

"THE HORLA," BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT

SUSAN EMERY

Seminar: Horror Fiction and Film

[Assignment: Write an essay arguing for your choice of a horror novel, story, or film to be included in next year's freshman seminar. By what criteria may the novel, story, or film be judged a work of horror as opposed to, say, a work of fantasy, mystery, or science fiction?]

(1) I feel that the short story, "The Horla," by Guy de Maupassant, would make an exciting addition to next year's horror fiction and film seminar.

(2) I chose this particular story partly because I was familiar with the author. De Maupassant is highly acclaimed as a masterful storyteller. He has written six novels, more than three hundred short stories and sketches, three books of travel, and a volume of poetry. "The Horla" is one of the most popular and widely recognized of De Maupassant's short stories.

(3) As I read "The Horla," I could see many similarities between it and other works of horror that we have studied during the semester. I especially noticed many parallels between this story and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. De Maupassant's story and Poe's works may be similar because both authors were influenced by similar experiences. De Maupassant, like Poe, was tormented by hallucinations and delusions of persecution throughout much of his life. In addition, both men tried unsuccessfully to take their own lives. Poe and De Maupassant were afraid of becoming insane, and they ultimately died under tragic circumstances. Because of the similarities between the two men's lives and work, I believe that "The Horla" should be assigned to students directly after they have read Poe. This will enable them to explore the likenesses and to identify certain differences between the two authors' styles.

(4) Although De Maupassant is a French author, he uses many of the same conventions of horror that American and British writers use. After reading De Maupassant, next year's students should be able to see that the genre of horror transcends all nationalities and cultures. "The Horla" shows that people of any country enjoy a good horror story. De Maupassant and the French are as fascinated by the supernatural as Americans and British are. "The Horla" should be included in the seminar not only because it is an exemplary work of horror genre, but because it will demonstrate to students that the horror is universal.

(5) De Maupassant's tale qualifies as a work of horror because it explores the possible existence of unseen beings. The name, "Horla," in fact, refers to a species of invisible vampires who feed on people while

they are asleep. These creatures have the power to possess the minds of innocent people. We, as readers, are tricked into believing that these supernatural creatures really exist. Horror, as it is defined in the dictionary, is "the strong feeling caused by something frightening or shocking." "The Horla" meets this definition, because it leaves readers with a feeling of helplessness and vulnerability. It forces readers to contemplate a world in which human beings are powerless against the manipulation and control of unseen beings.

(6) As mentioned earlier, "The Horla" is quite similar to several of Poe's stories. It is told in the first person by a narrator who remains anonymous. Like Poe's narrators, De Maupassant's appears at first to be sane, but gradually deteriorates into a state bordering on madness. The reader empathizes with the narrator's steady progression toward an inevitable fate. This is why "The Horla" produces such an effect on the reader. The reader fears that the experiences he is reading about might someday be his own.

(7) In order to make the story even more convincing, De Maupassant employs a technique that has been used by many other authors of horror fiction, including Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Bram Stoker. De Maupassant tells his story in the form of a journal. His narrator makes periodic entries, enabling the reader to see a logical progression of events. The tale is more horrifying in journal form because it seems to be documented and based on fact.

(8) "The Horla" contains elements found in the works of authors other than Poe. These include Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, and Horace Walpole. For example, the concept of vampires who attack people while they sleep was repeated by Bram Stoker in his novel, Dracula. It appears as though Stoker used De Maupassant's original idea of blood-sucking vampires as the basis for Dracula. Stoker then proceeded to create his famous novel by adding figments of his own imagination.

(9) "The Horla" can also be compared to Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein. Both Shelley and De Maupassant are adept at depicting the beauties and splendors of nature. Frankenstein takes place in Switzerland while "The Horla" has its setting in France. The description of these scenic countries leaves a reader breathless and captivated. By describing nature in detail, Shelley and De Maupassant are able to lull a reader into a sort of dream-like state. When this technique is used, the reader is almost always awakened from his reverie by the occurrence of some horrifying event. In "The Horla" we cannot believe that some menacing presence is lurking amid the peaceful countryside of France. This contrast between nature and horror is highlighted for dramatic effect. Furthermore, by dwelling on the serenity of nature, a reader is given some respite from the otherwise horrifying events which take place in the story.

(10) "The Horla" also contains some of the elements that we found in Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto. The idea of the supernatural and the notion of invisible presences are prevalent in both stories. The Castle of Otranto makes many references to unexplained happenings. It focuses on ghosts and spirits as the cause of these weird happenings. "The Horla," too, deals with things that cannot be seen, touched, or experienced through the senses. It is frightening to be at the mercy of these unseen presences. Neither Walpole nor De Maupassant attempt to explain the strange occurrences in a rational way. This reluctance to satisfactorily account for unaccountable events leaves the reader with a sense of uneasiness and horror. In addition to the supernatural, "The Horla" contains a strong Gothic element. De Maupassant makes allusions to the Gothic towers and Gothic buildings that are found within the country of France. This reference to the Gothic ties in with the Gothic style of writing that is common in many works of horror.

(11) "The Horla" is an exemplary work of horror because it offers insight into human nature. It is important not just for its shock value but because it stimulates a reader to ponder moral and psychological questions. It causes a reader to examine the realm of the unknown. It also invites the reader to think about the relationship between human beings and supernatural beings. Is it possible for humans to live in harmony with unseen presences? Or, is the supernatural a thing to be feared and avoided? "The Horla" stresses the notion that humans will always be afraid of things they can't rationally explain. When humans come into contact with supernatural events they become insane.

(12) In conclusion, I feel that "The Horla" would make a good addition to next year's seminar. It provides intellectual and thought-provoking material which can be used as the basis for class discussions. Because it was written by a French author, the story brings a universality to the horror genre. When read in conjunction with works by American and English authors, we see that the conventions of horror transcend nationality. "The Horla" also relates well to the other novels we have read and studied. Many parallels can be found between it and the works of Walpole, Shelley, Stoker, and Poe. Because "The Horla" is relatively short, it would be easy to place it after the tales of Poe so that comparisons could be made between the stories. "The Horla" meets the definition of horror in the highest sense. The reader is left with a feeling of powerlessness in the face of unexplained phenomena and shocking occurrences.