

Pages & Platforms presents

The Essentials of Writing Horror





Happily Ever Author Club

www.storypath.me/hea



Why learn this?



You may struggle with:

- Story structure
- Scattered scenes that don't hang together yet.
- What exactly a constitutes a Horror story.



Horror is difficult to innovate.



You're going to learn:

- What a working Horror story is.
- What every Horror story needs.
- How to incorporate the essential elements of Horror into your story.



What does it take to write a good Horror story?

- Read and study masterworks of Horror.
- Structure your story around these guidelines.
- Dig deep into your own fears.



CAVEAT

- This isn't a one draft process.
- This presentation is a blueprint for assembling your story parts.





Tools,
not
rules.



A Professional Working Draft has:

- A protagonist with a definite **change** arc.
- Protagonist and antagonist pursuing conflicting **desires**.
- Clear **stakes** arising from the desire of your protagonist.
- A strong **premise** reflected in every scene.
- The **emotional experience** your audience expects to have.
- **Characters, settings, & moments** your audience expects.



Then revisions can begin.

- Three or four more drafts
- A full structural edit
- A line edit
- And a copy edit



What a Horror story
is and isn't.



It's Horror no matter the setting.



It's Horror no matter the setting.

Settings are the landscape, the milieu, the type of world in which your story takes place.



Some popular Horror settings

Fantasy
Science fiction
Dystopian
Historical
War



Fantasy Setting:

Stories set in worlds where magic or the supernatural is real.





EVIL DEAD 2

DEAD BY DAWN

Science Fiction Setting:

Stories that go into the future or an alternate present, generally involving advanced technology.





H.P. LOVECRAFT'S

COLOR ^{OUT} OF SPACE

A RICHARD STANLEY FILM

Dystopian Setting:

Stories that also go into a future, usually showing our real-world gone wrong.





ZOMBIESTHAAN

Historical Setting:

Stories set in the different world of a historical period.





THE
GIRL
FROM
RAWBLOOD

a novel

CATRIONA WARD

War Setting:

Stories set in a war environment or against a backdrop of war.





TRENCH 11

VIOLENCE IS CONTAGIOUS

Settings are important.

They may greatly influence a reader's decision to read your story.



Know your settings.

- Know the trends.
- Read widely & deeply.
- Know what readers expect.
- Do your research.



Settings don't tell you how to
construct your story.



Settings don't tell you:

- What your protagonist wants (**desire**).
- What the protagonist has to lose or gain (**stakes**).
- How they **change** under pressure from the antagonist.
- What **emotions** your audience will expect to feel when reading this kind of story.



Settings don't define Horror.



Consider these Horror settings:

- On a spaceship (*Alien*)
- In the ocean (*Jaws*)
- In the woods (*The Blair Witch Project*)
- At home (*1BR*)
- In a fantasy world (*The Girl from Rawblood*)



What exactly is a Horror Story?

- Essentially about a victim trying to escape a monster.
- The monster is powerful, incapable of reason or empathy, and intent on destruction.
- The protagonist is a victim facing impossible odds, motivated to stay alive and avoid death and torture.



Horror stories are plot-driven.



Some Horror examples



Toni Morrison



B E L O V E D

Read by the Author

U N A B R I D G E D

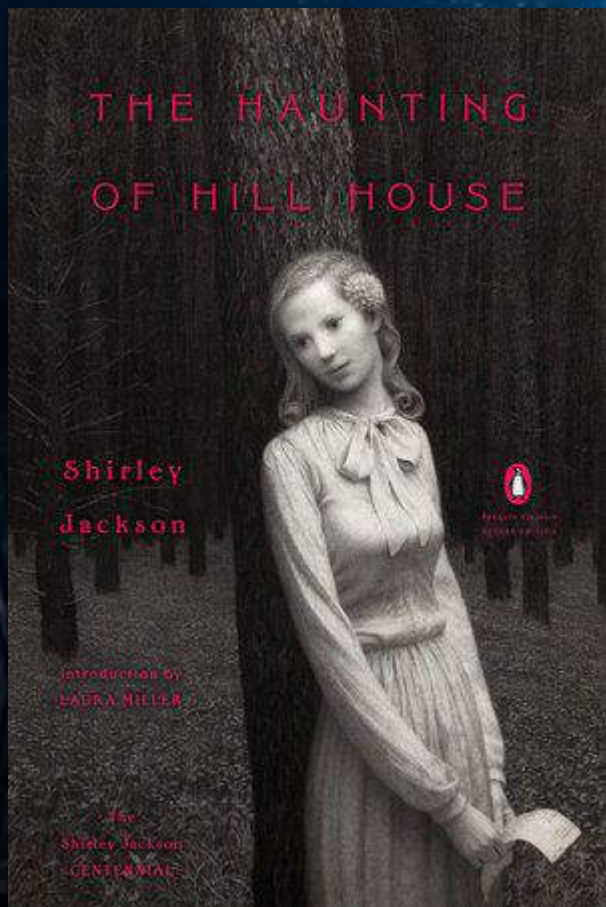


THE HAUNTING
OF HILL HOUSE

Shirley
Jackson

Introduction by
LAURA MILLER

For
Shirley Jackson
CENTENNIAL





THE
FINAL GIRL
SUPPORT
GROUP

A NOVEL

GRADY HENDRIX

New York Times bestselling author of
THE SOUTHERN BOOK CLUB'S GUIDE TO SLAYING VAMPIRES



A Horror story uses all the tools of
good storytelling.

And that means...



Your protagonist must have:

- Clear **stakes**.
- A defined **want and need**.
- An arc of **change**.



Your story must:

- Have a unifying **premise**.
- Evoke particular **emotions** in your audience.
- Incorporate all the essential **characters, settings, and moments**.



How to make these
essentials happen.



CAVEAT

- There's much more to learn about the Horror Story Type.
- You can find more on the **essential moments** in our Happily Ever Author Club.



You can adapt our
suggestions to the kind of
story you want to write.



Audience Emotion:

- What the reader wants to feel, the reason they choose your type of story.
- Horror audience primarily wants to experience terror and feel courageous in the face of it.
- Emotional range is terror, fear, excitement, relief, a sense of victory at escape, and vicarious bravery.



Audience Emotion Tip:

Create tension between what the reader
HOPES FOR and what they FEAR.



Character Wants and Needs

- Escape death or a fate worse than death (torture).
- Outwit the monster (since they can't overpower it).







Stakes

- What the character has to gain or lose.
- The higher the stakes, the greater the pressure on the protagonist.
- Must escalate as the story progresses.



Horror Stakes

- Death and eternal torment vs. life, escape, and the defeat of the monster.
- Protagonist must try to stay alive and avoid torture.
- If they fail, they will suffer death and the possibility of a fate worse than death.



Horror Stakes must

- Operate in every scene.
- Impact your protagonist.
- Rise throughout the story.



Horror Stakes Continuum

Eternal torture

Death

Danger

Escape

Safety

Survival

Life



A Story's Essential Premise is:

- The message you hope your story will convey.
- A cause-and-effect statement that comes directly from your protagonist's choices.
- Based on protagonist's want & need, and the stakes.
- A sentence demonstrating the central idea of your story.



Your premise guides you as you write.

Not sure what scene to write next?

Not sure if a scene belongs?

Dialogue seems iffy?

Consult your premise
statement.



The Horror Story message

- Evil will get you if you aren't careful.
- We need ordinary people to save others from terror.



Some general Horror premises

- Outwitting or escaping the monster allows victims to avoid torture and death.
- Failing to outwit or escape the monster leads to victims' torture and death.



Other Horror story premises

- Monsters test the weak.
- Evil demands courage.
- Cleverness leads to escaping from evil.
- Teamwork defeats the monster.



Essential Characters



Horror Essential Characters:

- Protagonist (victim)
- Antagonist (monster)
- Other Victims



Protagonist:

- One of the monster's potential victims.
- Actively trying to survive.
- Has characteristics or goals that the audience can identify with.



Antagonist:

- A monster intent on annihilation.
- Can't be reasoned with.
- Vastly more powerful than the protagonist.
- May be human, animal, or supernatural.



Quick character tip:

- Let the audience experience the power of the monster while empathizing with the victims.
- Make them feel for the protagonist and enjoy watching them suffer.
- Encourage audience identification with the monster.





Victims:

- Additional victims who die, showing the protagonist what not to do.
- Their deaths reveal the monster's full power.



Possible Additional Character:

- Character, narrator, or news report expressing the belief that the monster is unbeatable. (Herald)
- Could be the protagonist or one of the other victims.



Essentials of the Horror Setting:

1. Must allow for the existence of a monster (e.g., the woods, a remote area, the ocean, outer space).



Essentials of the Horror Setting:

2. Must make it difficult for victims to contact outside assistance.



Essentials of the Horror Setting:

3. Must be a crucible, hard to escape, controlled by the monster, giving protagonist no real choice but to face the monster.



Essentials of the Horror Setting:

4. Usually dark, claustrophobic, labyrinthine. Allows the monster to conceal itself while preying on victims at will.



Quick setting tips:

- Mask the power of the monster.
- Keep the monster “out of view” as long as possible.
- Progressively reveal the monster’s power.



Essentials of the Horror Setting:

5. Begins as ordinary for the victims and becomes extraordinary when the monster attacks.



Horror Essential Situations:

1. The first deadly attack by a monster puts the initial pressure on the protagonist.



Horror Essential Situations:

2. The protagonist actively tries to survive. They investigate and learn the truth behind the horror.



Horror Essential Situations:

3. Lives depend on the protagonist defeating the monster.



Horror Essential Situations:

4. Even if the monster is human, the events of the story are improbable or impossible.



Horror Essential Situations:

5. The story contains elements of suspense. The monster attacks randomly. Neither audience nor characters have a chance to settle.



Horror Essential Situations:

6. Protagonist is the final victim; characters killed can be agents of the monster or allies of the protagonist.



Horror Essential Situations:

7. There is a false ending. (Likely a current trope, becoming a cliché, needing innovation).



Horror Essential Situations:

8. The monster is vanquished in the end, but not definitively. It could return. Where and when is left unknown.



Horror Essential Moments:

8 essential movements

21 core moments

Audience expectations



Pacing



Pacing

- Lean scene count.
- Efficient scene turns.
- Limited description in action scenes.
- Give the reader a chance to catch their breath.
- Use humor.



Gore

- Use your imagination.
- Aim for believability.
- Balance the explicit and the suggestive.
- Allow readers to use their imaginations.



Subtext

Use dread and revulsion.

- *Dread* is a grim certainty that bad things are coming.
- *Revulsion* is seeing how bad things unfold.

Cycle your scenes between the two.



Ripping Your Guts Out

- Horror is personal.
- Weigh your story by whether or not it stirs you.
- Mine your fears for story material.
- Dare to create new monsters.



Innovation

- If the story theme is old, create a fresh and new payoff.
- Write what others are afraid to write by being bold and brave.
- Convey fear rather than telling your reader something is scary.
- Don't pull your punches.



Moving to the next level of
your writing.



Masterwork Suggestions

- Uncanny: *Alien*, *Frankenstein*, and *Get Out*
- Supernatural: *The Conjuring*, *The Amityville Horror*, and *The Blair Witch Project*
- Possession: *The Exorcist*, *Child's Play*, and *The Vampire Chronicles*
- Ambiguous: *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Saw*, and *Carrie*



What you learned today:

- What a Horror story is and isn't.
- The essential story requirements:
 - Clear, high stakes.
 - A protagonist with a clear want and need.
 - A definitive change arc for that protagonist.
 - A unifying premise.
 - Particular emotions the Horror audience expects.
 - Specific characters and situations.



And you now have:

- A list of masterworks to study.
- A structural framework for your story.
- The basics of the Horror story.
- A plan to finish *your* story.





Happily Ever Author Club

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Need an editor?

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Thanks for joining us!

We hope to see you in the
Happily Ever Author Club!



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