

## Chapter 12

# Bringing the ELA Classroom Back From the Dead: Utilizing Horror to Connect With Students and Reinvigorate the ELA Classroom

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, authors explore the pedagogical potentials of using horror-based film and television in the English language arts classroom. The horror media genre offers unique opportunities for student engagement and discussion of literary elements, close reading, and increased awareness of social emotional response to texts. Furthermore, the narrative trope of the monster promotes analytical engagement with social and cultural critique. After providing a review of the literature on using film and horror in the classroom, the chapter will share a set of classroom scenarios using horror films and television to illustrate effective pedagogical practices for incorporating horror media in the classroom.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is nothing more frightening than the relevance of the English classroom being dead and buried. While this fear may not cause sleepless nights for all, debates do persist over which types of texts and writing to include in the English Language Arts classroom. Questions of cultural relevance and linguistic diversity challenge traditional understandings of the canon in ways that are necessary to move the discipline forward (c.f. NCTE position statements). Yet, while leaders of the field rewrite the boundaries of what is in and what is out, our teenage students forge highly mediated worlds of their own, with personal screens that deliver information, entertainment, and persuasion across a complex array of social media platforms. With this in mind, students often do not feel like their interests are represented in the

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assigned texts of the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. There is a large number of assigned texts throughout various ELA classrooms that some students find to be unapproachable or outside of their reading abilities. The aforementioned issues combined with being uninterested in the subject material can lead to a dangerous apathy and disdain for ELA classes as a whole, with some students skimming Cliff Notes or turning directly to paper writing services like Essaybox to complete class assessments. This is not to say that print based texts do not have value in the ELA classroom. They do and always will. That said, the widespread use of social media to further the discourse of pop culture texts cements an established relevance that connects people with each other and their respective ideas. This connection demonstrates the communicative power of visual texts such as film and television to express identity while at the same time informing and persuading others (NCTE, 2022). How might the ELA classroom harness the power of these visually-rich, pop culture texts to further connect with students' lives and preferred ways of making sense of concepts?

Teachers are constantly being told to make lessons engaging and approachable for each type of learner, but how can this be accomplished if print-based texts are the predominant mode of instruction? Several educators have reported on the benefits of incorporating film to promote active reading (Golden, 2001) and learning of digital literacies (Lim & Tan, 2018). The horror genre in particular has been shown to be of high interest to students, given its tendencies to interrogate cultural norms and identities through unsettling storylines and visual aesthetics (Ahmad & Moreland, 2013). Unfortunately, horror is an oft maligned genre, no matter what form it takes, with people believing that it is of lower worth literature-wise or trivial in nature (Matek, 2015). The horror genre, no matter how discredited, remains a popular genre among students. The world itself is unstable and terrifying, which may be why adult horror books and films are still extremely popular (Richards et. al, 1999). More recently the horror genre has been praised for its ability to critique racism and social scapegoating, topics that can be difficult and discomforting to talk about in daily conversation and classrooms yet are deeply ingrained in the human experience (Newkirk, 2019). In recent years, horror has seen an influx of innovative minds who have changed the way that the genre is perceived in the mainstream. Jordan Peele, who was known for his career in comedy, has brought the concept of social critique to the forefront of his horror films. Peele's films encourage viewers to analyze plots from a critical perspective, highlighting the levels of social critique that the films entail.

With horror's popular allure in mind, this chapter aims to spotlight the classroom use of horror-based media such as films, TV episodes, short stories, and other fan-based media. Questions to be explored include: How does the emotional intensity of the genre involve a willful surrender to fictional worlds in ways that go beyond suspension of disbelief (Whitney, 2014)? How does the symbolic nature of horror narratives invite close reading and complex literary analysis (Golden, 2001; Ahmad & Moreland, 2013)? And finally, how does the multimodal nature of horror media texts and their intentional play with social anxieties open new spaces for social critique and social emotional awareness (Golub et. al, 2017)? The conversation surrounding the use of film in the classroom and the unique affordances of horror-based media in particular are rich and offer several avenues to explore.

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