

# A History in Horror

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By Tricia L Sparks

Horror. It has often been referred to as the orphan of the literary world.[2] Say the word and certain images immediately spring to mind Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees or maybe that creepy looking puppet on the tricycle from the Saw series. For others the first thing that comes to mind may be names like Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Ted Decker, Mary Shelly or Edger Alan Poe. Written or filmed fans of horror love being scared. It reminds us that we are human. Horror in film and in the written word has become a staple of our lives. Like all genres of fiction it began with writing and branched into film where it has translated well. Being the biggest industry in film today, there were 366 movie made in 2010 of them 75 were horror that's about a quarter of all the movies made last year devoted to one genre. It may surprise you to learn that in truth the big screen is not as far from where the genre began to take shape as you might think. That said let's take a walk through the corridors of time and see just how horror got its start.

Horror has its roots in folklore and religious traditions, the horror story probably began before the genre was born in literature, with sinister tales of dragons and malevolent gods focusing on death, the afterlife, evil, the demonic and the principle of evil embodied in The Devil. These were manifested in stories of witches, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and demonic pacts told around camp fires. That said, however, horror as noted by history is much more recent. True, Sophocles and others offered stark, horrific visions in ancient Greece, and Beowulf from 10th century Europe has echoes of the horrific, but we had to wait for Shakespeare and his contemporaries with plays such as Macbeth and Hamlet before we received stories that were specifically horrific for the sake of the story. These were both performed on stage before a grand audience in the Globe Theatre. [1]

Yet horror was to become more subtle. Born out of the Gothic visions of the Romantics it became a merging of the psychological with the environment, or, in the ghost story, the supernatural. Gothic Horror was a type of romantic fiction that predominated in English literature from the late eighteenth century to the pre-twentieth century. The setting was usually in ruined Gothic castles or in other secluded places, which could be built upon to create gothic horror. It was during this time when such classics as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were born.

The first noted horror tale of this age was Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, written in 1764. The next noted piece is Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* in 1818. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

is often thought of as the first horror novel, but really this is more science fiction than horror. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* 1886, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 1890, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* 1897. [4]

From these tales came several enduring icons of horror they include Victor Frankenstein and Frankenstein's Monster, Count Dracula, and Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde. All of which have been translated many time to film and no one seems to get tired of revisiting. Other legendary figures of horror from the nineteenth century are the murderers like Burke and Hare, Sweeney Todd, and Jack the Ripper.

It was the Victorians actually who created both the horror and ghost story in its modern sense. Prior to this period, if a ghost appeared in a tale, it was most likely to be prophetic rather than disturbing. It was Charles Dickens who changed this, with his fine ghost stories. A missing component in early horror was an element of normalcy in the tale it was M R James, who perfected this craft vital to the success of the genre. These were also the times of Edgar Allan Poe, and H. P. Lovecraft classic masters of horror, without whom the genre would not be the same.

Edgar Allan Poe was an American author, poet, editor and literary critic, considered part of the American Romantic Movement. Best known for his tales of mystery and the macabre, Poe was one of the earliest American practitioners of the short story and is considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre. He is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He was the first well-known American writer to try to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career.

H.P. Lovecraft whose name is synonymous with horror fiction; his writing, particularly the "Cthulhu Mythos", has influenced fiction authors worldwide, and Lovecraftian elements may be found in novels, movies, music, video games, comic books, and cartoons. Many modern horror writers, including Stephen King, Bentley Little, Joe R. Lansdale, Alan Moore, Junji Ito, F. Paul Wilson, Brian Lumley, and Neil Gaiman, have cited Lovecraft as one of their primary influences.

*Want to read on the History of Horror? The article is continued on [www.TrinityGateways.net](http://www.TrinityGateways.net).*

## **Works Cited**

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