

Fear and suspense essay



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Fear and suspense are part of people's sentiments. They are two of the many natural and inevitable emotions that human are prone and capable to feel. They are part of our behaviors; they are embedded in human nature. This is the main reason why fear and suspense are two of the themes that are usually depicted in the media and the arts. They are commonly used as the favorite topics for various works and materials. For example, fear and suspense have already become the target emotions of most movies before and nowadays.

To cite examples, there are the Psycho, Jaws, Alien, The Bride of Frankenstein, The Exorcist, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Resident Evil, The Hills Have Eyes and others that definitely made the viewers scream and become paranoid for a short time. The point is, these movies and other suspense and horror materials are continuously gaining success and popularity because they tackle two of the most common and universal emotions among humans. People support horror and suspense materials because they can relate to the themes that these works present to them.

According to behavioral theorists like Watson and Ekman, fear is one of the basic human emotions, like anger and joy. Fear serves as human's defense mechanism against negative stimulus. It is also said that most people feel fear because they associate it to pain. For example, a person suffers a fear of heights because he knows that when he falls, he may get injured or dies. Although it seems as a simple emotion only, fear is as complex as anyone could imagine. In fact, this human emotion is associated to other feelings like anxiety, paranoia, worry, and horror.

Suspense, on the other hand, is felt when a person waits uncertainly on series of events. Most of the time, suspense can create tension on the part of the person experiencing it. Suspense is one of the emotions that are commonly employed to various kinds of works. As said earlier, people patronize horror and suspense works because they can share the same sentiments portrayed into these kinds of materials. This mentality, perhaps, was what Doris Lessing and Shirley Jackson thought when they decided to write two of the most acclaimed horror and suspense literary works ever written—*The Fifth Child* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

The Fifth Child by Doris Lessing was set in the 1960s, narrating the life of a happy couple Harriet and David Lovatt who had a child very different from his other four siblings, physically, emotionally, and socially. The novel tried to tackle about the issues of human normalcy and variation, pregnancy, and childhood development while invoking to its readers the theme of fear and suspense. How does Lessing really invoke such emotions to her readers? Analyzing the novel, Lessing used the idea of monstrosity to inject horror to the readers.

Ben, the fifth child of Harriet and David, was described in the novel as unusual even before he was still at the womb of his mother. Harriet's delivery was considered as a nightmare because she almost died trying to give birth to Ben. Lessing did not stop in that stage; she continued by describing how Ben looked when he was finally out from Harriet's womb. Lessing described her as " ugly, strong, with cold eyes, and an unusual strength", in contrast with the appearances of the first four children who have " wispy fair hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks.

Her mother, Harriet, also said that “ He’s like a troll, or a goblin, or something. ” With this kind of appearance, the Lovatt family, little by little, felt fear and at the same time, loathe to the newest member of the family. Harriet, for example, felt pain and torture everytime she tried to breastfeed Ben, simply because the boy’s teeth are too sharp. The family also decided to give the child to an institution, a clear evidence that they do not like Ben at all.

Harriet, however, was already attached to the child and so she came back from the institution with Ben on her arms. What Lessing tried to invoke to the readers was the fear of accepting reality. She has managed to let the readers think of the possibility of Ben’s case in real life. She did not simply frighten the readers by the way she narrated the story of a monstrous creature, a genetic overthrow. She also tried to invoke to the readers the idea of reality—one of the most inevitable fears that some people could not escape.

Lessing was successful in stirring these two emotions into the readers because her novel tackled fear and suspension on two aspects: first, fear by using the idea of monstrosity, and second, fear by using the idea of accepting reality. The same analysis could also be regarded in Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The novel was narrated in the first-person point-of-view by Merricat Blackwood, telling the story of the family. She lives, together with her Uncle Julian and elder sister Constance far from the village and isolated to the people.

The story started through a flashback of events six years ago, where it was narrated that the rest of the Blackwood family was poisoned with arsenic in their dinner. The three characters were saved from the tragedy, though two of them suffered different consequences after the event: Uncle Julian got sick while Constance became agoraphobic, a kind of an anxiety disorder which made the person feel uneasy and nervous when taken from his comfort zone. She barely leaves the house and meets only her closest relatives. It was only Merricat who has direct connection to the world outside their isolated house.

However, children would always tease her with their chants: Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea? Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me. Merricat, said Connie, would you like to go to sleep? Down in the boneyard ten feet deep! The novel discussed the themes about acquiring and conquering fears, choice, and greed. In the story, Jackson injected fear and suspension through the use of unusual characters, Merricat and Constance. Both characters were portrayed by the author as different from the rest. For example, Merricat once said, " I can't help it when people are frightened," says Merricat. I always want to frighten them more. "

In addition, Constance's condition was also strange, too. She suffers panic attacks everytime she feels that she is not in her comfort zone. These particular fetishes of Blackwood sisters made the novel frightening and suspenseful. Towards the end, the author revealed that it was Merricat who put poison in the sugar that killed the rest of the family. In similarity with Lessing, the fear in the novel that Jackson wanted to invoke to the readers pertains to the fear of affirming life.

In the story, both characters portrayed that they were not able to affirm their lives the way they should do it. Fear feeds upon them as they tried to escape the life bound for them. Jackson was also successful in making her novel appeared to the readers as horrible and ghastly. The playful use of characters who have strange characteristics made the story exciting and thrilling. Through Lessing's and Jackson's works, the use of fear and suspense was proven to be excellent themes not only in the field of artistic works, but to life itself.