

English 101

September 23, 2015

Habits of a Thriller: *American Horror Story*

She wanders through the hall alone in the dark; she is just feeling her way by the walls because she cannot see. She is crying and walking ever so slowly; suddenly, eerie music appears in the background as she slows to halt feeling something different about the wall in this one spot: it is wet and sticky. She does not see it, but the audience sees the dripping dark stain on the wall and knows instantly it is blood. As soon as the music comes to a climax and she brings her hand to her face to realize what she is touching, a corpse falls from the worn out ceiling that can no longer hold its weight. This is just an example of a scene seen in many television shows and movies that call themselves thrillers. The thriller and horror genres are somewhat similar, but where the horror genre seems to go after the gorier effects as its main draw, thrillers pull in aspects of music, scenery, and lighting to intensify the thrill of the events about to take place. One television series that has the thriller genre down is *American Horror Story*, and although it has 'horror' in its title, the artistic habits of its creators make these seasonal series true works of the thriller genre. Through the habits in use of opening credit music and image, inclusion of the supernatural or strange, and presentation of innocent victims, the *American Horror Story* series Season 1: *Murder House*, Season 3: *Coven*, and Season 4: *Freak Show* illustrate a true thriller genre.

One of the easiest habits of a thriller to recognize is the visual and audial imagery it portrays, and the opening credits of all seasons thus far of *American Horror Story* open with the

Commented [a1]: Title helps promote idea in paper

Commented [a2]: Example of a story intro...makes you get into the scene

Commented [a3]: Introduction of the overall subject

Commented [a4]: Thesis looks at the habits of three different seasons that overall help produce the notion of this series as a thriller

Commented [a5]: Topic sentence joins a general notion with the specific look at the series named.

same warped sound and imagery. The *Murder House* season opener shows a light flashing on and off as a camera makes its way around what looks to be an empty basement with sounds only of flipping paper and squeaky doors. The music starts with a burst suddenly as old sepia pictures of children are shown and suddenly shown in the negative (“Rubber Man”). These creepy images of items in the basement along with the music that comes and goes sets the tone for the thrill that the audience will be getting. The opening credits of the *Coven* season contains a group of black masked figures walking through an open wood (“Boy Parts”). This visual makes viewers wonder what mischief the group will be up to, and know it is something no good because of the color of their outfits and the resemblance to ku klux klan attire. The season of Freak Show adds a child-like element with a sound almost like a slow ice cream truck or jack-in-the-box tune. Claymation conjoined skeletons and other freak show images appear in front of a scene of The Big Top (“Edward Mordrake”). The images and changed music here take away a little of the horror feeling to this season, but nonetheless makes for a strange opening. The music continues to be a mix of odd sounds and beats bursting when names of actors are shown on the screen in these two and all other seasons. The beginning of all the shows in each season opens with this minute-long montage of oddly pieced together photos or still life images with lighting that comes in and out of focus upon a bed of Nine Inch Nail type music. This use of image and music habit prepares the audience for the thrill they are always going to get in watching any of the shows.

Furthermore, all three seasons of *American Horror Story* incorporate some type of supernatural element in them to bring out a sense of thriller. The *Murder House* plot revolves around the supernatural as it is based off the notion that there are ghosts roaming within the house of the main characters: anyone killed in that house seems to remain there after death in a

Commented [a6]: This is a citation of a paraphrase that begins with “The Murder House Season opener shows...” When setting up a paraphrase that will take several sentences, make sure the first sentence that starts the paraphrase mentions the source and the last sentence has the citation.

Commented [a7]: After each of the paraphrases, the writer makes his or her own comments to illustrate why those paraphrases help support the argument.

Commented [a8]: Conclusion sentence sums up the idea of the habit of music and image in thrillers.

Commented [a9]: Topic sentence uses a transition to show how it relates to the paragraphs prior to it.

spiritual sense. These ghosts often appear and do harm to the living people in the house. In episode 8, this is shown when one of the ghosts wears a rubber suit and has sex with the wife of the house; she soon finds out that it is not her husband that was in the suit, and the maid confirms for her that there are spirits in the house (“Rubber Man”). The notion of something not of this world creates a true thrilling sensation, and viewers are feeling just as scared as the actors portraying the people. *Coven*, the third season, centers itself around the supernatural idea of witchcraft. There are good witches and there are bad witches and the forces are working against each other. In episode two, one of the girls in the school for witches is pretty rebellious, and after she blows up a bus of football players, she and another witch girl decide to stitch the body parts of some of the boys into one perfect boy. After stitching the parts together, they say a spell and make the boy come alive (“Boy Parts”). Spell casting is definitely a use of the supernatural to illustrate that dark side like thrillers tend to do. Also, in the *Freak Show* season, the supernatural appears as a green mist carrying a man looking for freaks for his supernatural freak show. He comes in on this mist, kills the freak and then takes him or her with him to the other side. A habitual use of supernatural elements makes people think twice about the actions they are viewing and sets the scene for a psychologically thrilling time.

A last element that all three seasons of *American Horror Story* use as a habit to create the ideal thriller is the innocent victim. Viewers always pull for the innocent person in the show and bite their nails as that innocent person begins to walk the line of danger. In *Murder House*, the wife of the house is the innocent victim. The daughter actually talks to and becomes one of the house ghosts, and the father is a cheating murderer. So, the wife is the innocent, and many times throughout the season, viewers see the ghosts through her perspective. This scares the audience because they are just as innocent as she is and they are spooked at these visions. In *Coven*, a

Commented [a10]: Again, the writer argues how the paraphrase helps support the idea in the paragraph

Commented [a11]: Transitions are used within the paragraphs to move between the subtopics

Commented [a12]: Conclusion closes up idea and touches on thesis purpose

Commented [a13]: Since this is not a direct observation from the action in the television show, there is no need for a citation.

group of innocent people are represented by a time hop back to days of slavery. Episode one shows Madame Delphine Lalaurie take one of her slaves up to the attic where she has many other slaves kept in some type of torture chamber (“Bitchcraft”). The audience sits by waiting in horror to see what she is going to do to the innocent slaves. Finally, the season *Freak Show* illustrates an innocent victim in one of the last episodes. In the episode, Maggie, a girl who was initially scamming the freaks of the freak show but who has had a change of heart, volunteers to be the assistant that gets sawed in half for a magic act. The audience sees Chester, the magician, begin to go through a psychotic episode, and they know he is going to lose his mind and do something crazy. He actually saws Maggie in half (“Show Stoppers”). The audience sees through the perspective of Maggie and is stunned at the actions. The habit of the innocent character being terrorized makes each episode in all of these seasons thrilling.

A true thriller will use combinations of images and sounds along with a horrifying story to make a show or movie fit the genre. *American Horror Story*, each time it comes out with a new season, fulfills this use of images, sounds, and plots. Each season’s opening credits set the tone of oddity before the viewer even gets into the show itself. The use of supernatural or strange elements in all the episodes keeps viewers wondering what is real and what is of another world. Finally, all thrillers go savage on those innocent characters, and this series definitely puts all innocent people at risk of life-threatening danger. If a thriller is desired, *American Horror Story* and its habit of thrilling audiences, is a perfect choice for viewing night.

Commented [a14]: A quick mention of some needed context is used here to let readers of this paper know who is being talked about without having to tell the whole story

Commented [a15]: Sum up of the first paragraph idea

Commented [a16]: Sum up of the second paragraph idea

Commented [a17]: Sum up of the last paragraph idea

Commented [a18]: Overall comment and clincher to finish up essay

Works Cited

- “Bitchcraft.” *American Horror Story: Coven*, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, season 3, episode 1, 2013-2014, Netflix.
- “Boy Parts.” *American Horror Story: Coven*, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, season 3, episode 2, 2013-2014, Netflix.
- “Edward Mordrake.” *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, directed by Michael Uppendahl, produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, season 4, episode 3, 2014-2015, Netflix.
- “Rubber Man.” *American Horror Story: Murder House*, directed by Miguel Arteta, produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, season 1, episode 8, 2011-2012, Netflix.
- “Show Stoppers.” *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, directed by Loni Peristere, produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, season 4, episode 12, 2014-2015, Netflix.

Commented [a19]: Each episode paraphrased within the essay is alphabetized on the works cited page.