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Honors 104

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The Horror! The Horror!

The horror novel is nothing new to literature. Humanity has always had an acute fascination with the repulsive and terrifying that dates back to oral folktales. Through the years, horror as a genre has evolved and changed, and the nuances of what makes a horror story effective have become more well-known. An effective horror story is told in a way where the protagonist's fate is never certain, and there is a sense of tension and release that keeps the reader on the edge of their seat and never allows them to rest. However, there are different formats through which the author can achieve this goal of anticipation and fear.

During a 5-week period in 1974, Anne Rice wrote the first novel in what would become a thirteen-book series. Four years later, Rice would publish *Interview with the Vampire*, a gothic novel that tells the tale of a young plantation owner turned into a vampire, and his struggles with morality in his new immortal life (*Prism of the Night: A Biography of Anne Rice*).

The novel is written in third person, although much of it is from a first-person perspective. This is because as the title implies, it is an interview. The book itself is from the third person perspective, however, since Daniel Molloy, a young radio journalist, is interviewing Louis de Pointe du Lac, the titular vampire, the bulk of the story is Louis speaking, and therefore in the first person.

The format of this novel could be considered a modern twist on the epistolary novel. Most epistolary novels are written letters or documents, however, in *Interview with the Vampire*, the cassette recordings of the interview serve in their place.

The novel effectively uses this format because it is not just one long memoir by Louis. Molloy interrupts the vampire multiple times to ask clarifying questions and give comments. This allows a deeper insight into the life of the vampire. The reader knows as little about this world as Molloy does, and Molloy asks the questions that the reader might were they there. Through Molloy's questions, we are able to learn more about the physical aspects of Louis' vampirism and how he differs from humans:

The vampire reached across the table now and gently brushed an ash from the boy's lapel, and the boy stared at his withdrawing hand in alarm. "Excuse me," said the vampire. "I didn't mean to frighten you."... "I just got the impression suddenly that your arm was...abnormally long. You reached so far without moving!" [the boy said]. "No," said the vampire..."I moved forward much too fast for you to see. It was an illusion." "You moved forward? But you didn't. You were sitting just as you are now, with your back against the chair." "No," repeated the vampire firmly. "I moved forward as I told you. Here, I'll do it again." And he did it again, and the boy stared with the same mixture of confusion and fear. "You still didn't see it...But... if you look at my outstretched arm now, it's really not remarkably long at all. You have experienced a fundamental difference between the way you see and I see. My gesture appeared slow and somewhat languid to me."

Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire* (The Vampire Chronicles, Book 1) (p. 26). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Through these conversations, we also see a closer look into Louis' inner psychological drive, and we are able to see how he is similar to humans as well:

“Babette, the way you speak of her,” said the boy. “As if your feeling was special.” “Did I give you the impression I could not feel?” asked the vampire. “No, not at all... But I was wondering ... did you have a special feeling for Babette?...“You mean love,” said the vampire. “Why do you hesitate to say it?”

Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire* (The Vampire Chronicles, Book 1) (p. 59). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* does an effective job using the epistolary format to tell a cohesive story. It allows a story to be told completely, while filling the reader in on the aspects of the world of the novel that differ from ours. By having Molloy interrupt with questions, it saves the reader from confusion, and allows one to relate to Molloy as he hears the story, and Louis as he tells it.

The format of an epistolary story is nothing new to horror. In fact, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, one of the first horror novels, is an epistolary novel. However, it does not make use of this form of storytelling as well as *Interview with the Vampire* does.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* begins with a series of letters written by a young explorer, Captain Robert Walton, who has journeyed to the arctic with a crew of sailors in hopes of expanding his scientific knowledge and achieving fame. One day, Walton's crew finds a man on the surrounding ice. This man turns out to be Victor Frankenstein, and after a few days, he tells Walton the story of how he came to be in the arctic.

The remainder of the novel, save the end of the final chapter, when Walton continues writing in letter format, is essentially a memoir. It is completely told from Frankenstein's perspective, and Walton makes no interjections and asks no questions.

This varies from the way *Interview with the Vampire* works as an epistolary novel. Daniel Molloy often stops Louis when he is telling his story. He asks him clarifying questions on decisions he made and how he felt. Walton makes no such interjections to Frankenstein's story, which essentially becomes a memoir. The only interaction between Walton and Frankenstein in regards to the story telling, occurs right before the proper story of the novel begins:

I [Walton] felt the greatest eagerness to hear the promised narrative, partly from curiosity, and partly from a strong desire to ameliorate his fate, if it were in my power. I expressed these feelings in my answer. "I thank you," he [Frankenstein] replied, "for your sympathy, but it is useless; my fate is nearly fulfilled. I wait but for one event, and then I shall repose in peace. I understand your feeling," continued he, perceiving that I wished to interrupt him; "but you are mistaken, my friend, if thus you will allow me to name you; nothing can alter my destiny: listen to my history, and you will perceive how irrevocably it is determined."

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein* (AmazonClassics Edition) (p. 9). Amazon Classics. Kindle Edition.

The first part of *Frankenstein* has no reason to be in the format of letters. Walton writes nothing that gives the main story fuller meaning. He rescues Frankenstein from the ice, and believes he sees the Creation in the distance at one point, but the main story gains nothing from these points. If anything, having the novel start at the end lessens the stakes of the protagonist.

The story begins where it ends, and therefore, as the story progresses, the reader knows that Frankenstein and the Creation are not truly in danger. Any threat made on their life is not fatal, because Frankenstein is telling the story after the fact, and the Creation is seen by Walton. Although Frankenstein does die at the end of the novel, and the Creation leaves with a plan to do the same, for the main part of the story, they are never in any real danger.

A similar problem is met in *Interview with the Vampire*. Since it is Louis telling the story after it has happened, the reader is aware that he is never in any real danger. The supporting characters can die, and that can be tragic, but the protagonist is untouchable.

A stark contrast to the story that begins at its end, is Stephen King's *Misery*. The story is told in real time from the perspective of author Paul Sheldon as he is held hostage by his number one fan, Annie Wilkes. The reader is constantly in fear for Paul's life because they do not know if he will manage to escape Annie's clutches. Because the story is told from the first person in the present time, and not after the fact, the stakes are raised:

There was a glass water-pitcher on the table. She seized it up and brandished it at him. ...In his mind...he saw her bringing the pitcher down into his face, he saw himself dying of a fractured skull and a massive cerebral hemorrhage in a freezing flood of ice-water while goosepimples formed on his arms. She wanted to do it; there was no question of that. At the very last moment she pivoted away from him and flung the water-pitcher at the door instead, where it shattered as the soup-bowl had the other day.

King, Stephen. *Misery* (p. 44). Scribner. Kindle Edition.

In this moment, the reader does not know what Annie will do. They do not know if Paul will be injured, and because of this, the fear felt by the reader is deeper. In the format of a first-

person narrative told as the events happen, it is possible for the protagonist to perish. And when King first conceived of the story, he intended for Paul to not make it out alive (*Stephen King on Writing*).

Horror that is told as it happens is not a new concept. Edgar Allen Poe writes many of his stories in this way and is successful in creating tension and anticipation. Both in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the story progresses in a linear way and the reader does not know what will become of the narrators. In the former, the reader is left in shock when the floorboards are ripped up to reveal the old man's still beating heart. And in the latter, they are filled with terror at the appearance of Madeline Usher from her tomb. Both stories have building action to their climax, and the reader is in the dark about the ultimate fate of the narrators until the end of the story is told.

Horror as a genre is most effective when one is never sure of the ending. By not knowing the ultimate fate of the protagonist, the reader is constantly on the edge of their seat each time they encounter danger. Every time Annie Wilkes enters the room she holds Paul Sheldon captive in, the reader does not know what horrors he will face and if he will survive them. The reader does not know if the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart* will get away with murder. Both *Frankenstein* and *Interview with the Vampire* are lacking in this effect. Every time Louis faces an attacker, the reader knows he will survive because otherwise he would not be able to tell Molloy his story. In the same way, every encounter between Frankenstein and his Creation will not end in either dying, because Walton has bared witness to both of them.

The use of an epistolary novel is most effective when the one recording the story is indirectly involved in its telling. Usually, the story being told is fantastical and unbelievable, as is the one telling it. For this reason, although the reader may relate to the storyteller, it is the one

recording the tale that the reader sees themselves in. While a reader may relate to aspects of Sherlock Holmes, it is Dr. Watson that we connect with and understand. Because of this, it is in the story's best interest to have Molloy interrupt Louis' story. Walton never interrupts or gives comments on Frankenstein's tale, so although the reader may sympathize with the protagonist, there is no one for the reader to truly see themselves in.

Horror is a reflection of humanity; the things it values, the things it despises, and the things it desires. An effective horror novel will have a reader reflecting on their own values, while relating to and scorning the story they hear. The decision of using an epistolary novel to tell a horror story can be damaging in the level of fear the reader has for the protagonist. But if done correctly, it can allow an insight into the story that is otherwise near impossible to accomplish. Horror is most effective when the stakes the characters face could truly be dangerous, and when the ending is a mystery until it is reached.

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