

**Ljubica Matek**

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Croatia

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## Teaching Horror Literature in a Multicultural Classroom

### ABSTRACT

As a genre, horror tends to be marginalized in literature classes because it is often mistakenly perceived to be inappropriate for the classroom environment due to the intensive emotional effects that the genre's typical macabre motifs and topics may produce in the reader. However, this paper argues that, for two reasons, horror texts represent a valid and important addition to a literary syllabus. First, they typically have a positive impact on the students' increased interest in reading, which is, in the pedagogical and scholarly sense, a desirable activity. Second, they tend to contribute significantly to the development of empathy with and tolerance for others, which is an especially valuable learning outcome in a multicultural classroom characterized by implied intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** horror literature; multiculturalism; interculturalism; learning outcome; empathy; tolerance

## Poučevanje grozljivk v večkulturnem razredu

### POVZETEK

Žanr grozljivk je pri pouku književnosti pogosto postavljen na stranski tir, saj ga mnogi po krivici dojemajo kot neprimerna za učno okolje, ker naj bi zanj tipični temačni motivi in teme v bralcu vzbujali premočne čustvene odzive. Prispevek kljub temu zagovarja nasprotno stališče in trdi, da so besedila z grozljivo tematiko lahko učinkovita in pomembna del pouka književnosti. Za to navaja dva razloga. Prvič, grozljivke običajno spodbujajo študente k branju, kar je zaželeno tako s pedagoškega kot z akademskega vidika. Drugič, grozljivke pomembno prispevajo k razvoju empatije in strpnosti do drugih, kar predstavlja dragocen učni izid predvsem v večkulturnih učnih okoljih, ki vključujejo medkulturno komunikacijo.

**Ključne besede:** grozljivka; večkulturnost; medkulturnost; učni izid; empatija; strpnost

# Teaching Horror Literature in a Multicultural Classroom

## 1 Introduction: Teaching Horror

When Schopenhauer asserted that there are “two kinds of authors: those who write for the subject’s sake, and those who write for writing’s sake” ([1851] 2005, 10), he pinpointed the critical problem that presents itself before scholars, critics, teachers and students of literature who attempt to discern which, out of a myriad of published texts, are the ones worth reading and teaching. His essay on authorship illuminates the idea that the first group of writers write because they “have had thoughts or experiences which seem to them worth communicating” ([1851] 2005, 10), while others simply write for money. The first, we could tentatively say, write high literature, while the others create trivial works.<sup>1</sup> Horror literature is a typical disreputed genre, the works of which are often collectively, and quite unfairly, put into the category of trivial, which is why the notion of a literary representation of *thoughts and experiences worth communicating* becomes especially relevant when discussing horror literature as a means, among others, to decide whether a text is worth teaching or not. Horror texts typically aim at engaging the reader’s emotions, at scaring or horrifying the reader, thereby targeting the most basic of human instincts: the instinct for survival. To survive, every human needs a self-preservation mechanism which becomes activated thanks to the feelings of pain or fear. Taking that mechanism into account, this paper aims to show that literature teachers can and should take advantage of this physiological fact in order to create a successful learning experience for racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students in a multicultural classroom. By focusing on what is common to all, namely, the feeling of fear, they are able to unite their multicultural students under the joint flag of humanity. Moreover, the paper shows that despite heavy prejudice against the genre, horror has its rightful place in the literature classroom, particularly a multicultural one, as it provides an adequate framework to develop students’ empathy for others as well as to dismantle prejudice against the Other(s).

## 2 The Specifics of a Multicultural Classroom

The paper focuses primarily on horror literature and its potential positive effect on achieving learning outcomes in a multicultural classroom,<sup>2</sup> but before tackling horror, a few words are due concerning the dynamics and challenges of teaching in a multicultural classroom. In a globalized and globalizing world, a multicultural classroom is an inevitable reality. Whether we are talking about a classroom assembled from students of the same nationality but a different economic background and/or cultural and/or racial and ethnic background (such classrooms typically exist in the United States of America), or assembled from students of different nationalities, which inevitably implies a different cultural, ethnic and possibly racial background (examples of such classrooms are more

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the problem is much more complicated in reality and Schopenhauer himself admits that writing just for the sake of covering paper can also be recognized in the best of authors (2005, 10). Thus, rather than labelling specific authors’ entire oeuvre or entire genres as trivial or not, we should be talking about and evaluating individual texts.

<sup>2</sup> With respect to teaching in a multicultural classroom as opposed to teaching in a non-multicultural classroom two points should be made clear. A separate paper, following adequate research, could elucidate whether there are significant differences between teaching horror to students in a multicultural vs. non-multicultural classroom. However, this would demand a very clear definition of what we take to be a culturally homogenous classroom. My teaching experience so far has shown that it is hardly possible to find a non-multicultural classroom if we take culture to include not just race and ethnicity, but also gender, religion and class background, as well as membership of a particular subculture, which is a frequent situation with young people/students.

common in Europe when students are assembled together under the auspices of Erasmus or similar exchange projects),<sup>3</sup> cultural diversity presents teachers with specific dilemmas. Most notably, in line with Chesler (2003), both teachers and students bring with them “in one way or another the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic baggage that abounds in our culture,” which is why a teacher must find a way to overcome “patterns of racial and ethnic ideology and interaction” in order to create a safe environment which supports learning but also protects “moral sensibilities” of both the students and the teacher. Moreover, in such a classroom, even more than in a more homogenous one, the teacher must attempt to dismantle the existing stereotypes and prejudices, as otherwise he or she actually “permits these historical, cultural, and media-generated stereotypes and fears (or hostilities) about differences to persist” (also in Chesler 2003). Weinstein and Obear (1992) have noted that faculty themselves experience various issues in a culturally diverse classroom, such as the need to deal with their own biases, lack of knowledge or social and identity conflicts, and the need to respond properly to bias or discrimination when it occurs. Clearly, to overcome these problems and to handle these sensitive issues successfully (and thereby enable learning) both the teacher and the students need to be self-reflexive, and at the same time open for change. The typical strategy for overcoming bias in a literature classroom is exposing students to different voices. For instance, in her book *Thriving in the Multicultural Classroom; Principles and Practices for Effective Teaching*, Dilg (2003) suggests the following strategy to compile a syllabus: “The works will be artistically intricate and demanding. The writers will be, among others, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, European Americans, and Middle Eastern Americans, as well as religiously diverse” (2003, 159). While it undoubtedly seems like the proper approach, as insight into diverse experiences enables understanding and fosters sympathy (and possibly also empathy), this paper offers another possibility, equally acceptable as the traditional one: to focus on texts that seem to be concerned with universal human issues, rather than specific cultural or ethnic ones, but nevertheless allow for many interpretations and offer a myriad of proofs that we are all the same: human and vulnerable.

### 3 Emotionally and Cognitively Engaged Reading

H. P. Lovecraft, a prominent figure in the history of literary horror, famously asserted that fear is the “oldest and strongest emotion of mankind” ([1927] 2013, 1). But already more than a century and a half before Lovecraft, and before modern psychology, Edmund Burke found that passions which concern self-preservation, namely, those connected with pain and danger, are the most potent ones. According to him, whatever awakens the ideas of pain or danger is terrible and thus the source of the *sublime*. The sublime is, in turn, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” because pain and the ideas connected to suffering have much stronger effects on both body and mind than any form or cause of pleasure (Burke [1757] 2014; see part I, sec. VII). In fact, the role of aesthetic representations of the horrible is a topic considered already at the very dawn of literary theory. In his *Poetics 4*, Aristotle notes that we thoroughly enjoy the mimesis of horror: “Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike the sights of actual violence, which people typically find abhorrent, mimesis of terrifying events and creatures garners much interest because literary representations of horror are realistic enough to

<sup>3</sup> In cases like this, we are typically talking about TEFL or teaching English literature to non-English students. This means that teaching and studying is in an English-mediated environment and that most (or all) of the students are not native speakers of English. This adds an additional dimension to the unifying classroom experience as it makes all students similar in the sense of having to deal with the language barrier.

<sup>4</sup> This and the subsequent translations of Aristotle’s work are by S. H. Butcher (see Aristotle 2000).

stir our feelings and imagination ('what if...'), and yet we are at all times aware that this is fiction and this realization provides the necessary detachment needed for objective thinking. Scholarly and readerly interest in horror has not decreased despite the fact that it has been contemplated for millennia, which exemplifies the continuous relevance of horror. To illustrate, Ken Gelder makes it clear that horror is an integral part of the very fabric of our society: "the socio-political system needs these rhetorics, narratives and so on – that is, it needs horror itself – in order to be what it is and do what it does" (2002, 2). Precisely because horror is so essential to human existence, horror texts tend to be very engaging for the reader, and this is a quality that should be taken advantage of in a classroom environment. To achieve learning outcomes, it is beneficial to incorporate into the syllabi texts that will motivate the students to read and think about these outcomes.

Another benefit of adding horror texts to a literature syllabus is the fact that horror's ambition is not mere titillation of the senses. On the contrary, to skilled readers, or those aided by skilled teachers, horror gives the opportunity to ponder upon different, often taboo, issues of human existence, and the intricacies of the human mind and desire as they are presented in literary texts. They can think about them, learn from them, and finally create their own thoughts on the subject. The fact that violent or macabre subjects should be considered taboo in a classroom is rather odd, as life is, among other things, made up of various unpleasant or violent events which everyone must learn to deal with in a socially acceptable way. In a multicultural classroom this allows everyone to focus on our essential sameness, a realization that can typically be lost in such contexts where we tend to focus on differences. What is more, the effect of the horrible and scary in literature is such that it may produce thoughts which have a strong emotional impact on the reader. And it is this emotional response that the teacher should be able to take advantage of in teaching not only about literature, but also about life.

Because of its ability to scare (and sometimes to be repulsive), horror has always been quite popular, and therefore considered 'trivial'. The misconception that popular texts necessarily have to be trivial is somewhat understandable, as many popular texts indeed display atrocious characterizations, poor diction, predictable plots and other unseemly features that make a literary text trivial.<sup>5</sup> But even more than that, horror's controversial position typically originates from the misconceptions connected with its topics and motifs, as well as the readers' doubts concerning the authors' motivation to write about horrific situations and events. Horror stories seem to be superficial (especially when connected with the supernatural), undignified, and lacking in ambition to signify anything beyond mere depictions of carnage. Or, as Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila have put it, the highest concern with regard to horror as a popular genre is the fear that young people cannot "make meaning" from such texts (2006, 40), which is not true.

According to Dawes, horror engages both our emotional and cognitive facilities as the readers' problem-solving cognitive structures utilize the readers' previous knowledge and their attitudes and values to create alternative solutions to the story at hand (2004, 449). For a successful literature class, students have to be motivated to search for a deeper meaning, and it is horror texts that very often "envelop the students into a new way of thinking, understanding, and conceptualizing the world around them" (Aho 2008–2009, 32). Dilg has a similar idea when she claims that to create a supportive environment, "[w]e need to design curriculum that appeals to students from multiple cultures and that aids them in understanding and constructing meaning in their world" (2003,

<sup>5</sup> But trivial texts have been produced within the realm of other genres – love stories, autobiographies, adventure stories, among all the others. Triviality is not inherently connected specifically with horror, a fact that tends to be disregarded. Objectively, of course, a horror text may be as well (or as badly) written as any other literary text which deals with less macabre topics and is therefore spared the initial prejudice and misgiving.

203). In other words, a text that has already intrigued the student with its content is more likely to make the student accept the responsibility for their own learning and persist in their classroom and out-of-class engagement, even if the search for meaning, that is, the learning process, becomes more demanding or difficult. In fact, with motivated students, the student-teacher relationship assumes a quality of complicity which is extremely rewarding for both sides as students feel that the class is not 'useless' or boring and that the teacher is offering them something they can relate to and understand, even if it is demanding, which is a necessary prerequisite for successful teaching and learning.

## 4 Horror as an Impulse for Positive Change

In addition to horror's alleged triviality, the idea that the interest in aversive stimuli in literature might somehow cause the reader to become violent is another argument against reading horror. In her study *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject*, Elena Gomel (2003) looks precisely at narrative influence on violent behavior and examines the way popular culture constructs violent subjectivity (for instance, in serial killers or perpetrators of genocide). She also claims that being a killer is the end result of social construction, just like being a woman or a man, and looks at modes in which narrative representation contributes to our capability of committing violent acts and resistance to them (Gomel 2003, xiv). By way of explanation, it is not (just) what we read that makes us violent, but, rather, violent identity is such a complex construct that it cannot be simply reduced to being a consequence of inadequate reading choices, or any other single reason. In line with this, there are many more studies that show how reading about tragic or horrific events provokes feelings quite opposite to aggression. In *Poetics 11*, for instance, Aristotle speaks of three components of the complex plot of tragedy: *peripeteia* (reversal), *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *pathos* (suffering). The first two represent unforeseen complications of events that have moral and psychological consequences for the protagonist(s). Pathos, however, is very graphic. It refers to a clear display of violence: "the destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like" (2000, 16).<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, pathos is the horror necessary to make the moral of the tragedy more pronounced and to contribute to the final sense of catharsis. Tragedy, a noble genre, should "imitate actions which excite pity and fear" (2000, 17) and to a great extent, many horror texts are indeed tragic in the literary sense of the word.<sup>7</sup> Thus, horror seems to be a necessary ingredient of a complex play, as it provides the realistic context crucial for successful mimesis (which should provide us with the model for truth and beauty). Expressly, we should learn from the play/the horror and change our behavior for the better.

In her book-length study *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen (2010) argues that we still do not know how much of the felt empathy caused by sympathizing with fictional characters is translated into the actual behavior of emotional readers, suggesting the need to examine how emotional readers behave in life. Following that line of thought, Bal and Veltkamp have conducted experiments with people on the basis of which they were able to give scientific proof that reading fiction enhances the readers' actual empathic skills. In fact, the more emotionally involved a reader is in the fictional text, the greater the personal transformation (2013, 9–10).<sup>8</sup> Their research shows that changes

<sup>6</sup> Gomel concludes that "Pathos is what people react to when they throw up at the sight of blood. It is arguable that nausea is the true foundation of morality" (2003, xxiii).

<sup>7</sup> This means they feature a tragic hero, one who is better than us, who makes some kind of tragic mistake or has some great frailty of character (fatal flaw) that leads to his downfall (consider Victor Frankenstein, Faust, or Dr. Jekyll, among others).

<sup>8</sup> Bal and Veltkamp (2013) are not the only ones who have written about the personal transformations of readers subsequent to reading, but their paper contains actual research results with exact numbers and graphs illustrating the data (e.g. hierarchical regression analyses predicting empathy; standard deviations, means, reliabilities, and correlations of the study variables, and so on). Other relevant psychological studies that deal with this topic include: Miall and Kuiken (2002), Mar et al. (2011), and Kidd

occur even if the reader is not emotionally engaged, but these are changes of a different kind. For instance, if the reader is simply interested in how the story ends or how the mystery is resolved, he or she engages only his or her cognitive abilities and, thus, reading results in other outcomes, that is, enhanced problem solving skills, instead of higher empathy. For readers of horror fiction, which for the most part engages readers on an emotional level, the expected outcome then is to “identify and sympathize with others” (2013, 10),<sup>9</sup> but also to learn from their mistakes, as Aristotle suggests. This is not at all far-fetched if we look at several texts of the genre and the issues they promote and/or discuss.

## 5 Deconstructing Prejudice through Horror

One of horror’s crucial qualities as a literary genre is its versatility and the ability of its tropes to represent and, more importantly, mean more than is obvious. This means that in addition to simply scaring the reader, which undoubtedly is its primary purpose, good horror texts also demand of the reader to reflect upon different (taboo?) phenomena related to human life, be they our (deviant) sexual impulses, forbidden desires, aggression, hatred, or any other part of individual psychology that we have to come to terms with in order to function in our social environments. These texts offer an insight into what happens when the boundaries of socially accepted behavior are transgressed,<sup>10</sup> and they reawaken the reader to the reality that our behavioral conventions are far from natural, but rather arbitrary social constructs and norms. Gelder explains that “horror’s capacity to disorient and disturb” is its major strength because “the disturbance it willfully produces is in fact a disturbance of cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted” (2002, 3). That is to say, instead of perpetuating the status quo with its implied inequalities, intolerance and prejudice against the Other, horror texts have the “ability to call conventional representations of temporal, sexual, cultural and national identities into question” (Gelder 2002, 3). According to Dilg, in order for students and teachers to thrive in a multicultural classroom, teachers should promote a pedagogy of belonging and this means, among other things, “to understand our own strengths and weaknesses, the power and limitations accorded us by our own histories and identities” (2003, 203), which is precisely what certain horror texts enable and support.

While, for instance, a comparative approach in studying the linguistic differences among variants of a language (World Englishes) or in studying cultural differences which are in the focus of pragmatics has its theoretical and practical value in a multicultural English classroom, it is equally important to offer courses that approach the heterogeneous student audience from a different point of view. Instead of focusing on the differences, a course in horror literature will tend to examine different social constructs that are presented as defining and identifying of a group and dismantle them as they tend to contribute to prejudice and blur the truth of our universal human nature. In this, horror tends to (ab)use the body as the vessel for understanding more abstract ideas, for instance, freedom and equality. To put it bluntly, a horror story will make the student understand what the power-obsessed villain of Ayn Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead* formulates with shocking cynicism: “We are all brothers under the skin – and I, for one, would be willing to skin humanity to prove it” (1996, 264).

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and Castano (2013). Among relevant narratological studies are, for instance, Zunshine (2006), Phelan (2007), and Thrailkill (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to reading fiction, which typically causes people to relax from their everyday obligations, reading non-fictional texts may be associated with alternative consequences: instead of feeling empathy, readers of non-fictional texts that contain descriptions of horrific events may experience feelings of guilt or obligation (Slovic 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, it can be said that this is one of the primary functions of (high) literature in general (see, for instance, Leitch 2001). This subsequently also implies that horror is not trivial by default.

## 6 Interpretative Richness of Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The motif of skin, to continue in the same tone, is symbolically a very potent one when it comes to teaching horror. The outside appearance of any horror story protagonist is very important because it (among other things) often offers a key for unlocking the possible meaning(s) of a literary text. Probably the most well-known literary (anti)hero whose appearance is crucial for his tragic destiny as well as the destiny of other characters in the novel is the nameless monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Because of its rich symbolism and Shelley's crafty employment of the archetypal story of creation, the novel offers numerous interpretative possibilities, one of which is certainly the issue of Otherness: how we deal with it and what the consequences of our behavior toward those who seem to be the Other are. Victor Frankenstein, the ambitious scientist, is the embodiment of a Western post-Enlightenment hero. He is white, male, well-educated, and rich. However, his desire for knowledge and his experiments, which include grave digging and desecration of dead bodies, are motivated by personal ambition rather than an urge to help humanity in its everlasting struggle with/against death. He defies authority and in his search for ultimate answers concerning human life rejects modern science and turns to alchemy:

As a child, I had not been content with the results promised by the modern professors of natural science. [...] I had retraced the steps of knowledge along the paths of time, and exchanged the discoveries of recent inquirers for the dreams of forgotten alchemists. Besides, I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth. [...] So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein – more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. (Shelley 1991, 32–33)

After becoming “capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter,” Frankenstein's obsession with grandeur prompts him to change his original design: instead of creating “a being like myself, or one of simpler organization,” he decides “to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large” (Shelley 1991, 37–38). Blinded by ambition, he assembles a giant out of body parts stolen from the graves of people recently deceased and buried, never thinking that the final outcome might be anything but pleasing to the eye: “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful” (Shelley 1991, 42). However, upon bringing the creature to life, he finds it to be an aesthetic “catastrophe”: “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley 1991, 42). Without ever attempting to communicate with it or to investigate its nature, he simply runs away into his bedroom, leaving it alone and unattended in the laboratory. Prejudiced by its unseemly appearance, he rejects the creature, instantly displaying a shocking lack of sympathy for the being he has just created as well as a lack of morality and responsibility toward mankind: if the creature is as evil as it is ugly, how could he simply leave it at large without warning anyone? The creature, who is – quite ironically – “naturally good” (Johnson 1991, xiii), follows him, attempts to speak and make contact, but the scientist runs away again unable to deal with the consequences of his work, which turned out to be aesthetically unsatisfactory. The essence of the creature's nature is never questioned; rather, Frankenstein assumes it must be dangerous and malevolent because it is displeasing to the eye. Contrary to his assumption, it is Frankenstein's prejudice and intolerance,

his lack of empathy with and sympathy for his ‘son’ based solely on the creature’s appearance, and not the creature’s malevolence, that causes all subsequent tragedies. What is more, Frankenstein’s actions are mirrored in those of the creature, and as the story unravels, the initial assumptions of Frankenstein as good and moral become subverted as the creature’s search for love and acceptance and his innate altruism only emphasize Frankenstein’s cowardice and selfishness.

Shelley’s depiction of both of these characters makes it worthwhile for the teacher and students to discuss the justification of Frankenstein’s actions. In cases of explicit racial prejudice, students will tend to respond ‘automatically’ and judge the discriminator without necessarily empathizing with either of the characters. They will judge based on what they have learned so far, namely, that it is wrong to discriminate against people simply based on their skin color or religion. But, in Frankenstein’s case, this distinction is somewhat blurred because of the creature’s ‘unnatural’ origin and its inhuman appearance. In order to make conclusions about both Frankenstein’s and the creature’s behavior, they will need to imagine themselves in such an improbable situation and make conscious correlations between Frankenstein’s actions and similar situations in real life. For instance, why do certain parents leave their children at birth? Why the persistence of the trope somehow correlating beauty and brains or even virtue? Is the creature’s unnatural origin necessarily proof of its bad character? Moreover, after Frankenstein abandons the creature and decides to keep everyone in the dark concerning his huge accomplishment, he seems to become the chief culprit for the creature’s crimes; the only reason the creature kills is in order to get back at his father/creator for abandoning him. This can (and should) be brought into connection with issues concerning the students’ life as well as certain major historical events, such as slavery, racial segregation, gender inequality, and causes and outcomes of different civil rights movements.

## 7 H. P. Lovecraft and the Issue of Race

While Shelley’s novel champions, among other things, empathy with all living creatures and the need to take responsibility for our actions, there are horror texts that address the issue of Otherness from a different perspective. For instance, H. P. Lovecraft’s stories represent the justification of the fear of the Other. Lovecraft is – and rightfully so – believed by many to be the master of horror. His stories can truly unsettle the reader with their specific atmosphere and depictions of malevolent alien races determined to destroy humankind. But unlike Shelley, who writes from the position of the Other (she is a woman struggling to succeed in the male-dominated profession of writing) and thus understands and reveals the injustices of the patriarchal world, Lovecraft’s position is a different one. He is a white male Protestant of European descent, completely uninterested in women and women’s issues (women practically never appear in his stories), as well as highly prejudiced against people of color. His letters reveal him to be quite racist (Joshi 2002, xi) and so do his stories in which miscegenation is represented as degenerative because it corrupts the blood of white people. For instance, in “The Call of Cthulhu” the narrator explains that the regions of “evil repute” in a city are “unknown and untraversed by white men” (Lovecraft [1926] 2002, 151), suggesting that white men are the pillars of decency and morality. Consequently, he further exposes people of mixed blood as those who are most susceptible to alien cults because they are mentally and morally challenged. Lovecraft describes them as an “indescribable horde of human abnormality” and “hybrid spawn,” as “men of a very low mixed-blooded, mentally aberrant type.” Furthermore, “[m]ost were seamen” with “a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese” ([1926] 2002, 152–53). To the contemporary reader, such instances of racism may seem quite shocking, but they also provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the issue of racism in class. Lovecraft’s representations of people of color as mentally and morally “aberrant” will allow

students to understand that fear is the crucial factor which fuels racist imagination, but they will also allow the students to take a stand against such misconceptions concerning the imaginary threat that arises from the presence of the Other.

In a multicultural classroom, students will be especially aware of injustices that follow from prejudiced generalizations based on skin color, race, nation, religion, class, and so on, and such topics may be especially pertinent to this type of a heterogeneous classroom, provided that both the teacher and the students understand that mutual respect is the required norm of behavior and interaction. Typically, students will share their personal stories and opinions as a response to problems presented in fictional texts – a very important step toward learning. Moreover, they might make parallels between their personal lack of knowledge and prejudices (or stereotypical notions) concerning certain cultures, and those of Lovecraft’s narrators and protagonists who always construct the most horrific assumptions about the cultures they are not familiar with. As the fictional world comes into interplay with real-life circumstances of individual students, reading (and the discussion about the texts read) becomes an actual personal experience, which is the first step toward personal growth.

In this sense, Kaufman and Libby’s (2012) research dedicated to reading as “experience-taking” that can change beliefs and behavior of readers is especially relevant for learning outcomes in a multicultural classroom. Experience-taking presumes that the reader immerses himself or herself into the text “as though they were a particular character in the story world, adopting the character’s mind-set and perspective as the story progresses rather than orienting themselves as an observer or evaluator of the character” (2012, 2; also see Oatley 1999). In their study, they investigated how postponed disclosure of a character’s sexual orientation or race may impact experience-taking, and such issues are crucial in multicultural classrooms where the acceptance of Otherness must be the norm. Reading allows us to “live as many more lives and as many kinds of lives” (Hayakawa 1990, 144) as possible, owing to our mental simulation of the characters’ experiences which imply “new roles, relationships, personalities, motives, and actions” (Kaufman and Libby 2012, 17). Kaufman and Libby’s experiments “demonstrate that the effects of experience-taking can be harnessed and directed toward such positive ends as increasing civic engagement and reducing prejudice and stereotyping” (2012, 17), which is a crucial outcome of intercultural communication within the classroom context. Specifically, this implies using different (experiential rather than conceptual) methods in class, such as discussions, role-plays or written assignments, that require students to actively and consciously suppress their conceptions of themselves in order to simulate the character’s mind-set and their subjective experiences (Kaufman and Libby 2012, 15).<sup>11</sup>

## 8 Bloodless Horror – A Feast for Imagination

While it is true that the primary aim of horror fiction is to provoke feelings of fear in the reader, well-written horror texts also have the ambition to go beyond mere carnage (which is sometimes avoided altogether) or spookiness, and tackle certain universal issues. As Jean-Loup Benét (2005), a horror writer and English teacher, asserts: “horror is not all immature blood and guts” and “[s]avvy teachers can harness the students’ love of the genre to engage them in meaningful lessons that will

<sup>11</sup> In order to simulate the character’s “thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and motives” (Kaufman and Libby 2012, 15) students have to think of answers to questions pertaining to the context (time, setting), the character’s familial ties and relationships, his or her education, social and cultural background, and experiences. This results in a better understanding of the Other as represented by a literary character (not necessarily adopting his or her position, but acknowledging it as legitimate), and, according to Kaufman and Libby, it also typically results in “a bottom-up change to individuals’ self-concepts” (2012, 15) as they inevitably grow through the process of temporary experiencing and incorporating these attributes.

get them excited about learning.” In other words, horror literature employs certain scary motifs and topics in order to deal with everything that causes anxiety in our everyday lives: from growing up, to illness and death, from loneliness and loss to faith, and so on. In fact, stories that lack any descriptions of violence seem to ultimately leave the deepest impact on the reader, as they can almost never be understood as a caricature or farcical exaggeration.

One such story is “To Kill a Child” by Stig Dagerman. The story, which describes how easily accidents can occur if one is driving too fast, was commissioned in 1947 by the Swedish National Society for Road Safety as a part of their traffic safety campaign and, unlikely as it may seem, it became one of the greatest short stories in Swedish literature. Dagerman’s story is “a poignant tale of choice, chance, and human loss [...] with a capacity to generate human empathy, identification, and understanding” (Hartman 2014), which are among the most important desired objectives of literature classes. The students’ initial reaction is typically that “this is not horror” because there is no blood-spatter or actual murderous intent, but the more they talk about the tragic accident and the more they attempt to feel for and feel with both the driver (the perpetrator) and the parents who have just lost their child, the scarier the story gets. Dagerman ensures the reader that “life is constructed in such a merciless fashion” (1961,154) and that “[a]fterward everything is too late” (1961, 154), which creates a suffocating feeling of being trapped either by destiny or by one’s poor choices. Either way, there is no happy ending for anyone:

[T]hey will never forget. For it is not true that time heals all wounds. Time does not heal the wounds of a dead child, and it heals very poorly the pain of a mother who forgot to buy sugar and who sent her child across the road to borrow some. And it heals just as poorly the anguish of a once cheerful man who has killed a child. (Dagerman 1961, 155)

The possibility that one’s life can be so utterly and irrevocably changed for the worse in a millisecond is so devastating that the story becomes more horrible the more one thinks (or talks) about it. In the case of “To Kill a Child,” horror is more philosophical than visceral, which enables the teacher to prompt the student to think about issues such as guilt, responsibility, and atonement, because the child’s death casts a shadow not just over the life of the driver, but over the lives of the parents, too. The strong philosophical and cautionary bent of the story allows the students to realize that horror as a genre has many faces, even though the immature, gory one might be the most famous. But it always and unmistakably aims at the most fundamental issues of life and humanity and thus it can very well motivate students to become people who will better their society. Social worth and learning outcomes that support students’ development into better citizens are considered especially important, so Dewey suggests that the criterion of social worth should be used when choosing among a wide variety of available teaching materials (1966, 191–92; cf. Dilg 2003, 171–73).

Similar to “To Kill a Child” is Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery.” Apart from being an excellent example of Jackson’s masterful literary style and her ability to create suspense and intrigue the reader with her description of an (invented) gruesome yearly ritual somewhere in the rural US, it opens up a path for a discussion concerning different unpleasant or violent customs and cultural practices that can injure the integrity of an individual for the alleged sake of the community. The story focuses, through irony and shock, on the fact that people tend to give great importance to form regardless of the actual meaning and that often people are hurt for the sake of tradition. Through the chill, casual voice of the narrator who describes the village’s preparation for the lottery, the reader finds out that the “original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago” (Jackson 2008, 7), suggesting that the lottery has somehow lost its purpose, but is being perpetuated unquestioningly by the elders of the village who do it simply because “[t]here’s always

been a lottery” (Jackson 2008, 14). With every page the tension grows and the reader is intrigued about the nature and the purpose of the lottery, as well as about the reward for the winner. The gruesomeness of the ritual and the lack of a proper reward is revealed only at the end: “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones” (Jackson 2008, 20). Ironically, the lottery ends with the murder of an innocent victim. The sheer horror of what people can do to their neighbors in the name of a half-forgotten ritual with an obscure purpose underlines Jackson’s point that people are violent and merciless, but also gullible and deficient in critical thinking. The idea of perpetuating various cultural practices and rituals in order to keep us safe from the Other, be that someone outside the community or, more frequently, some malevolent (super)natural force, is completely subverted as it becomes clear that people should fear one another the most. “The Lottery,” originally published in 1948, is unfortunately still a very relevant text about culture and humanity as it reveals the absurdity of ritual killings. Human sacrifice seems to be justified in the name of tradition and faith, and the mass, guided by blind obedience, forsakes any empathy for the fellow man, instead resorting to murder in the name of God. What is more, in “The Lottery” it becomes quite clear that danger does not come from without, from another or the Other, but rather from within: from your family, neighbors and friends who are willing to stone you to death for the sake of tradition and form.

## 9 Conclusion

Despite typically being viewed as inappropriate material for classroom use, reading and discussing horror literature can be very rewarding for both the teacher and students. First and foremost, every literature class benefits from a syllabus which consists of texts that the students themselves find intriguing and that they actually want to read. A careful selection of texts that are neither trivial nor superficial, but such that they allow for multiple interpretations or enable contemplation on different phenomena of everyday life can result in successful achievement of different learning outcomes: both those connected with literature interpretation and theory, and those which imply the improvement of the students’ English skills. Moreover, unlike many culture-oriented subjects that tend to emphasize the difference between students or literature classes that expose students to various voices in order for the students to understand and appreciate one another more, a literature course in horror focuses on what is universally common to all of us as humans, regardless of the cultural background. Students are encouraged to think and talk about abstract concepts such as fear, humiliation, tolerance, pain, hatred, suffering, and many others, which point to our basic vulnerability and sameness. Thus, students focus not on their mutual differences, but on their inherent similarity and equality as human beings, with the aim of understanding that everyone is entitled to the safety and integrity of their person. In addition, instead of supposedly becoming more violent, they actually tend to be moved and become more appreciative of the human right to live and make choices for oneself. They learn the value of compassion and understanding toward one another, and, by becoming more emphatic, they also become more tolerant members of a(ny) society.

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