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The Intersection of Horror and Fairy Tales in Graphic Novels and Comics

Introduction

This Proposal will explore the three words: Fear, Comfort, and Childhood within the context of horror-based fairy tales in graphic novels, comics, and manga. By examining these themes, I aim to uncover the deeper psychological implications of why people are drawn to darker themes and how that reflects the human experience of growth, evolution, and the human psyche. Researching psychological and anthropological concepts will allow for a deeper understanding when exploring these words. It will draw upon psychological theories such as Carl Jung’s concept of the shadow and Joseph Campbell's archetype of the hero's journey. Additionally, exploring the narrative structures in fairy tales and horror stories will provide insight into how these themes are interconnected. The exploration of these narratives will allow a deeper understanding of the power of horror storytelling and its significance as vessels for exploring the depths of the human psyche.

Fear

> “The universal trigger for fear is the threat of harm, real or imagined. This threat can be to our physical, emotional, or psychological well-being. While

there are certain things that trigger fear in most of us, we can learn to become afraid of nearly anything." Ekman, P. (2019)

Fear has been a recurring theme throughout history, with artists exploring the topic through various mediums. Often depicted through symbolic imagery, dramatic compositions, and emotive expressions, the theme of fear has been explored in a myriad of ways, from existential dread and supernatural horror to more mundane anxieties and societal fears. For example, paintings from the Renaissance and Baroque periods are filled with themes of fear, with artists such as Hieronymus Bosh and Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicting fantastical landscapes populated by nightmarish creatures and tormented souls, conveying the fear of divine judgment and the consequences of sin.

Surrealism is one example of an artistic movement that has a complex relationship with the topic of fear. While it's not a central focus of the movement, it often seeps through into surrealist artworks as a by-product of the movement's exploration of the subconscious mind, the irrational, and the uncanny. The theme of body horror is a common convention used throughout surrealist art to explore and challenge conventional notions of beauty and propriety.

This exploration of fear has transitioned from surrealist and Renaissance artists such as Salvador Dalí and Hieronymus Bosh to more modern mediums such as comics, manga, and graphic novels. Junji Ito is an artist who stands out in the genre for his ability to evoke a sense of dread, unease, and existential terror in his readers through themes such as body horror (see Fig.1). Ito's ability to depict grotesque and macabre

scenes, as unsettling transformations and monstrous entities through his distinctive artistic style is one of the major contributors to the sense of horror and discomfort experienced by readers. However, this prompts us to question why precisely Ito's work and the horror genre at large hold such widespread appeal.

Figure 1: Junji Ito’s collection, Shiver (2017)

Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, held the theory that phobias and other psychological conditions stemmed from unconscious desires. He suggested that people unconsciously express these repressed desires through phobias, which manifest as anxiety and tension (science.jrank.org, n.d.). Carl Jung, the founder of

analytical psychology, had a similar theory of the shadow and the identity where the "shadow is that hidden, repressed, for the most part, inferior and guilt-laden personality" (The Society of Analytical Psychology, n.d.). Research into Freud and Jung's theories provides a framework for understanding the psychological allure of the horror genre, including Junji Ito's work. It's seen in Ito's work how he crafts stories where characters often grapple with suppressed fears and desires, which manifest in terrifying and grotesque ways. Through these narratives and surreal imagery, Ito manages to explore the depths of the human psyche and tap into primal fears and anxieties within readers.

Although Freud and Jung's theory provides a basic framework for the draw of the horror genre it's still a subject that's debated. In the book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990) by Noël Carroll, Carrol delves further into the paradox of horror and how people can be attracted to something repulsive. Carrol states the idea that the horror genre stems from a combination of fascination and curiosity and that although it is a topic that can't have a definitive conclusion, he acknowledges how there appear to be parallels between the current horror trends and postmodernism. This nuanced perspective offers further insight into the compelling draw to the horror genre.

Comfort

> "A comfort zone is a psychological state in which the person feels at ease, secure, and familiar. In your comfort zone, you will feel in control of your

> environment while experiencing relatively low levels of stress and anxiety." (Psychology, 2022)

Various forms of art have allowed individuals to express and process their emotions and find connections, distractions, and relaxation. Fairy tales have a place at the very heart of comfort, not only for readers but also for artists. The depiction of 'fairy paintings' began to gain popularity during the Victorian period and has continued to capture the attention of audiences today, as evidenced by the success of companies such as Disney (artuk.org, n.d.). From Renaissance to contemporary, fairy tales and authors such as the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen have created a fertile ground for artists such as Arthur Rackham and Miranda Meeks to explore adaptations and reinterpretations.

In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy tales* (1975), psychologist Bruno Bettelheim explores the psychological significance of fairy tales and their ability to provide emotional comfort and guidance. Bettelheim discusses how the rich symbolic nature and imagery of fairy tales resonate deeply within the human psyche. Through symbols and archetypal characters, children can explore and come to terms with inner conflicts, fears, and desires in a safe and imaginative environment.

Stereotypical fairy tales offer comfort through their predictability with their familiar motifs of princes, princesses, and happily ever after. In *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1999), editor Maria Tatar explores this sense of stability and the appeal it has. Tarta delves into how presenting a clear moral lesson and archetypal characters within the

stereotypical fairy tales allows for a comforting narrative framework, which can be used to navigate the real world's challenges and uncertainties. One of the common archetypes found in these tales is the hero's journey. The term was first coined by Joseph Campbell in 1949, but the archetype predates its formal designation. The essence of this archetype is that every character, whether it be in literature or cinema, traverses a similar route, encountering three essential stages— separation, initiation, and return (TEDxMileHigh: Ideas Worth Spreading, 2020). This archetype, being ingrained within various stories, offers comfort to the audience as the characters face obstacles, which may reflect real life. But the audience is safe in knowing, whether consciously or subconsciously, that these characters will overcome these obstacles and follow the archetype to a happily ever after.

Modern retellings divert away from the traditional tropes that are seen within traditional fairy tales by injecting themes of darkness, ambiguity, and psychological complexity. However, by injecting these more complex themes into a familiar narrative it still offers a sense of comfort to the reader. Examples of this are included in, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) by Angela Carter where classic fairy tales are reimagined through a feminist lens, exploring themes of female empowerment and agency. Similarly, in *Through the Woods* (2014) by Emily Carroll, fairy tales are twisted into gothic stories where the lines between fantasy and horror are blurred. This intersection between the two genres of horror and fairy tales provides readers with a sense of familiarity and nostalgia, even as they venture into darker, more unsettling territory.

These more modern retellings of fairy tales that explore darker themes aren't entirely unfettered. Although fairy tales are known to be joyous and quite often have a happy

ending, their source material is often steeped in horror and supernatural. In "The Annotated Brothers Grimm" (2012) by Maria Tatar, these dark and macabre origins of classic fairy tales are explored. For example, the Brothers Grimm version of Cinderella is filled with body mutilation with a stepmother who mutilates her daughters' feet to fit into the glass slipper, and birds who peck out the stepsisters' eyes as punishment for their cruelty. These more sinister origins can offer comfort to illustrators and authors alike as it offer a basis for fairy-tale retellings based in the horror genre.

An example of a modern retelling that incorporates the fairy-tale structure with darker themes and subverting well-known characters is the comic series *Fables* (See Fig. 2) created by Bill Willingham. Throwing traditional fairy-tale characters into the modern world, *Fables* manages to blend darker themes and horror elements with traditional story structures. This retelling offers a fresh look at beloved stories and shows how these stories can continually be rewritten and reimagined.

Figure 2: Willingham, B. (2009). *Fables Volume 2*. DC Comics.

Childhood

“Nostalgia serves several important psychological purposes, Batcho asserts. One is the need to feel that we are in control. Even if our circumstances are largely out of our control, nostalgia can help us feel like we at least have some control over our personal development.” (Science, National Geographic, 2023)

Childhood is a major intersection between fairy tales and horror. As previously explored horror taps into primal fears that often originate from childhood. It’s also a pivotal stage where individuals are introduced to fairy tales, but also aspects of horror through common childhood fears, such as the fear of the dark, monsters under the bed, or ghost stories. It is often these universal and persistent fears that can be seen explored through a lot of the horror genre, drawing individuals back to the time of childhood when an active imagination and vulnerability to the unknown allowed for fear to take root.

A clear example of this can be seen through the story of Red Riding Hood and various authors have delved into the analysis of this tale. Catherine Orenstein in her book "Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked," explores the sexual and moral undertones of the tale, suggesting that it reflects anxieties surrounding female sexuality and societal expectations. Whereas Jack Zipes in "The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood," explores various versions of the tale and delves into the fears and anxieties reflected in different historical periods. Whichever, version or perspective the tale is analysed from it appears that the exploration of fear is prevalent throughout. This could be one reason why this tale seems to be quite widespread throughout the horror and retelling genres as it continues to resonate with modern audiences.

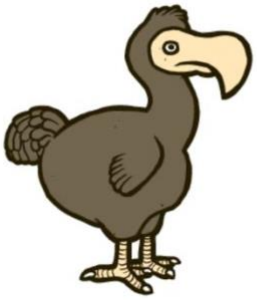
According to Jean Piaget, a leading psychologist on child development, the transition from childhood to adulthood involves a gradual process through different stages. Cognitive growth is marked by increasing levels of abstract thinking, moral reasoning, and self-awareness (Thompson, 2019). The intersection between horror and fairy tales

reflects this transition by exploring themes of innocence, vulnerability, and the loss of naivety. Fairy tales are given to children to teach them moral lessons and the complexities of the world, however as they develop over time and confront the harsh realities of the world, their perceptions of these fairy tales can often twist and evolve, leading them to develop a deeper appreciation for the darker side of the stories. This concept can also be supported by Lev Vygotsky's social development theory, where he states that “children internalise and learn from the beliefs and attitudes that they witness around them” (Gowrie NSW, 2022).

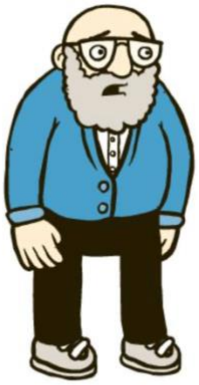
Not only does the child’s cognitive development change and move forward, but the media contents that they are allowed to consume change and develop with them. With the introduction of age restrictions in children’s books, readers are guided towards age-appropriate content that protects them from potentially harmful or inappropriate material. This gradual access to more mature content could also be a reason why horror and fairy tales seem to cross over so often as exploring these darker themes in an already established story can be less jarring as well as offering a sense of nostalgia for the stories from their childhood.

Thus far, the research and concepts explored have centred on the addition of horror elements into fairy tales which is traditionally regarded as a child-centric genre. However, by shifting the focus, we can delve into adult books that focus on darker and more intense themes but in a children’s book format. These books are often referred to as “adult picture books” and are a genre of books that combine the nostalgic elements of a traditional children’s book but with mature themes and humour that resonate with older audiences. One example of this is *All My Friends Are Dead* by

Avery Monsen and Jory John, which despite its simplistic illustration and childlike format, explores existential themes through humour and anthropomorphic characters (See Fig, 3). While this book is not explicitly a horror story or fairy tale, it explores fear and the universal fear of death, which is a common theme explored in both genres, in a new and imaginative way by employing dark humour, and anthropomorphic characters to explore themes of morality and loss. *All My Friends Are Dead* blurs the line between childhood innocence and adult sensibilities and challenges perceptions of what constitutes a fairy tale or a horror story, further expanding the boundary of these two genres.



All *my* friends are dead.



Most of my friends are dead.

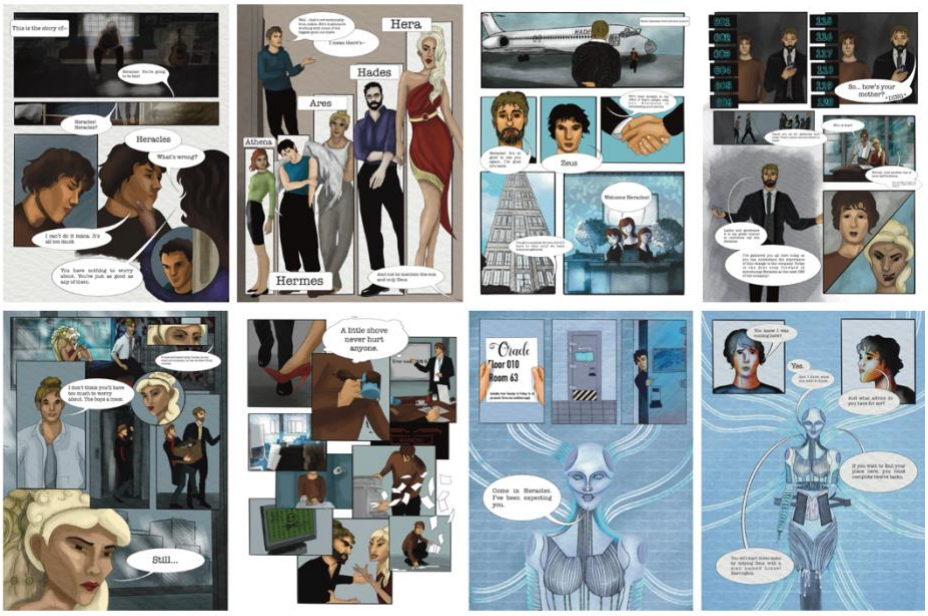
Monsen, A. and John, J. (2010). *All My Friends Are Dead*.

Gaining an understanding of how childhood experiences shape perceptions of horror and fairy tales allows for a better appreciation of the complex interplay between the innocence of fairy tales and the dark themes of horror narratives and enhances our understanding of the human psyche and the fascination by combining these two contrasting genres.

Practice

Researching the three keywords fear, comfort, and childhood and discovering the intricate connections between them have allowed me to shape my ideas for next year's project. Through research, I've found that the horror genre pulls from the deep-seated fears of childhood and how that makes it a preordained partner for the fairy-tale genre despite how at first glance they seem to be inherently opposite genres. By combining the elements of horror with traditional fairy-tale motifs, storytellers can create narratives that blend the comforts of fairy tales and the thrills of horror to create a deeper connection with readers. It's led me to the key question "How does nostalgia contribute to the allure of the crossover between horror and fairy tales, and how does it influence our interpretation and reception of these narratives in contemporary contexts?"

My Practice will entail developing a graphic novel to retell the story of *Red Riding Hood,* drawing from inspiration such as Catherine Orenstein's "Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale" where Orenstein uncovers the underlying themes and symbols embedded within the Red Riding Hood narrative. I've decided to work with the story of Red Riding Hood because of its thematic potential in exploring the overlap between childhood innocence and the darker elements of the horror genre. By drawing upon Orenstein's research, I plan to delve into the complexities of the Red Riding Hood narrative. The graphic novel will reflect the themes of fear, vulnerability, and the darker aspects of human nature.



Four Coloured Spreads

Figure 4

The project itself will draw from my previous work on developing a graphic novel (See Fig. 4) and consist of 2-3 double-page spreads with an addition of a front and back cover (See Fig. 5).

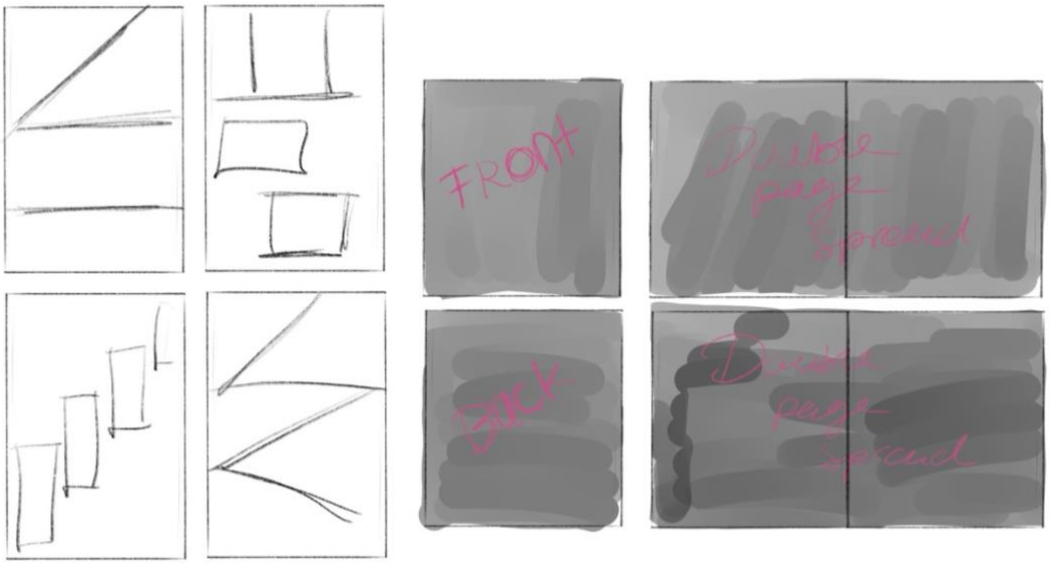


Figure 5

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