Terror and Horror: Ann Radcliffe’s Brilliant Distinction

One of the oldest distinctions in horror fiction is the difference between “terror” and “horror.” In their literary usage, these terms were famously defined by the Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe in her essay “[On the Supernatural in Poetry](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/radcliffe1.html)” (1826). Radcliffe, although mostly forgotten today, was a best-selling novelist who helped define and legitimize Gothic fiction—the genre from which horror descends. On the surface, horror and terror seem like synonyms, but Radcliffe argues that “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them.”

What is the difference? Terror is the feeling of dread and apprehension at the possibility of something frightening, while horror is the shock and repulsion of seeing the frightening thing. Terror is the sounds of unknown creatures scratching at the door; horror is seeing your roommate eaten alive by giant rats. Terror is the feeling a stranger may be hiding behind the door; horror is the squirt of blood as the stranger’s knife sinks in.

Gothic scholar Devendra P. Varma elaborates the difference between terror and horror this way: “Terror thus creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread, *a certain superstitious shudder at the other world*. Horror appeals to sheer dread and repulsion, by brooding upon the gloomy and the sinister, and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural.”

In sum, terror is an interior feeling of the unknown that is just behind the wall behind which we hear feline screams, while horror is the exterior realization of the sight of the dead woman with dried blood on her head and the dreaded black cat sitting on her head!

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