

LITERARY TERMS TO USE IN DISCUSSING NOVELS AND MOVIES

Please use these terms in our discussions and in your papers
to shape your analysis of our books and movies.

- 1) **Protagonist/Hero/Heroine:** in simplistic stories, this is the “good guy” or “good girl.” But more importantly, this is the character (or characters) whom the story revolves around. Often this is a rounded, complex character, who demonstrates change and/or growth during the story. The protagonist will always be involved in the climax of the story, and will vanquish the antagonist and/or gain some significant realization through this climax and resolution of the story. Katniss, of the *Hunger Games*, certainly exemplifies the protagonist/heroine role. She grows into her role as the heroine of the games, makes ethical choices, defies the state in the climax of the story, and rejects the values espoused by the games in the end. Typical of many horror/sci fi films, Katniss is also the character who survives the carnage, and it is again typical that she survives because of her virtues of intelligence and physical skill.

Other protagonists might appear to be “heroic,” but wind up exemplifying characteristics



opposite of those we presume to be of the hero, so he/she might be called an **anti-hero**. Jack in Stephen King’s *The Shining* is certainly a central character whom much of the action revolves around, but as his mental state disintegrates, it becomes clear that he is not the hero/protagonist of the novel, but instead his son Danny is. Danny can withstand the attempts by the haunted hotel to take over his psyche, but Jack cannot. Another interesting anti-hero is Wesley Snipes’ character Blade in the *Blade* series, who plays a vampire hunter who is actually infected by the virus himself.

- 2) **Antagonist/villain:** this is the force working against the protagonist/hero/heroine. In horror novels and movies, certainly this force might be non-human, even to the point of being a setting: a vampire, werewolf, monster haunted house or haunted wood, etc. But often the antagonist can come from within: the good human is contaminated by the vampire virus, the father/mother/innocent child is possessed by the demon/ghost. In complex stories, the source of evil is not always a simple, direct external one, but there might be both internal and external causes and conflicts.
- 3) **Conflict(s):** conflicts are the various ways in which forces (usually forces of good and evil in horror movies and novels) oppose and battle one another. In discussing conflict, it is important to be able to name the two forces or sides of that conflict. Conflicts may be external, such as Alice against the zombies and the Umbrella Corporation in the *Resident Evil* films. But they can be internal too, as the protagonist might have to acknowledge and address his/her own inner evil or possession.

- 4) **Climax:** in simple narratives, this is the scene where the protagonist and antagonist meet for one last battle, and the protagonist finally succeeds in vanquishing the evil. In *Lord of the Rings*, this is presented as a dual climax, with Frodo struggling with both Gollum and himself to throw the ring into the fire, while Aragorn's tiny army faces Sauron's monstrous troops at the gates of Mordor. This is where the vampire is staked through the heart, the werewolf is shot with silver, the serial killer is captured/killed, and the heroes/heroines escape to freedom. Of course, the evil isn't always entirely vanquished; the image of the cocooned demonic boogie man of *Jeepers Creepers* hanging from the barn wall does a great job of suggesting another appearance of this monster without descending into cliché.



- 5) **Setting:** the setting is simply time and place. But in horror movies and novels, setting can be absolutely vital, often taking on a personality of its own, especially since that setting can be haunted (such as *Amityville Horror* and all other haunted house/castle/hotel stories), and thus become the antagonist. Other settings might not actually be the antagonist, but can certainly be threatening to the protagonist, like the magical woods in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, or the Black Hills in *the Blair Witch Project*. Perhaps more so than any other literary genre, setting in horror literature plays a significant and fascinating role.

- 6) **Moral Center:** admittedly an old-fashioned term, but it tends to work for the horror genre. The



moral center is the point-of-view that provides us with the "correct" or ethical way to view the characters and conflicts of a particular story. Sometimes the moral center is fairly obvious and represented by the protagonist or narrator. Van Helsing of *Dracula*, for example, is an obvious moral center, who presents us with the ethical position we

should take against the forces of evil. However, sometimes "right" and "wrong" are less obvious, and the moral center isn't really clear until the end of the story; for example, is Katniss the moral center of *The Hunger Games*, with her ending words to Peeta that they should try to forget about their experience? Or did her kissing of Peeta demonstrate her succumbing to the pressures of the Games? Is she a moral center to be trusted at the end? It's somewhat ambiguous.

- 7) **Narrator:** this is the voice or point-of-view telling the story. It can be significant whether this voice is *omniscient*, with a god-like perspective that can report all events and thoughts of the characters, typically using 3rd person; or the story can be told through 1st person narrator, typically a character who is a *reliable* or *unreliable* narrator. Poe uses the unreliable narrator to great effect in many of his stories. A great example is the *Tell-Tale Heart*, where the narrator slowly goes mad in the telling of his awful tale of the body he has buried beneath the floorboards. Sometimes it's quite clear that the 1st person narrator is the moral center, and

thus a reliable narrator. In epistolary novels used in the early years of the novel, such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, the 1st person narrative is often frequently shifting from one character to the next, presenting a kaleidoscope of events.

- 8) **Theme:** the theme (or themes) of any novel or movie refers to the larger idea/message/point of view/moral position that the work is trying to get across. For instance, quite often Stephen King has explored the theme of the dangers of bringing someone back from the dead, most effectively in *Pet Semetary*. Many sci-fi as well as horror novels explore the theme of the dangers of science when it explores the boundaries of the human condition with any ethical consideration. *Frankenstein* is our earliest example of this theme, and more recently the 1990 film *Flatliners* and the 2012 Ridley Scott film *Prometheus*. Many horror stories place the individual within an impossible moral position of having to choose between individual and group survival. In a well written work, the theme will be evident in the way the major characters are developed, and how the conflict and climax come about.

