

# Joe Hill and Game Rodriguez's *Locke & Key* (2008-2013) - Horror Comics.

## Spaces of Horror in *Locke and Key* – Horror and Comics

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Horror as a literary and cinematic genre revolves around the shocking, grotesque and obscene. It sits in counterpoint to other forms of Gothic such as terror: defined by Radcliffe as the threatening, obscured and unknown. Many past horror comics combine these two strategies, moving from unseen threat to shocking reveal (EC, Warren) and contemporary works also range between these two poles, from the explicit and violent (*Crossed*) to the implicit and psychological (*Adamtine*). Both types of fear are well suited to the comics medium, whose stylised art and staccato panels enable grotesque images and horrifying reveals. The medium also exploits terror's imaginative potential as events can be hidden between panels and the reader must also interpret the shown content.

Critical interpretations of horror and Gothic have often applied psychoanalysis (Schneider 2001). In such readings the spaces of horror blur the psychological and physical. Settings are both iconographic and symbolic and often stand as metaphors for the text's themes or characters. Dr Frankenstein has his 'workshop of filthy creation'. Castle Dracula is isolated, foreign and mysterious – full of long passageways and closed doors. Buffalo Bill has a secret, feminine sewing room. Eleanor 'come[s] home' to Hill House, Mrs Rochester has her attic (referencing concealment and mental disturbance), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's narrator has her yellow wallpaper, its 'bars' a symbol of her imprisonment. Each of these spaces represents and reinforces the character's mental state and the text's themes.

This chapter explores how Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez's *Locke and Key* (IDW, 2008-2013) uses space to construct horror and to reflect on its psychological interpretation. It first examines the comic's spectral and uncanny qualities, which are created by markers from cinematic and literary horror such as serial killers, possession, and transformation. I then look more closely at spatial tropes such as the abyss and the haunted house. I argue that, despite numerous literary markers, *Locke and Key* privileges physical

places and literal meaning over symbolic or metaphorical interpretations. The comic responds to closed psychoanalytic approaches with intertextual citations and by literalising horror symbols and their psychoanalytic meanings into physical, spatial forms.

*Locke and Key* is about the three Locke children, Tyler, Kinsey and Bode, who move to their ancestral home, Keyhouse, after their father's murder. They discover that Keyhouse's doors offer a range of powers when they are unlocked with special keys. These include transformation of various types (animal, gender, ethnicity, size, and even corporeality), healing, control over shadows and animals, and so forth. The keys have been made from a substance called 'whisp'ring iron' by various Locke generations since the eighteenth century. This iron is the physical form of demons that have tried to enter our realm through a portal called the Black Door without being able to attach to a human soul. Soon the siblings are engaged in a war to prevent the Black Door from being opened by Dodge, a possessed character who was once their father's friend.

*Locke and Key* initially marks itself as horror by including visual motifs from horror cinema. In Volume 1 Sam and Tyler's fight is shown in heavily shadowed images, arranged as jumbled snapshots on an otherwise black page, representing the intermittent flashes of light from Sam's gunshots (1.25-26)<sup>1</sup>. This draws on established visual tropes noted by Stephen King (1982: 216) in films such as *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Birds*, where a 'strobe' effect arises from the use of limited light from a single source, creating 'a nightmare dreamscape of shifting, swinging shadows'. The effect is repeated later in the same volume (1.108-9) when Bode converses with Dodge while flicking a flashlight on and off.

Other sub-genres of cinematic horror are also referenced. The story opens with a home invasion that ends in Rendell Locke's murder by student Sam Lesser, referencing classic horror movies such as *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *When a Stranger Calls* (1979). Nina Locke kills Sam's accomplice with his own hatchet in a splash page that evokes the rape-revenge genre – her torn clothes and scratched body recalling the publicity images from *I Spit on*

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<sup>1</sup> These references refer to Volume 1, pp25-26.

*Your Grave* (1978). The comic is also scattered with visual and verbal references to other horror subgenres and titles. Dodge climbs out of the well in a scene reminiscent of *Ringu's* notorious television incident (Figure 1), and archetypes such as vampires (4.9) and werewolves (4.16) are cited. Visual cinematic effects also appear at other points, for example where focus is used to show the foreground and background of a scene in turn (5.28).



Figure 1. Intertextual references. *Locke and Key: Welcome to Lovecraft*, Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez, 2011 (1.110). © IDW. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

Wolfreys (643) claims that 'Literature is citation. Literature is spectral' and so these intertextual markers can also be read as a kind of spectrality, where other texts haunt the one we read. Alongside these nods to horror cinema tropes, *Locke and Key* situates itself as literary horror in paratextual and intertextual terms. Its author Joe Hill is Stephen King's son, and dedicates Book 5 'To Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman', two of the most writerly names in comics. Literary namechecks also abound within the story: from the town Lovecraft to the family's 'Uncle Machen' (6.163). The comic's structure is also self-consciously literary as the opening issues of the first volume are focalised through each main character in turn: Ty, Bode, Kinsey, and antagonist Sam.

Echoes of the literary Gothic are also apparent in its paratexts, which include 'The Known Keys': extracts from the diaries and correspondence of generations of the Lockes, drawn as aged scraps of paper.

At first glance, the story's content also seems to privilege the literary by using traditional horror symbols and metaphors. For example, much is made of the uncanny potential of shadows, reflections and mirrors. Kinsey speaks about not recognising her own image (1.62, 1.81) and all the children spend a deal of time staring at their reflections. The medium emphasises this through repetition and page layout, for example as Tyler imagines different versions of himself (1.10). Mirrors have special power: they can show the real rather than an illusion, for example Dodge's reflection as a decaying corpse (1.59). Mirrored page layouts (1.125) and panels pairing or doubling characters are also used to underline this (6.147). Other traditional horror tropes are also present. Possession and transformation underpin the story as characters use the Animal Key, the Skin Key, or the Gender Key to change their appearance. The visual aspects of the comics medium are well-suited to this and layout is also used for emphasis: the first time Tyler uses the Giant Key the panels become splash pages, changing size to echo his enormous stature (3.96-110).

Horror has often lurked in the darkness: its 'ghosts come alive in the shadows' (Brown 2005: 161). In Volume 3 the children find a crown that allows control of shadows. This is expressed particularly well by the comics medium where a menacing shadow within a panel requires the reader to search for it (1.112) rather than being alerted by movement or extratextual signs. The visuality of the medium also privileges shadows at various points,

bringing in another marker of horror, the eyes. Injured and injurious eyes are a common motif to both horror and comics (Waller 1986, Round 2014). At many points characters (particularly Tyler) are drawn with cavernous or shadowed eyes (Figure 2, also 1.76, 1.96, 1.99, 4.75), and eyes also mark the Black Door, transforming from stone carvings to alert, open and yellow as it opens (Figure 2, also 5.27, 5.102). When Dodge surveys the house using the Philosophoscope Key his eyes appear as ghostly red images (4.90).



Figure 2. Injured and injurious eyes. *Locke and Key: Clockworks*, Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez, 2012 (5.22). © IDW. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

Freud argues that the uncanny not only relates to doubles, doppelgangers and reflections, but also to the involuntary repetition of acts. *Locke and Key* often repeats panel compositions within scenes, creating an uncanny atmosphere. Each issue contains an average of three sequences where the same image is repeated across three panels or more.<sup>2</sup> These sequences often continue for pages at a time, privileging the physical space of the story by representing the locations as static and unchanging places

<sup>2</sup> Based on random sampling of ten issues.

within which time passes (2.113, 2.29). The technique is used particularly in scenes of death and sadness. For example at their father's funeral (1.13-15) a layout of the same long thin horizontal panels repeats across two pages as various family members comfort Tyler. Another double page sequence of repeated panels follows when Bode demonstrates his use of the Ghost Key to Kinsey (1.70-71).

Freud also notes the uncanny potential of womb phantasies and haunted houses (Creed: 53) and so spaces such as the abyss and the haunted house are of particular interest. The abyss 'inspires anxiety, terror and awe' and exists as a pole of both attraction and repulsion to characters, 'embodying an ambiguity that is central to the Gothic' (Edwards: 4). The Well-House and the Drowning Cave (location of the Black Door) are both examples of the abyss and the site of significant story events, as the catalyst for the tale is when Bode releases Dodge from the well.

The Drowning Cave in particular is a good example of symbolic horror. Creed (27) argues that the horror film is an ideological project of patriarchy, and so a common image of horror is 'the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole'. This is the site of the archaic mother, representing 'the blackness of extinction – death' (28). It evokes the desire for non-differentiation; to return to the womb, described as 'the desire to merge' which then 'gives rise to a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego [...] the obliteration of self' (28). This is apt as the demons that come through the Black Door have this same purpose: to merge with a human soul and consume its identity.

Critics also argue that the haunted house is a symbol of the uncanny in horror. Doane argues that the house 'becomes the analogue of the human

body' (1987: 72) and Creed reads it as another space where identity can collapse and the womb may be symbolised. Haunted houses contain cruel secrets and have witnessed terrible deeds (Creed 55) and thus are symbolic spaces where three primal scenes (conception, sexual difference, desire) are played out. Superficially this seems to apply to Keyhouse, as Sam Lesser's ghost tells Rufus: 'This may look like an old house, but [...] It's a battlefield. The fighting has claimed many lives' (4.84). The children and other characters also reflect on Keyhouse's haunted qualities, for example musing 'Nice place... For a medieval torture chamber' (1.99, also 5.46). But in actual fact, although the house *is* the site of many battles, it is not in itself uncanny. In *Locke and Key* it is the Lockes' old home in San Francisco that is the site of murder and rape. Dodge's malevolent spirit is relegated outside Keyhouse, to the Well-House. Kinsey's awakening sexuality and relationship with Jamal begins in the Drowning Cave. Instead Keyhouse is a place where the children can literally unlock and examine their memories (using the Head Key) and heal themselves (with the Mending Key).

The temptation in psychoanalytic readings of horror is to hone in on the metaphorical import of motifs like these. Punter suggests that metaphor creates the uncanny: 'saying both more and less than it knows' (2007: 8). *Locke and Key's* themes and symbols all point towards a reading of the comic as a symbolic horror based around uncanny doubling and haunted caverns – nicely woven, but nothing new. However, new approaches to contemporary horror and Gothic argue against closed psychoanalytic readings like these, suggesting instead that this literature exists in an intertextual space and thus

offers many possible interpretations and subject positions to its constructed reader (Buckley 2018).

*Locke and Key* enacts this revisionist approach to horror by undermining psychoanalytic readings, for example by using phrases that sound metaphorical but are actually literal. When Nina says 'I swear the locks in this house have minds of their own' (1.112) she is more right than she knows – the whisp'ring iron keys have both agency and power. When Kinsey realises 'Ideas can't really be killed. Not for good' (5.40) she isn't speaking in the abstract but is referring to her memories and emotions that exist as tiny anthropomorphised characters and live on despite drowning. When Dodge claims 'Your father [...] unlocked my thoughts and took my memories' he is, again, speaking literally (1.139) – the Head Key allows for things to be put in and taken out of people's heads.

This literalisation creates a metatextual commentary on the use of metaphor in horror that relies primarily on the use of space. Taken as a whole, *Locke and Key* is a story about psychological healing: a 'resolving' horror of the type identified by Jancovich (1992). It reverses and rejects literary metaphor by literalising the abstract processes of psychoanalysis. Doors are opened and memories are removed and put back again. Tyler literally locks up his negative emotions and memories in his head (5.43), but this type of repression is not the answer. After she has removed her Fear and Tears, Kinsey injures herself (2.99), nearly kills her friends in the Drowning Cave (3.36-51), and disastrously places her trust in Dodge without a second thought – unable to hear her Fear warning her: 'You need me! [...] He's daaaanger!' (2.115)). The 'key to being a complete person' is not just

believing in oneself (1.80), but literally exists and can be used to return a person's personality and memories (6.176).

The trajectory of the story depends on this manipulation of the spiritual and physical, which transform into each other throughout the text. Demons turn into iron and characters' emotions take on tangible, physical form. At the story's close Dodge attempts to describe 'the place spirits go':

You ever find a cat sleeping in a ray of sun?  
There's a *sound* over there. It's a *golden* sound. That's the only way to describe it. It's a *bright* sound, and it has little flecks of music in it, drifting like motes of dust.  
(6.172-3)

Here the visual becomes the audible, just as throughout the text the abstract has become the physical. Traditionally, critics have argued that 'horror uses image and metaphor to embody what we fear' (Wisker 38). But rather than using symbolism, *Locke and Key* makes horror metaphors and clichés into literalisations that form the basis for its fantastic plot: a strategy particularly suited to the visual medium of comics.