KILLING THE KING
OR FACING MEDUSA:
EXPLORING THE EVILS OF LITERATURE
THROUGH DRAMA

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Abstract: This paper considers the values of reading horror literature in the
classroom and describes how teachers might use drama with students in the
exploration of horror literature.

A girl is kneeling in the South American rainforest with her tied hands raised in
prayer and her eyes fixed with acceptance on the young man who stands facing her
holding a raised knife which is already spattered with the blood of a sacrificial
animal. Beside them are attendants and beyond them the hanged bodies of the
previously dead. All support and believe in the ritual which is about to be enacted;
all believe that the girl will achieve everlasting life even though her physical body
will die.

Though this event might have occurred in my imagination, in a
documentary film, or even in a Stephen King novel, in fact it occurred in a
workshop which I led as part of the Reading Stephen King Conference at the
University of Maine in October 1996. In the room were nearly sixty conferees
ranging from high school students to seasoned teachers, and from parents to
academics. As part of the workshop, with imaginary props the participants
created and enacted images like these. In a similar workshop at Children’s
Literature ’97, participants experienced first-hand how drama can be used by
students as they explore literature in classrooms which are open to the
uncensored study of the writing of Stephen King or others who are also
concerned with themes of, for example, good and evil, horror, terror,
violence, suffering, life and death.

The censors who want to “kill” Stephen King and other writers for
elementary and adolescent readers are not alone -- they have accomplices
who range across time and space. From the sixteenth century Puritan
Christians of New England to the late twentieth century fundamentalist
Islamic mullahs of Iran there have been those who have seen it as their duty
to protect us from what they perceive to be the corrupting images of “evil” in
literature. However, those who censor are not only religious zealots or
vitriolic public officials who act with the authority of the U.S. Senate or public
school board, many are well-meaning teachers and parents who
believe that horror literature's stories and images are bad for us. While I
neither dispute the right of parents to restrict their children's choices nor the
desirability of a teacher's wish to extend students' reading experiences, I agree
with those who argue that in public schools we should, in principle, support
students' rights to choose whatever literature they want to read and talk
about. Though I once had major reservations about the exploration of such
intense images and their accompanying themes in the classroom, after
several years exploring horror literature with students I now believe that it is
students themselves who should have censorship control over what they
want to encounter on the classroom. Students have a right to "just say No"
to emotional encounters with horror stories just as they have the right to
resist unwelcome physical encounters. Equally however, students have a
right to say "Yes" to horror stories and when they do, I believe that as teachers
we have a duty to explore those stories with them. Drama is one powerful
way of doing so.

In stories we can read about the horrific deeds of "Medusa" and other
monstrous creatures of imagination who embody evil and inflict pain on
others; in drama students can "face" Medusa. When teacher and students use
drama in the classroom they can not only read about monstrous acts, they can
encounter horrific images and interact with them face-to-face. In drama,
students' ideas and images can become visible and concrete as they are
formed and contextualized in a fictional "drama world" (O'Neill 1995) which
the group creates together as a response to a work of literature.

THE DRAMA WORKSHOP

The drama session which I planned for the workshop engaged
participants with an M.R. James horror short story titled "Lost Hearts." I
deliberately chose a text which few of the participants would know -- none did
-- because I wanted to illustrate how drama can be used to approach and
engage students in literature without the requirement of any prior knowledge
of the text. They did not read the text until after the workshop, yet through
drama the students began to think about some of the themes, for example
violence and death, in the context of the story of a man -- an academic called
Abney -- who was prepared ritualistically and cold-bloodedly to kill others
because he thought that by doing so he would live for ever.

In the workshop I demonstrated how teachers can, with students,
dramatize "at the edges of the text" (Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, in press).
Rather than act out the story we entered the world of the story obliquely
through the "frame" (Heathcote, 1984) of a media consultant company.
Before the workshop I had made a Fax [See figure 1] as if from Steven
Spielberg, the Hollywood director, to Blockbuster Media Consultants, a
company he had previously consulted before making some of his movies. In
the fax he outlined his idea for an "Indiana Jones meets Poltergeist" type of
movie based on the diaries of a deceased mythologist, Anatole Abney. He
asked for Blockbuster's professional advice and some draft movie clips or
still along with their rationale for using them. He also asked them to obtain
the consent of Abney's only relative, his cousin Stephen Elliott. I also invented the titles of two texts which I imagined Abney might have written and covered two books to look as if I had been able to obtain copies of them. They were "The Rituals, Practices, and Beliefs of Everlasting Life" his academic tome published by Yale University Press along with "Living Forever" his "Indiana Jones"-type book published by Penguin Press which I invented had been a best-seller in the 1930's. I also copied photographs from anthropological photo essays which looked as if they might have come from these books, for example, one showed a close-up of a blood-covered knife over a pottery bowl while another showed ghost-like dark-skinned dancers with faces painted white.

FIGURE 1

FAX...FAX...FAX...FAX...FAX...FAX

from

SPIELBERG ENTERPRISES INC.
Hollywood

Los Angeles
FAX: 213-498-7530

BLOCKBUSTER MEDIA CONSULTANTS INC.
San Francisco
FAX: 415-645-1342

October 3, 1996

Dear everyone at Blockbuster,

This letter is just to confirm my telephone call with Jeff.

Glad you agree that the life of Anatole Abney should make a terrific movie. We can change his name of course! I see this as a sort of "Indiana Jones meets Poltergeist" type of movie!

I can confirm that I have acquired the movie rights -- subject to the approval of his cousin Stephen Elliott, whose address you already have.

Please do the following as soon as possible:
• send mock-up movie clips or stills with your rationale for these possible scenes
• contact Stephen Elliott in person -- make sure you get his written approval for this project
• see if Stephen Elliott has any more diaries or information -- there's got to be more on this guy than in those published diaries.

Thanks,
STEVE

P.S. I'm no longer interested in a JURASSIC PARK sequel. However, thanks for your excellent report -- the check's in the mail.
The original tale has no reference to the movies but all of the other
details of the drama world which I invented were closely based on the facts of
the story. I invented sufficient details to give flesh to the bones of the frame --
Blockbuster Media Consultants new assignment. I was then ready to engage
the participants and begin to build a drama world with them which would
enable them to begin to explore some of the themes of M.R. James' short
story.

I began by passing out the fax and asked people what they could
discover or infer about the company from the fax. As they read, talked in
pairs, and shared ideas with the whole group, we began to invent the
company's history, reputation, interests and expertise. Many began almost
immediately to talk as if they worked for the company. "We must be good at
our work," one person remarked. "Good enough to work on Jurassic Park"
agreed another. Within five minutes, everyone had agreed to imagine -- and
interact -- as if they worked for Blockbuster Media Consultants. One
participant began waving an imaginary knife in the air as he talked about a
possible scene for the movie, so I sent them all, in imagination, to the
company prop room for possible objects to use in the stills or clips which Mr.
Spielberg had requested. They returned and showed others the swords, ropes,
jars, crosses and other archetypal images of horror they had found in the prop
room. Then I produced Abney's two books and copies of the photographs and
soon everyone was examining these in small groups and working intensely
to come up with drafts of potential movie stills or clips which we would
consider sending to Mr. Spielberg. Several of the scenes were shared with the
whole group, including the one described at the beginning of the chapter
which was a draft of a five-second video clip prepared by five high school
students.

As the draft video clips were shared I asked the other participants
either to consider a narrator's possible commentary or to think about how
they would justify to Mr. Spielberg its inclusion in the movie. Narrators
varied from a "village elder" who explained the need for sacrifice, to Anatole
Abney himself who commented on the sincerity of their belief in everlasting
life. As we talked together as if we were the media consultants seeking to
justify our choices, questions arose which engaged the group in
considerations of Blockbuster's artistic intentions and financial
responsibilities. A majority of the participants seemed settled with a position
that their responsibility was solely to propose a money-making venture.
They were thinking about the economics of horror movies and made the
point that if people liked to be scared and horrified then we should give them
what they wanted. However, one participant publicly disputed a single
money-making view of our intentions. She felt that we should, in principle,
do more than think about what sells -- we should not be sensational but
should try to be respectful of the people depicted.

The participants continued to think about horror and they dialogued
about the impact of horror movies on audiences. In the ongoing discussion
between the movie consultants as another group shared its draft video clip,
questions arose about the consultant's need to think about potential audiences who might include children or people who had deeply-held religious beliefs. Again, most considered that they need not concern themselves with questions of how an audience might respond to the movie. "They don't have to watch it if they don't want to" remarked one person. I raised the question of whether or not we should be concerned with how a devout religious person might feel. "What about our principles I asked?" Did we have a responsibility, I wondered aloud, to also attempt to be respectful of others' with strongly held beliefs who might find this material offensive? The opinions expressed by participants were divided on the issue as we had a brief discussion about our ethical responsibilities. Some felt we should, while others -- especially the younger students -- repeated that our only concern was to show how to make the maximum amount of money.

Toward the end of the workshop I interrupted their deliberations to tell them that Stephen Elliott, the cousin and only surviving relative of Anatole Abney had arrived to talk with them. Knowing they had to get his approval the group was divided about what to say to him. Some wanted to trick him into agreement, others wanted to flatter him. Few wanted to share all of our ideas with him. I walked away from the group, turned around and re-entered as Elliott. His arrival changed the tone of the session. His story brought a chilling realization that ritual killing might happen closer to home. He produced a blood-spattered page from Abney's diary which had just been found and sent to him by the house-keeper who had looked after Abney. She had befriended Elliott as a twelve-year-old boy when, as an orphan, he had been adopted by his cousin. In the diary page [which was taken work-forward from the original story -- see Figure 2] Abney, the mythologist, explains how he had discovered the secret of eternal life and outlines the gruesome details of what he will to do to avoid death -- eat the hearts of three freshly killed children. In the diary entry Abney confesses to having killed two other children and plotted Elliott's death. Speaking as Elliott and adopting a distraught attitude I told them how I now realized that I had only been saved from death because I had heeded the warnings of two ghosts -- those of the two dead children -- and missed my midnight rendezvous with my cousin. In response to the consultants' questions I retold what I knew of the bizarre circumstances of Abney's death which as a child I had been shielded from -- his heart had been torn out presumably by wild animals on the very night I had been summoned to his room.

![Figure 2](image.png)

I have discovered the ancient secret of eternal life. It requires the sacrifice of three children on the first day of spring. Their hearts must be removed while they are still alive, and burned to ashes on a grill. The ashes are mixed with wine, and then drunk. I have already killed a little girl, whose body I hid in the old bathroom. And also a young boy, whom I buried in the wine cellar. My next -- and final -- sacrifice will be my cousin, Stephen Elliott. Then I will live for ever!
Elliott left and then the media consultants had to decide whether or not to include the events he re-told in their drama-documentary. Immediately, questions of responsibility, reliability, appropriateness, and differences between fiction and reality came to the fore. Some of the comments in the ensuing lively exchanges were: "We have to try to find out what really happened -- we can't just assume that this is true." "I don't think children should be allowed to watch this -- we'll need an NC-17 rating." "But what about Jurassic Park?" "Yes, but that was fiction. It's different if it really happened." "But it's horrible." "Yes, but we still need to tell the story."

Some participants after the workshop talked with me and mentioned how my arrival as Stephen Elliott had made such a difference. One said it "changed everything because we had to deal with a person." Another participant recalled: "I felt so guilty. We had decided to lie to you and then you came in with a story which showed you had lived this. But then I thought we had to ignore this as we just had to make money. It made me wonder about what moviemakers think about."

**EVIL IN THE CLASSROOM**

Our classrooms are too "good." I think there needs to be a place for more "evil" in the classroom and drama creates a space in which evil can safely be explored.

Of course, we want our classrooms to be "good" spaces -- safe, respectful havens where books are read and new ideas are formed. However, it can be a short step from respect to repression; from enforcing standards of tolerant exchange to removing forums in which uncomfortable topics like our fascination with violence or our capacity for hatred can be examined. All too often, as in the wider culture, the books we read in school and the topics we talk about with students tend to avoid or trivialize evil and the boundaries of what we consider to be normal. As teachers, we may not want to dwell on the negative and the depressing sides of literature, history, science, or popular culture -- but our students often do. We may resist reading horror stories with our students but many of them are part of an enormous readership which makes Stephen King the best-selling author in the country. So why are our students so invested in the evils of horror?

Recent research by Ruth Vinz (1996) provides recent confirming evidence from adolescent readers in support of the idea (proposed by, among others, James Twitchell) that horror stories provide readers with the intense experiences of transgression and evil which they crave. She surveyed nearly 600 readers between the ages of 12-18 and interviewed twenty-five avid readers of horror. She found that horror literature "satisfies [adolescent readers'] desire to experience... forbidden and dangerous alternative realities" (7).

In horror tales almost anything can happen -- we read, and can vicariously experience, forbidden, dangerous, unrestrained and evil deeds which regularly violate social norms. Stephen King (1989) has noted that "the nature of evil is a natural preoccupation for any horror writer" (39). Evil
deeds break all the rules of what is considered "normal" behavior -- people are just not supposed to act in the ways that horror characters like Dracula or Mr. Hyde do. But as King has also pointed out, the destructive power of evil in horror stories highlights the constructed nature of norms. "The horror tale screams at the top of its lungs -- aren't you afraid that your normality is in itself a lie? There is no such thing as normality."

Ingebretnsen (1996) argues that this questioning of norms is a key reason why King and other writers of horror from Mary Shelley to R.L. Stine have been censored -- they "contemplate the unspeakable" (182). In a few pages horror writers may appear to undermine all that socially responsible adults stand for -- the social, cultural and psychological norms and expectations which guide our daily interactions. Our sociocultural beliefs in kindness, care, rationality, and non-violent solutions of problems can be dismissed in a snarl or a slash. Horror literature can feel "bad" because the images portrayed are so "anti-social" and even challenge the very norms of what it means to be human. The characters of the horror story are the victims or perpetrators of the sort of evil which our society tries to avoid or control -- unrestrained and unpredictable excesses of uncontrollable violence and hatred. Protagonists may be murderers, stories take place in terrifying situations, and characters may do anything from go mad to tear out a human heart. The apparently benign can actually turn out to be malignant, (for example, in the M.R. James story which I used in the workshop, a bookish professor can be a child-killer), or the terrifying can in retrospect be seen as necessary (for example in the same story, frightening ghosts are actually warning of impending evil).

This "contemplation of the unspeakable," which Ingebretnsen describes as the reason for our tendencies to censor horror, is precisely the reason which Vinz gives for the popularity of horror literature. One way to recast and thus reconsider some of the psychological and sociological functions of horror literature, is to see these tales in the wider context of assumptions of rationality, control, tolerance, and predictability which are so pervasive in our schools and culture. We live, and are expected to lead, "good" lives -- lives which are reasonable, measured, and cooperative. Yet, we all know that life is not always like that. Our students are no different -- they also want to experience uncontrollable evil and our power to destroy; they wonder about social norms and want to explore what happens when they are broken. As one student whom Vinz interviewed said "Reading [horror] makes me think more about what I take for granted as normal... how the unexpected can happen to anyone that would cause you to lose your house or your life" (11).

I suggest that the exploration of horror literature in the classroom should be promoted. Given that horror is a major literature of adolescent choice, it makes sense to seriously consider removing horror from the margins of the classroom. Further, if students are fascinated with images of transgressions and horror and have a desire to explore our capacities for evil, then reading and exploring horror stories in the classroom provides us with a site for experiencing and looking at evil with students which is also an
important alternative to a more volatile and problematic context for encountering evil and transgressing boundaries -- everyday life.

However, to explore evil in the classroom we must have "good" classrooms which students know are safe spaces where ideas of all hues -- including the darkest ones -- can be shared respectfully and seriously explored. Drama, like all cooperative group work, needs to be created in the same sort of respectful and playful space which is found, for example, in a good literature reading group. Teacher and students in drama ideally explore together the positions and perspectives they express, adopt and encounter.

This workshop was a respectful playful sharing of ideas. One student told me that he often imagined he was characters in Stephen King's novels yet before the workshop he had never shared his ideas with anyone else. I suspected that for many of the high school students in the workshop this was the first time that they had been able to shape and share so forcefully and in such depth some of their views on horror and violence with adults and teachers. No doubt, many adults had a reciprocal experience. Despite the seriousness of both the topic and the tone of the workshop I want to stress that there was a sense of play throughout. Participants enjoyed themselves and I laughed with several as I felt the incongruity between our actual setting -- a room in the students' union -- and the contexts we were depicting.

Vinz found that students "enjoy visiting the shadowy zones between physical and psychic reality" (5) and in drama, they can not only enjoy their "visit" to the shadowy zones of horror -- they may also interact as if they are the characters in a horror story or are people who might be concerned with the events in the story.

In drama, students can try out new perspectives and share them with each other. However, it is critically important that the drama never becomes a mask for meanness. Talk about evil or the dramatization of evil actions must not become actual hurtful words or deeds. With other groups I have occasionally experienced times when a student has said or done something which others do not like. If this does happen it can be dealt with in the ways we always address such concerns -- by talking with individuals or the whole group to check that all students are comfortable with the work.

Worlds are created in horror literature where we may encounter the monstrous yet very human faces of evil. As one student, whom Vinz interviewed said, "I think we humans have a darker side within us and these books let me go to that place without rules" (9). King agrees: "the werewolf in us is never very far from the surface" (39). In drama, if students want to, we can safely cross with them to the dark side, unleash the werewolves, and explore with them those horrific worlds where social rules change and may even seem to disappear.

DRAMA, PROTECTION AND EVIL

Censorship is rooted in a belief that to keep people safe we should unilaterally protect them from experiences even if they want to have them. When I find myself contemplating the censorship of literature -- or drama -- I
find it useful to remember not to confuse art with life. There is a fundamental difference between fictional images of, for example, a person's violent death and the lives and deaths of actual people. This is true whether we read about or depict such images. Because students interact in drama, they may seem to be doing evil deeds or having evil thoughts. However, students are no more evil in drama than when they read and identify with characters in a novel or on the television.

As art, drama and literature both transform feelings and thoughts about life -- yet our actions and thoughts in drama and in reading are not impinging on actual people. In drama we are free to draw on and express whatever ideas and feelings present themselves to us. However, we transform any "real life" feelings when they are expressed in the context of a drama. When one of the students sharing a draft movie clip said "In killing her we give her everlasting life" even if he was drawing on feelings of a desire to kill, his words and actions were contained within the fictional context. It was quite clear that "he" did not say them about "her", especially when he giggled after speaking his solemn words. However, in the drama this student was able to enact and get close to the experience of ritual killing while at the same time maintaining an aesthetic distance from the event.

Drama, like all art, provides protection for participants. Rather than protect students from experiences, in drama students can be "protected into" experiences which they want to have (Heathcote 1984). However, not all will want experiences of the same intensity. If students all want to explore a horror text or theme, then the drama needs to be established in such a way that the students' engagement can reasonably vary from the superficial to the deeply involved.

At the core of the protection in drama is the frame. The frame of Blockbuster Media Consultants provided an expert role and a professional context for talking about and depicting evil. The frame necessitated the students adopting an additional perspective on the actions of Anatole Abney which intrinsically gave them a reason to consider in detail the meaning of the events of his life as well as a responsibility to advise about the movie's potential impact and effect on audiences. From this perspective and within a fictional context, students could examine issues such as good and evil, terror, death, murder, ritual killing, suffering, haunting, horror, and everlasting life. Most significantly, as media consultants who had to make decisions and recommendations, they could "think from within the framework of choices instead of talking coolly about the framework or choices" (Heathcote 1984, 119 my underlinings).

Yet the intensity of each individual consultant's engagement with particular tasks could always vary. Whereas some participants seemed to relish taking the part of the perpetrators of violence, others who were more reticent or who experienced more discomfort were equally able to take a more detached and critical view. For those who might have been obsessed and fascinated with horrific images the drama frame legitimated their fascination. Conversely, for those who were somewhat repulsed, the drama frame
required them to be professionally responsible but the frame did not require them to have been in total agreement with the project. As media consultants they could then object to the sensational aspects of the proposed movie or even propose not working on the project.

As we interacted in the drama, participants were always treated as "experts" even when they were depicting evil deeds. In the drama context there was an assumption -- shared by all participants -- that all interactions were "professional" exchanges. All depictions and encounters were for professional purposes. Thus, for example, some participants' remarks about how they liked to see blood and death in ritual killing coupled with their eagerness to depict it were always framed within the context of movie consultants who had reasons for considering the appeal of horrific images and who ought to be enthusiastic about their work. However, I and others were able to respond to and offer alternative choices but from the respectful position of a consultant colleague.

Another aspect of the protection which is provided by the frame, is the shared knowledge that the context for the drama is fictional and can disappear or be suspended at will. Frequent talk as "us," especially at the outset of work, in addition to talk as "the experts," reminds participants that they are never trapped in the experiences and interactions of an imaginary world -- they can always talk about what happens in a drama world as well as interact within it.

The protections of the expert frame and the related awareness of the fictionality of the context create a kind of "double consciousness" -- at the same time the students have both an engaged close experience of the horrors of evil and have a more detached viewpoint on their experience. This double consciousness is fundamental to the inherent protection of drama and gives participants control over the images they encounter and explore in drama. In other words, in drama the students are continually choosing their experiences are not forced to experience anything they do not want to.

Further, double consciousness protects participants further into experiences so that they experience the freedom to adopt perspectives which are novel for them and thus experience the world in new ways. Participants in drama frequently comment on how they find themselves saying and doing uncharacteristic things. "I was surprised that I became a hanging corpse for the ritual" noted one participant after the workshop. Thus, in drama the students can be protected into the exploration of viewpoints they would not normally consider. Images and opinions which would tend to be repressed or suppressed in everyday interactions can safely be expressed and seriously examined in drama. Views which would normally be taboo or highly inappropriate to express in school or at home, including what many would call "evil" views of life, may suddenly become quite germane and very appropriate. Students may, for example explore together the actions and motivations of killers, the meanings of apparently bizarre rituals, and the moral or immoral views of audiences.
In summary, as students face choices as experts in drama, they can experience, express and also reflect on the meaning of intense events which they may have previously only privately wondered about.

CONCLUSION

I agree with Stephen King (1989) when he declares his belief that "people can master their own destiny and control and overcome tremendous odds" (43). Horror literature creates worlds in which there are inhuman almost insurmountable dangers yet protagonists survive because of their human courage to face the impossible and act wisely. From Van Helsing, who ends Dracula's reign of evil by risking his own life, to Perseus who used the gifts of the gods wisely, people are able to overcome or at least deflect the power of evil. Others were not so fortunate, but Van Helsing and Perseus learned from their mistakes. Stephen Elliott, the child in M.R. James story was also courageous and wise. As a vulnerable 12-year-old orphan he could easily have been murdered by his own cousin, yet he survived his horrific ordeal. He listened to the "irrational" voices of dead victims -- despite the fact that their bloody appearance made them look so terrifying -- and he chose not to meet with the adult whom he had every "reason" to trust.

Like Stephen, our students want to question our overreliance on reason and want to listen to irrational voices. Like the bloody ghosts they can imagine they were the victims of horrific deeds or like Abney that they were the perpetrators of evil. Framed as consultants they are protected into examining these images, making choices, and thinking about the meanings of such actions for everyday reality.

Perseus faced Medusa without being turned to stone because he looked at evil indirectly using a mirrored shield. Drama provides us with "mirrored shield" which we can use in the classroom to protect us as we approach and examine evil. Without actually unleashing the destructive power of gorgons, werewolves, or vampires, we can face their powers and learn from our encounters with them.
REFERENCES


