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Creepypasta – the modern twist in horror literature

The 21st century saw humanity making great advancements in many fields, such as medicine or science, none however has had as great an impact as the rise of the Internet. Ever since it was open to the general public, there have been many debates as to whether it is a useful tool which gives us endless possibilities, or perhaps a means of turning people into mindless, antisocial zombies. Although one could find arguments to justify both of these claims, it is true that as technology is developing, people appear to be less inclined to read. This is demonstrated in a study conducted by Jessica E. Moyer entitled “Teens Today Don’t Read Books Anymore”¹ among many others. If this is the case, can we say that using the Internet leads to illiteracy and portends the fall of literature? Not quite. As we all know, everything depends on how we use the tools we are given – and such is the case here. A truly remarkable example of how the Internet can lead to popularizing both reading and writing, and even contribute to literature itself appeared several years ago. It is known as Creepypasta and has unfortunately been rarely discussed in the media (only a few articles have been published so far), and almost completely ignored by literary scholars. In the past, literature was passed down orally – this is mirrored by how Creepypastas circulate. The only difference is that the voice of a storyteller has been replaced by electronic communication devices. The principle however remains the same – a tale is being told and shared with those willing to read or listen to it. This article attempts to analyze the phenomenon

¹ J. E. Moyer, *Teens Today Don’t Read Books Anymore: A Study of Differences in Interest and Comprehension Based on Reading Modalities: Part 1, Introduction and Methodology*, ‘The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults’, 02 Feb. 2010, p 2.

of Creepypastas by explaining what they are, how they draw from and develop literature in general, how they can influence other media and what possibilities they present for potential authors.

It is not really possible to determine when Creepypastas actually came into being. What is certain, however, is that the term originates from “copy-pasta”, a word used on the popular 4chan forums in 2006, which is used to describe viral copy-and-pasted text. As one might deduce from the adjective ‘creepy’ alone, they are horror-related stories of varying length, which are distributed by readers copying and pasting them all across the Internet. This is not the only means, however, as during the last few years a new trend has arisen. The popular video streaming website YouTube was flooded with narration videos. Those were simply audiobook versions of popular horror tales and real scary stories, however, their bulk consists of Creepypastas. The popularity of such videos is incredible, with some narrators having audiences of millions of viewers, which – coupled with the number of people posting these videos – results in Creepypastas having a greater audience than books written by established writers. Apart from more traditional works (those which resemble horror fiction as we know it), there are also other kinds which are divided into various ‘sub-genres’ based upon their form and the topics they touch upon. The most popular of these are:

- Ritual Pasta: not literally stories *per-se*, mostly plotless – usually descriptions of occult rituals leading to different results. Interestingly, many of them are based on real rituals of several different traditions, like pagan, vican, satanic, etc.
- Feels Pasta: not always horror related, these stories are very emotional. Their aim is to evoke deeper feelings in the readers, such as sadness, happiness, melancholy, etc. They also tend to moralize.
- Parody Pasta/Crappy Pasta: low quality stories, either due to technical issues or simply being foolish. The term Parody Pasta is usually reserved for stories which are intentionally written to be like this, whereas Crappy Pasta for those which were not, but ended up being sub-par.
- Lost Episode Pasta: Stories either describing an episode (or several episodes) in existing non-horror series, usually cartoons, which never actually aired and are disturbing in nature. Also tales of people’s encounters with such episodes.
- Mental Illness Pasta: Stories involving insanity and/or mental problems.
- Photography Pasta: Tales revolving around pictures and memes. They have gained considerable notoriety due to the fact that the images which they refer to actually exist (whether they are genuine or not is debatable), which adds to the feeling of realism.

- Computers/Internet Pasta: These revolve around anything IT related, be it strange websites, cursed programs, etc.²

The above mentioned examples are only a few select ones. There is a large number of such 'sub-genres' and yet no definite categorization has been established due to the fact that the Creepypasta genre is still expanding. Thus, when researching this topic, many different names given by different commentators may appear, with none being agreed upon.

The sheer number of Creepypasta authors is astonishing (not to mention the number of stories) and it would be pointless to try and come up with an even approximate number (moreover, not all of them use their real names while posting their works – some remain completely anonymous, not leaving even as little as a nickname). What is important however, is that this community of amateur writers spans the entire world, which means the stories they create have very different cultural backgrounds, which in turn leads to each of them potentially bringing something new into the horror genre. Also, since they are constantly coming in contact with each other, they borrow and mix various elements, which leads to extremely interesting results, sometimes surpassing even the works of established authors. Shira Chess goes as far as to compare the phenomenon of Creepypasta to folklore, noting however, that instead of taking years to develop and be passed down orally, these texts are created within hours and distributed instantaneously online³. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H. P. Lovecraft wrote: "Sometimes a curious streak of fancy invades an obscure corner of the very hardest head, so that no amount of rationalization, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood."⁴ Nowadays, we may have traded the real campfire for a digital one, the basics however stay the same. For those familiar with Creepypastas, it is hard not to agree with such a statement, especially due to the fact that as readers we cannot (in some cases of course – it all comes down to the author's skill) verify whether what we read is in fact fiction or perhaps an actual account of a paranormal phenomenon. When someone holds a horror book in his or her hand, they are almost completely certain that it is fiction – it was written, verified, printed and sold for profit. But what happens when they read something posted on a message board or a regular website? They are aware that nobody profits from this and considering the places one

² "Genre Listing." Creepypasta Wiki. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.

³ S. Chess, *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology*, (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2016), p.15.

⁴ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), p.4.

finds such texts at, perhaps they are authentic accounts or even people seeking help? If we add to this the very nature of their content, it is safe to call them ‘weird fiction’. To quote Lovecraft again, the most important aspect of ‘weird fiction’ is:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain — a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daeligmons [demons] of unplumbed space.⁵

All of the above adds to the scare factor Creepypastas inherently depend on, and other literary forms that they sometimes mimic. In order to better understand how this works, an analysis of some of these texts is vital.

Not all Creepypastas are lengthy or complex texts – some of them manage to convey the sheer sense of dread in a few simple sentences. A fine example of such a story is “Bad Dreams”:

‘Daddy, I had a bad dream.’

You blink your eyes and pull up on your elbows. Your clock glows red in the darkness — it’s 3:23. ‘Do you want to climb into bed and tell me about it?’

‘No, Daddy.’

The oddness of the situation wakes you up more fully. You can barely make out your daughter’s pale form in the darkness of your room. ‘Why not, sweetie?’

‘Because in my dream, when I told you about the dream, the thing wearing Mommy’s skin sat up.’

For a moment, you feel paralyzed; you can’t take your eyes off of your daughter. The covers behind you begin to shift.⁶

This story may seem simplistic, but it definitely manages to greatly rouse the readers when told or read in proper conditions. Certainly many people can recall scary stories they had heard in their childhood, such as those told around campfires. Looking back we would most likely consider them silly and wonder how it was possible for us to fear them. This story proves such an explanation

⁵ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), p.5.

⁶ "Bad Dreams | Creepypasta." Creepypasta. N.p., 10 Oct. 2013. Web. 29 Aug. 2016.

wrong – it is highly reminiscent of such ‘campfire tales’ and perhaps this is exactly why it strikes a chord within us, touches the inner child and awakens primal fears – fears so basic that we actually believed we were rid of and yet we never really will. Even though it is a far-fetched story (as most supernatural works are), one cannot deny the fact that due to its realistic feel and simple nature, it manages to actually reach its intended goal of frightening the reader. On the technical side, it is also something that we would never find in, for example, a compilation of short horror tales, which makes it all the more unique.

“The Russian Sleep Experiment” is an example of a medium length Creepypasta of a more traditional, plot-based variety. It is a surprisingly good story, thus it is very unfortunate that its author remains anonymous to this day. The Creepypasta is set in the 1940’s and tells of an experiment conducted by Russian scientists in order to analyze the effects of sleep deprivation. The subjects are selected prisoners of war (lured by the promise of being released once the experiment comes to an end), who are locked in a chamber with only port-hole windows and intercoms for contact. They are given books, food and other items to help them survive their ordeal. The chamber is then filled with a stimulant gas, in order to make sure everybody stays awake. After several days the subjects began to show signs of mental disorder and started to scream like mad men. On the 14th day the room was completely silent and thus the scientists decided to use the intercoms to provoke some response, telling the prisoners that they would open the cell in order to check the microphones and compliance with their orders would earn one of them freedom. The response was “We no longer want to be freed”. Puzzled, the scientists decided to vent the gas from the chamber and check the situation, which only led to the subjects erupting in a mad scream. The prisoners were in a state which could hardly be called alive, their bodies mutilated (apparently by themselves), the food untouched – they looked like living corpses (even went as far as to remove some of their organs) and yet they continued to function, even exhibiting inhuman strength when the guards attempted to remove them from the chamber. Finally three subjects were placed in a medical facility, where the scientists realized that they were almost completely immune to sedation (of which they were terrified), however a greater dose (and – in turn – falling asleep) would actually kill them. It was also noted that for some reason they enjoyed pain, up to the point of actually smiling during an operation without the effect of anesthetics. When asked why they acted in such a way, one of the men simply replied “I must remain awake.” Despite protests from the scientists, the officer in charge of the experiment decided not only to continue it, but also to seal the researchers with the subjects. Finally,

after giving the order to eliminate all involved in the experiment, the commander was shot by the last remaining guard, who also killed the remaining two subjects. As the last prisoner was dying, he managed to utter the phrase “So... nearly... free...”

It is quite possible to perceive parallels with *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, a short story by the previously-mentioned horror writer, H. P. Lovecraft. In his story, a man is plagued by visions of worlds hidden behind the veil of dreams. The protagonist manages to see these realms and even converse with other-worldly beings which explain that – when sleeping – humans become beings of light and exit their bodies. This can be interpreted in two ways: either such creatures actually existed, or they are the personification of madness. In “The Russian Sleep Experiment”, when one of the subjects is asked what he is, he states:

‘Have you forgotten so easily?’ the subject asked. ‘We are you. We are the madness that lurks within you all, begging to be free at every moment in your deepest animal mind. We are what you hide from in your beds every night. We are what you sedate into silence and paralysis when you go to the nocturnal haven where we cannot tread.’⁷

These words seem to reflect the idea present in Lovecraft’s *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*. This story evokes humanity’s most primal fear (and probably the worst one of all) – fear of the unknown. Despite all of our advancements in science and medicine, we must yet understand the meaning and source of dreams. Some people still tend to add supernatural qualities to them. Interestingly, many experiments of a similar nature have actually been conducted (one rumored to be exactly like the one in the story – it was most likely the inspiration for it), although their results are not always released to the public. This in turn adds to the possibility of the story not being fiction, but rather an account of true events. As such, since we cannot disprove its claims of probability – the chilling thought of being separated by only a thin veil from a nightmarish realm of creatures beyond our comprehension, who prey upon us (whether they actually exist or are the personification of our own madness), is all the more striking.

A fine example of a novel-length story is *Apocalypse Z: The Beginning of the End*, although some readers may be surprised that it is mentioned here as a Creepypasta (due to the fact that it was released in print). To clear up any confusion regarding this matter, this novel written by Manel Loureiro started out as a tale in the form of a blog (and was actually posted on a blog the author created). After gaining popularity, it was released in print and thus many people

⁷ "The Russian Sleep Experiment." Creepypasta Wiki. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2016.

may not be aware of its origins. The novel is actually a diary written by an unnamed attorney living in Pontevedra, Spain. He writes about his life in order to vent his emotions, but soon his words become the record of his survival. The world is struck with a global viral outbreak which changes people into zombies. The protagonist at first tries to hold out in his house instead of evacuating, which turns out to be a good idea, as the military 'Safe Zones' are quickly overrun by the walking dead. Due to loneliness and lack of resources however, he is soon forced to leave his house and search for a new safe haven. During his travels he comes across other survivors and finds out that even in such dire times, not everyone can be trusted, as sometimes humans are as bad if not worse than the undead that hunt them. In the end, he and a few other survivors manage to get to the Canary Islands, where they think it is safe.

The story may seem simple and similar to many others involving zombies, but it is not the plot itself that is the most important aspect of the novel. It is the way in which the story is told and the protagonist himself – he is no hero, only an ordinary man facing overwhelming odds who does his best to survive using the skills he has. Whereas most tales of this kind have a central character who is a born survivor (or quickly becomes one), here the protagonist is someone who does not even know how to use a firearm, let alone survive in this apocalyptic world. This makes it all the more personal for the readers, as they can more easily relate to him, imagine themselves in the situations he faces and the choices he makes. The manner in which the story was first circulated adds to this in a significant way – as a blog, the reader considers it less as literary fiction and more as an actual account of events (although in the end he or she is aware of its fictional nature, as obviously no such outbreak has occurred in reality). By posting the story at regular intervals of time and by using real background information, the author established credibility – a trait inherent to Creepypastas. This is further strengthened by analyzing the relation between the author and his creation. When researching the story and its author, it becomes evident that he himself is the protagonist (their jobs, age, hobbies, etc. are the same) and the action takes place in locations he knows very well, down to the slightest detail in many instances. This allows him to give his work a sense of reality rarely found in fiction. It is worth mentioning that the novel's popularity inspired two sequels (*Apocalypse Z: Dark Days* and *Apocalypse Z: The Wrath of the Just*) which were also released in print and boosted Loureiro's literary career. This trend of Creepypasta authors becoming recognized writers has become more frequent in recent years.

Due to their nature, one can argue that the best Creepypastas are the ones which make full use of the medium by which they are circulated. By being

anonymous and creating an air of supposed realism, their authors create tales which start to be copy-pasted across the Internet, causing them to become part of a modern-day mythology of sorts, not unlike the tales our predecessors spun in taverns or at campfires. Thus, one can argue that the author receives no recognition and may only be rewarded by his or her own sense of pride in the creation. That is not always the case, however, as some have actually managed to have their works released in print. Whether encouraged by the success of their craft or by being sought out by publishers, these amateur writers were given a chance to try their hand at being professional writers. The most recent example is Jamie Townsend, whose compilation of works entitled *Ghoulies, Ghosties and Other Terrible Terrors* was published in May 2016. He is not the only one, however, since many others have had their works published, either as a complete compilation of a single author's pieces, or as collections containing tales of several authors. These include works such as: *Creepypasta: An Anthology* (edited by R. C. Bowman), *Creepypasta: Black Edition* (authored by Zachary Ryan Davis), *Creepypasta* (collaboration of several authors) and *The Big Book of Creepypasta: Thirty Tales of Terror from the Darkest Corners of the Internet* (anonymous publication) just to name a few. The literary community was not the only one to recognize the potential of Creepypastas, as recently also the cinema began to show interest in this phenomenon. Famed movie director Max Landis has expressed a wish to create a horror anthology series based on the popular "Candle Cove" Creepypasta series. He is not the sole example, as one of the best known names in both horror literature and cinema, Clive Barker, has started working on a webseries entitled "Creepypasta", which covers some of his favorite tales⁸. It is also worth mentioning that many indie horror films of varying length have already been made and are available online. This goes to show that this online literary phenomenon potentially has a bright future in the cinema as well. That is not the end, however, as several video games have also been created (such as the extremely popular "Slenderman") and there is even a comic book series already being made. All this proves just how impactful this phenomenon is and that it definitely will not be falling into obscurity anytime soon.

In conclusion, Creepypasta is a truly unique phenomenon. Not often do we see a literary genre (in this case – horror) evolve into a worldwide fascination. A positive one at that, as it is apparent that it leads people to actually develop their writing skills (the authors constantly receive feedback from users, which helps them improve), while also giving them a chance

⁸ "Are Creepypastas The Next Big Thing For Horror Films?" Medium. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2016.

to be recognized as professional authors and have their works published. The new genre also manages to pull in a new kind of audience and in turn popularize reading amongst a community which was thought to be anti-literary. It also appears to transcend the boundaries of literature itself, by making its way into other media, such as visual novels, video games and the cinema. All in all, Creepypastas are a very interesting and complex phenomenon which definitely deserves attention of academic scholars. The fact that these works are digital does not make them inferior to their printed counterparts and that is a lesson classic-focused critics will hopefully learn. Apparently literature is not dead as many have prophesied – it is simply evolving.

CREEPYPASTA – WSPÓLCZESNY ZWROT W LITERACKIM HORRORZE

Streszczenie

W pierwszej części artykułu, autor wspomina o tym, że Internet często obwiniany jest za malejącą liczbę czytelników. Sprzeciwia się temu argumentowi opisując ‘Creepypasta’ – nowy trend polegający na pisaniu i rozpowszechnianiu w internecie opowiadań różnej długości z gatunku horroru. Dzielą się one na różne podgatunki, zależne od tematów których dotyczą. Ich wpływ na społeczność internetową jest tak duży, że Shira Chess porównała go do folkloru, zaznaczając przy tym, że w związku z metodą rozpowszechniania osiągają zamierzony efekt znacznie szybciej. Dzięki temu, opowiadania tego typu niosą ze sobą coś, czego nie ma ‘standardowy’ horror – wrażenie realizmu, który w znacznym stopniu wzmaga poczucie strachu, co jest przecież celem tego typu literatury. Druga część artykułu analizuje trzy ‘creepypasty’ o różnej długości (“Bad Dreams”, “The Russian Sleep Experiment” i “Apokalipsa Z: Początek Końca”). Celem autora jest pokazanie w jaki sposób teksty te czerpią z bogatej historii literackiego horror (jak np. Mitologia Cthulhu H. P. Lovecrafta) i jak poprzez łączenie klasyki z realizmem tworzą coś zupełnie nowego w tym gatunku. W ostatniej części autor zwraca uwagę na fakt, iż ‘creepypasty’ przyciągają uwagę wydawców – świadczy o tym fakt, iż wielu autorom tego typu tekstów umożliwiono ich opublikowanie. Niektórzy (jak np. Manel Loureiro) osiągnęli nawet sukces komercyjny. Pozostałe media również interesują się tematem ‘creepypasta’, czego efektem jest duża liczba bazujących na nich filmów i gier wideo. Chociaż wiele z nich już się ukazało, tytułów będących w produkcji jest znacznie więcej i zajmują się nimi tak znane postacie jak np. Clive Barker. Autor podsumowuje, że ‘creepypasta’ stanowią wyjątkowy fenomen. Nie tylko obalają argument jakoby Internet wpływał na brak zainteresowania literaturą, ale również przyciągają nową grupę czytelników, dają początkującym autorom możliwość rozwijania swojego warsztatu, a nawet szansę na zostanie zauważonym.