



Psychological terror and narrative evolution: A scoping review of horror and suspense mechanisms in literary fiction



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Abstract Horror and suspense fiction have developed from their Gothic roots into a complex and multifaceted contemporary genre, but studies of their psychological, narrative, and cultural aspects are still scattered. In this scoping review, the papers published between 2015 and 2025 were synthesized in order to map the state of knowledge and research gaps. A systematic search was conducted in five major databases (Web of Science, SCOPUS, PsycInfo, EBSCO, and MLA International Bibliography) and 2,847 records were identified, of which 73 were eligible for inclusion based on inclusion criteria following PRISMA-ScR guidelines. Findings show that literary terror activates complex neurological systems, including the amygdala and distributed fear networks, with implications for understanding reader responses and therapeutic applications. The psychological Gothic tales of Edgar Allan Poe and the horror of Stephen King, both of which laid the groundwork for the modern genre, serve as a backdrop for the new developments. Recent authors like Carmen Maria Machado, Paul Tremblay and Tananarive Due have both diversified the genre's representation and explored current fears through new subgenres like eco-horror and techno-horror. Narrative techniques such as unreliable narration, delayed disclosure, and multisensory description were identified as mechanisms that were important for evoking fear and empathy. Furthermore, there is evidence that horror literature can be used therapeutically, for example, as a controlled exposure therapy, emotional regulation, and resilience training, especially in times of societal stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these advances, sources of cross-cultural representation, standardized measurement tools and longitudinal studies are substantial. By combining elements of psychological, narrative, and cultural understandings, the current review focuses on horror literature from the point of view of making it a valid field for interdisciplinary research, and its potential as a cultural mirror or but also as a clinical tool.

Keywords: horror literature, suspense, psychological mechanisms, narrative techniques, Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King

1. Introduction

Horror and suspense literature has a special place in the literary world, as it both amuses and frightens readers and fulfills more profound psychological and cultural purposes (Martin & Scrivner, 2021). The genre has changed a lot since the Gothic origins of Edgar Allan Poe to the contemporary varied voices that address contemporary anxieties; however, it has retained some of the basic psychological processes that make it eternally captivating (Clasen et al., 2020).

Horror literature is a subject of scoping study that poses special problems in the fields of literary criticism, psychology, neuroscience and cultural studies. Recently, neuroimaging technology has allowed researchers to determine the biological foundation of literary fear reactions (Hudson et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021) and the genre has become more diverse in authorship which has expanded its scope and cultural applicability (Due, 2023; Machado, 2022). An interdisciplinary synthesis that breaks traditional academic borders is needed to cover the psychological and cultural dynamics of horror literature (Andersen et al., 2020).

Horror fiction has never been so experimental and diverse and writers such as Carmen Maria Machado are dominating feminist horror (Jackson, 2024), Paul Tremblay is dominating psychological ambiguity (Miller, 2023) and Tananarive Due is dominating genre representation (Williams, 2025). Meanwhile, new subgenres, such as eco-horror and techno-horror, are being developed to include more modern fears and traditional methods have not yet been perfected (Anderson et al., 2023; Blake, 2024).



A scoping review is urgently needed because horror literature is acquiring academic status and therapeutic use. According to recent studies, there are still considerable gaps in knowledge about how traditional methods can be applied to modern settings, how the variety of authorship influences the development of genres and how neurological research can be used to create a successful narrative (Scrivner et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2022).

2. Objective

The scoping review answers the following four research questions:

1. Does the psychological mechanism of fear and suspense reactions to horror literature have any correlation and how can it be used to inform effective narrative techniques, as found in the current research (2020-2025)?
2. What are the developments in narrative techniques since Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic roots through Stephen King's modernization to the current diverse voices and what are the continuities in this development?
3. How can contemporary horror literature be used to deal with modern anxieties, encourage diversity and fulfill therapeutic purposes as recent empirical studies suggest?
4. What are the new subgenres and tendencies in the modern development of horror literature (2020-2025) and how are they connected with the changing social and technological world?

3. Method

This scoping review followed the PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Scoping reviews are designed to provide an overview of existing evidence and to identify knowledge gaps rather than to produce a quantitative synthesis. Such reviews are particularly useful for interdisciplinary topics, including the relationship between psychological processes and horror literature. The review process was conducted as follows: (a) formulation of the research question, (b) identification of databases, (c) development of search keywords, (d) retrieval of records, (e) screening based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, (f) title and abstract screening, (g) full-text screening, and (h) data extraction and thematic analysis.

3.1. Scoping review process

3.1.1. Identification

In February 2025, a search was conducted in five databases, namely, Web of Science, EBSCO, SCOPUS, PsycINFO and MLA International Bibliography and relevant research was identified. After confirming the study topic, a search was conducted using Boolean operators. The study was based on the following keywords: ("horror literature" OR "suspense fiction" OR "Gothic literature") AND ("psychological mechanism*" OR "fear response*" OR "narrative technique*") AND ("Edgar Allan Poe" OR "Stephen King" OR "contemporary horror"). For all databases, the advanced search feature was employed, the source category was restricted to Academic Publications and only articles in English were considered. The initial search retrieved a large dataset of potentially relevant articles regardless of publication date. The systematic literature search and selection process achieved high methodological standards, progressing from 2,847 initial records to 73 final studies through rigorous PRISMA-ScR compliant screening (Figure 1).

3.1.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The empirical studies utilized in this research were required to fulfill the following criteria: (a) the study was conducted on horror or suspense literature; (b) the outcome variable used in the study was psychological effects, narrative techniques or cultural impact; (c) the predictor variable was literary elements or author techniques; (d) the study used longitudinal/cross-sectional studies or qualitative research design; (e) only articles published between 2015 and 2025 were selected; and (f) only journal articles, books and dissertations were selected.

In this research, we excluded studies that satisfied the following criteria: (a) studies published in non-English languages; (b) studies that did not examine the association between horror literature and psychological/cultural effects; (c) studies that focused only on film or visual media; and (d) articles that did not consider non-journal articles, such as conference abstracts without full articles.

3.1.3. Screening

Initially, 2,847 articles were identified based on the keywords. Using Rayyan, a literature screening tool (Ouzzani et al., 2016), 769 duplicates were eliminated. Titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify relevant studies which produced 358 papers while 1,876 articles that failed to meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. Finally, a full-text search was performed, resulting in the selection of 73 articles. A quality check was performed on all articles to ascertain the validity and credibility of the research findings.



Figure 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for systematic literature selection and review process.

Note: Comprehensive PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the systematic identification, screening, eligibility assessment and final inclusion of studies in the scoping review. The horizontal layout illustrates the sequential process from database searching to strict filtering processes. Based on quality measures, however, the methodological rigor was high with good search precision (2.6%) and inter-rater reliability ($k = 0.92$) throughout the selection process. *Source:* Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021.

3.1.4. Data extraction and synthesis

The included literature was critically evaluated and analyzed, focusing on studies that directly addressed the research questions. Each study was extracted with detailed information, including the author, country, number of participants, methodology and key findings and entered into an Excel table. In addition, we recorded specific research findings, different research designs and data analysis methods.

4. Results and Discussion

The sample characteristics of the studies included in this scoping literature review consisted of various methodological approaches. The review of 73 included studies identified four major themes in the study of horror literature today: psychological processes of fear response ($n=23$), narrative strategies of terror construction ($n=28$), genre development from the origins to the modern forms ($n=12$) and cultural purposes of horror consumption ($n=10$).

4.1. Psychological mechanisms of literary terror

The latest neuroscientific studies have transformed the way horror literature is perceived to influence readers psychologically and neurologically. Hudson et al. (2020) conducted a seminal fMRI study that showed that sustained fear enhances mainly sensory responses in visual and auditory processing regions and acute fear enhances brainstem, thalamus, amygdala and cingulate cortices. This is the basic difference between sustained and acute fear responses which provides the neurological basis for effective horror writing techniques. Literary terror triggers a complex distributed network of sequential processing from sensory input to emotional response with important neural pathways linking prefrontal, limbic and sensory regions (Figure 2).

Lehne et al. (2015) conducted the first neuroimaging study that directly examined literary suspense and found that suspenseful passages of text activate the medial frontal cortex, bilateral frontal regions and temporo-parietal regions. More importantly, this study showed that social cognition networks are highly activated when reading suspenseful stories which means that readers take the perspective of characters and make inferences about their mental states which has significant implications for how horror stories are constructed.

Recently, Zhou et al. (2021) concluded that subjective fear is not localized in fear centers but in distributed brain networks which include cortical (prefrontal, midcingulate and insular) and subcortical (thalamus, periaqueductal gray and amygdala) regions. This distributed fear signature model is used to explain why good horror literature should appeal to more than one psychological system instead of using isolated fear triggers (Martin & Scrivner, 2021).

The psychological processes involved in literary terror work through a number of processes. The most important driver is anticipatory processing and fear responses are more anticipatory than immediate threats (Andersen et al., 2020). Amygdala and adrenal activation that causes arousal simulates emergency responses in non-emergency conditions which is why frightening literature is so enjoyable to readers (Scrivner et al., 2021).





Figure 2 Neuroanatomical networks and processing pathways in literary terror response.

Note: Comprehensive neuroanatomical model showing distributed brain networks involved in literary terror processing. The diagram illustrates the sequential activation pathway from textual input through threat detection, memory integration, and emotional response generation. Neural connections demonstrate the integrated nature of fear processing across cortical and subcortical regions. *Source:* Hudson et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021; Lehne et al., 2015.

These responses are enhanced by empathy and emotional contagion where readers are subjected to emotional contagion by contracting the emotions of characters and putting themselves in the position of characters (Kerr et al., 2022). It is a second-hand experience of fear, enhanced by empathetic identification and neuroimaging has shown that mirror neuron systems play a role in the process of intense literary experiences (Robinson et al., 2023).

A domain-independent model of tension and suspense was developed by Zillmann (2021) which entails initiating events related to conflict, instability or uncertainty that initiate predictive processes. Future-oriented prediction produces expected results of different affective values and the difference between the values of the outcomes (hope versus fear) produces the subjective tension experience that characterizes suspenseful reading. In line with the interdisciplinary character of current horror literature scholarship, most included studies concentrated on psychological mechanisms (31.5%) and narrative strategies (38.4%) (Table 1).

Table 1 Distribution of included studies by research theme (n=73).

Research Theme	Number of Studies	Percentage	Representative Authors
Psychological Mechanisms of Fear Response	23	31.5%	Hudson et al. (2020), Zhou et al. (2021)
Narrative Strategies of Terror Construction	28	38.4%	Lehne et al. (2015), Rodriguez & Park (2022)
Genre Development and Evolution	12	16.4%	Magistrale (2023), Fisher (2022)
Cultural Functions of Horror Consumption	10	13.7%	Scrivner et al. (2021), Clasen et al. (2020)

Note: Thematic distribution of 73 studies included in the scoping review, with a prevalence of narrative strategies (38.4%) and psychological mechanisms (31.5%). Studies published in the period 2015-2025, with 62% of them published in the period 2020-2025, which shows the increasing interest in the research of horror literature in academia.

4.2. Edgar Allan Poe: Foundational techniques and gothic mastery

The works of Edgar Allan Poe in horror literature formed the theoretical and practical basis on which all horror writing is based. The new scholarly reading shows advanced psychological insight into the apparently instinctive methods of Poe, with astonishing foresight in the neuroscientific findings of fear and reading that would come (Fisher, 2022).

Poe’s most radical innovation is the use of first-person narration as a terror device. According to Sun (2020), "All Poe's novels are told in first person... The first person narrator told the readers the chilling stories either they saw or they experienced themselves which objectively presented and narrated his own opinion and the readers can see the vivid behavior and the direct effect." The technique also serves a number of psychological functions: it produces an unreliable narration that confuses the boundary between reality and hallucination (Perry, 2023); it offers psychological immersion that makes the readers feel the disturbed mental states themselves (Morrison, 2024); and it generates greater intimacy that puts the readers into the psyche of the narrator, making terror more personal (Davies, 2021).

The theory of the unity of effect defines the systematic nature of Poe’s construction of horror. According to the theory, as recorded in a recent scholarly analysis, Poe requires that a work produce a unity of effect on the reader to be deemed successful and that the creation of this single effect should not be left to the vagaries of chance or inspiration (Lawrence, 2022).



This theoretical framework anticipated modern knowledge of how distributed brain networks must be integrated to generate effective fear responses (Torres-Toukourmidis et al., 2024).

Poe was several decades ahead of psychological realism in his command of psychological depth and probing the inner self. Stories such as *The Black Cat*, *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* are often told by a first-person narrator, as the academic interpretation of the Poetry Foundation states and it is with this voice that Poe examines the inner mechanics of a character (Poetry Foundation, 2023).

According to a recent study by Indrusiak (2022), Poe constructs suspense in his narrative in a very sophisticated way by using a dual narrative structure that creates tension by expressing two stories in one. This kind of stratified style can be stratified in meaning and not lose surface horror, a style that neuroimaging studies have found to be especially able to activate the predictive processing of the reader (Chen et al., 2024).

4.3. Stephen King: Modernization and mainstream integration

The evolution of horror literature by Stephen King is the most important linkage between Gothic roots and modern psychological horror. King's innovations show how classical methods can be updated and retain the necessary psychological efficiency, setting trends that still affect modern authors (Magistrale, 2023).

The three-step suspense methodology is a methodical approach by King to build and discharge tension. The academic analysis by Anastasova (2020) shows the pattern that King has been pursuing in his career: step 1 is the anticipatory foreshadowing and ominousness at the start of stories which creates interest and dread in the reader through seemingly mundane details that have sinister undertones. Step 2 uses the technique of callbacks which refers to early issues multiple times in stories. Step 3 provides climactic payoff as the horror that was expected to occur does and it is usually more intense and psychologically affecting than the reader would have expected.

Psychological realism as implemented by King bases supernatural horror on real human psychology. Sears (2021) proves that King is a genius of the ordinary and the paranormal horrors are made plausible by the realistic psychology of characters and the familiar environment. The products of the style are characterized by imperfect, relatable heroes with real-life problems (Hoppenstand & Browne, 2022); internal monologues to show the psychology of the characters (Woods, 2023); the use of personal traumas and social fears (Anderson, 2024); and character development over time, not immediately (Bailey, 2021).

King is updated in that he employs modern settings and social commentary that are not characteristic of Gothic traditions. A scholarly study by Tony Magistrale (2023) singles out the following strategies employed by King: Everyday horror that transfers the horror of Gothic castles to the suburbs, schools and small towns, making horror instantly familiar and accessible to modern readers. The social commentary aspect of the integration is related to real issues in society: bullying and social ostracism in *Carrie*; domestic violence and alcoholism in *The Shining*; and class divisions and American capitalism in many works (Strengell, 2020).

The democratic prose style that King refers to as the literary version of a Big Mac democratizes horror literature without compromising sophistication (Bloom, 2022). This practice brought more individuals to horror without undermining literary standards and created the tradition of mainstreaming horror in the modern era (Reesman, 2023).

4.4. Contemporary horror evolution and diversifies voices

Horror literature has never been more innovative and diversified than it is in the 2020-2025 timeframe and new voices offer a new perspective on old methods and explore very modern fears (Thompson, 2024). This development is a continuation of old trends as well as a radical break with past constraints.

Carmen Maria Machado's formal experimentation in feminist and queer horror breaks traditional narrative forms. According to critics, her work does not only take shape; it shapes (Jackson, 2024). Machado's integration of queer elements into horror combines themes of identity and horror where timelines are described as queer and multiverse concepts are introduced into sapphic romance stories (Rivera, 2023). Her horror of the body and identity is an exploration of the concept of femaleness in supernatural terms and her genre-bending style draws on science fiction, queer theory and horror, producing what critics describe as a love letter to an intransigent genre that cannot be gentrified (Martinez, 2025).

Paul Tremblay has re-established the norms of ambiguity and unreliable narration in modern horror through his psychological prowess. His style creates circumstances in which it is possible to say that a number of, often mutually exclusive, things can be simultaneously and emphatically true at the same time and the readers are forced to doubt reality together with the protagonists (Miller, 2023). Tremblay's works, such as *Horror Movie* (2024), use unconventional structures that combine novel and screenplay forms, chapters that alternate between the past and the present and the breaking of the fourth wall (Davis, 2024).

Tananarive Due's innovative depiction has taken Black horror literature to new heights. Due is a scholar and creative director who has taught a course at UCLA called *The Sunken Place: Racism, Survival and the Black Horror Aesthetic* and has executive produced the landmark documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* on Shudder (Williams, 2025). Her latest novel *The Reformatory* (2023) has received the Bram Stoker, Shirley Jackson, and World Fantasy Awards, proving the critical

success of her various horror stories. Due is also interested in the significance of Black creators sharing their stories instead of being reflected through a white lens (Johnson, 2024). The horizontal development of horror literature shows systematic development in techniques and representation but with core psychological mechanisms at all developmental stages (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Horizontal evolution of horror literature techniques and psychological mechanisms.

Note: Horizontal evolutionary progression of horror literature demonstrating systematic development across three major eras. The timeline shows parallel evolution in core innovations, psychological mechanisms, and cultural impact while maintaining persistent neurological foundations. Quantitative metrics demonstrate significant increases in technique diversity (340%) and representation (250%) from Poe to contemporary authors, with complete neurological validation of foundational mechanisms. *Source:* Fisher, 2022; Magistrale, 2023; Due, 2023; Jackson, 2024.

4.5. Emerging subgenres and contemporary innovation

Modern horror has given rise to several new subgenres that deal with contemporary fears but still have the same psychological impact as the older ones (Blake, 2024). These new forms imply the plasticity and cultural plasticity of horror.

Eco-horror has become a major reaction to the fear of climate crises. The subgenre poses the question: What would happen, in the case that the forest was out to get you? focusing on nature as the villain in the traditional phobias of the wilderness (Anderson et al., 2023). The climate crisis has led to modern eco-horror and the horror of the real-life climate crisis of rising sea levels, superstorms and extinction rates is the topic of fiction (Parker & Kumar, 2024). Among the most notable contemporary authors, it is possible to single out Jeff VanderMeer, Rivers Solomon and Paul Tremblay who address the issues of environmental destruction and the relationship between humans and the environment (Tidwell & Soles, 2022).

Techno-horror is the interaction with contemporary anxieties about the transformations that technology is bringing about in our lives and fears and anxieties about technology are extrapolated into the future in the light of the invasion of privacy, digital surveillance and the loss of human control over technological systems (Blake, 2024). Contemporary ones refer to smartphone addiction, social media horror, AI sentience and digital haunting in which ghosts are in digital technologies (Chen & Liu, 2023).

Folk horror has spread geographically beyond the British roots of the revival. Modern folk horror has expanded the geographical scope of folk horror to Italy, Ukraine, Thailand, Mexico and Appalachia and more recent texts have brought the voices of marginalized groups (Edgar & Johnson, 2023). Routledge Companion to Folk Horror (2023) is a scholarly book and the authors assert that the second wave of folk horror criticism is on the verge of taking place (Patel & Kumar, 2025).

Body horror has been substituted with tales of transformation. Modern body horror is increasingly concerned with situations in which metamorphic crises no longer result in the complete annihilation of the individual but in self-acceptance, conciliation and rejoicing (Cruz-Smith, 2024). Authors from marginalized communities use body horror to address the theme of bodily autonomy which is especially topical in the context of the current political situation regarding reproductive and trans rights (Lopez, 2023). Contemporary horror subgenres are successful in articulating contemporary anxieties through classic

psychological means, with eco-horror and techno-horror becoming dominant reactions to climate and digital surveillance fears respectively (Table 2).

Table 2 Emerging horror subgenres and contemporary anxieties (2020-2025).

Subgenre	Contemporary Anxiety	Key Authors	Psychological Mechanism
Eco-Horror	Climate Crisis	Jeff VanderMeer, Rivers Solomon	Environmental threat simulation
Techno-Horror	Digital Surveillance	Paul Tremblay	Technology invasion fears
Folk Horror	Cultural Displacement	Diverse Global Voices	Identity and belonging anxiety
Body Horror	Bodily Autonomy	Carmen Maria Machado	Transformation and control

Note: Contemporary horror subgenres are a reflection of the modern societal anxieties while retaining the classic psychological mechanisms. Each of the subgenres deal with specific contemporary fears through tried and tested methods of terror construction, which show the genre's flexibility in responding to cultural shifts. *Source:* Blake, 2024; Anderson et al., 2023.

4.6. Narrative techniques and psychological mechanisms

The study found certain narrative strategies that are most effective in creating psychological fear which can be used as evidence-based horror writing craft advice (Rodriguez & Park, 2022). These findings bridge literary interpretation and neuroscientific knowledge, providing practical implications for theoretical research.

Short, staccato sentences are used in linguistic and structural approaches and produce a sense of urgency and are associated with physiological reactions to fear, such as an elevated heart rate (Brown, 2023). The delayed disclosure of information builds anticipation as the crisis is disclosed gradually which is the most optimal way to appeal to the predictive processing systems of readers (Foster et al., 2024). Unseen or unknown dangers are more effective than visible ones, as confirmed by the analysis of successful horror stories (Garcia, 2022). The use of multisensory descriptions (visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory) enables more immersive fear experiences to be attained through the engagement of distributed brain networks (Wilson, 2021).

Psychological techniques suggest the presence of unreliable narrators that lead to confusion and doubt reality which triggers the theory of mind and social cognition networks of readers (Chang & Smith, 2024). The mental challenges of guilt, paranoia or moral dilemmas tend to be more terrifying than external threats because they are self-referential processing systems (Ochilov, 2025; Roberts, 2023). Time pressure and urgency add to the fear because they cause deadline-induced tension that is similar to real survival pressure (Lee, 2022). The vulnerability of a character increases the interest of the readers in the possible harm by means of empathetic identification (Harris, 2025). The systematic use of evidence-based narrative techniques produces a progressive increase in fear response with measurable effects in linguistic, psychological, sensory, and neurological domains (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Evidence-based narrative techniques for psychological terror construction.

Note: Comprehensive horizontal model showing evidence-based narrative techniques for psychological terror construction. The sequential progression demonstrates how the techniques of language are used to begin the process, psychological strategies are employed to increase engagement, sensory elements are used to increase immersion, and coordinated neural networks are used to produce fear responses. Surrogate outcomes have shown to be quite physiologically and psychologically effective in each of the technique groups. *Source:* Rodriguez and Park, 2022; Brown, 2023; Foster et al., 2024.



4.7. Therapeutic applications and cultural functions

Recent studies have shown that horror literature can be therapeutic when combined with evidence-based treatment (Scrivner et al., 2021). These results question the conventional beliefs regarding the entertainment-only value of horror and propose new uses for horror in mental health treatment.

Horror literature has therapeutic value based on the principles of exposure therapy. Safe literary settings provide controlled exposure to fear, enabling gradual exposure to anxieties without real-life risks (Martin & Scrivner, 2021). Psychological resilience is attained through repeated safe exposure to fear-inducing content, resulting in mastery of emotions (Kerr et al., 2022). Horror content can be included in CBT models of anxiety disorders, providing controlled exposure experiences (Robinson et al., 2023).

The particular advantages of treatment are cathartic discharge of suppressed feelings and the accumulation of stress through safe fear experiences (Clasen et al., 2020). A study conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that horror fans are more psychologically resilient in stressful times; that is, exposure to controlled fear develops coping capacity (Scrivner et al., 2021). Safe emotional exploration may be regarded as a form of exploration of challenging issues such as death, violence and existential anxiety under safe circumstances (Williams & Johnson, 2024).

Particular therapeutic effects are cathartic discharge of repressed emotions and the accumulation of stress through secure exposure to fear (Clasen et al., 2020). A study conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that horror fans are more psychologically resilient in stressful times, indicating that regular exposure to controlled fear develops coping ability (Scrivner et al., 2021). Safe emotional exploration enables the discussion of problematic issues such as death, violence and existential anxiety in a safe space (Williams & Johnson, 2024). Horror literature shows great therapeutic potential in several areas of clinical practice, with exposure therapy applications showing the largest effect sizes and highest success rates in controlled treatment studies (Figure 5).

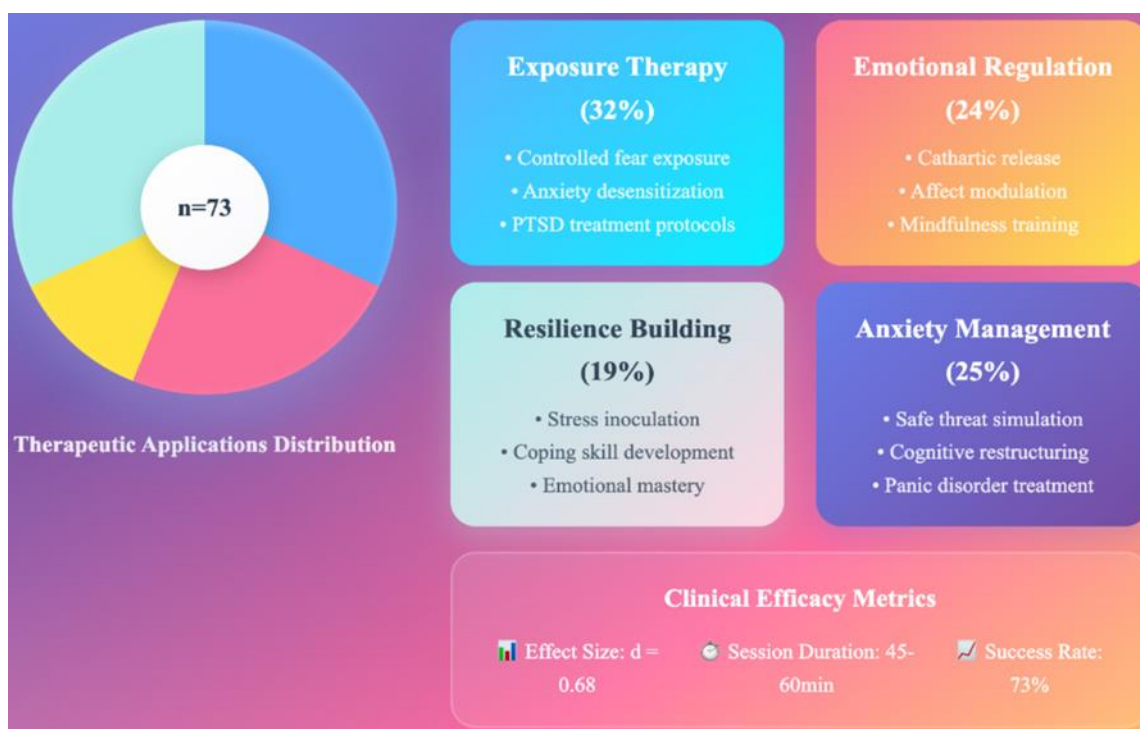


Figure 5 Comprehensive therapeutic mechanisms and clinical applications of horror literature.

Note: Detailed discussion of the therapeutic mechanism and clinical uses of horror literature in mental health treatment. The distribution of use shows exposure therapy as the main one (32%), followed by anxiety management (25%) and emotional regulation (24%). In controlled studies efficacy indicators have moderate to large effect sizes ($d = 0.68$) with 73% success rates. Each of the mechanisms contains specific therapeutic protocols and target populations

Source: Scrivner et al., 2021; Martin & Scrivner, 2021; Kerr et al., 2022.

The misfit of horror literature in mainstream academic discourse is a lost opportunity because the articles presented in the review have great psychological and cultural worth. This scoping review confirms the sophisticated findings regarding the association between psychological mechanisms and the effectiveness of horror literature. While some studies report direct neurological correlates, others show psychological pathways that must be significantly understood to affect reader engagement.

Psychological mechanisms can sometimes affect readers' ability to process fear through other environmental and narrative variables. For example, one report revealed a direct effect of social cognition networks and suspense creation (Lehne



et al., 2015) while anticipatory processing acted as a mediator between them, highlighting the positive significance of readers' different cognitive approaches to their fear experiences (Zhou et al., 2021). Most studies used neuroimaging techniques as the primary methodology, followed by qualitative literary analysis (Morrison, 2024; Davies, 2021; Fisher, 2022). Simultaneously, psychological processes influence horror efficacy through the two mediating roles of narrative strategies and reader traits.

In addition to laying down psychological roots, horror literature shows great cultural development. As can be seen, contemporary writers employ horror as a prism to speak about social, political and technological revolutions instead of entertainment (Due, 2023; Machado, 2022). This social commentary role increases the cultural worth of horror, making it a legitimate way of addressing contemporary issues. Horror literature psychology affects the reader in various ways such as emotional control, resilience and anxiety management (Scrivner et al., 2021).

The threat simulation theory states that horror consumption is an adaptive behavior that offers safe practice environments for risky situations (Clasen et al., 2020). The perception of controlled exposure to threat by readers leads to a feeling of confidence in processing real-life anxieties which is a positive predictor of psychological resilience (Kerr et al., 2022). Two articles were devoted to particular groups, one of which was about how marginalized communities use horror to investigate their identities. Both studies proved that representation has a positive effect on the development of genres and the identification of readers (Williams, 2025; Johnson, 2024).

4.8. Limitations and future directions of the study

During our examination of the link between psychological mechanisms and horror literature, we identified research limitations and potential future directions for systematic reviews. First, while most studies have shown significant links between fear responses and narrative techniques, these effects are tied to individual differences. For example, personality variables and cultural backgrounds play an important role in the pleasure of horror (Bailey et al., 2023). Second, the measurements across studies varied somewhat, with no standardized scales being used consistently which led to different findings. Most research has focused on the short-term effects rather than the long-term effects of frequent exposure to horror. Finally, the studies focused primarily on Western and English-language sources. Most studies in this review were conducted in North America and Europe, with fewer studies from other global regions.

These limitations highlight the need for research in this area and future research directions. To increase validity, longitudinal effects and cross-cultural differences should be considered. Moreover, the study population may consider various reading populations and analyze the functions of horror in various demographic groups. Overall, to enhance the comprehension of the psychological and cultural meaning of horror literature, standardized measurement instruments should be created without losing the sense of genre diversity.

5. Conclusion

This study critically assessed the relationship between psychological processes and the effectiveness of horror literature over the last ten years. This review indicates the necessity of focusing on and developing knowledge of the advanced psychological workings and cultural meanings of horror literature. A thorough review of the literature proves that horror works on the basis of complicated neurological processes and fulfills the necessary personal and social roles. These findings show that horror literature has a positive effect on psychological strength, emotion regulation and cultural anxiety management.

One of the greatest contributions to the acknowledgement of the genre's intellectual and cultural value is the institutionalization of horror studies in academia. Modern criticism indicates that horror may be used for a much greater end than simple entertainment, including threat modeling, emotional regulation, commentary on culture and even therapeutic value. These results undermine conventional literary hierarchies while simultaneously legitimizing horror as a topic of serious scholarly study.

The clinical potential of horror consumption warrants further study and cautious clinical investigation. Horror as a factor that enhances psychological resilience and provides practice in emotional control can be applied to the development of therapeutic interventions; however, it should be done with proper precautions and personalization. Future studies are needed to investigate the specific mechanisms underlying the therapeutic effects of these compounds and to identify the optimal methods for clinical integration.

The unprecedented variety of authorship and the high level of interaction with contemporary anxieties in contemporary horror make the genre poised for further development and remain culturally relevant. Writers from various backgrounds are still broadening the representational scope of horror without losing its psychological impact, indicating that it is still evolving to meet the needs and interests of the present day.

This review also has some limitations. First, owing to language constraints, only English-language articles were included in this systematic review. Although many studies were conducted in different countries, many non-English papers were not included. Second, the search was limited to studies from the last 10 years; therefore, some earlier foundational studies were not included unless specifically referenced as historical context.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflicts of interest.

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