing to it. He is neither psychologically susceptible to the scene outside the Usher House nor to the actions within the Usher House.

Therefore, the narrator rejects any notion of ambiguity because he relies solely on his own perception: "Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspects of the building" (264). To the narrator, the House of Usher is nothing more than an architectural achievement: "[...] I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, then conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master" (265).

After crossing the threshold of the Usher mansion, the narrator makes a choice to repel any notion of the supernatural or unexplainable. It is from this point on that Roderick Usher represents the primary focus of the story. The narrator states: "The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master" (265).

On one hand, we have the empirical eye of the narrator observing the house, the entombment of Madeline, and her ghostly resurrection, only to reject any supernatural explanation. We need the narrator's subjective viewpoint to contrast Usher. Without the narrator, Usher would seem more of a raving lunatic than a crafty and intelligent being on the verge of psychological transformation. On the other hand, we have entered the mind of Usher represented by the house itself and later Madeline. Here, the story breaks into two parallel tales, the realm of the narrator and the realm of Usher. The realm of Usher drives the story into the arena of horror through the dark labyrinth of his mind.

Usher and the House

In the realm of Usher, he conveys that his malady is a "family evil" for which "he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection" that displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Soon after, Usher echoes the tragic vision Goodman Brown comes to accept after he accepts evil in the forest: "I must perish in this deplorable folly [...] I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results" (267). Furthermore, Usher shows an unflagging competence when he reveals that his future is known. In a sense, he understands the choice he has made or that he will make: "In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR" (267). This foreshadowing continues to reiterate the analogous nature of Usher with his house. The *physique* of the house reflects the "*morale* of his existence." The narrator reinforces this in the first scene when he

notices the crack in the structure of the house; this reflects a divide in the story as well as Usher's mind. The "barely perceptible fissure" is noticeable in a zigzagging pattern down the wall. After all clues are gathered, it bodes ill for the narrator to discover that Usher and his house mirror each other. Heller addresses this issue:

The physical similarities are the clearest; they suggest that both man and house are living corpses, for though they look dead, they remain whole and animated. They are also alike in their manner of being, both showing a "wild inconsistency" between order and disorder, between life and death. Both are afflicted with constitutional ills that enhance their isolation, the houses' atmosphere and Usher's morbid acuteness of the senses. Each appears on the verge of collapse. (130)

Because Poe creatively represents Usher's state of mind as dependent and coexistent with the chambers and structure of the house, he can begin to play with Usher's changing psychology and his acceptance of the supernatural. Although Usher relates to the narrator that his "peculiar gloom" could be traced to more "natural" and "palpable" origins, this is soon contradicted with the appearance and importance of Madeline. She, Usher states, is the reason for the despair, since her illness will result in death and his solitude. Furthermore, her death will leave him as the last of the Usher race. While he speaks, the lady Madeline "passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, [...] disappeared" (267). The references to passageways, or thresholds, continue as the narrator traces her steps: "[...] a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother

[...]” (267). The narrator, then, tells us that Madeline’s disease had long baffled her physicians. Furthermore, he explains that his glimpse of Madeline is the last he will have of her, “at least while living” (268). Poe exhibits two apparent ideas here. One is that Madeline’s appearance foreshadows her reappearance later in a supernatural state; the other is that the door that closes behind her represents Usher’s mind closing off to the reality around him. Her reappearance symbolizes the final transformation of his mad psychological state, his acceptance of the supernatural, and his new reality that will inevitably destroy him. Poe, like Hawthorne and Goodman Brown, allows Usher to journey into the contours of the mind through alternative realities and personalities. The threshold is crossed, and the horror begins.

Madeline

Madeline’s brief passing through the apartment parallels all the things that Usher fears: the change of order, Madeline’s death, his physical disintegration, his lack of composure and sanity, and his life (Heller 132). In “The Haunted Palace,” the poem that surfaces after her appearance, there is mention of “evil things, in robes of sorrow” that “assail the monarch’s high estate.” Furthermore, the poem foreshadows Madeline’s reappearance with other lines: “Vast forms that move fantastically”; “Through the pale door/A hideous throng rush out forever/And laugh—but smile no more” (270). Shortly after, Usher informs the narrator that Madeline is “no more.” His intention: to preserve the body one fortnight “in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building” (271). We may infer that the *vault* represents one aspect of Usher’s mind where he understands and accepts death.

From here, the narrator aids Usher in the arrangements for the entombment. Poe further keeps with the theme of entrapment within Usher's mind as being represented by tangible objects. As we see, the confinement in the tale becomes smaller and smaller, from the division of the outside atmosphere and the interior of the house, to each room in the house, to a singular vault, and finally to a coffin. The progressive claustrophobic imagery represents Usher's progressive state of mind and his descent into an alternative reality. As the narrator reports, the coffin is placed into the vault. The vault is one "that had been so long unopened that torches half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere" (272). This gives them little opportunity for investigation. The narrator refers to this vault as a "region of horror," and, soon after, the unscrewed lid of the coffin is partially turned. The narrator notices the "striking" similarity between the *living* Usher and the *dead* Madeline. Usher, here, reveals that he and Madeline are indeed twins. After this revelation, the lid is screwed down, the "door of iron" is secured, and the two men make their way into the "scarcely less gloomy apartments" of the house (272).

Usher's inner psychological journey becomes more apparent in terms of the house. The narrator reports an "observable change" that comes over "the feature of his [Usher's] mental disorder." Usher roams "from chamber to chamber" with a hurried step. His countenance becomes such a menacing force that his condition begins to engulf and terrify the narrator. Although the narrator continues to rely on reason to control his nervousness at the situation, he feels the overpowering "sentiment of horror" taking hold of his frame. The narrator recognizes the step of

Usher outside on the staircase: “In an instant afterward he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered” (273). It seems that Usher is attempting to affect and enter the psychology of the narrator by presenting a question that shows he has almost completed his own psychological transformation: “And you have not seen it? [...] but stay, you shall.” Of course, Usher is referring to the apparition of his twin sister. The narrator, once again, resorts back to a rational explanation for Usher’s vision. It is nothing more, the narrator explains, than “electrical phenomena” that is not uncommon. After calming Usher, the narrator reads the “Mad Trist” aloud to pass the “terrible night.” The narrator comes close to falling into Usher’s psychological turmoil until he gathers his own senses in the wailing night. While reading the story, the narrator observes Usher sitting with “his face to the door of the chamber” (275). Harsh noises fill the house, and Usher’s agitation begins to mount once more until he comes to a definitive statement: “We have put her living in the tomb.”

At this point, we realize that Usher is beginning to emerge from his inner psychological journey. It begins with the smallest confinement, the coffin. “I heard her first feeble movement in the hollow coffin” (276). As his mind emerges from the vaults and chambers of his new reality and understanding, the final threshold must be crossed to complete the transformation: “*Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!*” Although some critics believe Usher is addressing the narrator as a madman, I believe the term is self-referential, for Usher is about to find that reality will be inverted and that he will find some truth. The scene continues:

[...] but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher [...] For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (276)

Heller correctly points to the purpose of Madeline in the story in terms of Usher's psychology:

Madeline's defining motion in the tale is to pass through doors, all of which are within the House of Usher: the apartment where the narrator first sees her, the lid of her coffin, the door of her temporary tomb, and the door of the narrator's room. Each time she passes through a door, she finds herself in another space that mirrors the condition of Usher. Her universe is Usher's universe, the exitless tunnel unnaturally lit from within. (135)

However, I disagree with one aspect of Heller's argument. He states: "She [Madeline], Usher, and the narrator have been placed alive in the tomb. For them, this is the human condition" (135). The final act, however, supports two ideas that take away from Heller's argument: The narrator comes dangerously close to succumbing to the psychology and reality of Usher but escapes, and Usher's psychological transformation, his acceptance and understanding of evil, and his life are complete with the final act. The narrator states that he escapes the dark labyrinth of Usher's mind: "From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast."

Furthermore, he states, “I found myself crossing the old causeway” (276). The narrator refers to various thresholds to represent his escape from Usher’s psychology. Though the narrator is almost a victim, he does not succumb to the supernatural forces acting on him. He fulfills his purpose as the empirical storyteller, consistently repelling any notion of reality outside his own perception. Though he believes, temporarily, in the scene of Madeline killing her brother, the crumbling house represents the experience as a “fragment” of his imagination, as we see in the last sentence of the story. This supports the narrator’s earlier impulse to deny anything he has experienced outside the norm. For Usher, the collapse of the house represents something more.

At the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Madeline simultaneously represents the death of Usher’s old reality, Usher’s resurrected psychological state, and a tacit supernaturalism that emerge in the story. As a character, she was once alive, as noted by the narrator upon her entombment and his witnessing her lifeless body. Since the narrator almost falls prey to the influence of Usher’s madness, it is only appropriate that he reports his temporary incapability of seeing Madeline as a real entity. As John Hill states in his essay “The Dual Hallucination in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” it is “absurd to imagine that Madeline breaks open her coffin, unfastens the massive iron door, and goes up to the House” (56). Because the narrator consistently rejects the abnormal throughout the story and replaces it with a rational explanation, it makes sense he would agree with Hill. But for Usher, the central focus of the tale, the possible resurrection of Madeline in a tangible body, is

not as important as her return to signal Usher's completed and transformed psychological state. Like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, Poe's Usher must go beyond this understanding to undergo a tragic end because of the inner truth he finds. Unlike Brown, however, the influential force that changes Usher is not due to a direct confrontation with a diabolical force. Instead of the influences being revealed, Poe's tale is concerned with the process of the change, the journey itself into the mind. In Poe, the supernatural elements emerge from Usher's psychological state, whereas in Hawthorne, the psychological state of Goodman Brown is influenced directly by the supernatural.

As J.O. Bailey points out in his essay "What Happens in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" the story contains many tacit *suggestions* of psychic and supernatural influences upon the feelings of the characters. However, the influences are not defined. There are no ghosts or devils (445). Poe uses the mind itself as a supernatural force that has the power to adapt, change, or pervert realities. Usher's mind produces the atmospheric elements surrounding him, and his mind is also responsible for the resurrection of Madeline either as a hallucination or a ghost of the mind. There may be no apparent supernatural entities in the story. Rather, they exist as constructs of the mind, a very realistic and powerful force in Usher's world. This construction of horror, as Poe invents it, reoccurs in Stephen King's *The Shining* in a more overt manner.

***The Shining* and Room 217**

In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King states that all tales of horror can be divided into two groups: “those in which the horror results from an act of free and conscious will—a conscious decision to do evil—and those in which the horror is predestined, coming from the outside like a stroke of lightning.” He continues: “The stories of horror which are psychological [...] almost always revolve around the free-will concept; ‘inside evil’” (71). Thus far, I have used Hawthorne’s dream of horror in “Young Goodman Brown” as a voluntary act of free will—“a conscious decision to do evil.” But also, I have used the tale as an example of the predestined, as the devil comes from outside Brown’s reality to influence his perceptions.

Likewise, I believe that Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” encompasses both of King’s definitions. Usher voluntarily, in an act of free will, subjects himself to psychological horror because he is already predestined to do so; he must reflect the atmosphere around him and vice versa. But King picks up on the “evil inside” concept to show another evolution in the horror story. Brown does not have what King calls “evil inside.” Rather, his evil is an external force that is chosen.

Usher, on the other hand, does have the “evil inside.” If Madeline is, in fact, the most repressed psychological manifestation of Usher’s psyche, her rage and her act of murder at the end either metaphorically or physically express an “evil inside.” King also addresses external evil: “Novels and stories of horror which deal with “outside evil” are often harder to take seriously [...]” (72). Because the dream motif used by Hawthorne to construct horror by way of an “outside evil” is less believable than the realities of the evils within the mind, some argue that psychological horror is

more intense; the origin is almost too believable. In King's novel, Room 217 reflects the intense nature of Poe's psychological horror and the "evil within." Within *The Shining*, the evil moves from an external influence associated with the dream and the bar scene with Grady, to internal evil associated with the Overlook Hotel; like Usher and his house, Jack Torrance's mind is mirrored and reflected by the various rooms of the hotel.

Although *The Shining* contains several explicit allusions to Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," I agree with Magistrale's assessment in his essay "Toward Defining an American Gothic" that the Overlook's real inspiration is the Usher house: it is "replete with its legacy of sin and death as well as its ultimate destruction" (101). The Overlook hotel, indeed, with its dark and twisting corridors, reflects Jack Torrance's psyche and introspective descent into madness and evil. There is a history of psychic residue in the Overlook Hotel: ghosts of various suicides, murderers and victims, and evil acts. This history mirrors not only previous guests but also Jack's history outside the Overlook. A former alcoholic with a past of inadvertent child abuse, Jack slowly succumbs to his own madness and the influences of the Hotel. In fact, as the novel progresses, we can see that the Overlook and Jack are, at times, one in the same. Each supernatural encounter magnifies his isolation within the hotel. Each room, corridor, vault, and hallway represents alternating realities of Jack's mind. By passing through the various thresholds, Jack sinks further into madness and despair, and his encounter in Room 217 reflects this descent.

As Valdine Clemens states in her study *The Return of the Repressed*, “in trying to resist promptings of his unconscious mind by relying increasingly on a rationalistic perspective, Jack only makes himself more vulnerable to possession by the unconscious” (202). The progression of the novel shows that Jack’s unconscious is analogous with the Overlook. The more Jack explores the hotel, the more he uncovers about himself.

Early in the novel, Dick Hallorann warns Danny not to enter Room 217: “[...] well, where a bad thing happened. That was in Room 217, and I want you to promise me you won’t go in there, Danny. Not all winter. Steer right clear” (86). Moments later, we see Hallorann thinking about his initial encounter with Jack:

He had probed the boy’s father and he just didn’t know. It wasn’t like meeting someone who had the shine, or someone who definitely did not. Poking at Danny’s father had been...strange, as if Jack Torrance had something—*something*—that he was hiding. Or something he was holding in so deeply submerged in himself that it was impossible to get to. (87)

Of course, Danny breaks his promise to Hallorann. Danny’s exploration accomplishes two things: One is that Danny, representing childhood innocence and the young Jack, is curious to enter unknown but evil territory; the other is that Danny’s experience should be considered as a real event since he has the scars and bruises to prove the event occurred.

Jack’s entrance into Room 217 later does not invoke the real in this respect. Rather, his experience with the room is saturated with psychological horror. As

Douglas Winter states in *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*, “horror fiction’s focus upon morbidity and mortality suggests a [...] exploitative experience, conjuring subjective fantasies in which our worst fears or darkest desires are brought into tangible existence” (3). This is what Jack accomplishes by exploring the darkest chambers of his mind. He chooses to cross the threshold and accept the reality on the opposing side.

The first physical encounter in *The Shining* with Room 217 is represented by childhood innocence: “Danny was standing outside Room 217 again” (213). We know that Danny is on the verge of crossing this threshold, but we are uncertain what lies on the other side of the threshold. “He *had* wanted to come here. Curiosity [...]” (213). What we are certain of is that the Overlook represents evil, history, and death. Danny, representing a younger Jack, must lose his innocence reflected in the older Jack, before a descent into evil and understanding can change his reality. This resembles Goodman Brown’s journey in the forest to encounter the influence of the devil. However, at the same time, the scene takes place in a concrete setting much like that of Usher’s house. On the verge of the threshold into Room 217, Danny takes out the passkey, unlocks the door, and explores. “Danny pushed the door open [...] He stood in the doorway [...] He stepped further in.” (215-216).

Within the room, other doors are open. King gives us the landscape and atmosphere of the room with reflective imagery: “To his left was a bathroom door, a full-length mirror on it reflecting his own white-faced image. That door was ajar and—He watched his double nod slowly” (216). This double represents his father,

Jack, and, in turn, represents the loss of innocence, as the room (Jack's subconscious) is explored:

Yes, that's where it was, whatever it was. In there. In the bathroom. His double walked forward, as if to escape the glass. It put its hand out, pressed it against his own. Then it fell away at an angle as the bathroom door swung open. He looked in. (216)

Here, King begins to represent the Overlook in a manner reminiscent of the Usher house: "Danny stepped into the bathroom and walked toward the tub dreamily, as if propelled from outside himself." After Danny pulls the shower-curtain back, King invokes the images of the resurrected Madeline:

The woman in the tub had been dead for a long time. She was bloated and purple, her gas-filled belly rising out of the cold, ice-rimmed water like some fleshy island. Her eyes were fixed on Danny's, glassy and huge, like marbles. She was grinning, her purple lips pulled back in a grimace. (216)

The psychological change in Danny is evident: "Danny shrieked. But the sound never escaped his lips; turning inward and inward, it fell down in his darkness like a stone in a well" (216). As the woman emerges from the bath, Danny flees the bathroom in horror, "bolting through the bathroom door," and into the closed door to Room 217. From here, "the door would not open, would not, would not, would not." Danny can neither leave the presence of the room nor, as the innocence of Jack's subconscious mind, escape what he now knows. The "fish-smelling hands closed softly around his throat and he was turned implacably around to stare into that dead and purple face"

(217). Danny, as Jack's subconscious, loses all innocence in the realm of a new reality where evil dominates. It is now up to Jack to explore for himself the evil of Room 217.

As Jack enters the room, we find that "Nothing in the Overlook frightened him. He felt that he and it were *simpatico*" (251). As he crosses the threshold, he dives into his subconscious mind: "He pushed the mirror-backed bathroom door open and stepped through. The light in here was off" (251). After turning on the light, Jack observes the room and relaxes after rejecting any notion of the supernatural in his presence. He journeys further into the room and finally into the bathroom. The shower curtain is pulled, and Jack must confront what lies behind the divide to "expose whatever might be there" (254). In sudden fear, he turns away and attempts to escape as he turns off the light of the room. He "stepped into the hall, and pulled the door shut without looking back" (254). However, he can hear something approaching him. Here, King invokes Madeline's return in Usher's house and mind: "Footsteps approaching the door or only the heartbeat in his ears? [...] If he opened his eyes and saw that doorknob moving he would go mad" (254, 255). The isolated rooms of the Overlook, along with the corridors, vaults, and basement, "mimic Jack Torrance's inward-looking, twisted claustrophobic obsession with his past" (Winter 49). Likewise, the rooms of the Overlook, and the horrors within the rooms, mirror the horrors found in Usher's house. The returning image of evil, the gruesome woman in the bathtub, is as powerfully evil as the resurrected Madeline.

In *Poe's Children*, Tony Magistrale compares the scenes of King's Overlook with Poe's house and the characters within those walls:

King not only shares Poe's psychological orientation toward character, he also inherited the latter's obsessional awareness of a psychology of place. The Overlook Hotel is animated with the same supernatural biology that we find in Poe's "The House of Usher" and the ever-transforming hellish dreamscape [...]. (105)

Magistrale elaborates:

Poe's presence haunts Stephen King's landscape. Whether used to inspire analogous plot and character situations, or employed to establish ultimate contrasts, over the past two and a half decades Poe's work has enriched and shaped King's fictional microcosm. (111)

Both Poe and King produce fiction that is saturated with evil and psychological turmoil, and both authors envelop evil and psychology within the walls of haunted external landscapes. Their characters cross thresholds of place and mind while consuming the powerful forces of evil, looking all the while for a release of subconscious desire. However, King elevates this horror to a greater degree.

Initially, Jack attempts to obstruct and block this descent and journey into his subconscious through exploring the Overlook. However, he eventually succumbs, like Usher, to the evil reality of the engulfing atmosphere. It is not a coincidence that later Jack smashes in his own bathroom door with a mallet in search of Wendy. His madness comes full circle as the forces around him grow stronger. Likewise, the

destruction of the Overlook, along with Jack, echoes the downfall of Usher and his house. Jack, however, finds a way to harness the psychological horrors of his mind and his environment to utilize his evil impulses and escape the fate of Roderick. The evil manifestation of the woman in the bathtub does not destroy Jack like Madeline destroys Usher, psychologically or physically. King, rather, at this point, propels and elevates Jack's psychological descent into evil beyond Usher's journey. Murder is the next horror of Jack's mind.

CHAPTER III

“They’re seen only across, as it were, and beyond—in strange places and on high places, the top of towers, the roof of houses, the outside of windows, the further edge of pools; but there’s a deep design, on either side, to shorten the distance and overcome the obstacle: so the success of the tempter is only a question of time”

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“MY DESIGNED HORROR”: Thresholds in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*

In Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the horror of the tale is fairly transparent. We see, with some clarity, the threat of change that burgeons deep within his psyche. The threat envelops the loss of a familiar world that is replaced with isolation, disintegration, alienation, and corruption. With Hawthorne, the introduction and acceptance of evil in the realm of the imagination are the gateways to finding the true essence of the human spirit. Evil must exist. Evil inevitably changes all foundations of reality. Hawthorne presents evil as an external supernatural power acting on the morality and isolation of the individual.

In “Young Goodman Brown,” this influence occurs within a dream landscape, a dream vision, where the Devil’s suggestive and powerful force dominates. This representation of horror, though effective, is simple. One realm represents the false perception of goodness and truth. The other realm represents truth based on the acceptance and influence of evil. Goodman Brown simply crosses the threshold and begins his journey into the evils of the psyche.

In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the threshold is a more complicated device. Poe's complexity lies within the analogous nature of his characters with the architecture around them. Numerous boundaries are explored, and many thresholds are crossed. Within the Usher house, Roderick encounters death, psychological torment, and his own descent into madness and acceptance of evil. The evil, however, is internal. Unlike Hawthorne's Brown, who is influenced by external evil before truth is revealed, Usher's dilemma begins and ends within his own mind. This change is mirrored and reflected by the chambers, vaults, and rooms around him, not to mention the entombment of Madeline and the confinement of her coffin. The depths of Usher's mind are congruent with the thresholds of Usher's house. The acceptance of evil, the resurrection of Madeline, and, in turn, Usher's own altered psyche, emerge to create a pulse of horror. Through this form of horror, Poe illustrates the depths and complexities of the mind in terms of the tangible, realistic settings. Usher does not fear what lies behind the closed doors of his mind. Rather, he embraces those fears. The result: his structured psyche crumbles down and his perception of reality is shattered.

Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw*, what James calls "my designed horror," exhibits many of the threshold images found in Hawthorne and Poe's fiction. Richard Dilworth Rust states that, in *The Turn of the Screw*, "the threshold is a place or condition of great power, but it also can be the locus of the horrible. It is the meeting ground for waking and dreaming, sanity and insanity, rationality and irrationality" (444). The psychological characterization of the governess is often analogous with various thresholds at Bly, from doors to rooms to windows; however,

many critics fail to address this issue. By observing the psychology and actions of the governess in regards to the thresholds around her, a reading of the story and a characterization of the governess surfaces.

The Turn of the Screw has traditionally taken on two readings; one is that the governess actually sees ghosts and attempts to protect the children from the evil around them; the other is that the governess is a victim of her own neurosis and she plays out her psychological dementia on other characters around her. These two readings have spawned a generation of various critical arguments surrounding the characterization of the governess and James's intentions for the narrative. As Terry Heller points out in his study *The Turn of the Screw: Bewildered Vision*, "the history of criticism in *The Turn of the Screw* suggests that neither the supernatural or the psychoanalytic interpretation is ultimately satisfactory" (24). According to many, the tale is one of true ambiguity because it does not allow a privileged reading either way.

However, a third reading of the story has emerged within the past few years: *The Turn of the Screw* is simultaneously a psychological study and a ghost story. This is the position I will take in dealing with the extraordinary power of the story. Because James's masterful story represents both readings simultaneously, the ambiguity becomes even more complex and difficult to analyze. Because it is situated in the real and imaginary, in psychology and the supernatural, many have surveyed and critiqued the story in terms of Tzvetan Todorov's classification of the "fantastic." In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov views *The Turn of the Screw* as a "pure fantastic" story because it is one that *hesitates* between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events that take place in what

appears to be a natural world. This hesitation is not resolved toward either a natural or supernatural cause but rather sustained through the end of the text. Because, according to Todorov, we cannot “determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere which surrounds her” (43).

Of course, Todorov’s idea of the fantastic in a text is concerned with how readers react and interpret a story instead of the elements of the story that provide the hesitation. Because the elements of the story that provide such a hesitation to the reader are often overlooked, many critics, such as Christine Brooke-Rose, argue neither for the ghosts nor the hallucinations of the governess. Rather, according to Brooke-Rose, there is no “word” or “incident” in the story that cannot be read or interpreted both ways (513).

But if we look closely at the clues given to us by James in *The Turn of the Screw*, mainly the numerous images of the threshold, a reading does emerge that includes both the supernatural and the psychological. Although there is an initial hesitation between what may be real and what may be imaginary in the mind of the governess, a close reading of the threshold imagery in the story moves one out of hesitation to a progressive analysis, possibly definite, of the governess’s psychological state. And, in the tradition of Hawthorne, Poe, and horror, James’s threshold imagery serves to invite or invoke evil, danger, and tragedy. James’s thresholds also create ambiguity and duality in character and setting, psychology and landscape.

This reading of *The Turn of the Screw* focuses on the numerous images of the threshold in the story and how the characters are defined by their relationships to these images. In particular, this reading reflects the governess's descent into madness and how it progresses throughout the story in terms of the thresholds she encounters: doors, rooms, and more significantly, windows. James also extends these images to characterize the children, Miles and Flora. Although their psychology and characterization are not strictly limited or subject to the threshold, their relationships to particular thresholds give clues to the evolving psychology of the governess. Like Goodman Brown's descent into the forest and Usher's descent into the dark corners of his mind, the governess's psychological descent is reflected by these encounters.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the enticing force of external evil, the ghosts of Quint and Jessel, influences the governess to continue on her path of self-discovery and purpose. Her self-discovery entails the acceptance of evil and the reality of the supernatural; her purpose entails that she must destroy to save. The governess, consumed by her own self-discovery and purpose, is the cancer of the family dynamic wherein James adds his own form of horror. And, as I will show, James uses the threshold to exhibit the loss of innocence and benevolent purity through the children. This adds to the magnitude of madness in the governess and the overall effect of horror in the tale.

The Governess, the Children, and the Threshold

The introduction of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is paralleled by numerous descriptions of various thresholds and characters around those thresholds. Her first encounter and description of Mrs. Grose and Flora is succinct. Soon after, however, the description of atmosphere around her is more impressive and important.

Though Flora is the “most beautiful child” the governess has ever seen, the governess is quick to reflect on the richness of her own quarters and neglect the child:

The large impressive room, one of the best things in the house, the great state bed, as I almost felt it, the figured full draperies, the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot, all struck me—like the wonderful appeal of my small charge. (28-29)

This initial scene constructs the analogous nature of the governess, the house, and the children that emerge throughout the rest of the story. It is not a coincidence that the “long glasses,” or mirrors of the room, are responsible for giving the governess the first view of herself as a complete person.

Since the grandiose room is paralleled with the governess and juxtaposed against Flora, the initial impression of the governess is one who is overtaken by her surroundings; they, in a sense, are all one and the same; they reflect each other. References to the architecture and reflection continue and progress into a form of introspection on behalf of the governess. The governess reverts back to the “radiant image” of Flora and the “restlessness” she feels. She wanders about her room “to take in the whole picture and prospect; to watch from [her] open window.” In this observation of the scene around her, the governess feels that she may have heard the cry of a child. This is immediately connected with the threshold to her room. She feels she hears another cry: “[...] there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep” (29). This image immediately stirs parallels with Madeline upon the threshold in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Before the governess is engulfed with these “fancies” of her surroundings and her perception of them, she reverts back to the job at hand, being a governess. James constructs the remainder of the novella around these juxtaposed elements. If we look carefully to the governess’s characterization in terms of the atmosphere or architecture around her, along with her observation of the children and ghosts within this atmosphere and architecture, each threshold dictates and reflects not only her own psychology but also its progressive decay and acceptance of evil.

Flora

As the governess focuses back on the purpose of her job at Bly and on Flora, she intends to “win the child into the sense” of knowing her. She spends the day with Flora “out of doors.” The governess also arranges that it is Flora who “shows” her the place, “step by step and room by room and secret by secret [...]” As the governess gains the friendship of the child, she continues describing their friendship and tour in terms of various thresholds. Flora, in her youthful energy, leads the governess through “empty chambers and dull corridors, on crooked staircases” to “the summit of an old machicolated square tower” which makes her dizzy. Flora, the governess’s “little conductress,” dances before her “round corners and pattered down passages.” This journey into the atmosphere and architecture of Bly is an overwhelming experience for the governess. She, here, is “strangely at the helm” (31). The governess, it seems, has difficulty assimilating with her new environment. On one hand, she perceives aesthetic beauty that ignites her imagination of an important and respectful position. On the other hand, the children detract from her lofty imagination. After all, she is at Bly for one reason only: to serve them.

Miles

The innocence and beauty of Flora are directly projected onto Miles before the governess ever meets him. However, Miles's innocence is marred by his trouble at school. The possibility of his delinquency separates Miles from Flora, though his introduction to the governess also involves threshold imagery:

I was a little late upon the scene of his arrival, and I felt, as he stood wistfully looking out for me before the door of the inn at which the coach had put him down, that I had seen him on the instant, without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister. (35)

The distinction between Miles and Flora, however, takes on new importance in observing the governess if we view them by their initial introductions and the thresholds they are associated with. Although Flora guides the governess through various thresholds of Bly, they both leave the confines of Bly for the outdoors. Miles, on the other hand, is associated with a "horrible letter" that is locked up in a drawer in the governess's room. Of course, the letter denotes his lack of purity and innocence, and the governess *locks* away this possibility. This denial ushers in the first evidence that the mind of the governess may be tainted as well.

As the story progresses after the introduction of Miles, the governess encounters strange visitors. Alone on a afternoon stroll and coming upon the house, the governess witnesses what she refers to as a man standing on the tower observing her: "What arrested me on the spot [...] was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real" (37). From here, the governess begins to question her own sanity.

Her query is whether or not the whole time there is a person residing in the house of whom she is ignorant. The next question: “Was there a secret at Bly?” (39). Then James gives us another clue: “[W]hen I re-entered the house darkness had quite closed in” (40). Darkness continues to envelop the psychology of the governess, and the descent into madness is mirrored in the governess’s choice to confine herself in her room. She states that she has to shut herself up to think: “I dipped into my room and locked the door” to think (40). Here that the governess makes “constant fresh discoveries” about the nature of the apparition. And from here, the governess becomes cognizant of the children again, especially Miles.

The Children and the Window: The Choice

The first important scene with the children together takes place on a Sunday. Sitting at tea with the children, the governess witnesses a horrific event:

The day was grey enough, but the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold, not only to recognize, on a chair near the wide window, then closed, the articles I wanted, but to become aware of a person on the other side of the window looking straight in. One step into the room had sufficed; my vision was instantaneous; it was all there. The person looking straight in was the person who had already appeared to me. He appeared thus again with I won’t say greater distinctness, for that was impossible, but with a nearness that represented a forward stride in our intercourse [...].

[...] his face was close to the glass [...] he remained but a few seconds—long enough to convince me he also saw and recognized; but it was as if I had been

looking at him for years and had known him always [...] his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room, was as deep and hard as then [...] he had come for some one else. (42-43)

This knowledge, “knowledge in the form of dread,” drives the governess to bound “straight out of the door again.” Soon after, the governess applies her own face to the pane and looks into the room as the figure had previously done, scaring Mrs. Grose.

As we have earlier seen, the governess is exposed to mirrors that reflect her appearance. In fact, the mirror in her room gives her the first complete view she has of herself. The window, however, is the perfect threshold to mirror not only Flora and Miles but also the psychological choice the governess makes. On one hand, the governess can look through the transparent glass to the outside of the house and, in turn, identify with the innocence of Flora. Or, on the other hand, she can see a reflection in the window that projects an image back inside the house and, in turn, mirrors the secret of guilt and evil in Miles and his letter that is “locked” away in the governess’s room.

The governess, as we know, chooses the latter and follows her subconscious descent into madness. Not only does she see a reflection, she reenacts what she has witnessed, further giving evidence that she is succumbing to the influences of her mind. The governess reports this horror to Mrs. Grose. She responds with a question: “Then how did he get in?” The governess responds with her own question: “How did he get out?” (46). The appearance of the figure in the window reflects the mentality of the governess and, in turn, she uses this power to manipulate Mrs. Grose into stating the appearance was not only a former employer at Bly, but also a dead one at

that. Mrs. Grose, in her own agitation and susceptibility to the governess, offers the only possible explanation she can deduce: it is Quint; he has returned from the dead. This reinforces the governess's perception of the event, and from here on, the apparitions are perceived by her as real and influential. This leads the governess "out of the inner chamber" of her dread (48). But the inner chambers of her mind are already corrupted.

Although she does not identify herself as the apparition, as the reflection called "Quint," she knows (possibly subconsciously) that the "man" wants "to appear to them" (49). But the governess also believes that she can "keep it at bay." In this situation, the governess believes that she, the children, and Mrs. Grose are "united" in their common danger. But as the governess is compelled to journey into the depths of her own mind, Quint will inevitably reappear at the window, reemerging to fulfill all subconscious desires of the governess and her own evils.

Separation: "There was no ambiguity in anything."

The governess's choice to see the reflection of Quint in the window establishes three things: first, she accepts (and chooses to see) the supernatural as an evil presence that has intention to harm the children; second, this excuse not only shadows her own intentions but also serves as a mirror to her own purpose; and third, from here on, the governess consciously does not see "ambiguity" under any circumstance. Because Douglas, the frame narrator of the governess's story, uses her account as an authorized version of the events that took place at Bly, we must also rely on the governess as a narrator to accurately describe her experiences. Her mentality is exposed to reveal an unnerving, maddening paranoia in which she truly

believes, consciously, her duty to protect the children will be compromised by outside forces. If we read the governess in terms of the children, their association with thresholds, and the governess's choice in the window, we know she is slipping into the darker corners of her mind. She sees only one explanation to the events around her, the supernatural, but James gives us a reason to doubt her moral vision: the duality of her personality.

Flora is identified with the *conscious* paranoia of the governess. Miles is identified with the *subconscious* intent of the governess. And, in turn, this reflects the dual nature of the governess. This nature is displayed once the children are separated once again.

Outside, with Flora, the governess sees another "positive" apparition standing across from the lake. Since she consciously sees no ambiguity in anything, a ghost is the only possibly explanation. This woman is a "figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil; a woman in black, pale and dreadful" (54). Of course, we also have another reflective device, the lake, that projects the image of the governess to the other side. She once again sees herself and, more importantly, Flora, apparently, does not.

The governess, however, believes that Flora sees the apparition as well, and this manifests into further conscious agony: "They *know*—it's too monstrous: they know, they know." But the governess is tormented because Flora will not speak of it: "Not a word—that's the horror" (54). Once again, the governess suggests to Mrs. Grose the apparition was her "predecessor." Mrs. Grose acquiesces upon the suggestion and the governess, once again, is supported in her argument. Mrs. Grose,

in turn, is shown twice to be a vehicle of reinforcement to the conscious psyche of the governess. Miss Jessel, it is confirmed, the “horror of horrors,” is now another personality of the governess. Soon after, out of doors with Flora and consciously aware, the governess succumbs to the explanation of all events as supernatural. She truly believes she now has seen two ghosts, and from this authoritative side of her personality, we may agree with her.

Subconsciously, Miles presents a different and opposing personality. Keeping in mind the relationship of the governess to Miles in terms of his thresholds and the “locked” drawer of marred innocence, we eventually see the subconscious personality of the governess begin to dominate the narrative. After Mrs. Grose explains the friendship and history of Quint and Miles, more threshold imagery reappears concerning the two. And, of course, they are within the confines of Bly. While reading Fielding’s *Amelia*, the governess looks “hard at the door of her room,” and feels something “astir” within the house. The governess goes “straight out of the room and, from the passage, on which [her] light made little impression, noiselessly closed and locked the door” (65).

Like Goodman Brown and Usher, the governess begins her journey and descent into the subconscious mind through supernatural exploration: “I can say now neither what determined nor what guided me, but I went straight along the lobby, holding my candle high, till I came within sight of the tall window that presided over the great turn of the staircase.” From here, the governess’s candle goes out by the “uncovered window” and she encounters Quint once again: “He knew me as well as I knew him [...] we faced each other with our common intensity [...] there was nothing

in me unable to meet and measure him” (65). She continues: “the thing was as human and hideous as a real interview: hideous just because it *was* human, as human as to have met alone, in the small hours, in a sleeping house, some enemy, some adventurer, some criminal” (66). We now see that Miss Jessel, the conscious manifestation of the governess, is an apparition. Quint, the subconscious side of the governess, was human.

After the figure disappears, the governess, once again, returns to her room. The governess makes out by candlelight that Flora (her conscious state) was not present. Her bed is empty. Flora states: “You naughty: where *have* you been?” The governess falls into her chair: “I remember closing my eyes an instant, yielding consciously [...] ‘You were looking for me out of the window? [...] You thought I might be walking in the grounds?’” (67). This brief conscious epiphany, again, correlates Flora with looking *out* of the window, *outside* of Bly. When Flora responds that she was not looking outside for her, the governess closes her eyes again and briefly thinks of seizing the child: “Why not break out at her on the spot and have it all over?—give it to her straight in her lovely little lighted face?” (67). The subconscious mind of the governess, now, threatens the conscious state. However, the governess does not act on this thought. Rather, Flora answers the governess: “[I] thought you might come back, you dear, and that you *have*!” (68).

The governess then briefly reverts back to her conscious state. When Flora disappears once more, the governess believes that she sees the figure of Miss Jessel at the bottom of the staircase: “I wondered whether, if instead of being above I had been below.” If she is identifying herself with Miss Jessel, and, in turn, the conscious

innocence of Flora, the governess is reverting back to a moment of benevolence, especially since the sighting occurs *within* the walls of Bly. This identification is also transferred to her encounter with Flora who is sitting on the windowsill looking out. The governess believes Flora also sees the apparition, and then the threshold imagery is invoked:

She was face to face with the apparition we had met at the lake, and could now communicate with it as she had not then been able to do. What I, on my side, had to care for was, without disturbing her, to reach, from the corridor, some other window turned to the same quarter. I got to the door without her hearing me; I got out of it, closed it and listened, from the other side. (69)

This experience of the governess is evidence that she is fighting the evil forces of her subconscious mind with a conscious choice, a choice to identify with Flora and look outside the window. However, James next gives us the most startling image situated around the threshold leading to Miles, and to the terror of the governess's mind:

While I stood in the passage, I had my eyes on her brother's door, which was but ten steps off and which, indescribably, produced in me a renewal of the strange impulse that I lately spoke of as my temptation. What if I should go straight in and march to *his* window?—what if by risking to his boyish bewilderment a revelation of my motive, I should throw across the rest of the mystery the long halter of my boldness? This thought held me sufficiently to make me cross to his threshold and pause again [...] I uncovered the glass without a sound and, applying my face to the pane, was able, the darkness

without being much less than within, to see that I commanded the right direction. Then I saw something more. (69)

What the governess sees *outside* of Bly, through the window, invading the conscious innocence of the governess, is little Miles.

The Mad Governess and the “Evil” Ghosts

The governess, in the remainder of the novella, is dominated by one state: her emerging subconscious evil mind. Transformed by the acceptance of personal evil within, the governess can project evil outside her own mind to the surrounding atmosphere. The apparitions, now, emerge as the focal point of the story. Not only do we have a deranged governess at work in the story, but also we have the possibility of actual ghosts. Here, James blends the psychological with the supernatural, and the end of the novella culminates in the merger of the two.

After the governess sides with the evil subconscious side of her mentality, James gives us quick glances at further threshold imagery concerning ghosts, the return of the dead, and horror: “the doors were indiscreetly opened”; “forbidden ground”; “return of the dead” (76). These images are parallel with a reminiscing governess who seems at peace with her situation and position at Bly: the caretaker for Miles and Flora.

However, the next vision the governess has of an apparition does not involve mirrors or reflection. The church scene calls into question the further correlation of the governess with thresholds that reflect her own psychological states. Miles asks: “Why in the world [...] did you desert us at the very door?” (84). This is a clue that the governess no longer finds solace in the innocence or evil of the children since her

characterization previously has been determined. She has chosen evil. The next encounter the governess has with an apparition involves a threshold but one without reflection or the presence of the children. At Bly, the governess ascends the staircase, opens the door, and encounters her “vile predecessor.” The governess, feeling she is the intruder, yells out: “You terrible miserable woman!” She is standing “by the open door,” and soon after, “there was nothing in the room the next minute” (85). Here, we have nothing to dispute the possibility that the governess does, indeed, encounter a ghost. This vision is not reflected in any way, and there are no children to project onto her vision as a possible explanation the occurrence.

The possibility of ghosts at Bly does not detract from the governess’s madness but, rather, adds to the overall effect of horror in the story. Though the governess descends into the dark corners of her own mind, she also seeks out protection from the apparitions. Flora, the mark of innocence, is sought by the governess as a form of protection from the “evil” ghosts. Since Flora cannot be found—she is outside of the house—the governess reverts to searching the rooms of Bly for her. In this search, the governess looks to protect her own evil purposes from what she considers a threat of supernatural evil. She attempts to accomplish this by finding Flora and making her *see* the apparition (Miss Jessel) for herself to justify her own nascent fear. However, both Mrs. Grose and Flora reject the vision so very apparent to the governess: “I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have” (99).

Soon after, Flora becomes ill and Mrs. Grose takes her from Bly, leaving the governess with her own inner psychological madness and new found paranoia resulting from the possibility of the supernatural. She must fulfill her own evil ends

while protecting herself from the evil apparitions that appear threatening to her own cause. This duality of evil is an overwhelming and understated paradox in *The Turn of the Screw*. Clearly, one of the most disturbing issues in James's story is the death of Miles at the hands of the one who is supposed to protect and instruct him. Caught in a deceptive web of evil, Miles is used to create madness.

“Well—so we're alone”: The Conclusion

The conclusion to *The Turn of the Screw* has generated some of the most elaborate and creative analysis of literary criticism. Most critics point to Miles as the central character in the story because of his tragic death: “Little Miles is dead [...] exhausted by the ordeal [...], too corrupted to live without evil” (Fagin 201); “Miles's soul is purged by confession [...] worn out by the struggle between good and evil (Liddell 141); “the experience—the fright, the horror, the recognition of evil—is too much for Miles” (Hoffman 104-105); “Douglas is Miles [...]. Miles did not die at all at the close” (Rubin 318).

However, some argue that the governess and her actions are the most significant parts to consider in the conclusion: “She kills Miles on the spot, with mingled excitement, fright, rage, and despair” (Sheppard 210); “The governess sees Quint again at the window and desperately attempts to force Miles to enter her hallucination” (Milne 298-299). Diane Hoeveler argues that “the face in the window can also be read as an image of one form that narcissism can take. In her construction of Quint the governess sees herself because she reads in her own interests the children” (358).

By reading *The Turn of the Screw* in terms of the various thresholds, I also agree that the governess is the focal point of the story and the conclusion. However, the apparition Quint does contribute to her cause. The governess, alone with Miles, already feels a “perverse horror” about what she was doing as well as her future intentions: “To do it *any* way was an act of violence, for what did it consist of but the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature” (112). The governess begins to enact her plan: to eliminate the marred innocence of her subconscious in the form of Miles, to fully accept the reality of evil, and to blame her actions on the supernatural, thereby relieving herself from culpability. She, in turn, protects her own evil nature from what she considers an outside evil force.

Because she has succumbed to the inner evils of her subconscious, she must protect this reality from the external evils around her. The elimination of Miles is the only solution. She uses him as a vehicle to achieve her sinister means. As she grabs Miles, she states that she has a “fierce split” of her attention. She positions Miles with his back to the window as she sees Quint coming to it: “from outside, he had reached the window, and then I knew that, close to the glass and glaring through it, he offered once more to the room his white face of damnation” (112). Here, Quint is both the supernatural *and* the reflection the governess observes in the window. Both merge, and the distinction between the two is not as important as the “neutral territory” on which they merge: the threshold of the window that is both transparent and reflective: “It came to me in the very horror of the immediate presence that the act would be, seeing and facing what I saw and faced, to keep the boy himself unaware”; “the thing at the window and saw it shift and move its posture” (113).

Though the “thing” disappears, it reappears once more to reinforce the governess’s plan of action: “and that movement made me [...] spring straight upon him.” She continues: “It’s there, the coward horror, there for the last time!” (116). “Where?” Miles responds. Miles sees nothing but the quiet day as he hurls around, falling into the grasp of the governess, and into the suffocating plan of the murder, with a “passion.” The governess describes the scene: “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (116). “We” is usually taken to mean the governess and Miles, but it also gives a clue to the real existence of Quint as an apparition. The horror lies not in the death of Miles, but in the companionship of the deranged evil governess and Quint. The “we” entails that Quint, the “Devil” according to Miles, has formed a union with the governess, for they share the fulfillment of evil and terror.

And, as we know, the governess lives to tell her tale. She escapes the fate of Goodman Brown and Usher. Her acceptance of inner evil, her own mind, and external evil, the supernatural, destroys all other forms of innocence and benevolence. But this is the truth that the governess “unlocks” to fulfill her purpose. This positions *The Turn of the Screw* as one of the most chilling horror stories known. Not only does it follow the psychological descent into evil found in Hawthorne and Poe through threshold imagery, it also incorporates a great possibility of the supernatural as an evil force. More important, however, James creates a greater magnitude of horror by weaving children into the plot. This, inevitably, has become another powerful force in contemporary horror.

The Child of Horror: Transcending the Threshold

In his essay “Inherited Haunts: Stephen King’s Terrible Children,” Magistrale quotes Stephen King’s response to the question of what terrified the author the most: “Opening the door of my children’s bedroom and finding one of them dead” (43). This fear has been transferred to King’s fiction time and time again. As an author who wants to “hold a reader spellbound for a little while,” King’s use of children in the dynamic of horror certainly compels his readers to stay fixated on the story. Many of King’s children characters are endowed with special powerful gifts. *Firestarter*, *Carrie*, and *The Shining* are a few examples that exhibit juvenile supernatural characters. Because readers have the ability to become attached to children in horror stories, especially for their safety, King effectively adapts *Turn of the Screw*-like children into his own plots and scenes.

Magistrale believes that the adults in King’s fiction also function, in many ways, as children: “they explore places where they have no business going, their behavior is often immature and without conscience” (44). Like *The Turn of the Screw*, King’s *The Shining* exhibits evil as a force that can malign or pervert innocence. If we look to the family dynamic in *The Shining* and compare it to the relationships in *The Turn of the Screw*, we see that the interactions of adults with children, along with the essence of evil, create complex readings. Magistrale points to these interactions: King’s young protagonists “are forced to pay for their fathers’ sins of curiosity; their innocence is the price for an intimate examination of evil” (45).

Like Miles in *The Turn of the Screw*, Danny Torrance must also pay for the evils of the adults at the Overlook, most notably Jack, his father, and the ghost of the

murderer, Grady, the former caretaker and father of two. Like *The Turn of the Screw* and its characters, the governess and Quint, *The Shining* merges the inner psychological evils of Jack with the external supernatural evils of Grady and the hotel to present a pure form of horror. This horror then is associated with the child, Danny.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Danny's curiosity and exploration of the Overlook's rooms mirrors Jack's descent into madness and his loss of innocence. Like the governess, Jack eradicates the innocent side of his personality to grasp fully the power of evil; he must destroy Danny and all that oppose his destructive impulse. This is what Jack desires; this is what Grady and the Overlook thrive on.

But King introduces another aspect in his horror that transcends the boundaries of the threshold. Here, goodness prevails and the child is spared. The gift of the "shine," or Danny's telepathy, opens new doors in the chambers of the mind. Tony, his imaginary friend who gives him the ability to shine, serves as manifestation of foresight and knowledge to defeat evil. Tony can transcend the boundaries of the threshold, wavering from the inner consciousness of Danny to the realm of external evils represented by his father and the Overlook. Though Danny inherits this gift from his father, Jack rejects the power as a sign of madness. King uses this division not only to exaggerate a child's perspective on the world, but also to allow a deeper, innocent exploration into the horrors of evil. As King once stated, "You must have a child's ability to believe in everything." But for Danny, this belief becomes tangible. In *The Shining*, the distortion of linear time, the shifting of reality, and the animation of immobile objects are presented as Danny would see them, then they are magnified and saturated with evil to represent not a dream, but horror.

Early on, Tony shows Danny a word: Redrum. Later, Redrum appears in a mirror and is read backwards: Murder. The image of the mirror, or reflective threshold, is apparent; the ability of Danny to transcend the threshold, but use it as a neutral territory between reality and his imagination, becomes his only weapon against the evil realms surrounding him. Danny tells Hallorann, “I dream when I’m awake” (82). Unlike Miles in *The Turn of the Screw*, Danny has the ability to see and foresee apparitions and the evil around him, and he does not become the victim of a deranged adult, but rather he overcomes what seems unconquerable: the merger of psychological evil with supernatural evil.

In a conversation with his mother, Danny explains Tony: “Thinking real hard. And...I saw Tony way down in the mirror. He said he had to show me again.” Wendy, his mother, responds: “You mean he was behind you?” Danny answers: “No, he was in the mirror [...] Way down deep. And then I went through the mirror. The next thing I remember Daddy was shaking me and I thought I was being bad again” (126). This, of course, foreshadows the end of the novel. Jack is *locked* up in the pantry of the kitchen, and, in turn, locked within his own madness. A variety of destructive thoughts, family violence, and rage fill Jack’s mind. Danny, Jack’s conscience and symbol of marred innocence, is on the outside, roaming the halls of the Overlook. Evil is subdued and good is free.

But like Danny and his shine, Jack has an opposing shine, one that seems as powerful. It also allows him to transcend barriers and thresholds that normally limit or imprison his mobility. Grady’s voice becomes audible to Jack’s mind: “You let them lock you in? [...] Oh dear. A woman half your size and a little boy? [...] I—and

the others—have really come to believe that your heart is not in this, sir. That you haven't the...the belly for it" (383). Jack screams emphatically back across the room: "I do! [...] I do, I swear it!" Grady responds, "You would bring us your son?" After Jack pleads for help and agrees to Grady's terms, the bolted door is unlocked from the outside, and the supernatural intervenes. Jack steps out of the door, without any sign of Grady, into the frozen world around him: "Then a voice, much deeper and much more powerful than Grady's, spoke from somewhere, everywhere...from inside him. (Keep your promise, Mr. Torrance)" (384).

Jack's freedom symbolizes two opposing forces within the walls of the Overlook, or his own mind. On one side, Danny, his conscience, is desperately trying to escape the evils of the Overlook. On the other side, Jack, the manifestation of subconscious evils and supernatural forces, is desperately attempting to eliminate the conscious, benevolent side of his mind. Like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Jack now is in a league with the supernatural apparitions to achieve his own purpose. They are one and the same, and the atmosphere of the hotel reflects his state of mind: "The lobby was dark and full of shadows"; "The ballroom doors were thrown wide, only blackness spilling out" (396). Jack attacks Wendy and pursues her through the passageways of the Overlook until she reaches the bedroom and locks herself in. Jack screams: "Don't you shut that door! Goddamn you, don't you dare shut it!" (408). He smashes through the door and unlocks the forbidden chambers of his mind. Wendy then flees to the bathroom and locks the door. As she penetrates the rooms of the Overlook, they become more constricting as they mirror the claustrophobic and suffocating evils of Jack's mind (and Usher's mind).

After Jack violently smashes in the door, Wendy slices his hand with a razor blade, and he retreats then disappears. In a sense, Wendy is protecting the last sacred and innocent corner of Jack's mind, one that she will not allow him destroy completely. Wendy, at this time, represents the last parental instinct of protection in Jack's mind. Like the governess, we expect Jack to use this instinct to protect Danny from the supernatural evils that permeate the hotel, but we are horror stricken to find this instinct, as well, has been perverted. Jack's paternal instincts of protecting Danny are used as an excuse for his own purpose. We see repeatedly throughout the novel Jack's thoughts: *Come take your medicine!* The medicine, the cure, is murder, not protection. The elimination of Wendy and Danny would leave Jack alone, isolated within the walls of the Overlook, his own mind, and his own evil. However, we know Danny and Wendy escape, the Overlook is destroyed, and Jack's evil is defeated.

Like Goodman Brown, Danny crosses over the threshold separating childish innocence from adult guilt and evil. He understands this new knowledge of evil as the dominant force in reality: "He retreated down the main corridor, and then took one of the offshoots, his feet whispering on the nap of the carpet. Locked doors frowned down on him as they had done in the dreams, the visions, only now he was in the world of real things, where the game was played for keeps" (422). As he flees, once more we think of Danny's experience: "Dream and reality had joined together without a seam" (426). And then, Danny has a final revelation:

Danny stood without moving. There was no place he could run where the

Overlook was not. He recognized it suddenly, fully, painlessly. For the first time in his life he had an adult thought, an adult feeling, the essence of his experience in this bad place—as sorrowful distillation: (*Mommy and Daddy can't help me and I'm alone*). (429)

Magistrale feels that King's children form the moral centers of his novels, and “from them all other actions seem to radiate. In King's fiction, children embody the full spectrum of human experience, they are identified with the universal principles of ethical extremes” (44). What is more horrific than a child who is used for evil purposes? It is apparent that James constructed his “designed horror” around this theme. Likewise, King follows suit as he weaves his own Miles-like child into the arena of evil to drive the narrative and horror of the story. Though King gives us a glimpse at a hopeful ending, Danny's escape, he is still a victim. He loses a father, his innocence, and his childhood. King makes us think, for one moment, that Danny's ability to shine will, someday, be trapped within the memories of the Overlook.

CHAPTER IV

***THE SHINING:* Emerging From the Neutral Territory**

In Stephen King's fiction, one finds all the conventions and prescriptions of horror. King's contemporary settings, plots, characterizations, and themes set the bar for the genre, and if one author can be responsible for the reoccurring and dominant motifs of horror, King is that author. As James Egan states, King "stresses the primordial power and pervasiveness of the unknown, the irrationality and unpredictability of the human psyche, and the moral reality of good and evil" (64). King questions the empirical and psychological paradigms that underlie contemporary society and, in turn, he explores the nature of reality.

Reality in King's fiction is a masterful blend of everyday life with an ever-expanding world of the unknown invading its territory. Everyday life, however, for King, involves the secrets of the mind and pervasive influence of evil coming to an explosive head. King's characters unlock the chambers and vaults of their minds to journey to the darkest corners of thought. The supernatural supplants the natural and becomes a part of reality, escaping the imaginary realms of doubt. King's contemporary horror fiction, in general, displays the neutral territory as a mirage.

Through the evolution of the American horror tale, the divisions of the real

and the imaginary have become more and more blurred, the distinction effaced. King's fiction, relying on the grand design of horror established by his predecessors, emerges from the neutral territories of our minds and our culture. Madness is no longer an abnormality. Children are no longer innocent. Evil is a viable conquering force that completes the duality of human existence. It often reveals the truth of our realities, our motives, and our purpose. What was once the confines of safety, the home, is now a reflection and manifestation of mental disorders. We explore the chambers of our minds and cross thresholds into tabooed realms and landscapes.

King weaves the extraordinary into the ordinary scenario...and then he expects us to understand a world based on paranormal events. More often than not, King establishes this world with plausible settings and characters. King's horror, unlike any other, develops psychological horror to the point of reflection, for readers can infer a glimpse of themselves in his characters. The affinity readers have with characters in King's fiction is uncanny. We also envision ourselves in his settings: the Overlook—its gallant walls filled with history, dictating our madness through isolation and a belief in what lies on the other side of consciousness, our doors and outlets to another life. As King states in *Danse Macabre*, “the good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of [...]” (18).

King's “secret door[s],” or subconscious chambers of the mind, are symbolic of the potential to unlocking the destructive forces of evil. The threshold in King's fiction, the vehicle for illustrating this concept, echoes the imagery used by Hawthorne, Poe, and James to establish various facets of horror. Looking back to the

previous chapters and authors, the threshold imagery progressively becomes more complex and difficult to analyze. Moving from Hawthorne's dream of horror, to Poe's psychological horror, to James's horror tale constructed from both the supernatural and the psychological, we arrive at the horror novel, King's *The Shining*, which illustrates each aspect. Moving from the short story, to the novella, and finally to the novel, we see that threshold imagery is still a pervasive force in the horror tale for constructing setting, and more important, character psychology. The journey across King's threshold, however, is not a slow and gradual one; rather, he allows his characters to "jump" the threshold almost instantaneously.

Jack Torrance, protagonist-turned-antagonist, suffers from a multitude of unresolved psychological problems. The history of family abuse, alcoholism, and violence is reflected in his own family. He lives vicariously through his son Danny and Danny's childish innocence to battle his own demons of guilt and sin. When he arrives at the Overlook, he is driven to discover not only its dark secrets but also his own desires. Jack, undoubtedly, is prone to evil; however, the choice of evil, for him, is easy. Jack's journey from a protective, benevolent father to a destructive, evil killer is not premeditated, but it is extremely rapid.

This transformation, as James Egan has pointed out, is one of King's most effective skills. He creates "a single powerful spectacle" that exhibits, without doubt, that human beings are all prone to evil. Horror fiction, King points out, lives on because we are simply fascinated by the dark side of humanity. What is forbidden in horror is also very appealing. It is easy to explore, vicariously, the chambers of our own minds, crossing thresholds along the way. Horror satiates our curiosity about

forbidden delights because it is “intriguingly alien and aberrant” (*Danse Macabre* 90). King argues that horror fiction regularly attempts to probe tabooed lands that permit readers to explore anxieties, fears, aggression, and morbidity. According to King, society sanctions horror “to indulge in deviant, antisocial behavior by proxy” (43). As well, horror reflects with brutal honesty the real nature of the human mind. In King’s world of contemporary horror, the mind is a fragile organism capable of abrupt and drastic transformation. Evil exists simultaneously in the inner mind and the external environment; danger is at every turn and tragedy is inevitable; the supernatural is part of the natural, mundane world.

And though many agree that this is the pulse of King’s fiction, others argue that King develops this idea of evil in horror to promote a larger message. Jonathan P. Davis does not see evil in King’s fiction as a liberating force. Rather, he feels King’s novels illustrate the destructive force of evil:

The tragedies in King’s fiction lie not so much in the victims of evil manifestations but in the stories’ central characters’ tendency to bow to their human shortcomings, allowing evil to flourish. A majority of King’s books place the central protagonists in positions to follow their moral or immoral impulses. Those who consider the implications of acting immorally and act accordingly are those who overcome evil; those who succumb to the immediate gratification that evil offers are those who eventually fall. (88)

Jack Torrance does fall at the end of *The Shining*. He succumbs to, and accepts, the evil of his own mind and the Overlook. Although this evil ultimately destroys Jack, it also leads to a new reality for Danny. Keeping in tune with

Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, Danny loses his innocence in exchange for an understanding of evil, the truth of its existence. Evil appears to him in every form, psychologically and supernaturally, and it leads to a stain—one that haunts his future. Dick Hallorann explains this to Danny: "There's some things no six-year-old boy in the world should have to be told, but the way things should be and the way things are hardly ever get together" (446). King illustrates that through the dark descent of horror, we find our way back to reality. As King states in *Danse Macabre*,

The melodies of the horror tale are simple and repetitive, and they are melodies of disestablishment and disintegration...but another paradox is that the ritual outletting of these emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive state again. (26)

There is a need for evil in *The Shining* to lead to some greater truth. As with Hawthorne, Poe, and James, King illuminates characters that must undergo rigorous psychological torment that is saturated with evil to come to terms with new realities. Goodman Brown crosses his threshold from safe-haven to demonic forest, enlightened by the truths of evil; Usher journeys to the darkest regions of his mind to resurrect evil and his sister; the governess excavates her own subconscious chambers, but eventually she must protect her inward evil from outside evil. Jack Torrance is the epitome of evil, a culmination of Brown, Usher, and the governess. He feels liberated by the Overlook, justified in his own evil acts, and fulfilled by a sense of purpose: the eradication of a reality based on false benevolence.

This reoccurring theme, of seeking out the tabooed regions of the mind and evil, apparent in Goodman Brown, Usher, the governess and Torrance, and

throughout the American horror story, is magnified time and time again by the image of the threshold. As the horror story has evolved, the neutral territory dividing the actual and the imaginary has, inevitably, become less distinct. Crossing the thresholds of the mind into tabooed regions, subsequently, is no longer an anomaly; it is hackneyed.

The contemporary horror story, especially King's *The Shining*, feeds off this acceptance. We never really question whether or not Jack Torrance is battling the evil rage of his history or mind. It is a part of his very nature. King never gives us a glimpse into Torrance as a devoted father and husband, a benevolent man driven to support his family emotionally or fiscally. We never see the protective side of Torrance, only a background of violence, tragedy, and rejection. There is a possibility he may have in this history, inadvertently or consciously, killed a child with his car. In reality, evil always has been present in Jack's life. Evil, to some degree, is already embedded in his psyche, and it manifests in his temperamental outbursts. Grady tells him that he has "always" been the caretaker. Indeed, he has. He has always carried the power and the passion of evil within himself, the "evil within," to drive his action and motive. Crossing the threshold into a world of absolute evil and horror is not a difficult task to undertake. It is a short yet significant jump into the reality and existence. The last threshold image in *The Shining* displays Jack's perception of how the world operates. More important, it may be King's prescription for the horror tale in general. Evil and horror stare us in the face no matter if we dream or simply gaze into the mirror.

The Great Wasps' Nest of Life

At the Overlook, just before the onset of winter, the Torrance family sits together on the front porch “as if posing for a family portrait” (98). The peaceful and serene view is juxtaposed against a sense of alienation and isolation. As Mr. Ullman, the manager, leaves them behind, they watch him drive away, and something changes:

They watched until the car was out of sight, headed down the eastern slope. When it was gone, the three of them looked at each other for a silent, almost frightened moment. They were alone. [...] There was no one to see the autumn leaves steal across the grass but the three of them. It gave Jack a curious shrinking feeling, as if his life force had dwindled to a mere spark while the hotel and the grounds had suddenly doubled in size and become sinister, dwarfing them with sullen, inanimate power [...] [they went inside] closing the door firmly behind them against the restless whine of the wind. (100)

Symbolically, this closed door should represent the history of Jack, left behind and forgotten. Since Jack is now isolated in the Overlook, we assume that he *overlooks* his past and his subconscious mind, those imbedded terrors that haunt him. This is, however, directly juxtaposed against the next scene. Jack is on the roof of the Overlook, symbolically in tune with his conscious mind and his contemplation of moving forward, overlooking everything else: “On the roof he felt himself healing from the trouble wounds of the last three years. On the roof he felt at peace. Those three years seem like a turbulent nightmare” (104). However, the “shingles had been

badly rotted.” One improper move, we suspect, and Jack will step into the corroded and rotted past of his subconscious.

Jack rips up the shingles and tosses them off, one by one, emphatically pleased with his work. A wasp stings him as he removes a panel. “The ironic part was that he warned himself each time he climbed onto the roof to keep an eye out for nests” (104). In other words, Jack must remember the danger in overlooking his past and his subconscious. We see Jack as one with an optimistic vantage point, where the “play was going very well.” He sees a symbol within the nest: “it seemed to him that it could serve both a workable symbol for what he had been through (and what he had dragged his hostages to fortune through) and an omen for a better future” (107). But when Jack begins to explore, once again, his history, repressed subconscious images begin to emerge as a dominant force: the spankings, the beatings from his “old man,” playground brawls, hangovers, “the slowly dissolving marriage,” hitting the child with his car, and Danny’s broken arm. These become powerful images:

He felt that he had unwittingly stuck his hand into the Great Wasps’ Nest of Life [...] He had stuck his hand through some rotted flashing in high summer and that hand and his whole arm had been consumed in holy, righteous fire, destroying conscious thought, making the concept of civilized behavior obsolete [...]. When you unwittingly stuck your hand into the wasps’ nest, you hadn’t made a covenant with the devil to give up your civilized self with its trappings of love and respect and honor. It just happened to you. Passively, with no say, you ceased to be a creature of the mind and became a creature of the nerve endings. (108-109)

Through Jack, King illustrates that evil “just happens” to his characters, whether they are prepared for the consequences or not. The mind becomes an impulse that does not neglect the power of the subconscious, or the innate evils within it. There is no neutrality between what is real and what is imaginary; King wants us to feel that everyday life is full of its own magnified horror. No matter how intensely Jack attempts to suffocate the demons of his past, the sting of reality, of evil and its lingering effect, will always emerge. Evil cannot be defeated. It is a necessary condition of life, something that is immutably present. Evil is an uncanny manifestation hidden away in each individual, raising its head to take a deep breath.

The Shining as an Uncanny Horror Text and Horror as an Uncanny Genre

In “Toward Defining an American Gothic,” Magistrale states:

[...] the tentative and often precarious moral search for selfhood that characterizes the nineteenth-century romance tradition is likewise present in King. King’s world-view is based on the complexity of modern life and his protagonists begin the voyage toward moral wholeness only after experiencing the most disturbing encounters with evil [...] his characters commence on their voyage to a moral comprehension of this world only at the point where they become profoundly aware of the existence of evil. (103-104)

In Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, the conclusion offers a striking example of what horror writers from Poe to King have achieved in terms of communicating the human condition: “sin—which man chose instead of good—has been so beneficially handled by omniscience and omnipotence, that, whereas our dark enemy sought to destroy us by it, it has really become an instrument most effective in the education of

intellect and souls” (1215). King’s *The Shining* takes us back, once more, to the themes of Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and James’s *The Turn of the Screw* because the essence of evil is not only necessary but also a viable force in determining truth in reality and imagination. The horror story is successful because it brings out uncanny feelings we as readers easily associate with. We can journey to the dark “taboos” of the mind through the horror story, and we identify with the characters because they show us our own fears—that we have the ability to confront evil, learn from it, or go mad from its influence.

In Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” he states that the uncanny is “that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar”

(123). Furthermore, the uncanny emerges when we see ourselves in another:

[...] the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own—in other words, by doubling, dividing, and interchanging the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations. (141)

The repetitive nature of the horror story and the pervasive force of evil, dread, and terror are apparent from Hawthorne, to Poe, to James, and, finally, to King. As King has found the pulse of horror in the fiction of his predecessors, readers of horror have identified with their characters. The uncanny manifestation of horror, then, is

twofold, lasting over a century of writers and readers. These same themes of psychological and supernatural horror reoccur today. Jacques Derrida states:

[...] we find ourselves constantly being brought back to that text by the paradoxes of the double and the repetition, the blurring of the boundary lines between 'imagination' and 'reality', between the 'symbol' and the thing it symbolizes [...]. (qtd in Royle 220)

We are brought back to *The Shining* in a similar manner. There is much about Jack Torrance that whispers seductively to the reader, especially when Jack represents the deepest and darkest manifestation of evil: “his relentless desire for fame, his alcoholic and sexual distractions, his struggle to find a viable place in the world, his inability to counterbalance lingering childhood traumas with love for wife and child” (*Poe’s Children* 33). The reader may find some satisfaction in the demise of Torrance, but an uncanny familiarity brings us back to recognizing the same destructive impulses in ourselves. This destructive impulse is mirrored in the horror tale from Hawthorne, to Poe, to James, to the “master” of the contemporary horror thriller, Stephen King.

These authors employ horror as means to highlight human frailties, to exhibit healthy psychological conditions through the acceptance of evil, to reveal the duality of human nature, and to elevate the ever-present self-destructive impulse. Readers recognize, in the tale of horror, “our own darkest propensities and worst inclinations” (95). As Freud states, “the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” (153). As Jack Torrance emerges from his repressed rage, the reader is allowed to emerge with him. Jack’s

world of isolation, alienation, guilt, rage, pressure, and history is all too familiar. We may not believe in walking into a magical forest where the devil presides, or the existence of haunted Gothic mansions or ghost-ridden hotels, but we can see ourselves in those settings because we see ourselves in the characters within those settings. We cross our own thresholds from reality into fiction, and live vicariously through the narrative. Our conscious tells us these worlds are not real, but our subconscious identifies with the struggles of the characters. They, inevitably, along with the setting, become uncannily familiar to us. This commingling of the familiar with the unfamiliar, as Nicolas Royle states, “does not permit a settling on one side or the other” within the dichotomy of imagination and reality (15). The uncanny concerns everything “that ought to remain hidden but has come to light” (51).

Jack Torrance’s journey into the basement of the Overlook Hotel reveals the uncanny in *The Shining*. Crossing the threshold into the dark bottom of the Overlook, and his own subconscious, Jack “brings to light” a history of the hotel, and, in turn, himself. With multiple images of a “flashlight” piercing through the darkness, Jack finds what he needs: “There was history here, all right, and not just buried in newspaper headlines. It was buried between the entries in these ledgers and account books and room-service chits where you couldn’t quite see it.” Jack emerges from the basement, showers (to wash off the filth of history?), and walks around the discovered papers; “his mind alive and tickling over possibilities in a speedy way that was exhilarating” (154). After sorting through various clips of history, Jack decides his own novel will take a new turn: “The future lay ahead, clean and shining” (155). Next, King references Poe’s “The Mask of the Red Death”: “Unmask! Unmask! [...]

and surely the Overlook—this shining, glowing Overlook on the invitation he held his hands—was the farthest cry from E. A. Poe imaginable” (155).

But King knows otherwise. Jack’s mind reverts back to subconscious repression of personal history and evil. King reverts back to the writing of his predecessors as he echoes Poe. While the uncanny is invoked between reader and character, it is also apparent between King and the horror writers before him.

Stephen King as a Horror Writer

In James Egan’s essay “Stephen King’s Gothic Melodrama,” he states that King “has given careful consideration to the aesthetics of horror fiction and has attained a sophisticated awareness of his strengths and weaknesses as a practitioner of a popular genre.” Furthermore, Egan states that King “deserves credit for understanding his subject matter, craft, and audience well” (74). Although many, like Egan, are quick to point to King’s literary contributions, others are not quite so fond of the author or his genre. Harold Bloom gives a lackluster view of the author: King “does not seem to me a borderline literary phenomena, whose works will have the status of period pieces. Rather, King’s books [...] are not literary at all, in my critical judgment. Reading *Harry Potter* is not reading, and neither is perusing Stephen King” (introduction 1). Bloom considers King as an author who emerged from the same “sub-literary” genres of Poe and Lovecraft. Furthermore, Bloom states that he will refrain from stating King’s inadequacies, then directly addresses them: “cliché-writing, flat characters who are names upon the page, and in general a remarkable absence of invention for someone edging over into the occult, the preternatural, the imaginary” (2). He continues: horror fans “find exactly what they want in King, and

these are the fans he shares with Anne Rice (a sickly imagination) and with Dean Koontz and Peter Straub” (2). This poses a serious question: Has Bloom ever read King’s fiction?

Jack Torrance not only represents the contemporary citizen—a father, husband, taxpayer, and writer—but also he is the epitome of the conscious mind succumbing to the influences of subconscious evil and horror, a reoccurring theme found in the annals of the American horror story. Like Goodman Brown, Usher, and James’s governess, Jack Torrance represents a time and place, flesh and bone. He allows us to cross the thresholds of the real and imaginary, getting us closer to forbidden realms both psychologically and supernaturally. *The Shining* is saturated with the past, the themes of horror from Hawthorne, Poe, and James are apparent. But it is also inundated with the present, for we see ourselves, our waking realities, in the evil purposes of Jack.

But Bloom does pinpoint one important aspect in his negative criticism of King: his books are “visually oriented scenarios” (2). But if we can see ourselves in King’s plots, settings, and horror, does he not accomplish, more than his predecessors in the genre, the essence of his creation? If we can visualize ourselves in these scenarios, or what Egan calls “self-contained episodes,” then King is already ahead of many fiction writers. If Bloom recognizes (though with negative attention) King’s ability to accomplish this design, he should also be able to recognize the strength of horror as a genre. We see a possibility in horror: the liberating force of visualizing ourselves in threatening worlds while confronting and accepting the evil impulses in our nature. Bloom, it seems, fails to accept horror fiction as an outlet for the reader.

Paradoxically, many critics feel King's contribution to the literary world is his detailed realism, particularly in his depictions of sex, death, violence, and society. Furthermore, his treatment of stream-of-consciousness in *The Shining* has recently received critical attention. He has been accused of participating in a harsh form of psychological honesty since his characters swear and act, well, like human beings.

Of *The Shining*, King states that "The book, to me at least, seemed to be primarily a story about a miserable, damned man who is very slowly losing his grip on his life, a man who is being driven to destroy all things he loves" (qtd in Herron 93). King's realism is a masterful blend of the supernatural with the psychological, all enveloped within simple contemporary settings and everyday minds. We see the "evil inside" King's characters and, in turn, ourselves. The threshold separating us from his characters is brittle, and it almost ceases to exist. In this way, *we are the monsters*, hiding in our own closets, with one foot on the threshold; all we need, like Goodman Brown, Usher, the governess, and Torrance, is to cross over. We find ourselves in the Overlook Hotel, and, subsequently, in Jack's mind:

A long and nightmarish masquerade party went on here, and had gone on for years. Little by little a force had accrued, as secret and silent as interest in a bank account. Force, presence, shape, they were all only words and none of them mattered. It wore many masks, but it was all one. Now, somewhere, it was coming for him [...]. (420)

If we lift the mask and reveal our own face, the horror story has accomplished what it has set out to do.

CONCLUSION

BEYOND *THE SHINING*: Reoccurring Thresholds

Despite the emergence of other genres into academic and critical circles, the genre of horror has not met with the same success. Thus far in my academic career, I have completed two courses that focused primarily on the genre of science fiction. The first, an undergraduate course, viewed both science fiction and fantasy fiction as neglected, legitimate genres that deserve promotion and critical attention. The second, a graduate course, continued this promotion, considering everything in science fiction that is usually considered particular to science fiction: extrapolation, utopias, dystopias, and unearthly characters; the concept of speculative fiction was also emphasized for a significant time. The elements of horror in science fiction, however, were never addressed or acknowledged. Though genres such as science fiction are finally receiving past due attention, the genre of horror is still overlooked and neglected.

While sitting in my graduate science fiction course, I thought about Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and Stephen King's *Dreamcatcher*: two great examples of how horror and science fiction have merged together to create wonderful novels. In *Solaris*, apparitions on spaceships, a giant telepathic ocean-brain, and neurotic characters create effective horror. In *Dreamcatcher*, the horror stems from the annihilation of a

close band of friends by grotesque alien forms that have the power to possess and control the human mind. But these works, and others like them, were never addressed. Horror has an uncanny ability to turn off academic discussion and application. So my question became clear: Why? Although this question did not drive this study of the threshold image in the horror story, it certainly lurked in every sentence.

As I stated in the introduction, the definition of horror has traditionally been fixed, not allowed to change. Just as it is not fair to say science fiction is exactly what is depicted in *War of the Worlds* or *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, it is not fair to define, limit, or encapsulate horror as exactly what is depicted in *The House on Haunted Hill* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Horror is more than haunted houses and monsters just as science fiction is more than flying saucers and space aliens. As I hopefully have illustrated, there are numerous engaging ways to analyze and think about horror—ways that are useful in dismembering previous notions about the genre and how it should be discussed or defined.

Recently, the horror genre has hit a period of resurgence both in fiction and in cinema after a brief slump in the late eighties and early nineties. Of course, Stephen King is still writing, selling, and promoting the craft. But the most productive increase in the genre has emerged through a cinematic lens. This, in part, is due to the popularity of the horror film in contemporary culture. It is also due to the horror fiction chosen by talented directors. Stanley Kubrick recreates King's threshold imagery in the Overlook Hotel with astonishing success. Kubrick's film version of

The Shining is considered by many one of the best horror films thus far, if not one of the best films in general.

What is more impressive, however, is that the horror picture seems to be reverting back to some of the classic symbols, images, and themes of horror fiction. The upbeat, psychological horror thriller on the big screen is returning to the recipes of horror set forth by Hawthorne, Poe, James, and King. The image of the threshold especially is being used in interesting and creative ways. Recently, I ventured across two *horror* films (some would not place them in this genre) that exhibit this creativity: M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* and Geoffrey Sax's *White Noise*.

The Village takes place in a quiet, isolated community in Pennsylvania where everyone seems to live in harmony and peace. In this particular village, there is a pact between the townspeople and the creatures that reside in the woods surrounding their establishment: the people do not enter the woods and the creatures do not enter the village. A visual threshold separates these factions from each other. Tall fiery columns, ornamented with yellow flags, represent the visual boundary that is off limits to the townspeople. A broken pact would create immense horror: the creatures, the evil and pervasive force, would cross the threshold into their realm, mark their homes with a red slash, and ultimately destroy them. But when one of the characters, Lucius Hunt, breaches this unspoken agreement in search of medical supplies, the neutral territory is eliminated. The forest is the uncharted territory of the mind that strongly parallels and invokes Hawthorne's setting. And in the tradition of Hawthorne, what stalks the forest is not only a reality, but also it is a fear that must be confronted for survival.

Shyamalan's film also spins the role of the *monster* in horror. When the blind Ivy Walker enters the forest to save the life and the failed efforts of Lucius, her love, she is confronted with a monstrosity (a enormous porcupine-like creature wearing a Red-Riding-Hood-like cloak) and her own fear. But we soon learn that the monster is nothing more than a costume; the real evil force is Noah Percy, a mentally unstable villager, under the disguise. Shyamalan not only reverts back to the horror we find in Hawthorne, but also he dispels the notion of the monster as the pervasive force in the genre. This is all accomplished, however, by the central crux of the film: the decision to cross the threshold into forbidden realms.

Sax's *White Noise* utilizes the threshold in a more creative way. The threshold image throughout the film is, interestingly enough, a television screen. On the outside, the normal mundane world is filled with death and grief. On the inside, something is desperately trying to communicate to the outside world. Through the static of white noise, Jonathan Rivers slowly becomes aware of images and voices through video and audio recordings. This visual threshold is subtle yet impressive. In one particular and striking scene, Rivers places his hand to the television screen, only to be met with a shrieking, distorted face flashing from within. The two images are separated by the glass screen, and Rivers makes an initial attempt to cross the threshold into understanding the forbidden world. What he uncovers is his dead wife's message of hope and life, and an opposing and threatening message filled with horrific evil.

These two films, though critically belittled, revert back to the classic horror tale set forth by Hawthorne, Poe, and James. I felt relieved to know that these

directors in the horror genre did not overlook some of the most appealing and important functions of horror: to explore the forbidden, unknown, and supernatural not only in the world but also in the mind. Furthermore, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they depict the image of the threshold to create and shape their settings, characters, and plots.

Authors creating new horror fiction, especially King, are once again returning to historical roots of the genre. According to King, “Young Goodman Brown” is “one of the ten best stories ever written by an American” (*Everything’s Eventual* 69). King’s short story “The Man in the Black Suit,” winner of the O. Henry Best Short Story award for 1996, invokes the historical themes of evil, the supernatural, and the loss of innocence.. The story, modeled after “Young Goodman Brown,” is of a young boy who crosses the threshold into uncharted and forbidden nearby woods, encountering the Devil along the way. The Devil is described as a horrific nightmare, but his knowledge is more frightening than his appearance. He explains to the young boy, Gary, that “A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don’t exist?” (56). Likewise, in the tradition of the horror story, evil is not always apparent, but it is pervasive, powerful, and controlling. The horror story, traditional and contemporary, always has a propensity to cross forbidden thresholds to acquire this knowledge.

Horror fiction, both classic and contemporary, often explores environmental and psychological landscapes of the real and imaginative, allowing characters to cross thresholds into the realms of evil and truth where forbidden knowledge and tabooed lands are not to be feared, but rather to be embraced. Horror fiction mirrors our own dark impulses, but we have the ability to observe these impulses from our own safe-

havens while living vicariously through uncanny characters. In Georges Bataille's *Literature and Evil*, he states, "Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so" (preface x). Horror literature, unlike any other literature, is guilty of expressing the existence and necessity of evil in humanity and society. It is guilty of exhibiting the darker sides of psychology in reality and the imagination. Time and time again, characters in horror fiction mirror or mimic Goodman Brown, Usher, the governess, and Jack Torrance as they undergo psychological transformations that "breach our foremost taboos" (Winter 4). Horror fiction, and the characters within horror fiction, allow us an unobstructed path to cross the thresholds of our own world.

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