

David B.'s *Epileptic* and the Gothic

In 2005, David Beauchard, published his nonfiction memoir, *Epileptic*. Throughout the story, David B. depicts the struggles and constant change that his family endured after his brother, Jean-Christophe's, diagnosis of epilepsy. This graphic memoir contains vivid and grotesque imagery that gives a visualization into the struggles of Jean-Christophe along with the other members of the family. Jean-Christophe's condition ultimately dominates the rest of his family and ends up controlling nearly every move they make from adolescence to adulthood. David B.'s depiction of his brother's terrible disease, when analyzed using Gothic elements becomes more real and appeals to those who have experienced similar circumstances. Within the panels, David B. includes some of the most studied and used Gothic elements, including Twitchell's study of fear, specifically the difference between terror and horror, Burke's sublime, and characteristics of the monstrous. The use of these elements advance the notion that examining and locating these elements lend to an improved and richer perspective on David B.'s plot and characters. *Epileptic* becomes more than just a memoir about Jean-Christophe's condition and the effect on the rest of the family, but provides readers with a momentary glimpse into the lives of those suffering from a disability or illness like Jean-Christophe. Gothic elements tend to be studied in genres outside of graphic horror, however, breaking down these elements helps readers understand the necessity of studying them in graphic novels outside of horror. This study not only expands the medium of graphic novels by applying a traditional set of concepts to multi-genre works, but also gives a new outlook into the evolving definition of the Gothic.

SLIDE ABOUT FEAR

Gothic works, no matter the medium, contain the element of fear. Often that fear drastically effects characters and their decisions, reactions, and their relationships. Throughout prose-only Gothic novels, fear frequently emerges in the form of the unknown, supernatural, or a more physical element. Authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Bram Stoker master the principle of Gothic fear in their works, ultimately setting the stage for other mediums to adopt this Gothic trope and use in these traditional ways. Fast forward decades, and graphic novels burst on the scene, specifically horror graphic novels like *From Hell*, *The Sandman*, and *Echoes*. The horror genre of graphic novels utilizes the Gothic element of fear similar to their predecessors in the prose-only universe. Obviously, using the Gothic definition, fear encapsulates the individual, stirring up emotion, and causing panic, whether it lasts an extended amount of time or just momentarily. Dani Cavallaro states in her book *The Gothic Vision*, “*The Gothic Vision* maintains that fear is not a sporadic event but an ongoing condition endowed with eminently ambivalent powers” (vii). In the Gothic world, fear remains an important aspect, especially when discussing the differentiation between horror and terror. James B. Twitchell describes fear or horror and terror in his book, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*, as “The fascination of the abomination, the gut-tightening, hair-raising frisson of confronting objects of phobia” (6-7). According to Twitchell, horror affects the senses, usually caused by something more internal, which triggers a longer lasting emotional response. On the other hand, Twitchell argues that terror equates to more external short-lived reactions. “Terror will pass, as in the Reign of Terror or acts of terrorism, but horror will never disappear, no matter how rational we become about it” (Twitchell 16). Twitchell’s words expose the contrast between the two emotional responses of horror and terror. Likewise, this distinction between horror and terror appears in graphic horror novels like *Echoes*, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, and *Through*

the Woods. In *Echoes*, the horror that Brian feels stems directly from his blacking out, forgetfulness, and confusion about the parts of his life he cannot remember. Most of Brian's fearful experiences revolve around his inner turmoil, the horror of his actions, and his father's assumed past. These works encompass the traditional aspects of a graphic horror novel, and analyzing fear, according to Twitchell's definitions, furthers the notion that Gothic elements emerge in the horror genre more blatantly.

Broadening the scope of fear in the Gothic provides a new outlook into the utilization of this element in graphic novels existing outside of the horror genre. David B. employs the same tools regarding fear usually seen in horror graphic novels and prose-only Gothic fiction. The storyline definitely follows the mold of a memoir recounting personal experiences; however, "While *Epileptic's* plot is nonfiction, its manner and style are fabulously, vibrantly, and elaborately figurative" (Baker 1473). David B. uses many metaphorical elements in his work to symbolize other things seen and unseen. A dragon becomes the visual symbol for the epilepsy, and the manner in which he demonstrates the penetrating force of the dragon complements the fantastically illustrated representation. David B. demonstrates many elements of graphic novels and comics and combines them effortlessly with the Gothic.

The horror Pierre-Francois feels takes on several different representations including typhoons and a dragon. The dragon often takes over much of the page and takes Jean-Christophe hostage against his will. Pierre-Francois wants to maintain control of his life, and seeing Jean-Christophe lose control, thanks to the dragon, horrifies him. The dragon, or the epilepsy, is unrelenting. Jean-Christophe becomes known only for his condition. His identity now aligns with his epilepsy, which strikes horror within Pierre-Francois as he watches this slow digression occurring in his brother over the years. Peter Hayward states: "In the eyes of Pierre-Francois,

Jean-Christophe is usurped by his illness – he becomes the *Epileptic* of the book’s title, rather than a brother” (278). The fear or horror of having to surrender to the metaphorical dragon deeply roots itself inside him, and this horrific response never diminishes. Twitchell claims that “Horror has no end, no closure, no conclusion; terror always has an end” (16).

While Pierre-Francois definitely experiences horror deeply and intensely, he also becomes familiar with the feeling of terror. The major example of terror in this work appears when David B. includes the stories and scenes from visiting specialists, doctors, and treatment centers for Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy. David B. illustrates this terror Pierre-Francois feels in highly figurative and unrealistic images. Jean-Christophe’s shaven head is the central focal point in these panels. The specialists working on him are much smaller. The “mad scientists” are riding the probes they use to pump Jean-Christophe’s head of gas, much like the piercing powers of the dragon (40). This panel showcases the figurative genius of David B. He employs many strategies here, the proportions, the elongated panel, and all of the detail. As this story is told from Pierre-Francois’s point-of-view, readers understand the fearful responses he feels when retelling the stories of all the treatments Jean-Christophe went through. All of the physicians, gurus, and specialists that Jean-Christophe sees seem to have a negative effect on Pierre-Francois. He deliberately pictures them as grotesque individuals resembling the man in an earlier scene.

SUBLIME SLIDE

Another key Gothic element is Burke’s study of the sublime, the elements that play into the sublime, and his definition of what the sublime means. His definition of the sublime continues to stand the test of time, and is often referred to in Gothic research:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; (39)

The sublime in essence is the simultaneous repulsion and attraction to an object, person, or event. Applying the Gothic element of the sublime to graphic novels outside of the horror genre, like David B.'s *Epileptic*, allows for new interpretation into the characters, plot, and circumstances revolving around the characters. One of the more obvious examples of the sublime in David B.'s *Epileptic* appears when Jean-Christophe experiences one of his seizures. Charles Acheson discusses that after the first seizure Pierre-Francois "notes a definite change in the neighbors' perception of his brother as the uncontrollable nature of the disorder scares and fascinates their friends" (85). This feeling of fascination and fear lines up exactly with how Burke describes the sublime. Later in the graphic memoir, David B. presents a panel where Jean-Christophe experiences a seizure while he walks by himself. Here, the people in the background behind the oversized Jean-Christophe have looks of horror and awe on their faces. The sublime, in Burke's simplest definition, explains this phenomenon. One man is even seen running away but looking back over his shoulder, echoing Burke's definition of the sublime. The people living in the town and seen in the panel, seem attracted and curious about what Jean-Christophe experiences while also repulsed at the sight of him. The sublime provides a new perspective into the actions of characters and helps explain their actions or reactions to certain situations.

MONSTROUS SLIDE

Most Gothic works throughout history include some form and characteristics of the monster. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* includes monstrous forms like vampires or a scientifically created "other." Many definitions

exist on the monstrous, but Judith Halberstam states in her book, *Skin Shows*, that a monster is “a beast who is all body and no soul” (1). Judith Halberstam describes the traditional characteristics of the monstrous: “Within the traits that make a body monstrous – that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal, or disgusting – we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native” (8). Halberstam’s description of the hideousness and grotesqueness of a body or outward appearance helps when talking about the monstrous in graphic novels by showing that not all monsters appear as ugly on the outside, but some monsters have an ugly or gross interior. Halberstam’s words aide in setting up the argument for the monstrous “other,” the weird, the repulsive, and the abnormal. David B. employs the monstrous in a variety of ways, especially through the characterization of Jean-Christophe. In the beginning of the novel, Pierre-Francois meets Jean-Christophe in the bathroom and barely recognizes him. His features are grotesquely depicted: “There are scars all over his body. His eyebrows are crisscrossed by scabs. / The back of his head is bald from all the times he’s fallen. / He’s enormously bloated from medication and lack of exercise” (David B. 1). This external representation of Jean-Christophe gives readers the external image of the monstrous. Pierre-Francois seems afraid of his brother and views him as a stranger or as the “other.” Another major example of the monstrous occurs near the end of the graphic novel, when Jean-Christophe’s form takes on a gigantic size that literally towers over everyone else in the story. His attitude, words, and stature showcase this feeling of the monstrous, especially in the eyes of his family members. They appear afraid of him and his outburst, which mirrors the way the other characters feel in the novel *Frankenstein*. David B. shades in Jean-Christophe’s face to give him a mysterious persona and one that enables the reader to associate him as dangerous and unhinged. Jean-Christophe’s reaction adds to the fear of the unknown felt by the family. The way David B. illustrates Jean-

Christophe as much larger than everyone else in the panel symbolizes the overpowering that the monstrous usually maintains in the story and on the other characters. In later panels David B. shows Jean-Christophe's super human strength, and how it nearly overpowers the rest of the family. The others try to calm him down, but it takes nearly all of them to tame his monstrous outburst. The words he yells in one panel even fit in his mouth, an interesting tool used by David B. to help show the maniacal way Jean-Christophe flies off the handle during certain episodes. As previously shown, the dragon metaphorically represents Jean-Christophe's epilepsy. David B. shows the dragon jutting out of Jean-Christophe's mouth, and even taking over as the border of the page. This visualization of the dragon helps readers make the connection between it and this parasitic condition that slowly takes over Jean-Christophe from the inside out. This monster attacks Jean-Christophe in his comfort zone, or as Halberstam explains that "The monster, such a narrative suggests, will find you in the intimacy of your own home; indeed, it will make your home its home (or you its home) and alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy" (15). Using Halberstam's words and applying them to Jean-Christophe's condition gives a different meaning into this monstrous side of him. While he obviously does not ask for the epilepsy, he also cannot control the parasitic tendencies it invokes on his life. Characters, including Jean-Christophe, who portray the monstrous do so without consent. The monster dives in and takes control of the subject without receiving permission. Halberstam discusses the unwanted presence: "The monster peeps through the window, enters through the back door, and sits beside you in the parlor..." (15). Halberstam's description of the monster lends to the notion that the monster can appear as something or someone completely normal, much like Jean-Christophe before the seizures take control of him.

CONCLUSION SLIDE

David B.'s *Epileptic*, while written as a graphic memoir, contains many of the Gothic elements usually studied in graphic horror or prose works. Applying concepts of the Gothic including fear, horror and terror, Burke's ideas on the sublime, and the characteristics surrounding the monstrous, allows readers to connect with David B.'s graphic memoir through his complex characters and on a personal level. Analyzing characters in *Epileptic*, especially Pierre-Francois and Jean-Christophe, lends to the assertion that using these Gothic elements allows readers a more in-depth investigation into the reactions, relationships, and situations. Utilizing these elements shows different sides to the main characters, and presents the hidden parts of their personalities. Acheson describes the use of images and words in *Epileptic*: "Beauchard creates an experience that brings readers closer to the traumatic narrative, without ever crossing over in appropriation – a feat possibly only with the combination of visual and linguistic rhetoric" (117). The coexistence of images and words brings Jean-Christophe's condition to life, giving it space to attack, and exhibiting David B.'s unique way of taking something often invisible and molding it as a visible entity. Combining Gothic elements and David B.'s exquisite blending of words and images, delivers a unique closeness to the subject matter and the characters portrayed in the story.