

## The Poetry of Fear

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### Introduction

“Come now, my child  
If we were planning to harm you,  
Do you think we'd be lurking here,  
Beside the path,  
In the very darkest part of the forest?”  
by Kenneth Patchen

Horror, in all its potential simplicity and complexity, captures the archetypal war between the Ivory Tower and the Box Office. Entertainment statistics from 2017 report that horror movies grossed almost a billion dollars that year<sup>1</sup>, and the plethora of horror movie previews on TV right now suggest that the genre might exceed those numbers. In light of this, the typical wisdom suggests that anything with this kind of pop-culture popularity is likely shunned by academia for its baseness, novelty, and untried academic merit. And while we might think this is true given our stereotypes of academia and the mythologized Ivory Tower, it is not entirely true when it comes to academic discourse on the horror genre both in literature and digital mediums. However, while a person can search a library book or journal database and retrieve books and essays on the use or application of horror, the amount of information available of horror-specific topics is frightfully low given its popularity and omnipresence. Indeed, in just about any academic book, essay, or anthology about the significance of the horror genre, the introduction of the text inevitably bemoans the lack of horror on academia's analytic radar. The introduction informs the reader that that book, essay, anthology seeks to show us that horror is worthwhile from a scholarly standpoint. But what of a pedagogical one, especially outside the liberal walls of universities? While horror enthusiasts battle to have the genre vetted in academia, the possibility of horror as part of a pre-college curriculum is largely unexplored and unacknowledged.

This unit will attempt to brush the surface of horror's importance and potential place in the high school curriculum because of, not in spite of, its terrifying, gory, controversial, and uncomfortable themes and images. I think horror can offer our students a rare opportunity to explore something that is seemingly gratuitous and squalidly popular but really something that forces us to be metacognitive about our experiences, motives, and desires to spend our Saturday night gripping our friend's arm, sweating, and peeking through our fingers. But why is horror that vehicle? According to scholar Bruce F. Kavin, it is because horror, unlike other genres that are built upon escapism and are

contingent upon a viewer losing him/herself in the story, demands that you are present and aware of your presence:

Horror can be full of things we never want to see done or to feel, yet there we are, watching. Reflexivity—a reference to the horror film within a horror film, or more universally, the conveyed impression that a work of art is aware of itself as a work of art [...]—has many uses in the horror film, and one of them is to make us conscious of our potentially voyeuristic, sadistic or masochistic position—to call attention to the moral, aesthetic and psychological aspects of filming and watching horror, of putting the frightening in a narrative frame and a visual one, of looking. [...] Many horror movies ask us to consider why we have decided to attend this spectacle of the frightful, the gruesome, the violent, the disturbed—why we have chosen to have a nightmare, to share the experience of a madman or his victim [...].<sup>2 3</sup>

## **Background**

Appoquinimink High School is a rapidly growing school in the booming district of Middletown, DE. Once a rural district, a population surge on top of increasing commerce and competing as the top-ranked district in the state means that AHS is and has been changing tremendously over the last few years. This coming school year we have already exceeded our school's population maximum of 1600 students. To service grades 9-12 we have added more administrative bodies, are continuously working to implement Common Core State Standards, are expanding our subject pathways and adding new courses, and will be a full one-to-one school this year. Though AHS comprises more of the affluent population of Middletown and the surrounding areas, we teach students from a variety of diverse racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds.

AHS functions on 90-minute block schedules with four periods that meet every day; students then change classes in January for the spring semester. In my 12th grades classes last year, my breakdown looked thusly: 1 section of AP Literature (31 students); 1 section of English 12 honors that met every other day for the entire school year (34 students); 2 sections of English 12 honors (57 students) over the fall and spring semesters; 1 section of English 12 CP (24 students) in the spring semester.

The vision for AHS is “college and career readiness;” we want our students to be well-rounded, global citizens that are prepared for life beyond high school. Indeed, that is the aim of any institution. As we continue to grow and aim for “college and career readiness,” we are taking inspiration from colleges to organize our courses and curricula via subject pathways, which function like college majors. As an 8th year teacher who has been teaching 12th grade ELA exclusively for about 5 years, I have been working with my colleagues to develop new courses for ELA in general and specifically for 12th grade. Three years ago, we piloted two new courses as alternatives to our standard 12th grade British Literature course. I have written and taught the American and British Gothic

Literature class since its inception and have been teaching it exclusively for the last two years (in the first year I taught both Gothic and British Literature). I currently teach the Gothic course solely and AP Literature.

## **Rationale**

While both high schools in my district have been revamping the 12th grade ELA curriculum together, I am the sole writer and teacher of the Gothic Literature course at my school. Though I am very comfortable in the early Gothic materials from my own academic background and my years teaching the British Literature curriculum, it is the newer units that focus on psychological thriller and horror that I am less familiar with and am working to expand. I want to use this DTI unit to further develop the horror unit as this is the one I am least confident with and have the least amount of knowledge of texts and resources.

And this lack of knowledge is entirely of my own making—I do not like horror as a genre to watch, read, write, etc. However, as I have been working with a colleague at our sister high school to write this curriculum, and as I have been swimming in a frightening Netflix sea of horror films, I have begun to understand and appreciate the craft and seductiveness that horror represents. In the research of this unit to understand the complex relationship between horror, brain chemistry, anthropology, and the loftier analyses of the genre, I have come to learn that horror within a classroom can be an immediately applicable and exciting experience that allows us to grapple with our earliest encounters with narrative and story-telling; the first time we reveled in forbidden, secret knowledge; the thrill we get from something terrifying; radical political, psychological, social, or personal ideas and behaviors; even how “our fears and stresses through identification and catharsis, [can] offer a purge for aggression and anxiety [...] to blow off steam.”<sup>4</sup> At its core, horror allows us to cross a metaphoric boundary between life and death, the crossing of which heightens and sharpens our perceptions of the world and prepares us to explore the unknown of our own lives. By opening ourselves up to reading and viewing horror texts we have already faced life and death, so we should not be afraid to face an unknown life.<sup>5</sup> In an archetypal sense, our participation in horror is our participation in our own epic journey where we are the epic hero facing terrible fears, monsters, the unknown, and our own deaths to ultimately arrive at a new understanding of ourselves, the world, and our place in it.

I want this DTI unit to further explore the possibilities within horror and elevate the genre as an acculturated vehicle for creative writing, emotional expression, and community understanding in my classroom. I think this unit about horror and ekphrasis can be important and impactful because of its universality—both of horror and creativity itself—and in the greater conversation of artful expression as remedy and therapy for phobias and fears as we learn to employ rich imagery and words to express emotions, make interpersonal connections, and hone mindfulness

To this end, my unit will begin with an overview of ekphrastic poetry to orient the teacher of what it is and its place within the larger poetic tradition (here the teacher will find that ekphrasis, much like horror, seems to defy neat definitions). I will then offer a few poetic forms that work well for ekphrasis and for students to give them structured formats and rules for approaching creative poetry writing.<sup>6</sup> After these sections about ekphrasis specifically, I will tackle the definition of horror and explore how fear works on a biological level. Later I offer a few classroom activities pairing ekphrasis and horrific images as well as potential cross-curricular projects.

### **The Definition of Ekphrasis**

Simply put, ekphrasis is poetry inspired by and written about visual art. Though ancient in its history—dating back to Homer<sup>7</sup>--ekphrasis has often been overlooked in the grand literary [and art] tradition until more recently with the ekphrastic poems of John Keats and W.H. Auden. Perhaps a long history of neglect stemmed from seeing ekphrasis too simply—"here are some words I wrote about a painting I saw." A modern perspective on the genre has elevated ekphrasis to a sophisticated and complicated art form that requires precision and addresses the tensions of authority over viewership, artistry, creative expression, and forms of narrative.

One argument for the promotion of ekphrasis is, in the opinion of scholars like Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner, that it presents "countless opportunities for the discovery of meaning."<sup>8</sup> These possibilities are encapsulated in the mutability of the genre itself. To read or write ekphrasis is to engage in a plethora of meanings because "it has been variously treated as a mirror for the text, a mirror in the text, a mode of specular inversion, a further voice that disrupts or extends the message of the narrative, a prefiguration of that narrative (whether false or true) in its suggestions."<sup>9</sup> To be a purveyor of ekphrasis denotes that you are calling on the viewer to become part of the creative process and asking them to find meaning in everything [and nothing]. It is both a simple and incredibly complex order. Because I can look at a piece of art and a corresponding poem for it, I can also engage in an intricate dance between what we are interpreting and who we are as interpreters. By looking at something seemingly innocuous, I am underhandedly engaging in an ontological discourse that is meant to reveal me to myself. This is possible in the process of viewing, reading, and creating ekphrasis because "it draws attention to the interpretive operations we feel compelled to carry out on it when we have ceased to disregard it as automatically devoid of meaning. In drawing us to interpretation, it also draws attention to the insubstantiality of those interpretations, the manner in which, much like a Rorschach blob, they point to the subjectivity of the interpreter."<sup>10</sup> In truth, we hope that this is the experience of each person when they engage in art and literature. And though this is a tall order, that pairing of art and poetry may be a highly effective way to bring our students into this subjective and philosophical conversation. Instead of giving our students just a poem or just a piece of art, the pairing of these two forms allows for a more fruitful understanding of both as it

seems “to put them in tune with the intentionality of the creative process.”<sup>11</sup> Because they can do this, they can develop a deeper understanding of both the poetic and artistic form to produce high levels of meaning for themselves and their interpretations of the piece(s). In Mary Ehrenworth’s perspective on students with ekphrasis, she finds that “when we ask children to write through their engagement with the visual arts, we ask them both to make sense of what they see and to make meaning on the page.”<sup>12 13</sup>

## **Ekphrastic Forms**

Though there is evidence and research of the exciting possibilities of ekphrasis and poetry, it is worth stepping back from the excitement and desire to plough through a lesson and shove this new genre into our students’ faces. While the pairing of art and poetry can produce higher-level analyses, it must be noted that our students still need an introduction to the idea of pairing art and poetry no matter how simple or natural it may seem. Indeed, author John S. O’Connor in the pedagogical text *Wordplaygrounds: Reading, Writing, and Performing Poetry in the English Classroom* proposes that teachers should provide a variety of poetic structures for students because “[o]ffering diverse models suggests a greater number of possibilities to students [...] and eliminates the notion that there is somehow a ‘right answer,’ a model to be followed exactly.”<sup>14</sup> Following this advice to promote student success and avoid the anxiety of the blank page, below are a few specific poetic forms a teacher may use in the classroom to improve his/her students’ knowledge and engagement with those forms so that, later, students will possess more agency and structure with which to demonstrate their interpretations and creativity.

### **Erasure**

Also called “Blackout Poetry,” this form of poetry requires the writer to select an already-established text then erase, or black out, words and phrases to “find” a poem within the existing text. This structure is both challenging and fun, and it even allows students to create their own designs in the blacking out process (see a Google search for wonderful examples). An erasure poem would be an excellent introductory structure since it gives students a text to work with to jump start the creative process. For a specific horror focus, teachers can select any number of gothic stories as the text to be erased. To add a deeper layer of practice and begin guiding students to a more traditional model of ekphrasis, teachers could display an image, hand out a new batch of texts, and have students create an erasure poem about the image they see. A further level of agency and collaboration would be to allow students to choose their own texts *and* images.

### **Tanka/Haiku**

Like a haiku, a tanka is a Japanese poem dictated by a certain number of syllables in each line. A traditional haiku is a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5

syllable count; a tanka follows a similar structure but has two additional lines. Therefore, a tanka is a five-line poem with a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count form. These poems have been highly prized and popularized for their emotive possibilities and simplicity; the typical subject of haikus and tankas tend to be nature, though tankas were particularly featured and used in courtship rituals in Japan to express lovers' intimacy. The broad philosophy of the haiku and tanka is to focus the reader and writer on a brief moment in time and to use images and words almost as one. Poet Ezra Pound, captivated by that blurring of image and word, said of the haiku: "The image itself is speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language."<sup>15</sup> With this quote in mind, a haiku or tanka selection for students could be a gateway into more ekphrasis.

### Dramatic Monologue

Sharing the stage with the theatrical monologue, the dramatic monologue serves many of the same purposes and is structured similarly: the audience the narrator is speaking to is implied; the narrator is the sole "character; and the narrator speaks via an assumed identity or persona. Because the dramatic monologue is solely from the narrator's perspective, the focus is on the subjective qualities and on the tension between perception and reality, the conclusion of which the reader must come to without help or answers from the narrator and his/her monologue. A few well-known examples of this poetic structure are Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," as well as T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Mirror," "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" by John Ashbery, "Night, Death, Mississippi," by Robert Hayden, and James Dickey's poem "Falling."

This form would be my top pick for this unit as the nature of the monologue puts the reader into the mind of [usually] unstable or questionable characters, or ones fraught with emotional turmoil. This heightens the possibility of questioning the character's reliability and asks us to delve into the tension between reality and what is perceived.

### Pantoum

Much like the sea-faring vessel you might confuse as the name of this poetic structure, the pantoum poem floats on groupings of quatrains, or four-line stanzas that typically rhyme *abab* in each quatrain. However, what might really rock your ship is the order of the lines and the repetition of certain lines in subsequent stanzas. In a pantoum, the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza, usually making the last line of a pantoum the same as the first and causing the lines to rhyme alternately. A few pantoum examples include: Linda Pastan's "Something about Trees;" Carolyn Kizer's "Parents' Pantoum;" John Ashbery's "Pantoum;" and Nellie Wong's "Grandmothers' Song."

### Concrete

In the same category as Erasure and Tankas and Haikus, where words are used as part of the created images, concrete poems also blur the line between word and art as the words are literally written to make the image. In a concrete poem, the poet uses the words of the poem to depict a recognizable shape. A simple Google search curates a host of fun examples, and a few more well-known ones are “The Little Horse” by e.e.cummings, “Concrete Cat” by Dorthi Charles, “Swan and Shadow” by John Hollander, and Lewis Carroll’s “The Mouse’s Tail.”

This could be an interesting approach in the horror genre to have the poems take the shape of the students’ fears, or have the poems concretely represent the theme present in the poem. For example, a poem about a violent death might be concretized into a dagger dripping with blood.

## Sonnet

Broken into two traditions, the basic formula of the sonnet is comprised of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. In the Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet, the rhyme scheme is *abba, abba, cdecde* or *cdcdcd* and is typically divided into two stanzas: the octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the final six lines). This division allows the author to rigidly structure his/her thematic organization. In the octave, the reader is presented with an observation or question. Transitioning between the octave and the sestet is the volta, or turn, that denotes a shift from the question or observation to a proposed answer.

The English, or Shakespearean, sonnet is very similar to its Italian progenitor with slight changes to accommodate the differences in language. Instead of an octave and sestet, the English sonnet is further deconstructed into three quatrain (four-line stanzas) and a rhyming couplet at the end. This alters the rhyme scheme to *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. In many respects, the three quatrains function like the Italian octave—a question is proposed or a set of observations about a subject recorded. Sometimes the third quatrain will contain a volta, but more often it is the final rhyming couplet that offers some kind of answer or epiphany about the subject. Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 is often cited in introductions of sonnets as it does just that. Twelve lines paint quite a harrowing picture of a love interest that seemingly no one could love; however, the couplet reveals to the reader that the superficial descriptions of outward beauty are fallacies that obstruct a person’s understanding and experience of true love.

Though sonnets are almost inextricably linked to thoughts of love, I think the intentional structure of the proposed question, argument, and eventual answer, especially of the Petrarchan sonnet form, offers a unique and very sophisticated opportunity for students to not only write about their fears but to perhaps also offer an answer or evaluation of those fears within the poem.

## The Definition of Horror

Your heart beats faster; a breath of air makes your hair rise to attention—so stiff and sudden that it is painful and sends a chill through each follicle. Your eyes dart back and forth; your ears tilt forward, almost out of your head, to pick up the smallest sound. Visions and images of monsters and ghosts start to parade through your mind's eye as the creak of the door behind you breaks the silence.

This scenario, whether we have experienced it before personally or simply seen it on screen, encompasses the physical and emotional definition of horror. The scary images, the sensation of your heart falling into your stomach, the knowledge that something *has* to be on the other side of the door—this is the definition that taps into our primordial fears and forces us to confront them, causing both terror and pleasure. This uncomfortable hostage negotiation between our desire for thrills and our disgust at those images and ideas is exactly what makes the horror genre so complicated to define and understand its popularity. Many scholars have taken a stab at capturing this “why” for horror, and most attempts have resulted in beautifully philosophical quandaries about the evolution of fear, the tapping into of primary motives of fight or flight, and the ontological experience of self.<sup>16</sup> Bruce F. Kawin in his book *Horror and the Horror Film* begins his novel with a similar attempt—how do we define horror and why is this genre, despite the way it “resists formulation and can be difficult and unpleasant to contemplate,”<sup>17</sup> worth our attention? In Kawin’s exploration, I think his profound comments are in horror’s age and how that age allows it to put us in touch with deep-seated fears and universal truths. For Kawin, because horror<sup>18</sup> brings us “uncomfortably close to the worst that could ever happen—to a character or to ourselves”<sup>19</sup>, horror *is* “part of our response to the world.”<sup>20</sup> Horror and the experience of fear is as old as humans beings, and to face horror is to allow ourselves to tap into a core set of fears that all humans have always experienced. In many ways, horror is a part of Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. All humans have always encountered horrific images and feelings and have had to react to them; so, when we participate in a horror text, we are bringing those unconscious fears and desires to be thrilled into the conscious mind. When we do this, not only are we connected to [the history of] humanity, we are also directly engaging in a “way to conceptualize, give shape to and deal with the evil and frightening.”<sup>21</sup> This in itself has therapeutic and cathartic possibilities for the individual.

Horror is fascinating in its evolution from unconscious, biological programming to deeply conscious, thrill-seeking creation and behavior. How has something that most likely helped early man survive become a multi-billion dollar creative and entertainment industry with devotees from every corner of the world? Surely it is unnatural to put our bodies and minds through this psychological and physical torture. What would early man say, he who trusted the fear stimulus to help him avoid bad water and dangerous creatures to us today who desperately and pervasively reproduce those fear responses simply for the sake of thrill and pleasure? In thinking about it this way, the pursuit of horror seems



to be an illogical and idiotic desire. The genre is base, gratuitous, and pointless. Why indulge in horror if our biology, physiology, and psychology balk at it?<sup>22</sup>

## **How Fear Works**

### Fear and Evolution

To consider what horror is and why it is so popular (and what it can do for us in the classroom), let us go back to the beginning and consider where horror and fear come from biologically.

Writer Stephen T. Asma<sup>23</sup> has a brilliant book, *On Monsters*, that tracks the evolution of fear and the human relationship to monsters in both the real world and in horror fiction of various mediums. Harkening to Darwin's theory of the evolution of instincts, Asma discusses how fear was built, hard-wired, into our species as we evolved over millennia, first filled with knowledge to help us survive. Strategically speaking, a key to survival is a reliable, clean water source. As early man learned the differences and risks associated with the different watering holes he encountered, that knowledge and those associations became hard-wired into our collective species' unconscious. So, our more modern fear of murky water and what might lie unseen just below the surface is a result of this instinctual learning, categorizing, and evolution from our early ancestors trying to ensure the water they found has drinkable.<sup>24</sup> In a similar sense, our fears and phobias of certain creatures arguably developed much the same way from our early instinct programming. So, if we accept this possibility that a case of arachnophobia a person has is simply a shadow of our species' time in Africa learning to avoid certain spiders, why might this phobia still persist in modern life where we have more control over our environment, where we sleep, have access to medical advances, and even shoes with which to smash the spiders? Why can't a person simply let go of a phobia? Asma makes a compelling argument about this idea:

In recent cognitive science debates, fears of snakes, spiders, and other creatures have been held up as examples of preset mental circuits in the human brain.

Though it is a controversial idea, a growing number of theorists argue that our brains come hard-wired with some belief content, such as 'snakes=bad.' The fact that phobias seem so resistant to revision in light of new experiences suggests that they are closed information systems. Even after a phobic person is told that a snake is not poisonous or witnesses the removal of the venom ducts, he or she still dreads handling the reptile.<sup>25</sup>

New research seems to back Asma's findings as well. Over the last few years, there have been strides to pinpoint how the brain processes fear and how that might be used to eventually treat mental health disorders. An article from *Neuroscience News* first speaks to Asma's writings about the importance of fear in our evolution: "People are motivated to remember fearful events, because this information is useful for daily survival."<sup>26</sup> Much

like Asma states, humans do indeed seem to be hard-wired to remember events or things that terrify us and then code that information for later survival needs to help us learn to avoid hunting in the dark, exploring certain caves, or listening carefully to the signal sounds of dangerous animals. What has not been clear outside of rodent studies is how exactly do human brain circuits process and store fear. Using horror movies as stimuli for their test subjects, scientists are beginning to find that this fear processing is possible through the interplay between *two* areas of the brain: the hippocampus and the amygdala. In the study, researchers found that “the traffic pattern between the two brain regions are controlled by the emotion of the movie; a unidirectional flow of information from the amygdala to the hippocampus only occurred when people were watching fearful movies clips but not while watching peaceful scenes.”<sup>27</sup> Researchers learned that “the amygdala first extracts emotional relevance”<sup>28</sup> from the horror movie, then sends that information to the hippocampus, which functions to process emotional events into memory. What is significant and fascinating here is that horror had to be the catalyst for this discovery. Because the test subjects’ amygdalae and hippocampi did not react to peaceful, calm stimuli, scientists had to utilize horror movies to track this “traffic pattern.” This corroborates Asma’s idea of the “closed information system” and can help us understand the more prominent role horror has play in human survival.

The inability to simply “let go” of a phobia that Asma writes about is what the horror industry plays with and preys upon. We still have fears that are programmed within us, and we are still seeking environments where we can encounter and interact with those fears. Why is this true? Why is this popular? And what might be the purpose now? These are the questions that I also want students to engage with. I think students will be able to wrestle immediately with these kinds of questions because they harken to ideas and experiences that are relevant, contemporary, and primal. As science turns to the horror industry to ask similar questions, we see this interplay between a primal human experience to document that which frightened us to death on cave paintings while simultaneously comprehending that that same experience of fear was keeping us alive.

### Ekphrastic Fear

So why are we pairing horror, with all of its evolutionary information, grotesque imagery, and emotional elicitation, with the high-brow subjects of poetry and art? Why is art important to horror and how is horror important to art? If we consider the love of horror and how it reflects real concerns that our teenagers face—all the different metaphoric monsters that plague them as they are trying to survive this tumultuous time of developing self-identity, emotional intelligence, and manage physical, social changes—how do we best express that horror, and how do we understand what it represents to us? What better way than through art?

With the rising popularity of alternative rehabilitations like art and music therapies, there is a burgeoning field of research that promotes the use of art with teenagers in

counseling capacities. Art is at the forefront of these developments because of how art can activate different parts of the brain and give a new perspective on expressing ideas and emotions. Proponents of art therapy cite a few of the following benefits of art with teenagers: art promotes more focus, new ways of seeing things, helps to hone problem solving skills, and even offers new coping mechanisms for stress.<sup>29</sup> With guidance and practice via art to develop these skills, art can then assist teenagers in exploring their self-identity and hone their non-verbal expression. It seems that teenagers are certainly ripe for this possibility as we see many teenagers go through phases of changing clothing styles, dyeing hair, getting tattoos and piercings, and so on. We can now harness this proclivity and provide art as another way to express their complex inner lives. By adding horror to the mix, we might be able to get to the heart of real fears teenagers face on their way to adulthood and finding their place in the world.

### **Classroom Activities**

The activity ideas included below are meant to set the teacher and students up for the convergence of horror, fear/phobia, and ekphrasis to consider how and why we might bring these seemingly disparate things together in the high school classroom.

To scaffold these bigger concepts and their connections, we want to first start by orienting students to the smaller building blocks and provide them with guided practice. The first activity seeks to simply get students to write creatively—having them do ekphrasis before getting too academic about the definition or analyzing already-published examples. I think this is an important first step as other pieces of this unit rely heavily on students being willing and comfortable with engaging their creative side. After that, the teacher can look towards more specific ideas and activities for ekphrasis, providing examples and explanations for those chosen images and words that fit this genre. Then, students will work towards a staggered approach where they can study poems and create an accompanying image, and then vice versa where students are given images and tasked with creating an accompanying poem. Then, I'd like to graduate students to creating both poem and image. I think there are cross-curricular possibilities in doing this with an art or psychology class as well.

#### **Activity #1**

Often with creative assignments, students have a difficult time finding a starting place. Indeed, in the conversation about fear and phobias that this unit encompasses, what holds more fear for a student programmed for academics than to walk into class and suddenly be asked to produce something *creative*? The tyranny of the blank page is enough for a student to break into cold sweat just as the agoraphobic might when stepping onto the porch. To guide students in their creativity, the activity may be well-served as a 1<sup>st</sup> activity for this unit, though it can certainly be used at any time.

This activity requires front-end work on the teacher's part; namely, searching for, obtaining, and re-producing horror images.<sup>30</sup> The best structure for this is to have the images printed somewhere, not in one book students can flip through; in a pinch, and in a school with one-to-one technology, teachers could commandeer a few student Chromebooks or i-pads and display the images individually on each device. The teacher will set up the images around the room to promote student physical engagement and thinking space as students circulate. Additionally, students will be given numbers (dependent on the number of images and how many students the teacher wants in a "group"), which will be important for later in the activity.

To start off, the teacher will give students post-it notes, one for each image in the classroom. The teacher can choose to have students come up in waves or start groups of students at each image then rotate in one direction. As students walk around and view each image, they are to take their post-it notes, write one adjective for the image, and stick it next to the image. Once each student has done this for each image, they will return to their seats.

Next, the teacher will share with the students that the numbers they received earlier correspond to one of the images they closely viewed (the teacher can simply count off the images from here or have them labeled with the images from the beginning). Their task now is to write a poem about that image using as many of the adjectives that they and their classmates placed around that image (the teacher can decide if s/he would like students to label those adjectives within their poems). Provide students with time to write. Once that writing time is over, the teacher will ask students to share their poems in any way that makes sense for the time available and the size of the class. A suggestion for sharing their poems would be to have all the students with the same number and image group come together and share their poems in a round-robin while the rest of the class does likewise simultaneously. Once each student in that number bunch has shared, the teacher will ask the group to select the best poem to be shared out loud. Then, the whole class will take turns sharing the selected poems from each group. My students enjoy the stereotypical "coffee house poetry snap" to celebrate each poem; I suggest something similar to promote a positive classroom culture, especially when it comes to encouraging student to share personal writing.

To note: depending on how the teacher wants to tackle this unit, they could, before this particular activity, have students read and analyze published ekphrastic poems to see how images and writing are paired and how authors focus on certain parts of the image to tell a story.<sup>31</sup> Once they've gained familiarity with the concept of art and writing pairs, they can then focus on analyzing how certain poetic elements are used to create meaning, discovering how to "read" an image and understanding how different artistic elements come together to make meaning, suggestions, and associations for the viewer. Of course, this can come after Activity #1 if the teacher simply wants to get the creative wheels turning.

## Activity #2

Now that the students have had some guided creative practice, the teacher will then have students find their own images as well as create a poem for that image. The teacher needs to be clear in the type or tone of images students should be looking for, or the teacher will provide students with a list from which to choose their image if more guidance is needed. For this unit that is based on Gothic Literature and the tackling of fears and phobias, students will be exposed to more grotesque images. Suggested images can be found at the end of this unit and include titles like: *Anxiety* by Edvard Munch, *Buried Alive* by Antoine Wiertz, and *Saturn Devouring His Son* by Francisco Goya.

## Activity #3

Like the activity above, this can be scaffolded up as students feel more comfortable and confident with their creative work. In reverse of the above activity, the teacher will begin by providing published poems to students or having them choose from an already-prepared list, and have them analyze the poem, thinking about the poetic elements and the feelings they elicit. Then, the teacher will ask that the students create an image to go with the poem they've been given or chosen. If the class is ready, the teacher will have the students create their own poems, then create the corresponding image. Suggested poems can be found at the end of this unit and include titles like: "Bombardment" by Richard Aldington, "Fear of Death" by Sylvia Chidi, "Fear of The Inexplicable" by Rainer Maria Rilke, and "The Panic of Sleep" by Samuel Tyler Coleridge.

A fun possibility with this activity and the one before it would be to put the images and poems in separate piles, shuffle them, then re-distribute to the students. The students could then circulate around the room, collaborating with each other to try to pair the original poems and images back together. The teacher could do a written or verbal extension where students must defend their choices before revealing the correct pairings to the whole class. A few well-known ekphrastic poems that are often published with their accompanying images are: Anne Sexton's "Starry Night" paired with Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*; Pieter Brueghel's painting *Landscape With the Fall of Icarus* that inspired both W.H. Auden's "In the Musée des Beaux Arts" and William Carols Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus;" "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats and "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" by Percy Bysshe Shelley.<sup>32</sup> For an extra challenge outside of poetry specifically, teachers can turn to [excerpts of] Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, which is supposedly based on Dostoevsky's frightened reaction to viewing *The Body of the Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein.

Extension and Cross-Curricular Ideas

Given the nature of ekphrastic poetry and the horror genre, there are many possibilities for cross-curricular projects with art teachers and psychology teachers (if the school offers psychology courses). With an art class, the art teacher could have an assignment for his/her students to create art within the horror genre. Then, the unit's teacher could collect those student works and give them to his/her students, who will analyze the art pieces and write ekphrastic poems based on those pieces. If an art teacher wanted to add extension in her own class, she could solicit the unit's teacher for student horror poems, give them to her art students, and have them create works of art based on their peers' poems.

For a psychology class, ink blot tests could be used as the art piece of choice for which to create an ekphrasis poem. Psychology students could take the ekphrastic poems inspired by published art pieces and try to "diagnose" the painter whose works inspired the poem. This could also work in reverse where the psychology student diagnosis the writer who wrote the poem that inspired a horror image. These practices could even be compiled into a type of visual textbook ancillary for the psychology class where a host of different phobias and abnormalities could have accompanying images and poems.

Another extension idea would be to research different Gothic/horror authors and what fears and phobias they might have [that could be evident in their writing]. Edgar Allan Poe would be a great starting author for this as his many fears are well-known and indisputably are found in his work. For example, Poe, like many 19<sup>th</sup> century people, had a vivid fear of being buried alive. Indeed, this was arguably well-founded as many diseases, customs of death, and health procedures for burial resulted in quite a lot of people actually being buried alive.<sup>33</sup> This fear turns up time and again in his writing where numerous characters are buried alive or actively seal that fate for another character.<sup>34</sup> Students could take this knowledge and create an image and ekphrastic poem about that phobia/fear specifically, or even in the persona of the writer who has those fears/phobias.

In combination with psychology, I think the ultimate activity for this horror and poetry subject matter will come if the teacher takes the above activity and has students confront their own fears and phobias, creating art and poetry to express those emotions. The importance of directly confronting those fears and phobias through graphic horror, poetry, and art is best summed up Philip J. Nickel's essay in the book *The Philosophy of Horror* where, as he tries to redefine horror's epistemology and its "so what?" question. As Nickel analyzes *The Birds*, he uses the final climatic scene where Melanie goes up to the second floor of the house even though the birds clearly are there. Though an audience would be frustrated by Melanie's actions because they seem so foolish in light of what is happening in the context of the movie, Nickel articulates instead that this moment is what makes our viewing of and participation in and with horror so important: "horror makes us realize that we can still go on, even in the absence of perfect certainty [...]"<sup>35</sup> As our students face known and unknown horrors in the world, as well as turbulent inner lives of

growing intellect, phobias, and hormones, perhaps at its core horror can offer them comfort and confidence in their abilities to face all of that and be successful, that they, like Melanie, can “continue to walk up the stairs even though [our] trust cannot be secured. It demonstrates that similarly, we continue to act in the presence of fear.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Ahmad, Aalya, and Sean Moreland. *Fear and Learning: Essays on the Pedagogy of Horror*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2013.

This would be an excellent starting point for general research on the place of horror in the classroom.

Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Vancouver, B.C.: Langara College, 2009.

Though focused on monsters specifically, Asma’s book does a wonderful job of introducing the nature of fear, its biological foundation, its connection to monsters in fiction, art, and entertainment spanning the Bible to contemporary movies. Asma breaks his book up into well-conceived sections for types of monsters, psychological studies, as well as external and internal monsters.

Bartsch, Shadi, and Jaś Elsner. "Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis." *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): I-Vi. doi:10.1086/521128.

Benshoff, Harry M. *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Clasen, Mathias F. *Why Horror Seduces*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Guner, Fisun. "Listed: Poems Inspired by Paintings: A Selection of 10 Great Poems and the Paintings That Inspired Them." Theartsdesk.com. August 18, 2013. Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/listed-poems-inspired-paintings>.

Though only a list of ten poems and paintings, this may serve as a starting place for teachers to familiarize themselves with the genre via well-known examples. What is particularly nice and helpful is that the author gives a small paragraph of context for each poem and painting to help the reader see the connection and inspiration between the two art forms.

Heller, Terry. *The Delights of Terror: An Aesthetics of the Tale of Terror*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

"Horror Movie Scenes Help Researchers Identify Key Brain Circuits for Fear Processing." *Neuroscience News*. February 08, 2017. Accessed January 20, 2019. <https://neurosciencenews.com/amygdala-hippocampus-fear-movies-6082/>.

Kawin, Bruce F. "Horror." *In Horror and the Horror Film*, 2-19. Anthem Press, 2012. Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www-jstor-org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctt1gsmz16.5>.

Kendrick, Walter. *The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment*. New York: Grove, 1991.

Jones, Stephen. *The Art of Horror: An Illustrated History*. Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2015.

For a vast assortment of "horror" art and images, this book is an excellent resource for an introductory search or as a sole repository.

Moorman, Honor. "Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art." *The English Journal* 96, no. 1 (September 2006): 46-53. doi:10.2307/30046662.

On page 49 of her article, Moorman includes a very helpful checklist for how to analyze a poem created for a work of art. This could easily be adapted into a handout for students, turned into a peer editing opportunity, etc.

Nickel, Philip J. "Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life." In *The Philosophy of Horror*, 14-32. University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

Oriana. "Oriana-poetry." THE AMERICAN GOTHIC: TWO POEMS. July 21, 2010. Accessed October 27, 2018. <http://oriana-poetry.blogspot.com/2010/07/american-gothic-two-poems.html>.

This website presents two ekphrastic poems based on the famous painting *American Gothic*. This is a great resource to see an already-done example of ekphrasis, and an image that might allow the teacher to discuss the visual Gothic suggestions as a way to enhance students' engagement with the Gothic beyond fiction.

Rusche, Henry. The Poet Speaks of Art. Accessed December 16, 2018. <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html>.

Created for English students at Emory University, this site would be supremely helpful to any teacher as an introduction of ekphrastic poetry where one can find about 45 examples of images and their accompanying poems.

Terror vs. Horror. August 25, 2008. Accessed October 27, 2018. [http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/terror\\_horror.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/terror_horror.html).

This particular page from the website offers various and contradictory definitions of horror and terror, demonstrating how linked these two concepts are but sometimes how difficult it is to differentiate between them. This could be a useful and fun source at the beginning of this unit to start a conversation about the definition of horror.

Tropp, Martin. *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 199.



## **Appendix A—Implementing District Standards**

The unit I am proposing touches on Common Core State Standards for ELA as well as Delaware Arts Standards. In ELA, this unit addresses reading standard 7 that asks students to analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem. Though this standard typically is used when teachers pair novels with movie versions or plays with live versions, I think it would be appropriate to think of ekphrasis as an interpretation of a poem and vice versa because the core of the standards is to have students evaluate how each version interprets the source text. Because half of this unit is based on the explication and creation of poetry, reading standards 3D, 4, 5 would all fit into this unit as they ask students to be mindful and meticulous about using language precisely, consider how authors structure a text, and how to analyze and break down the use of figurative versus literal language. In addition to ELA standards, the inclusion of visual art also speaks to the Delaware Art Standards. More specifically, this unit would bring in elements of the following standards: 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Art Anchor Standard #1 encapsulates the student’s process of generating and conceptualizing artistic ideas and work. This standard is appropriate for a suggested activity for students to produce their own artwork as well as a cross-curricular suggestion of pairing with art students. In examining existing art, anchor standards 7, 8, 9, and 10 address the students’ abilities to perceive, analyze, and interpret artistic meaning and the choices an artist makes to create a piece. Standard 10 tackles students’ capacity to synthesize their personal experience with art, and standard 11 broadens that concept to deepen artistic connections to social, cultural, and historical contexts.

## **Appendix B—Additional Texts to Consider**

### Poems

“(879) Fear Me-Stay Alive” by Melvina Germain  
“A Darting Fear” by Emily Dickinson  
“Bombardment” by Richard Aldington  
“Couples Therapy” by Patrick Roche  
“Daddy” by Sylvia Plath  
“Dope” by Amiri Baraka  
“Fear No More” by William Shakespeare  
“Fear Of Death” by Sylvia Chidi  
“Fear Of The Inexplicable” by Rainer Maria Rilke  
“Good Bones” by Maggie Smith  
“Mrs. Dahmer” by Sierra Demulder  
“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning  
“OCD” by Neil Hilborn  
“Porphyria’s Lover” by Robert Browning  
“Sanctuary” by Jean Valentine

“The Fear Warehouse” by Gary William Fincke  
“The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot  
“The Panic of Sleep” by Samuel Tyler Coleridge  
“The Price is Right: A Torture Wheel of Fortune” by Edward Dorn  
“This living hand, now warm and capable” by John Keats  
“What Do You Call Launch Audio in a New Window” by Cornelius Eady  
“What Kind of Times Are These” by Adrienne Rich  
Shakespeare monologues

## Art and Images

*Anxiety* by Edvard Munch  
*Buried Alive* by Antoine Wiertz  
*Cain in the United States* by David Alfaro Siqueiros  
*Defense of Culture—and the Walls Live* by Rudolph von Ripper

The two above are more political in nature, but this could offer an opportunity for the teacher to create a lesson around the possibility horror has to offer political critique and commentary within a popular entertainment genre. It may be valuable to pair these pieces with a recent movie like *Get Out*.

*Each Night a Dream Visits Us* by Antoine Wiertz  
*Ecce Homo* by Rudolph von Ripper  
*Ecco Homo* by Paul Delvaux

These two *Ecco* pieces could offer a lesson in comparison and title meaning.

*Hunger, Madness, Crime* by Antoine Wiertz  
*Madness* by Alfred Kubin  
*Place of Darkness* by Abraham Rattner  
*Saturn Devouring His Son* by Francisco Goya  
*Tauromachy* by Germaine Richier  
*The Great God Pan* by Adolf Dehn  
*The Incantation* by Francisco Goya  
*The New Lazarus* by Philip Evergood  
*The Nightmare* by Henri Fuseli  
*The Revenge II* by Jean-Marie Poumeyrol  
*The Scream* by Edvard Munch  
*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* by Francisco Goya  
*The Witches Sabbath* by Francisco Goya  
*Two Old Men* by Francisco Goya

## TV, Websites, and Media

Mahnke, Aaron. “They Made a Tonic.” *Lore*. Amazon Prime. 2017.

Torgovnick, Marianna. "The Top 10 Classic Fears in Literature." TED Blog. October 31, 2014. <https://blog.ted.com/the-top-10-classic-fears-in-literature/>.

Walker, Karen Thompson. "What Fear Can Teach Us." TEDGlobal. 2012. [https://www.ted.com/talks/karen\\_thompson\\_walker\\_what\\_fear\\_can\\_teach\\_us?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_thompson_walker_what_fear_can_teach_us?language=en)

There is also a Common Lit lesson plan for this TED talk:  
<https://www.commonlit.org/texts/what-fear-can-teach-us>.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> More specific facts can be found via this Forbes article:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/robcairn/2017/10/16/2017-is-the-biggest-year-for-horror-in-decades/#795e7b4352d9>

<sup>2</sup> From Bruce F. Kawin's first chapter in *Horror and the Horror Film*, pg. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Depending on the teacher's time restraints, a great exploration of this concept of metacognitive voyeurism can be explored via a lesson on the Grand Guignol, a Parisian theatre from 1897-1962 that celebrated all things horrible, insane, and degrading in the most graphic ways. A starting text for research on the theatre is: Gordon, Mel, and Teller. *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror*. USA: Da Capo Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Kawin, pg. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Kawin, pg. 17.

<sup>6</sup> While the idea of rigid poetic structures might seem counterintuitive to a unit about creative expression, the goal here is to give teachers forms of poetry to inspire students who may have little to know experience with writing poetry. Though a teacher is welcome to launch into free verse poetry, one sometimes finds that rules can actually help students produce poetry and lessen the fear of the blank page and "not having anything to say."

<sup>7</sup> Many would cite here the excerpt about Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*.

<sup>8</sup> Bartsch and Elsner, pg. i

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. i

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. ii

<sup>11</sup> From Honor Moorman's article "Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art," pg. 50

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Moorman also notes from her research that "Timothy Cage and Lawrence Rosenfield note similar results in their analysis of students' reactions to ekphrastic poetry: 'When the relationships between the poems and paintings are acknowledged, students' emotional and intellectual engagement with the texts is extended to new dimensions; the poem encompasses more and there is more to respond to simply because another art form is integrated into the literary text' (qtd. in Milner and Milner, 162-162)." Pg. 47-48.

<sup>14</sup> From Honor Moorman's article "Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art," pg. 47.

<sup>15</sup> From <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/haiku-poetic-form> citing Pound's famous haiku "In a station of the metro."

<sup>16</sup> In Thomas Fahy's anthology *The Philosophy of Horror*, author Philip J. Nickel's chapter "Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life" begins with a "simple" definition of horror. In Nickel's estimation, "Horror has two central elements: (1) an appearance of the evil supernatural or of the monstrous (this includes the psychopath who kills monstrously); and (2) the intentional elicitation of dread, visceral disgust, fear, or startlement in the spectator or reader" (pg. 15). Nickel goes on to discuss how his definition differs from Noël Carroll's definition of horror, Carroll being a foremost philosopher of art with a focus on film. In Carroll's analyses of horror films specifically, he defines horror as the fictional presence of monsters but focuses more on how those monsters elicit an emotional reaction from the viewer or reader; the reaction is

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more important, so the monsters are not real. For Nickel, his definition allows for the real presence of monsters: “the threats that horror presents are not always fictional but can bleed into the actual world” (pg.15).

<sup>17</sup> Kawin, pg. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Kawin specifically address the horror film, but I think his thematic ideas and interpretations allow us to see his analyses for any medium that utilizes horror.

<sup>19</sup> Kawin, pg. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Harry M. Benshoff, in his book *A Companion to the Horror Film*, echoes similarly: “Here is the problem: if fear and disgust are the kinds of feelings that people typically avoid, or, if they feel bad, then why in the world do people go to horror movies? This problem is known as the paradox of horror [sic]” (pg. 7).

<sup>23</sup> Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pg. 3

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pgs. 4-5

<sup>26</sup> From <https://neurosciencenews.com/amygdala-hippocampus-fear-movies-6082/>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> A few websites that offer some basic, helpful information about these changes in teenagers and the benefits of art are: [https://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/curriculum/guides/art/art79/Artadols\\_2.pdf](https://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/curriculum/guides/art/art79/Artadols_2.pdf), <https://www.trulyconnectedcounseling.com/news-1/why-teens-and-art-therapy-are-a-perfect-match/9/21/2017>, <http://www.talktomai.com/insights/express-feelings/>, and <https://schildandfamilypsychiatry.com/10-reasons-art-therapy-great-teens/>.

<sup>30</sup> An excellent place to start would be the following book: Jones, Stephen. *The Art of Horror: An Illustrated History*. Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2015

<sup>31</sup> See pg. 49 of Honor Moorman’s article “Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art” for a helpful checklist on how to analyze poems written about art.

<sup>32</sup> Additional texts can be found from these websites as well:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/nov/14/ten-best-ekphrasis-john-mullan> and

<https://artsandculture.google.com/theme/KwKixoZQslcaKw>.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps if a teacher is uncomfortable with the prospect of asking students to talk about their fears and phobias. They might want to use the podcast made TV series *Lore* through Amazon Prime. Told through a mix of documentary, acting, and animation, *Lore* explores the real-life foundations of various fears and phobias. The first episode “They Made a Tonic” follows George Brown’s family in 19th-century New England, and the early deaths of most of this family due to consumption. Weaved into the Brown family story is an exposé on the 19th century pandemic of “tapophobia,” or fear of premature death. At the time, deciding whether a person was dead or not had little to do with scientific knowledge and more to do with guessing and applying numerous stimuli meant to wake a person to ensure they were indeed dead. Bodies also waited to be buried for months and, when finally in the ground, some applied different inventions inside coffins that would allow a person to signal they were still alive if they were indeed buried.

<sup>34</sup> A few well-known examples from Edgar Allan Poe would be “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Black Cat,” “The Premature Burial,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “Berenice.” For other examples that are categorized, try this website: <https://blog.ted.com/the-top-10-classic-fears-in-literature/>.

<sup>35</sup> Nickel’s chapter in *The Philosophy of Horror*, pg. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.