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Lessons from Horror: The Rejection and Failures of Arête

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Abstract

Lessons from Horror explores the rhetorical term of arête in the context of horror and horror literature. Arête, the concept of excellence as used in ancient Greece, is defined and then applied to two horror novels in order to better understand how the path to moral excellence can be corrupted. The first novel, *Carrie* by Stephen King, warns of the influence and pressure of others to both accept and reject the path to excellence. The second novel, *Sour Candy* by Kealan Patrick Burke, explores the idea of fear of failure in arête, and the possibility of turning oneself into a monster.

To explore the rhetorical term of arête and its applications in horror, the idea of rhetoric must be defined. Quoting Covino and Joliffe (1995), “rhetoric is a primarily verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical and gives rise to potentially active texts” (p. 5). In terms of horror stories, this means that the text will use rhetoric as a tool to manipulate the thoughts and emotions of its readers, putting them in a state of mind that is vulnerable to ideas of horror. In the best scenario, rhetoric can be used in writing to either teach the reader or change their perspective of something they are familiar with.

Arête (ἀρετή), in its simplest form, is the concept of excellence and goodness, and it is a concept that changes meaning depending on its subject. Humans, creatures, and even inanimate objects can be described as having arête, albeit with slightly different meanings. The overall idea and purpose of arête has persisted throughout centuries in accordance with mankind’s never-ending desire to achieve excellence, if not perfection. Presently, the term brings to mind images of heroism, purity, and honor. In the times of Ancient Greece, it was mainly used in reference to the heroic deeds of characters such as Odysseus and Achilles, warriors who strived for arête in order to bring honor to their homelands. Therefore, the meaning of arête that best bridges the gap between past and present is the idea of moral virtue.

In Greek, arête is spelled ἀρετή. In its infancy, the word was used to describe anything that had excellence. The term got more complicated as people began to use it to describe virtue, which contained more nebulous meanings such as manliness, valor, reputation, and glory (Liddell & Scott, 1940). Virtue could not exist without its components of kindness, unity, and justice, and therefore, it makes sense that the personified version of arête would have a similar relationship to those things.

The goddess Arete was the sister of Homonoia, the goddess of unity, and the daughter of Praxidike, the goddess of justice. The sisters were known as the Praxidikai, or the Exacters of Justice (Suidas). Her nemesis Kakia was the goddess of vice and sin. In the story of Hercules at the Crossroads, Arete offers Hercules a life of glory in return for vanquishing evil, but Kakia offers the opposite: a life of laziness and unearned excess. Being the hero role model, Hercules chose the former and earned his status of moral excellence and honor, signifying to the audience that moral excellence was worth any sacrifice.

Many influential philosophers had differing opinions on the way *arête* was defined and used. In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, Socrates makes the point that virtue is something that must be sought after and made, not inherited, and that it is impossible to teach virtue. This leads to the idea that each person must go on a personal journey to achieve *arête*. Homer's heroes had a responsibility to be noble and chivalrous, achieving *arête* in service to their homelands. Achilles was taught by Chiron to achieve *arête*, clashing with Socrates' claim that virtue could not be taught. Isocrates brought a helpful perspective to this disparity. In Philip Vassallo's (2004) writings on ancient philosophers and *arête*, he explains that "while he shared Plato's skepticism about the teaching of *arête*, Isocrates hoped that through devotion to the art of rhetoric and lifelong application of its principles, his students would strive toward excellence" (para. 14). This became an influential part of the way students were taught: they would be educated and put in a position where it would be easier to pursue *arête*. This model persisted into the future as it became clear that ignorance would be an obstacle to achieving *arête*.

In accordance with Isocrates' proposal on education, *Arête* was also an important part of the *paideia*, the training of a child to manhood through physical, mental, and spiritual training (Jaeger, 1994, p. 227). In Ancient Greece, the journey to achieve *arête* was undertaken by every

individual and was thus unavoidably personal. However, when does one know when they have achieved arête and become as virtuous as Hercules? Excellence is not quantifiable - the threshold for excellence may change based on the society, but it will always be something to strive towards. Arête represents hope for a better future, a desire for improvement that was defined by the Greeks but is more ancient than any organized civilization. This struggle to achieve excellence can be compared to the concept of nirvana, or the desire for ascension seen in many religions. This stems from the belief that humans begin in a flawed state and must fight their way towards glory and virtue.

Outside of religions, however, there is less of a push to pursue excellence, although everyone still has their own form of arête to follow. Everyday kindnesses are more common than heroic deeds, but both further the moral excellence of an individual. Possibly the most powerful form of arête in the present is love. Love is also goodness; it is another word with a strange definition that depends on the context. Many good deeds could be described as acts of both arête and love, proving that the two concepts at least overlap. To live with love is a different kind of nobility, one that takes just as much effort as a heroic act on the battlefield. It is as valid a definition of arête as any other. There will always be some way for a person to advance their journey towards arête, and therefore, all of humanity is constantly striving for it.

The concept of arête can apply to all mankind. Excellence and perfection of moral virtue in humanity would mean the end of war and poverty. However, as shown in Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of the six stages of moral judgement, there must a progression towards virtue with social incentives guiding every step, which may be disrupted. A steady increase in awareness of sociomoral values is necessary to reach the final stage, which is the following of universal ethical principles (Colby et al., 1983, pp. 3-4). The moral development of humanity

through laws which adhere to these universal ethical principles has opened the way for many more to attempt their journey towards excellence.

What many do not realize, however, is that the journey to *arête* can be treacherous. There is no lower boundary for morality. There is no limit to the horrific acts that humanity can commit. Although it may be difficult to reach personal moral excellence, it is much easier to fall the same distance one climbs on the moral ladder. There are several reasons for this; they are the catalysts for horror and are seen in the horror story examples of this essay.

The term horror, alone, is an act or idea of depravity, fear, and revulsion, used to describe horrific tragedies and other things that are almost incomprehensibly terrifying. In terms of art, horror is used in the work to elicit that feeling of revulsion from the audience. In *The Nature of Horror*, Carroll (2018) explains that “art-horror has built into it, so to speak, a set of instructions about the appropriate way the audience is to respond to it” (p. 33). When a monster appears in a work of horror, the characters in that work will most likely cry out in fear or do something similar, making the audience feel that same fear.

Horror often explores how the pursuit of moral excellence goes wrong. The following horror stories, *Carrie* by Stephen King and *Sour Candy* by Kealan Patrick Burke, both contain different examples of the catalysts for horror and loss of morality. The main characters in both stories give in to malice, the opposition of *arête*, for several reasons. The two stories explore situations and characters that not only are devoid of *arête*, but actively work to destroy it. One purpose of horror is to serve as a warning of what one should not do, and what effects the wrong choices can have on oneself and others. Similar to the horror story in this regard is the religious idea of damnation for one’s sins, often explained in stories that warn readers of falling to darkness.

Additionally, a horrifying lack of moral excellence is used effectively in horror stories that feature ruthless killers. Horror exists when characters do not have the moral virtue to match the power they have over others, leading to an abuse of that power and the eventual creation of a monster devoid of morality. In the books that will be examined, the specific act of becoming a monster is important – it demonstrates how the failure to follow arête can make anyone capable of horrific acts. None are exempt from this rule, a fact that itself is a source of horror. Horror stories in the past have focused on the possibility that “anyone could be struck with criminality at any moment should God momentarily withdraw His sustaining grace and permit people to act upon their universally intrinsic nature” (Haltunnen, 1998, p. 32).

Carrie is the story of a girl with two major stresses: the students at school who all bully her, and her extremely religious mother who pressures her to be sinless, all while she is still learning about her telekinetic powers. Throughout the course of the book, Carrie’s life slowly spirals out of her control, until she finally breaks and unleashes the full strength of her power in retaliation, creating a scene of horror which kills almost every character, including Carrie and her mother.

Throughout the story, Carrie’s mother, and Carrie herself to some extent, were constantly struggling with the pursuit of moral excellence. Although Carrie’s mother wants them both to be better people, her violent methods only serve to anger and provoke Carrie. When Carrie’s mother punishes Carrie for beginning menstruation, Carrie responds by saying ““I didn’t sin Momma. *You* sinned. You didn’t tell me and they laughed”” (King, 1999, p. 65). This shows that by twisting the pursuit of moral excellence into inexplicably cruel punishment, Carrie’s mother not only distanced Carrie from her goal, but herself as well. Though Carrie’s mother, influenced by religion, wanted Carrie to be perfect, she instead drove her down into an insecure, volatile state.

This made Carrie distrust and hate God, the role model of moral excellence, who was used in an act of horror by her mother to push Carrie down even further: “God had turned His face away, and why not? This horror was as much His doing as hers” (p. 237).

Carrie relates to *arête* by showing how people can influence each other negatively on their journey to *arête*. Everyone in school was feeding off of each other’s bad influences, an endless cycle of depravity that stopped anyone from pursuing morality and instead led to all of their hatred and anger being directed towards Carrie. No students were innocent, as shown in the testimony of Norma Watson: “We couldn’t help it. It was one of those things where you laugh or go crazy. Carrie had been the butt of every joke for so long, and we all felt that we were part of something special that night” (p. 200). Encouragement and peer pressure forced characters who initially tried to follow *arête* to abandon their journey altogether. For instance, the character Chris was the one to pull the rope that showered Carrie in pig’s blood, something she normally wouldn’t have done if Billy wasn’t next to her, egging her on by saying “I won’t pull it for you babe. We can sit here till hell freezes” (p. 195).

Despite the actions of the students not being the main source of horror in *Carrie*, they were the cause of Carrie’s decline, and so couldn’t be defined as innocent or monstrous – they were somewhere in between. This is most clearly seen in the thoughts of Norma Watson, who mentions that “this other thought crept in, and it was as if it wasn’t my own at all. I was thinking about Carrie. And about God. It was all twisted up together, and it was awful” (p. 202). The true monster of the story would be Carrie herself. Carrie’s transformation into a monster happened because she lost all faith in *arête*; thanks to her mother she believed she would never get it right, and she also viewed everyone else as evil because they laughed at her. Carrie’s control over her own emotions failed, making her blind to morality and turning her into a monster. She even saw

the face of Miss Desjardin, who had previously sympathized with her, as “filled with lying compassion. Carrie could see beneath the surface to where the real Miss Desjardin was giggling and chuckling with rancid old-maid ribaldry” (p. 216).

Carrie warns of two different failures in the journey to arête. One was a misguided attempt: the pressure by her mother to be perfect, often coupled with physical and verbal abuse that damaged Carrie’s sense of identity and self-worth, which was already fragile. The second was the reciprocation of malice in the form of peer pressure to not only bully Carrie, but enjoy doing it, leading to everyone laughing when she was drenched in pig’s blood. The two problems combined to enable Carrie to reject morality and finally unleash her power upon both the guilty and the innocent.

Sour Candy is similar to *Carrie* in its use of horror to warn about the journey to arête. However, its warnings are slightly different, as the story makes the reader question whether the pursuit of arête can be trusted. The main character, Phil, begins the story with a problem that represents his overall attitude towards arête: His girlfriend wants a child, and although he refuses her, he also feels guilty. He will not make the sacrifice of pursuing arête, but his guilt means he is not comfortable without it. To his horror, the decision is made for him: a child inserts itself into his life, and throughout the story, the child becomes more and more parasitic, until it is revealed that it is a demon leeching off of Phil in order to have offspring.

The focus is now on Phil’s behavior with the child, since the child is ineligible for arête. If arête is the pursuit of moral excellence, it only applies to those who understand or once understood morality, and since the child is a creature with no concept of arête, it cannot truly be evil. It is only completing the necessary functions for its parasitic species to survive, with no malicious intent shown.

Once he receives the child, Phil's character develops along with it, albeit not voluntarily. At first, he tolerates the child and goes along with his needs, but his pursuit of *arête* only hurts him. The child forces him to eat sour candy, making his body and mind rot. Phil begins to lose hope, "because despite the torture he'd been put through, the pain and loss he did not believe he had done anything to deserve, he had tried to be a decent person, tried to stay within the confines of morality. And all it had gotten him was more suffering" (Burke, 2015, p. 48). This is where Phil asks himself if the pursuit of moral excellence is worth the pain of injustice.

The torment of Phil and his distrust of *arête* culminates in him becoming a monster to himself, for in a moment of moral weakness and need for survival, he uses the only power he has left to kill the child. Although the child was a monster itself, Phil immediately regrets the deed – "had *he* been the monster and the poor child his victim?" (p. 55) – showing that the demon has successfully tricked him into believing it was just an innocent child, and he was the monster all along. However, apart from the demon's trickery, Phil's decision to kill a child he thought was innocent would make him a monster regardless, since he had abandoned the sacrifice of *arête* in search of an easier option, which was to kill the child whether it was innocent or not. It is revealed that killing the child destroyed one monster but created another one inside him: a demon named Mora, planned by the other demons from the start. The book ends with Phil's last contribution: the birth of another demon child, a monster without any morals, his greatest fear.

Carrie and *Sour Candy* both teach that through several acts of horror, the pursuit of *arête* can fail, and make things worse instead of better. The abuse of power over the innocent always leads to acts of horror. Carrie had power and abused it when she lost her innocence and her faith that *arête* existed. The other students exercised emotional power to torment Carrie, deflecting *arête* through peer pressure. In *Sour Candy*, the demons have all the power, but no sense of

morality, making them parasitic monsters. Finally, Phil abused the only power he had to kill what he still believed was a regular child, making him a monster to himself.

Horror happens when the pursuit of morality is disrupted, making every character fall to malice. It is strengthened by vicious circles of hatred, such as the students against Carrie or Phil's battle with the demon. Every one of these characters perpetuated the horror, creating the perfect horrific situation. If even one of them had decided to follow arête, the creation of the monsters would have been more difficult, such as Carrie's mother deciding to help her or Phil refraining from murdering the child and never completing the demon's ritual.

Horror takes away the audience's sense of comfort and serves as a reminder that things can go horribly wrong at any time. Any person is capable of committing horrible acts or causing moments of horror. It takes a combination of stresses to break a person away from their path to arête, creating a monster that has forsaken morality. These stories teach the audience that the pursuit of personal excellence is not only encouraged, but mandatory to avoid creating monsters, whether they are within a person or created as a consequence of their misdeeds. In the end, if nobody stays on their path to excellence, nobody will win. Carrie, the students, Phil – they all failed in the crucial tests of their moral fortitude and they paid for it. Every person must follow arête or face the consequences – but keep in mind that the journey itself may be harder than it seems.

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