

### ***Introduction***<sup>1</sup>

A constant feature of gothic, horror, and weird lit from Ichabod Crane to Thomas Ligotti is paranoia: the sense that Someone or Something is out to get us. Although Americans didn't invent all of these genres, they have taken on their own identity in the American tradition and have taken on the paranoia that is a strong part of the United States' cultural DNA.<sup>2</sup>

From a single home ("The Yellow Wallpaper") to a town ("The Last Feast of Harlequin") to the entire cosmos ("The Call of Cthulhu"), weird fiction often depicts conspiracies, real or imagined, and paranoia (justified or unjustified).

Paranoia and conspiracy, of course, touch on some of the major themes of horror lit: the uncovering of forbidden knowledge, the boundaries between reason and unreason, and the boundaries between illusion and reality. What appears real to one observer seems like an absurd delusion to another; what appears to be solid evidence to one group of people appears to be wishful thinking or fantasy to another. Many if not most narrators in gothic, horror, and weird fiction are paranoid—after all, it's hard to sleep at night if Satan, ghosts, or transdimensional alien monsters are out to get you.

### ***Assignment***

Choose a story from the syllabus and examine the paranoia or altered state of consciousness exhibited by one or more characters from that story. Use a pivotal scene from the story to illustrate the conflicts between the "real" (publicly agreed-on) world surrounding the characters and the behind-the-scenes or alternate reality they have discovered, or inhabit.

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<sup>1</sup> This assignment is loosely based on one designed by Bridget Marshall, Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. That assignment can be found here: <http://faculty.uml.edu/bmarshall/first%20paper%20Gothic%20Spring%202015.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> If you don't believe me, do a Google search for the name of any American celebrity, politician, or news event followed by the word "conspiracy" (if Google's autocomplete doesn't insert the word before you're done typing). Or, check out the book *The United States of Paranoia* by Jesse Walker (Harper, 2014) or the essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" by Richard Hofstadter.

By “pivotal” scene, I mean a scene that introduces important characters or information, a plot twist or development, an important change in a character, or a change in the relationship between characters. A pivotal scene may also involve a confrontation of some sort, or an important loss, gain or discovery. The climax of a story is a pivotal scene, of course, but there are other such scenes in every story.

Your main idea (thesis statement) should explain how the character’s paranoia helps shape the story’s action and the reader’s understanding of the subject matter. The essay should be a minimum of 500 words long.

### ***Advice/Assistance***

#### **Questions to Help Build Your Comparison**

When re-reading and annotating your story, look for these things in particular:

- How do the characters’ paranoias isolate them? What is the “official story” or publicly-agreed on reality against which they struggle?
- How do the characters’ paranoias help them build new alliances with other characters, or reach new understandings of their worlds? How do these new understandings change them or affect those around them?
- What causes the characters to see the world the way they do? What experiences have influenced them? What dots have they connected to arrive at their paranoid vision of the world?
- Who is telling the story? Is it an external narrator or someone in the story? How reliable is the narrator? Why do you say this? Do the characters have good reason to be paranoid or do they seem deluded?

#### **What to Do**

- Quote from the story. Do it correctly, using MLA style. You can find a how-to guide on the Purdue OWL Website (linked from our Blackboard site). A quick and easy guide is provided by the Williams College Libraries (also linked from Blackboard).

- The correct method for quoting is this: Introduction/quote/explication. Never just drop a quote in as if it proves your point all by itself, but introduce it by linking it to your writing, making it clear what the quote is meant to illustrate, and then explaining how the quote proves your main idea.
- Explain material from the story; don't expect your reader to have memorized the stories or to agree with your interpretation before you have proven it.

### **Examples of how to introduce and explicate quotes**

Wrong way: Lovecraft's story does not have a happy ending, but instead foretells world-wide doom. "What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come—but I must not and cannot think!" Another way the narrator seems to lose his grip on reason is earlier in the story when he implies a preference for creative thought over fact. "It was from the artists and poets that the pertinent answers came."

Right way: Lovecraft's story does not have a happy ending, but instead foretells world-wide doom. Though the monstrous Cthulhu is not actively threatening the earth as the narrator concludes his tale, the narrator believes the evil being's return is just a matter of time. The story's last paragraph states, "What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come—but I must not and cannot think!" Even though Cthulhu was temporarily "trapped by the sinking" of his horrible, ancient city, the narrator—once a man of reason—now echoes the deranged cultist Castro in predicting Cthulhu's eventual rise and triumph. Here Lovecraft's narrator seems to lose his grip on reason, but in Lovecraft's upside-down universe paranoia is actually a higher form of awareness. The narrator sees what those around him are unwilling or unable to see, as the story's first paragraph implies: he has "[pieced] together ... dissociated knowledge" and thus "open[ed] up ... terrifying vistas of reality."

- Consult the handout on writing about literature from the University of North Carolina Writing Center linked from our Blackboard page. All of these resources are linked from our Blackboard page under “Helpful Stuff: How to Study, How to Cite Sources, Etc.”
- Spend a lot of time re-reading and annotating the story. Look for patterns and conflicts: reality vs. illusion, good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, order vs. chaos, etc. These patterns and conflicts will become the basis for your thesis statement.

### **What Not to Do**

- Don’t include biographical information on the author in your paper.
- Don’t cite sources other than the story you’re writing about. Especially do not cite a dictionary or reference source and, whatever you do, don’t plagiarize or “accidentally” include material from something written by someone else.
- If there’s a movie/TV/video game/other non-literary version of your story or stories, don’t discuss it.
- Don’t retell the stories. Focus the paper on analysis of your characters and pivotal scenes.
- Don’t try to argue something that everyone who’s read the stories would agree with (e.g., “The characters’ paranoia is the source of their fear” or “Each character is paranoid in his own way.”). You need a thesis statement that not every reader would agree with.
- Don’t try to think of your thesis statement before you start writing. Instead, let your observations about the stories, our online discussions of them, and your own draft writing lead you to your main idea.
- Don’t use one of the sample thesis statements below.
- Don’t use EasyBib to create your Works Cited page. Nine times out of ten EasyBib gets it wrong. I warned you.

## **Examples of Effective (A-B) Thesis Statements**

Though Harlan Ellison's main character in "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin" seems to be deluded and paranoid due to drug use, the real conflict in the story is the blurry boundary between human and animal, and the story uses animal imagery to symbolize evil. The very image of a "goblin" is an image of something that is neither human nor animal but somewhere in between.

The title character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is not imagining the horrors from which he flees, but neither are those witches and devils actually real. Rather, these apparently supernatural creatures are evidence of Goodman Brown's inner rebellion against Puritan society and norms.

## **Examples of Ineffective (D-F) Thesis Statements**

Gilman's narrator struggles against her own unconscious mind.

Ellison's main character is not a bad person, he is merely caught up in circumstances beyond his control.

Derleth's version of childhood in "The Lonely Place" is very different from the version of childhood we usually see in fiction.

These have the potential to be effective, but they are too obvious (in the case of the first two) or too vague (in the case of the third) in this form—they need more work before they are saying something original.

## **What to Do Next**

We will be discussing this assignment thoroughly on the discussion board "Paper 2." You can post questions or concerns there any time.

For now, look back at the stories we've read so far, and ahead to some future stories if one or more of them sounds interesting. Once you have an idea which story you'd like to write about, begin (re-)reading them and taking notes on them.

Ask me anything! The best place to ask questions is on the "Paper 2" discussion board, so everyone can benefit from your question.