

Genre Conventions of Haunted House Stories

A **genre** is a category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter. A **convention** is the way in which something is usually done, especially within a particular area or activity. A *genre convention*, then, is the sort of thing one typically finds in a particular sort of work (in our case, the haunted house story).

The House

- isolation

Early 20th century horror fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft writes, "Atmosphere is the all-important thing [of the horror tale] [...] not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation." Isolation helps to create the sensation of fear in the sense that it represents the oldest fears of them all: abandonment, separation from safety, being alone. In this way, physical spaces that are removed from people also remove inhabitants from the possibility of aid.

- imprisonment

Ghosts are trapped by houses, and houses trap inhabitants with the ghosts. Secrets are locked inside the house, and for the inhabitants to break free of these bonds, they must unlock those secrets and bring them to light. Until then, they are locked inside closed spaces with their own fears and nightmares.

- as metaphor for self

In some psychological dream interpretations, the house is a symbol for the self. The attic represents the intellect; the basement houses our unconscious instincts; and the bedrooms become the hidden things we lock away deep within us (secrets, repressed memories, fears). In this sense, the haunting becomes a metaphor for these darker parts of ourselves coming to light.

The Ghost

- the other

In some philosophical systems the Other is that which opposes the Self. It implies an incomprehensible subject which cannot be processed, and we cannot understand it is because it is an imperfect reflection of the Self-- representing those aspects of the individual that one fears or fears they may become. Thus, our fear is a rejection of the undesirable qualities within us all.

- the uncanny

The uncanny is a translation of a German word, *das Unheimliche* ("the opposite of what is familiar") in which objects or ideas are both familiar and alien at the same time, resulting in a feeling of the everyday seeming uncomfortably strange. In a ghost story, the ordinary is made frightening by its contact with ideas and presences that change it slightly into something that cannot be understood.

- fear of the unknown

The normal world is governed by predictable laws of cause and effect. This everyday stability is upended, however, when supernatural elements (literally, *above* or *beyond nature*) are introduced. The world becomes unpredictable and unstable, and this, in turn, creates the fear of losing our sense of the known.

Time

- the past as haunting the present and future

One of our most terrifying thoughts is that we are not truly free. Whether our actions are determined by gods, genetics, destiny, or social structures, we want to feel as if what we do really matters, that they are actual choices (rather than us being manipulated by forces outside our control). Haunted house stories tap into this fear, as something has set in motion events that are only dimly understood and, for this reason, are terrifying, as the past controls both the present and future.

- decay

Age and decay are linked, and if the house itself is not old, the ghost typically will be, even if only in the sense that a specter is the degraded remnant of a (once) human personality. At its root, the fear is caused by the loss of control, as age ruins that which was once desirable-- as inevitable as it is demoralizing. We are all helpless against decay, and age is a visible reminder of this helplessness.

- night

From a psychological point of view, fear and darkness are often linked. Darkness implies ignorance (we literally cannot see), just as one can speak of ignorance as “being in the dark.” Hence, the dark suggests a realm beyond understanding, where the normal rules of experience are no longer a sure guide to action, leaving us to act without understanding the full significance of our actions.

DIRECTIONS: Choose one of the concepts FROM TWO OF THE CATEGORIES. For each of these two, write TWO paragraphs that explain 1) how that concept is important to William Hope Hodgson’s “The Gateway of the Monster,” and 2) what the significance of that concept is to the story (this can be in terms of creating fear, developing the story in a specific way, establishing a theme, or something else entirely). EACH paragraph must use at least one quotation from the story. If this is not clear, you will be writing a total of four paragraphs.

Example paragraphs (using María Elena Llano’s “In the Family”):

María Elena Llano’s “In the Family” works by engaging familiar things in an unfamiliar, uncanny way. In the story, a mirror functions as a portal to an alternate world, much like the narrator’s own except that it reflects the “departed” (1) members of the family (rather than the living ones). Thus, not only is the function of the mirror subtly altered (a window instead of a reflection), but the occupants are similar to the living (in that they are all members of the same family), but they exist on the other side of the divide between life and death. This is what creates the disquiet, as ordinary objects and people no longer hold their customary properties, and the narrator’s expectations about reality no longer provide a reliable guide to action.

This is significant to the story by suggesting that the boundary between the two worlds is not as rigid as one might suppose. For example, when Clara joins the family on the other side of the mirror, the narrator remarks, “There wasn’t a great deal of difference between what Clara did before and what she was doing now” (3). Just as Clara was bossy and overbearing in life, now that she has died, she continues much as before-- this time trying to entice the narrator to eat the ghostly food that will result in her joining Clara in the mirror world of death. Clara, like the rest of the mirror inhabitants, does not lose her identity after death, nor is she cut off from communication to the world of the living. Instead, the two worlds co-exist side by side, making the narrator wonder at one point who is the guest of whom? The two worlds are different, but the same: uncanny, but familiar.