

Taylor Ross
Jenny Jackson
Liba 102
12 February 2019

Dysfunctionality and Demons

The genre of horror has astonished moviegoers for decades as audiences across the globe have not watched horror films, but rather, experienced them. The idea of eliciting fear within an audience has proven to be successful in the way that individuals crave the concept of being frightened. This fear is produced in the film *Hereditary*, which is a story of a dysfunctional family that is unknowingly sold to a demon king by their recently deceased grandmother, who was a leader of a satanic cult. The slow deterioration of the family dynamic is all of the demon's work as he utilizes the bodies of the family members to help his reign come to fruition. According to Noël Carroll's novel, *The Philosophy of Horror*, the film *Hereditary* is a horror movie because of the physical and cognitive emotional responses that the uncertainty of the film provokes and the impurity of the monster itself.

First are foremost, the ever-present feeling of anxiety and dread throughout the length of the film acts as a gateway to the direct audience. For instance, Charlie, the daughter of the Graham family, is "allergic" to nuts and accidentally ingests some. She fights to breathe as her brother, Peter, drives to the hospital, however, she sticks her head out of the window and is decapitated by a light pole (Aster). This scene is slowly built up in a way that creates tension within the audience. The music gradually gets louder, Charlie's breathing becomes more and more labored, and Peter increasingly raises his voice. This increasing sense of urgency is what makes

more frightening than simply having an allergic reaction to nuts. The physical response to this scene can be viewed as tense, an increase in heart rate, increased breathing, and sweating. The cognitive emotional response to this scene is one filled with panic, anxiety, and terror, which makes the horror of this movie so much more tangible than unnecessary dismay. In addition, Carroll addresses these factors and explains how they make a big impact on both the mental and physical state of the audience. He writes, "... it is important to stress that the original conception of the word (horror) connected it with abnormal (from the subject's point of view) physiological state of felt agitation" (Carroll 24). He explains that physical agitation and emotional distress go hand in hand when being frightened to a certain degree. Horror has a direct relationship to what the audience feels both physically and mentally. So, in connection with *Hereditary*, the distress built into Charlie's death scene is felt in the audience to elicit a response that corresponds to the definition of horror.

Furthermore, the creation of a monster in horror films is strongly based on the fact that it has impure qualities and defines the laws of nature. For example, the demon, King Paimon, possesses multiple characters in the movie. However, we see Paimon's true power when he takes over the body of Annie, the mother. As Peter tries to find his family in the dark house, we see Annie on the ceiling of Peter's room and she follows him throughout the home, on the ceiling. Peter runs to the attic to escape his now possessed mother and we find that Annie is levitating in the middle of the attic, cutting her own head off with a wire (Aster). This scene is significant because it demonstrates the threat of the monster that is not seen until that very moment of the

film and shows what is really at stake. Paimon defines the laws of nature by making Annie crawl on the ceiling, which is physically impossible, and when she is levitating in the attic, again

Ross 3

physically impossible. Also, by compelling Annie to cut her own head off this shows that he will stop at nothing to occupy a healthy male host, Peter. Similarly, Carroll describes the traits of what makes a monster and how that influences or embodies horror. He states, “Horrific monster are threatening... The monster may also be threatening psychologically, morally, or socially... Horrific monsters are also impure” (Carroll 43). Delving into what Carroll thinks of monsters, supports the idea that *Hereditary* is, in fact, a horror movie. The essence of impurity and the destructive tendencies that Paimon possesses show how he fits Carroll’s description and criteria of a horror movie monster. This monster threatens all of the aspects of the human body and takes control of any morality that the characters had, which proved to be dangerous for all of the family members.

Overall, horror is a genre that has continued to break barriers and mystify audiences through multiple factors that relate to the complete experience of the film. Noël Carroll has gone in depth as to what a true horror film is and how it can influence audiences to feel a certain way or react. The film *Hereditary* has shown that it is indeed a horror movie because of the intense scenes of misery and despair that makes the audience respond with visceral physical and emotional fear. The utilization of real-life issues that many people face (disconnected personal relationships and family troubles), pulls the audience into the story personally and shocks them with the supernatural aspects of the demon. With elements of unnatural abilities, Paimon goes above and beyond in true terror towards the Graham family. Personally, I think that *Hereditary* is a fantastic

example of a horror movie because it is so complex rather than just simple jump scares. The unnerving sense of looming death is what aids this movie in its terror factor, along with the supernatural elements of demon possession. The film corresponds with Carroll's

Ross 4

philosophy of horror in the way that the uncomfortable, macabre, and taboo issues of satanic cults. I think that it is different from other horror movies due to the mystery throughout the film and the shocking ending that surprised everyone.

Ross 5

Works cited:

Carroll, Noel. *Philosophy of Horror: or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge, 2015.

Aster, Ari, director. *Hereditary*. 2018. , A24, 2018,
www.amazon.com/Hereditary-Toni-Collette/dp/B07DJ1BXPM/ref=sr_1_1?crid=28SPMMLR7G0O9&keywords=hereditary&qid=1550010370&s=instant-video&srefix=here%2Cprime-instant-video%2C156&sr=1-1.