

ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

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Now And Then?

One aspect for consideration when reading a supernatural tale is the circumstances under which the story was written. Should we involve ourselves in thoughts of what the writers' life might have been like when they were toiling away at the PC, word processor, electric typewriter, manual typewriter, pen and ink, quill, cave wall, tablet of stone...? Do the life and times of writers present and past affect our enjoyment of a piece of fiction?

Clearly the influences on a writer, the minutia of their life, may have a great bearing on the style of their work. It can be of no little importance to wonder whether a change of life style would have meant a change in artistic direction. Was the writer married or single? Professional or amateur? Sad or happy? City, village; young, old; ill or in good health? Did they have all day to write or were they forced into writing in snatched moments? It is to no special advantage to have to spend all day at work then to come home and immediately place oneself in the frame of mind conducive to good writing. Even worse, horrors of responsibility; if there is a spouse who expects attention, concentration on conversation, help with washing up, children to entertain and put to bed.

There can be little doubt that the influences on the life of a writer such as Poe coloured his writing. No matter how great his natural tendency for the darker side of life, no matter how much a love of the night was born in him, the poverty and grief, which he knew, allowed his gift of eloquent woe to find its voice with deeper depths of agony and genius.

The life pattern of a modern person can be thought in itself to be alien to the emotive force of dark fiction. For the most part living in clean, bright, centrally heated homes, with human companionship so near, even through such devices as the telephone, e-mail, mobiles, pagers, Internet and more. It becomes increasingly difficult to grasp the feeling of 'living your work' that writers of old may have experienced. Perhaps it is over-romantic to imagine the writer of the past huddled over the light of a flickering candle in an otherwise darkened room. Alone with their imagination, with no electronic stimuli, no diversions from the mood of their creation, sheltered from outside influences. By living the horror of the ghost story mood, or the atmosphere of it, could the same be more easily transmitted to the written page? The writer of today must first think themselves into the mood of their fiction by, to a large extent, ignoring the normality of their surroundings, rather than being able to feed from, and upon it, as might be ideal.

Then there is television; the numbing of the senses, the intruding into imagination, the believing in the banal. Where does it provide the creative stimulus for the supernatural tale? It tells when it should cloak, it reveals when it should mask, it explains when it should be enticing. No extension of the creative framework here; rather a bland catch-all formula that drapes a cloud of easy viewing that batters at imagination and its defences until the wall crashes and true creation is lost.

Leaving the sterile atmosphere of modern life to one side, one of the least advantageous influences on today's writers must be the media of film; cinema and admittedly to a lesser extent with regard to supernatural fiction, the demon television. To say that all the best stories were written before the advent of screen horror would be wholly inaccurate but it cannot be ignored that the ability to see on the screen that which previously could only have been imagined from the written word has an immense affect on the modern reader, and therefore by extension the modern writer.

To take just one example, that of the vampire story, one of the most basic, and finest of horror vehicles. No matter how subtle the writer is, once it becomes obvious we are reading a vampire story then the images conjured are invariably not those intended by the writer but those of Schreck, Lugosi, Lee, or whichever cinematic character the story reminds us of – even *Twilight*. The force behind the writing is diminished because the vital ingredient of imagination on the part of the reader has been dulled by memories of film, or worse of the circumstances under which we went to see the film. So the writer of a vampire story may today be faced with a reader who does not pale at thoughts of the blood-sucking monster but rather one whose mind is busy recalling the delights of sitting in the back row of the cinema.

The basic and still much respected ingredients of the genre have been over-exposed by the film world so that their power does not work so deeply on today's audiences as they might have done a century ago. It might be offered that horror films have not only had an adverse affect on writing but also on the enjoyment of reading a good horror story. The words more often conjure cinematic images rather than the private images that they would have done previously.

The reader of *The Seventeenth Hole At Duncaster* today cannot experience the same atmosphere that the first reader knew in the 1920's. Their lives are vastly different. Their knowledge is different; therefore their senses absorb the words differently and appreciate the meaning and the moods in different ways.

There is sometimes the temptation to consider works of old as being superior in some way, purely because they have the competency of longevity. Even allowing for the sentimental regard with which stories of the past are held today, there is a stylistic difference between them and their modern counterparts, and this cannot be ignored when discussing the influences on writing. While a story may have been effective in 1900 it may not satisfy today, may be inaccessible due to style, rather than content, because its message may already be over-familiar through cinema, television, and other works of fiction. What convinced a century ago now appears merely dated and mundane. Creaking doors, and draughty ghosts, do not convince us as modern readers. Where our ancestors dreaded their intrusion, we merely wait for the bigger terror, the higher fix of horror.

Each age has had its share of true horrors, the reality of which brings us to book when we worry about the fictional versions. Since the raw carnage of 1914-18 and World War Two we cannot look with the same concerned expression upon fictional fright. Add to that the daily horrors now so freely reported in an increasingly sensationalist media and we have a wall growing ever thicker through which the suspension of disbelief must break. The narrative drive must reach wrap speed these days before it engages a gear high enough for our attention to be provoked. So desensitised have we become to stories of children killing each other, to mindless violence, sex, drugs, corruption, infidelity and genocide, that the fictional terrors we

create in our imaginations must be more subtle, more inventive than ever to jolt the reader out of their de-humanised veil of disbelief.

There are of course two ways to look at criticism. Many people would argue that art must live by today's standards, so that a film made fifty years ago must stand up to the techniques of today before it can be considered valid. This seems too easy an option. It places no importance upon circumstance, and indeed it seems to ignore the influences, surrounding the making of the film, or the writing of the story if considering fiction. This is not to suggest that excuses should be made for the writer if the story was written under difficult circumstances. If a wife has just left a husband should we excuse a poor story written as a result? Hardly. But if a work of art was considered valid when it was first created then it cannot be accurate if thirty years later it is deemed poor if it does not affect a modern audience in the same way. Is the modern audience a keener critic because a few years have passed? We may have become familiar with the style or the theme, but that is not the fault or responsibility of the writer. The art has not changed, merely the opinions and sophistication of the audience. Their views and tastes have changed but the words written remain exactly the same. It can surely only be accurate to take historical perspective into account when reading an old story. If a story fails to ignite us today we must look for a better reason than merely to suggest it has lost its spark along the way.

Would it be wholly valid to explore the avenue of thought that an influence on writing today is the greater availability of fiction to the mass market? After all it is within everyone's grasp today to buy a book on the Internet, or at any one of dwindling bookshops, or even to borrow it from the Public Library. This availability was not always the case. A second rate work of fiction today may well reach a far wider audience than a better book years ago simply because the distribution channels are so much more diverse these days. The Internet has increased this phenomenon with its ability to access fiction on the web sites as an addition to the printed page. The proliferation of self publishing has only added to the myriad of books available at far lower prices than used to be the case. Another medium available now but not previously is the talking tape where stories and novels can be abridged and spoken without the need even for the effort of lifting a book in leisure. Allowing for his distaste for the general public, and that it was not his intention to write for critical acclaim, it is interesting to ponder how the writing of H P Lovecraft might have altered if fed to a wider audience, and the difference it might have made if subject to a publishers deadlines.

Trends can sometimes be seen in current fiction that suggest a deliberate attempt to fool the voracious appetite of the reading public, sated as they are by these diverse images. Stories whose every intention is vagueness; over-explored themes deserted for stories of minimum plotline but maximum exploration of the mind of modern man. Then there are the stories of excess gore and sexual athletics. The intention of many modern stories seems to be to place Man as the monster, his way of life as the creator, and his mind as the catalyst that sparks the horror. To do this exclusively suggests that the writers believe the terrors of old are ineffective in today's society and that new and less traditional horrors are required. New approaches are always welcome but we should not ignore the classical in the pursuit of the wholly different just for its own sake. The meaning behind the words should not always be so

obscure as to leave the vagueness so clearly worked for as to give any feeling, emotion of atmosphere, no chance of survival as the puzzle develops.

Stories that are obvious are never satisfactory be they one day or one hundred years old. The converse is equally true in that stories that baffle to deceive are simply infuriating. From what viewpoint should a work of fiction be judged? Some good stories are poorly told, others well written but clichéd in plot. In all probability the only true way to judge a story is objectively and yet that disavows the emotional pull that should exist if a work of fiction is to engage our full attention. It is possibly because many critics take the subjective path that arguments about merit develop. The only true way is to read with a subjective eye whilst the objective mind can sort the poor craft from the well-meaning ideas. Merits to one are defects to another.

In terms of fiction the influences upon a writer are many and varied. This was always true and is more so today. The electronic stimuli, the modern stresses and pressures, the familiarity the reader has with themes and ideas, all conspire now to make the storywriter perform to their best if they are to emulate, let alone exceed, the writers of old. Because a story is decades old does not mean it should not be read and enjoyed today; though it should be treated with respect of age and not expected to perform as though a teenager in the prime of youth – make allowances for style, pace and even content - please.

A writer draws on many influences in the pursuance of their craft; their life style, their past, their aims when writing, their known audience, their publisher's wishes. Our modern emphasis on bodily comforts seems to spare the writer of horror the chance to experience the terrors at first hand, and yet each day carries with it some new nightmare from which to draw ideas. Dark fiction remains now as then, a valid release valve from the horrors of the real world, and a reminder that despite modern sophistication of living we should never get too complacent.