

Urban Horror Settings in the Works of Lovecraft and LaValle

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This article examines the defining traits of rural and urban settings in horror literature and compares their usage in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" and Victor LaValle's rewrite *The Ballad of Black Tom*. In these works, the urban landscape is used as a deliberate craft tool to generate a unique atmosphere of fear and to reveal the truth about their authors' race-conscious intentions.

In analyses of horror literature, scholars give much attention to the monster and the cultural anxieties it represents. A secondary element of the genre, however, and critical to the monster's terror, is the setting in which the action is played out. General discussions of horror settings typically conjure images of rural, isolated places, but of the horror genre's many sub-categories and offshoots, there appears to be a growing branch of urban-set horror, classified according to its rejection of rural landmarks in favor of populated, man-made areas to serve as the story's primary setting. Perhaps urban-set horror's most infamous representative is H.P. Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" (1927), a short story in which Lovecraft racializes—and by extension, monsterizes—the urban setting. However, in Victor LaValle's adaption of the Red Hook tale, *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016), LaValle subverts the role of the urban setting and deftly explores the city according to its individual neighborhoods. This paper will examine the defining traits of rural and urban horror settings in literature and compare how Lovecraft and LaValle deliberately choose the urban landscape as a craft tool, not only to generate a unique atmosphere of fear but also to reveal truth about their authorial, race-conscious intentions.

The horror genre largely relies on its settings to begin the chain reaction of psychological mechanisms triggered in the mind of the reader. In his study of psychological effects woven into well-known horror settings, Francis McAndrew defines the effectiveness of the setting by what it lacks and by what it activates. The best horror settings, whether rural or urban or a combination of both, lack prospect and refuge; in

other words, they lack a "clear, unobstructed view of the landscape" and a "secure, protected place to where one can be sheltered from danger" (McAndrew 48). Instead, horror settings will only offer ambiguous information about their architecture, origin, and level of hazard. This ambiguity activates one of the most crucial psychological effects in the horror genre: the agent detection mechanism, a heightened level of attention prompted by a sign or sound that cannot immediately be identified as harmless (50-51). Activating the agent detection mechanism is the essential device by which horror settings create their unsettling ambience. The setting signals fear, yet perversely invites the reader further in to unmask its mysteries.

Psychological components like this are often why many stories of the horror genre gravitate toward rural landscapes for their settings. Caves, woods, lakes, farms, cabins, and other secluded locations like these easily meet McAndrew's psychological criteria; their isolation and rugged, unpredictable terrain automatically disadvantage the protagonist, physically and psychologically, as well as present a myriad of opportunities to trigger the agent detection mechanism.

However, as Imar Koutchoukali asserts, rural landscapes cannot always capture and accurately represent the fears of modern audiences, therefore necessitating the rise of the urban horror setting. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, society "was defined by its existence on the border of the wilderness and its continuous struggle with nature. The wilderness was replete of existential danger, such as wild animals or brigands. Nature itself posed

a serious threat” (Koutchoukali 8). Yet, with sudden and intense urbanization, Koutchoukali reasons that “lives were no longer threatened by spirits or beasts lurking in the bogs, woods, or steppes, but by other human beings. And so, as humans came to predominantly reside in cities, so did their fears” (8). Urban landscapes—a combination of man-made structures and the crowds that inhabit them—function as horror settings by relying on McAndrew’s psychological components but also by relying on characteristics unique only to them. Like rural areas, urban environments create a sense of isolation, ironically not by a lack of a population but by an overwhelming amount of it. With their towering structures and faceless crowds, urban locations are also better equipped to display the fears of invasion, loss of control and identity, and deception of what should and should not be safe—all considered modern fears because of their distinct link to rapid globalization, according to Koutchoukali.

H.P. Lovecraft’s notorious short story “The Horror at Red Hook” embraces the urban landscape, for better or for worse, to capitalize on its connection to the fear of invasion. However, because scholars have concluded the story is largely influenced by Lovecraft’s personal worldview, the invasion in question is clearly one of non-white populations. Lovecraft describes the neighborhood of Red Hook as “a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another” (Lovecraft II). More than once, Lovecraft uses phrases like “a babel of sound and filth” (II) as he takes his time describing the local immigrants and the physical decay they cause in their streets, buildings, and water sources. As James Kneale points out, Lovecraft makes urban life itself monstrous by giving the crowds behavior akin to a mobile infection: “People swarm, or they spill out of buildings, like a ‘semi-fluid rottenness’ that swells, threatening to burst and spread” (Kneale 118). Though the literal monster of Red Hook may be Robert Suydam and/or the arcane horrors he releases, Lovecraft spares no prose to establish that Suydam’s urban, ethnically diverse stomping grounds are equally, if not more, abhorrent.

Lovecraft may not be the first major author in the horror canon to link racial anxiety to the urban landscape, but his reputation for doing so is well known. The issue that arises, however, is

when more than one author, across more genres than merely horror, begins to link racist fears to the same elements, like urban settings. In turn, this can translate into powerfully coded meanings in the minds of the author’s audience. To explain this effect, Casey Schmitt, an American folklorist, builds upon the theories of intertextuality as discussed by Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin, by observing that intertextual theory may also be applied to “objects less traditionally examined as ‘texts’” (2), objects which include any biophysical or spatial environment. These non-authored objects, as Schmitt terms them, can become coded with meaning through intertextual relationships. For example, a mountain in the Pacific Northwest can take on magical, spiritual, even religious meaning to a large demographic of people simply because, to them, the mountain is physically akin to its famous fictional counterparts mentioned in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series. Schmitt makes an interesting observation that this phenomenon also applies to the people who live and work a majority of their lives in one particular environment; they will still interpret their home space “through the frame of some other, popular media form” (Schmitt 1). Using Schmitt’s theory of a non-authored objects like physical locations inheriting meaning from a separate media form, we can perhaps draw the conclusion that an urban landscape is a non-authored object of its own right, and the meaning it inherits can come from any number of potential literature/film sources: gritty mafia tales that depict the city as a concrete jungle to be dominated, romantic comedies and musicals that depict the city as a place of opportunity and vivacity, or short stories like Lovecraft’s, which depict the city as a dangerous boiling pot of people he believes to be inferior. Should a large base of readers consume enough Lovecraft-adjacent content, they could unintentionally cement an intertextual relationship between urban landscapes and racist textual depictions of crime-ridden neighborhoods. To an extent, this relationship already has cemented.

These troublesome associations are precisely what Victor LaValle counteracts in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, a rewriting of “The Horror at Red Hook.” LaValle revises the racist connotations Lovecraft imbues on the urban landscape and reclaims the city as a horror setting through new means. LaValle subverts Lovecraft’s setup that the citizens of color are

what contribute to the setting's monstrosity; instead, LaValle shows that those citizens are the victims of the monstrosity. The novella's protagonist Tom—a young, clever black man—is the lens through which readers are shown the urban landscape, not as a homogeneous setting but as a patchwork of neighborhoods that undulate in ambiance as the story progresses. The ethnic crowds Lovecraft uglifies LaValle now describes as a safe haven for Tom: "Late night in Harlem on a Friday and the streets more full than at rush hour. Tommy Tester cherished the closeness, to his father and to all the bodies on the sidewalks, in their cars, riding buses, perched on stoops" (36).

In direct and purposeful contrast to "The Horror at Red Hook," New York's suburban, all-white neighborhoods are what evoke true horror for LaValle's black protagonist. Ironically, these neighborhoods are described as more rural, at least relative to Tom's point of view: "Though the borough had grown, modernized greatly...to a boy like Tommy, raised in Harlem, all this appeared rustic and bewilderingly open. The open arms of the natural world worried him as much as the white people, both so alien to him" (LaValle 13). While Lovecraft creates urban fear through a combination of cramped buildings and crowds of people of color, LaValle writes the exact opposite: urban fear is orderly neighborhoods and a vigilant community of white people. The monstrosity of the story is no longer intertwined with the fear of foreigners; the monstrosity is intertwined with the problem of racism itself.

It is noteworthy to mention that other major characters besides LaValle's black protagonist also perceive the city's communities of color in a positive, or at least neutral, light. The white detective Malone does not initially perceive the Red Hook neighborhood as a place of horror in LaValle's rewrite: "So Malone returned to the neighborhood. He'd missed the place. He doubted there was another white man on earth who would ever think the same" (91). The Red Hook community, despite preexisting tensions between the locals and the white NYPD police squads, accepts Malone as a regular visitor, speaking "...freely around him, if not always to him, and Malone's notepad filled with their lore" (92). Because of LaValle's sensitivity to racial relations, however, Malone has a noticeably

different experience than Tom when walking through suburban white neighborhoods. The scene is described as "a pleasant morning for travel" and nothing more than "a short walk" (95) for Malone. The detective is not intimidated by the openness of the neighborhood, nor is he hyper-aware of what groups of men may walk past him or eye him at the train station. There is no ambiance of unease for Malone because what he fears is inherently different than from what Tom fears. Any horror setting, urban or rural, is only as effective as the fears it can trigger in both the characters' and readers' minds, but LaValle's work is evidence that some fears are not universal; rather, specific communities feel specific fears.

Though seen less often in the horror genre, urban settings contain traits that can trigger the same psychological mechanisms as traditional horror settings, and the urban landscape represents its own unique set of fears associated with the modern, globalizing world. However, as Schmitt's intertextual theory regarding non-authored objects suggests, the urban landscape is at constant risk for storytellers like H.P. Lovecraft associating them with racist attitudes, using urbanity to amplify the fear of the foreigner. It is the work of authors like Victor LaValle which counteract these dangerous associations and instead utilize the urban landscape as a shifting, complex setting to point to one of the true horrors of an urban world: the *us versus them* mentality that keeps both dominant and oppressed classes afraid.

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