



## The Uses of Horror

TTh 1:30-2:45pm; 3-4:15pm  
Classroom: CGIS Knafel 107

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“We live in Gothic times.” –Angela Carter

“When you’re writing, you’re trying to find out something which you don’t know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don’t want to know, what you don’t want to find out.” –James Baldwin

“How can I tell what I think ’til I see what I say?” –attributed to E. M. Forster

### I. COURSE OVERVIEW

In a conversation with Stephen Colbert, comedian and filmmaker Jordan Peele referred to his 2017 horror film, *Get Out*, as a “historical biopic.” His claim that “the movie is truth” invites us to reflect on the relationship between horror and history – between fictional and filmic fantasies that terrify us and our own lived realities. In this course, we’ll think about what makes horror cohere as a genre, how its aesthetic qualities operate on the mind of the observer or reader, and what kinds of social and cultural commentary might we discover in a genre that’s often been dismissed as frivolous. The readings for this course – and our responses to them – will help us think through some key questions: How do we explain our cultural preoccupation with the macabre? How might our engagement with terrifying works of the imagination help us think in new ways about the world in which we live? While these questions are relevant to (and potentially answered within) a range of disciplines – from sociology to psychology to neuroscience, and beyond – our primary sources in this course will be works of fiction and film.

In our first unit, we'll read a range of short stories (by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joyce Carol Oates, Carmen Maria Machado, Mariana Enriquez, and others), paying particular attention to how they express anxieties about the unknown and the irrational and how they serve as allegories for psychic and social realities. We'll also think about how the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century authors riff on and subvert the conventions of their 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors. In the second unit, we'll turn to two recent horror films: *Get Out* and *The Babadook*. We'll read several critical and theoretical sources that will help you think (and write) about how these films operate as allegories. For the third unit, you'll have the opportunity to write a research paper about a primary source (or sources) of your choice: horror film, Gothic novel, short story, etc. Our shared sources for the unit will provide a broader sense of the genre and some of its key questions and concerns. These sources will serve as springboards for your independent research.

### **The course is organized into the following three units:**

**Unit 1:** In our first unit, we'll read a range of short horror stories – both classic and contemporary – by Edgar Allan Poe (“Ligeia”), Nathaniel Hawthorne (“Rappaccini’s Daughter”), Angela Carter (“The Bloody Chamber”), Joyce Carol Oates (“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”), Mariana Enriquez (“The Dirty Kid”; “Things We Lost in the Fire”), Carmen Maria Machado (“The Husband Stitch”). Your first essay will give you the opportunity to practice one of the most essential skills in academic writing: posing an analytical question and engaging in a close analysis (of a primary source) that argues for an answer. Our questions will concentrate on representations of women in the horror genre: innocent victim, empowered “final girl,” love/lust object, femme fatale, etc. We'll also consider how the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century authors on the syllabus riff on and subvert the conventions of their 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors.

**Unit 2:** Your second essay will build on the work of the first, but this time you'll be making a comparative argument, framing your own interpretation of a primary source (Jennifer Kent's film *The Babadook*) through the lens of another source. We'll read several theoretical sources to help us think more deeply about the film, how it operates as a psychological and social allegory, and how Kent deploys formal film techniques to make meaning.

**Unit 3:** Finally, for our third unit, you'll have the opportunity to write a research paper about a primary source (or sources) of your choice: horror film, Gothic novel, short story, contemporary or classic. As we get closer to unit 3, we'll review some possible pathways for your research. For now, keep in mind this preliminary “food for thought” from the course trailer:

- Those of you interested in **philosophy** might want to pursue the question of horror's aesthetic and emotional appeal in the course's research unit. Noël Carroll's book [\*The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart\*](#) would be a great place to start.
- Those of you considering a concentration in **psychology** or **neuroscience** might investigate the physiology of fear and why we find certain kinds of terror pleasurable. Here's a 2013 *Atlantic* interview to get you started: [“Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?”](#)

- Interested in **film & media studies** or the **history of science**? You might focus your research on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “phantasmagoria” shows that served as predecessors of the modern horror film. Here’s a short piece from *JStor Daily* to get you started: [“The Magic Lantern Shows that Influenced Modern Horror.”](#)

As you can see, the course topic opens itself up to many different types of research projects. And in the first two units, you’ll hone the skills you’ll need to write the most effective, convincing research paper you can—skills like textual analysis, evaluating other scholars’ arguments, and working with different kinds of sources.

These three sequences of instruction – and their accompanying texts – are designed to help you hone some important writing skills and develop habits of mind that will be useful to you both within and beyond Expos 20. Over the course of the three essay units, you’ll learn how to analyze and evaluate sources, develop your thinking with evidence, and structure clear and persuasive arguments. Each unit builds on the ones before it, asking you return to and sharpen these (and other) core writing moves as you tackle several important versions of the academic essay: the close analysis paper, the comparative analysis paper, and the multi-source paper that sets up a “conversation” with and around a primary text. The response paper assignments within each unit build on each other as well and are designed to help you develop the skills you will need to write your essays.

Some of our writing goals will change unit by unit. Other goals will remain our focus throughout the entire course: developing your sense of what you do well and challenging yourself to grow as a writer; expanding your repertoire and practice of revision techniques; and increasing the complexity and originality of your analysis as well as the effectiveness and elegance of your prose. One of the most exciting things to learn in a writing course is that the learning process never stops; one doesn't “arrive” at being a good writer, but rather continually becomes one. With these goals in mind, we begin with these important premises:

**Writing is a process.** As you’ll see on our calendar, each essay unit is approximately four weeks long. During each of these four-week blocks, you’ll read carefully, take notes on your reading, write and revise response papers that help you focus your ideas, draft a full-length essay, and revise that draft in conversation with me and with your peers. This continued process of drafting and revision is the primary work of this class and is the main way your ideas evolve and your writing grows stronger. While inspiration is the moment we all hope for in our writing, it comes most readily when that inspiration is earned – in other words, when you have dedicated *sustained effort to that process* of reading, thinking, questioning, drafting and revising. This course will also ask you to be *reflective* about that process and about what you want to accomplish in each assignment: in your cover letters about each essay and in your Writer’s Letters at the beginning and end of the term.

**Writing is thinking.** In Expos 20, we approach writing not as a static recitation of what you already know but as a means of thinking about *what you don’t know* – a means of inquiry. Writing is one of the best ways to *figure out* your ideas and you should expect these ideas to evolve throughout the writing process. You may find, for example, that what you *thought* was your thesis when you started your draft is less compelling than a point you make much later on in your paper – one you’ve written your way toward. Your revision, then, will involve making that compelling point

– the one you may not have realized you were building toward but “Eureka!” there it is on p. 5 – central to your paper. The frequency with which writers (both students and professionals) experience this “Eureka!” moment suggests that our best ideas come often come *through* and *in* our writing. “*How can I know what I think 'til I see what I say?*”

## II. HOW THE COURSE WORKS

### Required Texts & Materials

- All assigned readings will be distributed as PDFs on Canvas and as hardcopies.
- Links to stream our Unit 2 film will be available on Canvas.

I will also assign reading from:

- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>
- *Exposé* (now called *Key Terms*) the magazine of student writing (available online or as handouts in class)

Since Expository Writing courses generate a great deal of paper – response papers, in class writing exercises, drafts – I strongly recommend that you purchase a three-ring binder for this course. Each assignment builds on the next, and this will help you to keep those assignments (and my comments on them) organized for later reference.

### Classes and Conferences

Class time is an essential part of this course, so please come to class ready to contribute. You are expected to engage in lively conversation about the readings, as well as to provide constructive criticism during workshops of writing assignments and, most importantly, of drafts. Much of what you learn in the course will occur to you in class discussions as you listen to each other’s ideas and enrich each other’s thought. One of the benefits of Exposé is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class; as in any seminar, you learn much more from formulating, articulating, and questioning your own thoughts than from simply listening to what others have to say. Put simply: class is a joint endeavor, and in everything we do this semester your participation is essential.

Conferences – individual tutorial sessions – are an extension of class, and in conference we will discuss your essays and work together to improve them. You will have at least three draft conferences with me over the course of the semester, and you should come prepared to talk about both process and product: What you’ve struggled with as you’ve drafted your essay and what has come more easily; what the draft at hand is doing well and what you feel needs work. Toward this end, you’ll submit a cover letter with each essay draft.

### Grading

You will develop each of your essays through a guided process of prewriting, drafting, and rewriting. At the end of this process, I will grade the final essay. Ideally, your essays should:

- Develop a fresh, insightful **thesis** and **argue** for that thesis in a logical and interesting way.
- Explain the **stakes** of your thesis (i.e. trace its implications to a larger, more important topic).
- Thoughtfully and thoroughly reason with **evidence**.
- **Analyze** evidence convincingly. By **analysis**, I mean: going beyond observing or summarizing your data (i.e. evidence), taking it apart, grappling with its details, drawing out any significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view.
- **Structure** your paper logically with a clear beginning, middle, and conclusion and a progression of evidence and analysis that is more than simply a list of examples or series of restatements of the thesis (i.e. “Macbeth is ambitious: he’s ambitious here; and less ambitious here; and he’s ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious.”).
- Work with **sources** accurately and effectively, avoiding plagiarism.
- Address your readers respectfully in a clear, graceful **style**.
- Express your thoughts in prose that correctly uses the conventions of grammar, usage, and punctuation.

I will evaluate your work by these standards:

A-work creates an impression of excellence in all the listed criteria.

B-work creates an impression of excellence in most of the listed criteria, and competence in the others.

C-work is average but creates an impression of competence in all the listed criteria.

D- or F-work is below average and is deficient in one or more of the listed criteria.

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown:

Essay 1: 20%

Essay 2: 25%

Essay 3 Annotated Bibliography: 10%

Essay 3: 35%

Engagement: 10%

In addition to being prepared for and contributing to class discussion, engagement in the course consists of: completing and submitting response papers, drafts, and essays on time; responding to peers’ drafts in peer review and workshop; responding to discussion questions or discussion threads on Canvas; doing the reading thoughtfully; and preparing for and contributing to conferences.

The standard for each essay also becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay). At the end of the course, you will turn in your final Writer’s Letter so you can assess your own progress over the semester (so save all your work!).