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**THE GOTHIC HORROR TRADITION AND RELIGIOUS SANCTITY: TERROR
AND FAITH IN *MIDNIGHT MASS* (2021)**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the English Department

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Kearney

By

Kalen Krantz

April 2024

Acknowledgements & Dedications

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English degree, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Supervisory Committee

Name	Department
<i>Theodora Ziolkowski</i>	English
<i>Annarose Steinke</i>	English
<i>Gregory Brown</i>	Kinesiology and Sport Sciences

Rebecca Umland

Supervisory Committee Chair

04/24/2024 | 09:34 CDT

Date

Abstract

Writer/director Mike Flanagan's titular serial-television series, *Midnight Mass* (2021) created both critical controversy and acclaim. The television series, which aired on Netflix, employs elements of the Gothic tradition found in both literature and its later development in the film medium, especially that of the Gothic's subgenre, horror, but its popularity is also reliant upon its originality, this resting largely on its combination of the horror genre with religious questions—ideas of the holy. Through a study of this series' thematic and formal features, I show the vitality of the Gothic tradition by identifying elements in *Midnight Mass* that are either recognizably part of the Gothic Horror genre or are present in a displaced manner (setting, for instance). Following a discussion of what makes Flanagan's work traditional, I turn to its innovations, some of them in content, but also in the particular medium of the television mini-series—the demands of this venue and audience expectations created through this form of filmmaking. I argue that this Flanagan's reliance on the Gothic tradition, balanced by his own originality as a writer/director, is the reason for the critical and popular attention it garnered. Questions related to religious belief and ideas of the holy are especially what distinguishes this mini-series from many other Gothic Horror works. *Midnight Mass* (2021) has not been widely written about by academics, although the Gothic horror in literature and film has a long tradition of critical inquiry. Moreover, the religious dimension of Flanagan's mini-series fits within a well-established branch of criticism. My thesis adds to this discourse through its study of *Midnight Mass* (2021).

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Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Gothic in Literature and Film

Kalen Krantz

My thesis focuses on a miniseries that employs the Gothic horror tradition and the religious film. This opening chapter will touch briefly on the rise of the Gothic tradition in literature and its transition to the film medium in the early decades of the twentieth century. Not intended as a comprehensive discussion of every literary work from its inception to the present day, this introductory chapter identifies a few features that will have direct bearing on my discussion of *Midnight Mass* (2022), one of those being the vampiric nature. There are religious undertones present, especially in early Gothic works. This can be explained primarily by the typical setting in the Middle Ages and often featuring an important part the Catholic Church plays in shaping beliefs of that time. For example, the medieval Catholicism in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is explained by the device of the found object which dates its manuscript to that earlier era. In addition, the characters ascribe to Roman Catholic ideas of marriage, sin, and inheritance. Manfred, the villain, is preoccupied with inheritance and eventually atonement for his sin and his wife's piety and obedience can also be explained by her religious tenets. Matthew Lewis's novel, *The Monk* (1796) features a monastic setting and a corrupt monk, the villain of the novel. However, by the time Mary Shelley moved the Gothic formula ahead with her innovations, in *Frankenstein* (1818), religion plays no major part having been replaced largely by science. The decreasing importance of religion as a prominent feature in the Gothic tradition can be seen as the nineteenth century progressed so that by the time Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his urban-Gothic Horror novella in 1886, organized religion plays virtually no role at all. Characters such as Theodore fit the spiritual

Christian mode, as opposed to Manfred who violates Christian ideals through lust and murder. These undertones have been present since the inception of the Gothic and have become staples of the genre.

The Gothic Revival that flourished in the second half of the 18th century featured an interest in antiquarianism, and a new admiration for the medieval Gothic style in art and architecture. The Gothic novel began with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. According to its author, the genesis of this novel was a vision that occurred at his now-famous residence, Strawberry Hill House, a recreation of a medieval castle. Walpole claims that, after this vision of a gigantic hand in armor that appeared on his staircase, he conceived of the story and wrote obsessively until it was completed. It was unlike any literary work; in the preface, he explains what he was attempting to do in fusing two genres:

“It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance—the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. . . . The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions” (“Preface to the Second Edition”).

This quote shows us Walpole’s ambition to return to medieval romance as an inventive principle (one where “imagination” and “fancy” were given free reign) while at the same time accommodating more recent literary tastes by creating characters true to “nature” and who follow the “rules of probability,” in their thought and speech. What resulted was an entirely new form and genre.



Fig. 1 (Left): The Strawberry Hill House Staircase which was owned by Horace Walpole and served as inspiration for his Gothic novel. “The Gallery at Strawberry Hill House - Picture of Strawberry Hill House & Garden, Twickenham - Tripadvisor.” www.tripadvisor.com, www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g528819-d2331558-i483623159-Strawberry_Hill_House_Garden-Twickenham_Richmond_upon_Thames_Greater_Lon.html. Accessed 24 Aug. 2023.

Fig. 2 (Right): The title page for the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, which features the fictional manuscript and translator. (Public Domain).

Walpole was uncertain about how it would be received by the public, so he first sent it to a circle of friends, among them poet Thomas Gray, who wrote: “some of them cry a little, and all in general afraid to go to bed o’ nights” (Walpole 2). The novel was then released to the public, but anonymously, under the pseudographic guise of a “found object” from the Middle Ages by one William Marshal, Esquire, the translator of the manuscript with Walpole as the editor. Only in ensuing editions did Walpole claim it.

From Walpole's titular classic, *Castle of Otranto* (1764), readers immediately became enamored by the conundrum that the Gothic had placed in front of them. A revolt against the ideas and thoughts of the Enlightenment period, the Gothic set out to retrieve an earlier time period's eminence. In her study, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (1995) critic Maggie Kilgour states, "Like Romanticism, the Gothic is especially a revolt against a mechanistic or atomistic view of the world and relations, in favor of recovering an earlier organic model" (Kilgour 11). As mentioned earlier, *The Castle of Otranto's* originating Gothic features consist of the castle, the villain, the paranormal, the repressed, and the abdication of false authority. From the helmet of a living castle crushing the next illegitimate heir to the throne to the usurping of the crown by the rightful heir, this novel set the stage for what would and could eventually come from the Gothic genre. The environment, the repressed, the abdication of authority (even the divine), and the paranormal all converge between Flanagan's series and Walpole's novel. Character development is another key, and integral, part of Walpole's Gothic formula created through *The Castle of Otranto*. Kilgore articulates this when speaking on Walpole's impact on the Gothic as she states, "... it was both sheer self-indulgence, an expression of nothing but his own eccentric individuality, a rebellion against modern conventions and expectations, *including individuality*" (Kilgour 23). What Kilgour understands is the portrayal of character has a decided effect on how the audience perceives the audience. How characters are portrayed in a literary work is paramount to how the audience perceives said characters. Walpole in making his characters not very individualistic, and seemingly very role-oriented allows for the Gothic to become formulaic. Characters

become typologies: ‘the wise man’ and ‘the villain’ and finally possibly ‘the damsel in distress’. By having characters that fit specific, repeated molds, characters can continually achieve popular objectives that have worked in the past previously.

The creation of this genre occurred because, as Walpole claims in the quote above, he was fusing two kinds of romance, “the ancient and the modern,” the fantastic and imaginative and that of realism. Features that are now familiar to readers include a quasi-medieval setting, secret chambers and hidden trap doors, the presence of the supernatural and a lurking “secret” that threatens to push up from the repressed past. The Gothic villain, usually one with incestuous designs on a passive heroine, is usually foiled by a one-dimensional Gothic hero. Expanding literacies that contributed to the rise of the novel combined with the Gothic Revival helped increase the popularity of the Gothic novel. As Kilgour states, “Recent historical studies have positioned the genre more specifically about the rise of the middle class and the novel proper, with which that class has been identified... its development is one of rapid rise and fall, which occurs roughly between 1760 and 1820” (3). The establishment of the genre led to the continuation of the formula which became standard accompaniments for later Gothic/Horror literary works, though altered to accommodate changing audience tastes and, as we will see, new media—the stage and eventually the screen. For instance, we detect innovations introduced in Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. *Frankenstein*, the archetypal horror figure of the mad scientist appears with the character of Victor Frankenstein, and along with this, the tendency to build social criticism into the genre: Shelley is particularly interested in how science and ethics are often at odds.

Shelley's novel was not an immediate success, but survived through stage adaptations, and then through cinema. Although these new media changed the Gothic formula, it remained a popular genre that evolved in literary works and later media. As Kilgour observes in her 1995 study:

“One of the factors that makes the Gothic so shadowy and nebulous a genre, so difficult to define as any Gothic ghost, is that it cannot be seen in abstraction from the other literary forms from whose grave it arises, or from its later descendants who survive after its demise, such as the detective novel and the horror movie. It feeds upon and mixes the wide range of literary sources out of which it emerges and from which it never fully disentangles itself . . .” (3-4).

The two genres Kilgour alludes to, the detective novel and the horror movie, show traces of the Gothic. In cinema, this is evident in the film noir style with its reliance on shadows, an underworld, and often the figure of ‘Mister Big’ from German Expressionism. Through the writings of Raymond Chandler, in a recognizable Noir world, that the Gothic influenced in a later film genre. Horror itself continued in both literature and film developing to cater to audience taste. The Gothic bifurcated, spreading out in different but related directions, as Kilgour maintains, making it a complex genre to define. The detective novel may include certain Gothic elements, in particular the “secret” or mystery to be solved, while horror focuses on the monstrosity often connected with the villain.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) offers a more complex portrayal of the Gothic villain. In her creation of Victor Frankenstein, Shelley provides us with the first

“mad scientist,” an archetype that becomes fixed in later literary and film works. Moreover, the novel introduces the Gothic hero and the Gothic villain as doppelganger figures, doubles, thus blurring the boundaries of good and evil, and thus asking questions of a larger moral and social nature than the earlier formulaic genre. The familial bond present between Dr. Frankenstein and his monster is comparable to that of a father and his son. Although the setting shifts constantly, the watchful eye of the monster over his creator does not change. Being both the cheater of death and the creator of life, Dr. Frankenstein’s tenacity pushes him to want to break the very first rule of life: death. Dr. Frankenstein’s tenacity and ignorance become evident when he states, “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Fairclough 314). Dr. Frankenstein’s naive personality becomes evident through his speech, his position in society has given him the idea that these ‘archaic’ rules are meant to be exceeded or broken. Unlike Walpole’s famous villain Manfred, Dr. Frankenstein is ambivalent towards his own prior actions and has difficulty, until it is too late, seeing his way to a future resolution. Dr. Frankenstein comes across as more sympathetic than previous Gothic villains, and shares this role with his creation who is, after all, a serial killer. Shelley wants us to think about actions and their consequences, about extenuating circumstances and how they may impact heroism and villainy.

Breaking the molds of previous Gothic villains, John William Polidori’s short narrative, *The Vampyre* (1819), was a result of the same ghost story contest that served as the inception of Shelley’s novel. Polidori based it on the tale Lord Byron recounted at the

Villa Diodati and this work, though less famous than Frankenstein, it also contributed to the portrayal of the vampire figure as it developed in popular culture. The ruthless vampire villain of the story, Lord Ruthven, shares several prominent features of the vampire: the ability to enact chaos anywhere he is, the ability to allure, and the desire to feast on the blood of young attractive women. When discussing the success of Polidori's work, James B. Twitchell, in his 1981 book, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, states, "Polidori's work set off a chain reaction that has carried the myth both to heights of artistic psychomachia and to depths of sadistic vulgarity, making the vampire... the most compelling and complex figure to be produced in Gothic imagination" (Twitchell 103). From all the features, Lord Ruthven creates havoc in all the places he visits and gambles under the careful eye of Aubrey who slowly picks up on Lord Ruthven's tendencies. Lord Ruthven's stranglehold he has on anywhere he goes accentuates the vampire's charismatic appeal, one often associated with an erotic impulse, an appetite for human blood or sex. As the author states in his short story, "They described it as the resort of the vampyres in their nocturnal orgies" (Polidori). For as much as Lord Ruthven must feed, it also seems that he gets satisfaction from corrupting young women and ruining their lives. Vampirism is not a horrifying disease, but rather a psychological phenomenon as Lord Ruthven also looks to steal the young woman's social status, relationships, and fortune alongside their blood. Lord Ruthven's tenure as a vampire also brings about another distinctive feature that would not be reversed until *Nosferatu* (1922): the ability to be outside during daytime in the sun. Although this may seem insignificant, the vampire's ability to roam in the sunlight is a feature that was later

slashed in favor of a more nocturnal predator. Another Gothic story that features this element is *Carmilla* (1872) which was written by Sheridan Le Fanu. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Polidori's *The Vampyre*, the impact of *Carmilla* is seen not only through its literary popularity but also through many screen adaptations.

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) does not deviate from the likes of *The Vampyre* (1819) in terms of the 'rules' of the vampire that we have become familiarized with: the vampire can prance in the daylight, *must* feed off the blood of the young beautiful women, and is capable of causing chaos on a community-wide scale in terms of their reach. As is evident, *Carmilla* attacks more than Laura's family and makes the whole community feel the wraith of the vampire. It takes the community coming together, finding the vampire's coffin, and driving a stake through the heart of the vampire. The vampire's main weakness in this state comes from being asleep, with eyes wide open, inside of the coffin during certain hours which are typically in the early day. As the novel displays, the vampire can either become attached to their prey and slowly feed off them, or simply finish them off in one feeding depending on the allure of the victim. Laura is victimized slowly, through a host of nightmarish dreams that invade her bedroom and feed on her in the night. The vampire is shown to have the ability to transcend dreams, locked doors, and reality as Laura must fend off the trauma caused by *Carmilla* for the rest of her life. The vampire's touch is permanent, as Laura has constant trauma from *Carmilla* even after the stake is pushed through her heart. The vampire comes to represent the things that *can* touch us while we sleep, the immoral nature of the antagonist who can and will find you. Like the immoral nature of the antagonist, and their

pursuit of innocence, this same element can be seen in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde features a plethora of features and elements that have their respective histories in the Gothic while also finding new ways to branch forward and develop the Gothic genre. The setting of London takes the Gothic from the deep, dark, caverns of the Gothic mansion and places the action in the sprawling city of London. Victorian London provides an interesting backdrop full of apartments and houses for our antagonist to blend in through, and hordes of people to prey on and use as cover. In adapting for the audience's taste through a modern location Stevenson also adapts Percy Bysshe Shelley's mad scientist feature as Dr. Jekyll must battle with himself to figure out how to eliminate the personality of Mr. Hyde within him. The morality of science and the lengths to which the 'mad scientist' will go to achieve/destroy their results shows the ethical and moral questions the Gothic associates with science, especially in the Victorian era. Finally, Stevenson's Gothic story takes another page out of the Shelley's writing in terms of antagonist development through Dr. Jekyll and his many personalities. Like Mary Shelley's portrayal of Victor Frankenstein and the monster as doubles, Stevenson uses the double in Jekyll and Hyde, however, he does more than this. Stevenson anticipates the science of psychology when his character admits to the possibility of not two, but many, personalities, and Stevenson has Jekyll and Hyde exist in the same body. This is a perfect metaphor for the modern setting, not only urban, but also contemporary in time. This novel has also had an impact on cinema, and

through the stage, as there have been several attempts at displaying this double through acting.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) builds upon preexisting notions of setting featured in the established Gothic tradition represented by *Otranto*, *Frankenstein*, and certainly by both Polidori's story and Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 vampire novel, *Carmilla*. *Dracula* is also considered a complex villain who has many evolutionary qualities passed on from previous Gothic antagonists. This becomes evident as James B. Twitchell states, "The anti-hero/vampire in fiction became Nietzsche's Superman in philosophy, who became Adolf Hitler in fact. This process may in part account for the myth's rapid return from serious literature to popular culture" (Twitchell 140). *Dracula* is a cold-blooded villain but also an alluring one, who knows his boundaries and is not afraid to escape if needed to save his own life. This is partly because the inclusion of Dr. Van Helsing means that there *is* a counterpoint to anything the Count may throw at the cast of humans. The old-world scientist provides a balance to the old-world predator that resides in *Dracula*. Count *Dracula*'s immortality means that he has witnessed his family's lineage rise and fall, and thus in suffering while living as a mortal he becomes more sympathetic and understandable in his pursuit. Although his mission is dark, the reader can understand his distaste for the modern world in which he is imprisoned. Several features in Stoker's *Dracula* have been sustained and used again in Gothic works of the present. *Dracula*'s trunk is a prominent sign of his travels and is something that will be seen again in *Nosferatu* (1922)—and later in *Midnight Mass* (2021). The trunk represents the vampire's way out, in later renditions a way to travel without being exposed to the Sun or

onlookers. For Dracula the trunk and the ability to shapeshift conceal his features which cannot be easily hidden. Ironically, the weapon used to eliminate vampires is the wooden stake. It would also be important to mention the prognosis of what Dr. Van Helsing considers a vampire to be in medical terms, considering his status as a doctor and what it can determine in later novels by establishing vampirism. In Dr. Van Helsing's own words, vampirism could be articulated as, "... the curse of immortality..." (Stoker 287). This differs drastically from future entries in which vampirism is viewed as a disease or a medical anomaly rather than an old-world hex or curse to be placed on someone. This is an important distinction to make, in part because it affects how the reader perceives Dracula himself. Dracula is to be seen as a man plagued by the effects of the curse of vampirism, a man turned into the calculated killer before you through a curse. If Dracula is to be perceived in any other fashion it is to take away from the character of Dracula. Another key feature of the vampire is the allure and sexual tension, which have roots in the Gothic storytelling past as well as in modern storytelling techniques.

In discussing *Dracula* the Gothic genre continues to be important. There is no better place for examination than through Lucy and Dracula's encounter in which Lucy becomes a vampire herself through transformation. When discussing the impact of the transformation, James B. Twitchell states, "A nightly visit from a beautiful or frightful being, who first exhausts the sleeper with passionate embraces and then withdraws from him a vital fluid..." (Twitchell 136). From this, it can be ascertained just how the vampirism process emulates that of sexual interaction. Like sexual intercourse, vampirism is an exchange, life for fluid, like the extension of life through intercourse and

impregnation. The transformation also makes this once innocent and prude woman into that of a highly erotic and interesting woman who replaces Lucy as Dracula's right hand. Through this transaction we can see how the minds of authors at the time were concerned with. The vampire has, "a slow gravitation toward the sensual and forbidden" (130). The willingness of audiences to read about something forbidden and eventually end up seeing it on the big screen meant that communities were opening towards this villain and the possibilities that the villain led to in terms of storytelling potential.

The advent of new technology that gave rise to cinema meant that this new medium was both commercial and artistic from its beginning. One designed to reach mass audiences with some immediacy. For the Gothic tradition, this new medium allowed for the horrors of the mind to be shown visually, and strategically, while cinema also was creating its traditions. Cinema took a shovel to the graves of many Gothic villains, and like Dr. Frankenstein, brought new life into these lifeless corpses. The results were astounding, many of these Gothic stories were given new life and years of entertainment value through their film adaptation. Chief among the changes made when adapted to the film screen were the features used to express theme and symbolism through a film. The paragraph became replaced by the camera frame, and in the process, the ways in which we pinpoint features and thematic elements also changed. The first of these Gothic villains to be adapted was *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1908), but another of the classic Gothic villains would not be adapted until 1922 through *Nosferatu* (1922).

F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) features many similarities to *Dracula* (1897) in part because Murnau was creating a cinematic retelling of Stoker's titular work. Stoker's

wife famously pressed legal action against Murnau, and thus the vampire was changed to Nosferatu, and Dracula to Count Orlok, becoming its own work. In Bram Stoker's novel, Count Dracula freely moves about during the day—sunlight is not a concern for him. However, in a significant change from Stoker's novel, in Murnau's adaptation Count Orlok can be destroyed by sunlight. A similarity between the two works is the impact of the vampire in an expanded environment. The vampire may just be hunting one or two people; the vampire's effects are felt by all in the immediate area. The introduction of a vampire into an area almost always means the introduction of 'bad omens' like fish dying, famine, or death looming around. Even as Jonathan meets Dracula for the first time, he can, "...feel the dread of this horrible place overpowering me" (Stoker 45). Dracula's arrival to England brings about many bad omens which plague the surrounding area. The Demeter's travel to Europe is hindered by Dracula's feedings and antics along the way to England (Stoker 115). Another comes through a slew of children who are feasted upon by the newly transformed Lucy, a victim turned ally to the vampire. (Stoker 259). *Nosferatu* (1922) also possesses the charged sexual energy that we saw from Dracula through Count Orlok's obsession with Ellen. The obsession with Ellen leads to his demise due to his exposure to sunlight, all the pieces are together for the sexual tension that the vampire can produce. In Murnau's adaptation, Ellen must sacrifice herself to the predatory vampire to save everyone else, including her husband. In this instance, the female dies to protect her husband and community from the horrors of the vampire. In sacrificing herself, the female saves the whole town the vampire is presiding in as well.



Fig. 3: Nosferatu (Max Schreck) in *Nosferatu* (1922). *Nosferatu*. Directed by F.W. Murnau. Prana Film, 1922.

Universal's box office success with its film, *Dracula* (1931), was largely due to Bela Lugosi's captivating performance. His alluring eyes became the sexualized tension that had been written about many years before. This film marks the first vampire film to feature sound, which bolstered Lugosi's performance as the titular vampire. Audiences awed at Lugosi's stare, and the iconic tone and diction that he would become known for, with a deep Romanian accent to go along with it. Another successful film that drew upon the popular image of the vampire was Hammer Film's Technicolor *House of Dracula* (1958). Outside of having Christopher Lee as the vampire, this outing does not do much original in terms of features. The stage allowed for the Gothic to become more personalized for theatrics, the book was replaced for the stage play and even eventually the film screen. Despite eventually ceasing to be as powerful as it once was, the Gothic had prolific runs in all forms of media: literature, the stage, and subsequently in film. Like the Gothic's oversaturation of literature and eventual remission, Hammer Films' reign over the Gothic film genre came and went.

In 1968 Roman Polanski would direct *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), an adaptation of Ira Levin's novel of the same name. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) became popular for its terrifying depiction of the young American family caught in the clutches of Satan. The film revolves around a young couple moving into an apartment complex with a seemingly dark past. The seemingly ordinary hotel building harbors a Satanic cult. The hotel and its inhabitants are wolves in sheep's clothing, preying upon whoever may step inside. Stories prior had villains appear in ghastly attire, but the antagonists of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) appear as elderly neighbors. The film is indebted to the Gothic through its core tenets. The setting is very reminiscent of a modern *Castle of Otranto* through the hidden passageways that connect the rooms. The Bramford Hotel takes on a character of itself as the film continues and the hotels secrets are uncovered. Through the setting, and the shifty apartment folk, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) proves that setting and character are paramount to what terrifies us in film. The film also highlights its Gothic roots through these very same features and their usage in the plot. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) would become the first of a new age of Gothic horror films, William Friedkin would continue where Polanski left off through his faith-based Gothic horror, ironically another film adaptation of its literary source, *The Exorcist* (1973).

With the release of *The Exorcist* (1973) director William Friedkin would rekindle an interest in Gothic horror, combined with questions of faith, in the film adaptation of William Peter Blatty's 1971 best-selling novel of the same name. Blatty also won an Academy Award for best screenplay. The success of the novel and film adaptation led the way for Hollywood to create sequels, prequels, and even a television series set in the

world of *The Exorcist*. John Boorman would take the helm in the sequel, *The Exorcist 2: The Heretic* (1977). In 1990 Blatty would direct the third installment, *The Exorcist III* (1990). *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004) would be followed by *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* in 2005 and then the TV series, *The Exorcist* (2016-2017). Most recently, the series released *The Exorcist: Believer* (2023) which saw the return of Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) and Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), two titular characters from the original 1973 film.

The Exorcist novel and its film adaptation enjoyed commercial success and has also been acknowledged for its lasting influence, some of which must be attributed to the fact that it combined horror with religious faith. At the heart of this horror film lies a test of faith, for the Catholic priest, Father Karras as he struggles to exorcise a demon who has possessed a young girl, Regan. Regan's battle for control of her body emanates from that of the female in distress, as the young girl shifts between committing demonic acts and vying for control over her soul. In the presence of cold-calculated evil, there is no doubt that the odds can seem miniscule and that is the feeling that Pazuzu gives off through their aggression. This battle of faith, or the fusion of horror and religion, has created a genre of its own. A genre with Gothic horror elements but still distinct through the religious elements. Karras's sacrifice saves Regan and gives her more time to uncover her powers in the sequel to help others afflicted by Pazuzu's wraith. Friedkin also makes use of several film techniques that are both unique and original, which opened the doors for other directors, including Mike Flanagan, to have more fun placing hidden motifs in the background of frames that may otherwise not outwardly show the hidden motif. For

example, several shots in *The Exorcist* (1973) feature the statue of Pazuzu, or the demonic face of Pazuzu patched mid-shot over Regan's face, a 'clarification of sanity' for the viewer and character.



Fig. 4: Father Merrin (Stellen Skarsgard) as he finds the statue of Pazuzu during an archeological dig in Iraq.
The Exorcist. Directed by William Friedkin. Performances by Ellen Burstyn. Warner Bros Pictures, 1973.

Four years later, John Boorman would take over the directorial role from Friedkin for *The Exorcist 2: The Heretic* (1977). Set in the Middle East, this film activates the cinematic tradition of the curse that results from violating sacred places. As we shall see, the origin of evil resides, also, in *Midnight Mass* (2021). The focus towards the metaphysical side of possession and religion as Regan and Father Lamont fight for their souls, and the souls of others, against Pazuzu one more time. The locust, an Old Testament Biblical plague is used here as invasive, insectoid minions of evil showing that evil proliferates through direct contact. Like the effect of the vampire on a town, the locusts make more evil appear through the introduction of evil. The act of sexual coercion is even used by the doppelganger Regan (who is Pazuzu) to try and sway Father Lamont to becoming evil himself. The battle for the body of a young female leads to the two powers clashing, and Father Lamont winning and besting Pazuzu. The sexual nature

of Possessed Regan's advancements may also harken back to elements brought up in the vampiric sexual tensions discussed earlier. Although it is important to note, like many other evils in the Gothic, Pazuzu and the demonic forces are not permanently subdued, but rather sent off to lick their wounds until they have enough power to attempt another possession again. *The Exorcist* (1973) film, and its subsequent sequels, join horror and religion, as good and evil vie over control of another's body. Although the possessed individual may change, each Exorcist film features a battle between the faithful and the departed as demons vie for control over a lost soul. It is up to the good forces to make sacrifices and take back control of the innocent. In finding and facing utmost evil, there is a slight reaffirmation that there is also good at work in the world which strengthens the characters to push back against evil. The Exorcist franchise represents the development of horror out of the Gothic as Kilgour has pointed out. The combining of the horror genre with a religious theme is in large part responsible for the success of *Midnight Mass* (2021). Although subsequent entries have not had the theatrical impact that the first Exorcist film did, it cannot be stated enough the impact that this series has had on future Horror entries.

Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005-2008) book series and the eventual film adaptations show the evolution of the vampire feature throughout time. What once started as *Nosferatu* (1922) not being able to be seen in the Sun has now become Edward Cullen glistening like a diamond through direct contact with the sun. Tyler Chadwick, in his article states, "...I've found it useful to situate *Twilight* in relation to Gothic literature, that increasingly popular fictional realm sometimes labeled "'a literature of nightmare.'""

(Why *Twilight* is Good for You: How the Uncanny Can Make Us More Christ-like).

There are at the time of this publication seven books and five films in the *Twilight* series. As Lev Goodman states in his article, “Meyer has sold 45 million books in the U.S. and 40 million more worldwide” (“It’s *Twilight* in America: The Vampire Saga”). The success of the books and subsequent films shows just how the culture became enraptured by vampires once again, albeit the vampire has changed significantly since the time of the Gothic novel. Meyer’s novels have always had a profound resonance with her lifestyle. While Ashley Fetter’s article in *The Atlantic* suggests the characters should be read allegorically to represent racial strife and differences in class (“At Its Core, the ‘*Twilight*’ Saga Is a Story About ____”). This however seems to minimize the imaginative creation of character and story that Stephenie Meyers has contributed to the enduring formula of horror and spirituality. That she should include werewolves honors a long and venerable line of legendary lore in both literature and film. The latter from *The Wolfman* (1941) to *The Howling* (1981). Her purpose is to introduce an innovation that provides originality to her series. This flexibility will also appear in some of the choices we see in *Midnight Mass* (2021). Although the series does harken back to Meyer’s lifestyle, it also pushes the Gothic vampire forward through its use of two different Gothic villains: the werewolf and the vampire.

Since the inception of the Gothic formula in Walpole’s novel, its effect has been to instill terror through contact with the paranormal. Through fiction, stage adaptations, and eventually film, the Gothic has developed, bifurcating into related genres like horror, prompted by technological advancements and audience sensibilities. As it grew to include

more complex social commentary, with novels like Shelley's *Frankenstein and* Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it has, at its best, embraced religious and spiritual issues. Horror and Religion may appear at first to be counter-intuitive, but the evil that is pervasive in the Horror genre becomes an apt test of faith. The union of Gothic Horror and Religious faith accounts for the cinematic success of *The Exorcist* (1973) and Mike Flanagan's *Midnight Mass*, (2021) as the ensuing chapters will demonstrate.

Chapter 2: *Midnight Mass* (2021) as a Gothic Horror Film

Horror has captivated audiences since its inception on the screen and has continued to develop and renew itself through constant change. Broadly, Edward Lowry states on the term horror, “...horror films relate the genesis and the threat of someone or something which is *monstrous*” (Lowry 13). Although horror can be attributed to the threat, the threat can take various forms: slasher films, psychological thrillers, and alien invasions. Despite the number of horror subgenres, all horror subgenres share a few governing principles. These recurring features become recognizable as they appear across subgenres. This informs our reading of *Midnight Mass* (2021) as it partakes of this larger film tradition. In its particulars, the series also owes a debt to specific features of the longer Gothic literary tradition, one that was influential in the development of the horror film. This chapter will first address the question: “What is a horror film?”, by identifying a few features of horror, their appearance in influential films in this genre, and their presence in *Midnight Mass*. Particular elements that derive from the Gothic tradition in both literature and film also contribute to our understanding of *Midnight Mass* (2021) as a Gothic horror film. Suspense, a fear of the alien other (monstrous)—often both more and less than human-- and the importance of setting are principles of horror that persist across subgenres. In *Midnight Mass* (2021) these all contribute to the *effect*, the creation of terror in the viewer, that contributes to this series a successful representation of that genre.

Suspense primarily revolves around the absence or removal of common information that leaves the audience thinking through how the story may unfold. Alfred

Hitchcock articulates suspense, or at least what is a common fear that causes suspense when he states in his BBC interview, "... the American audience is the global audience... You don't understand America because you think they are Americans, but they are not, America is full of foreigners, they are all foreigners since 1776" (BBC Archive 2:08-2:28). Hitchcock understands America's audiences represents the global one because of America's unique history in film. A great example of suspense comes from Alfred Hitchcock through *Psycho* (1960). Hitchcock further writes on suspense, and how to garner it, as shown through *Psycho* (1960), in his BBC interview when he notes, "I believe in putting the horror in the mind of the audience, and not necessarily on the screen... As the film developed I was putting less and less physical horror on screen because I was leaving that in the mind of the audience" (7:18-8:22). The iconic shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) is an example of powerful tension at play. The very methodical preparation before the shower is countered by the fact that we know the young woman is in danger. Once the danger shows itself, which Hitchcock has cued us in on, the audience sees the release of that tension that has built up across minutes of screen time. A second observation revolves around the inclusion of simple fears, childhood fears, as Hitchcock notes his fear of police officers following a time his father had him put in jail for a small petty crime to teach him a lesson, "If you can trace the origin of your fear it will disappear, that whole thing is a confounded lie, because I still have it" (The Dick Cavett Show 4:54-5:19). Hitchcock understands that childhood fears stick with us for life typically, like his fear of police officers following his traumatic arrest as a child. A final example of suspense and terror also comes from Hitchcock, and his definition of a

McGuffin. Hitchcock describes a McGuffin when he states, "...you see it in spy films... it is the thing the spies are always after" (6:29-8:24). The McGuffin could be considered a throwaway scene in the beginning of the film that highlights the main issue shown throughout the film: in slasher horror this could be seen through the killer finding a one-off student and killing them mysteriously to set the plot in motion. Suspense is paramount to creating terror. When applied to horror it becomes evident why suspense creates terror so important to the genre: They are used to build terror in the audiences.



Fig. 5: Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in *Psycho* (1960) during the titular shower scene.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount Pictures, 1960.

Suspense leads to terror, and as Bryan Stone states in his article, "Horror film functions both as a threat and a catharsis by confronting us with our fear of death, the supernatural, the unknown and irrational, "the other" in general, a loss of identity, and forces beyond our control" (Stone 2). In removing information from these areas that already petrify viewers the director can make the suspense more powerful through the manipulation of the viewers' emotions. An example of suspense in a horror film may be seen in *The Exorcist* (1973) in which the possession of the young girl is not clearly stated

until it is far too late. The possession occurs off-screen, and we are left to watch Regan (Linda Blair), the girl who is host to the demon, slowly start to show signs. The audience knows something strange is happening, but Regan's mother (Ellen Burstyn) does not know what this is until the doctors have tried every science money can buy. In removing the audience's certainty about the paranormal happenings, the suspense makes the horror more poignant. A young child has begun acting awry, their mother and the best help money can buy cannot stop the behavior. The terrifying act of losing your child to an unseen force also builds suspense in the film. Regan's possession is a form of suspense in the film: the audience, the doctors, the priest, and even Regan's mother all struggle with the idea that a demon has taken residence inside of Regan's body. A scene that displays suspense for the viewer happens when the demon Pazuzu, who is in control of Regan, is confronted by Father Karras (Jason Miller) in a preliminary exorcism meeting. When Father Karras demands Pazuzu remove the straps as it did earlier Pazuzu states, "That's much too vulgar a display of power, Karras" (Friedkin 1:23:57-1:24:02). This quote shows that Pazuzu's actions are all intentional and that Pazuzu's power is legitimate, which is far more terrifying a revelation than any amount of pop-out jumpscare can attain. Pazuzu's power is shown as Detective Kinderman (Lee Cobb) views Father Karras leaving the preliminary exorcism meetings with a subdued Regan in her bedroom upstairs, only to look up and see a dark mysterious shadow moving ominously across the window's view in the room alone. Keen viewers will recognize that Regan has undone the bindings and is *floating* around the room (1:29:06-1:29:09). More explicitly, there is sobering terror at the end of the film as well. Father Karras does *not* necessarily kill

Pazuzu; instead, he allows the demon entry and then kills himself before the demon can assume control of Father Karras and kill Regan. Evil did not lose that day, it was only hindered from continuing. Part of the suspense and terror is generated from the looming question as to whether Pazuzu is vanquished or if the demon will rise again, which led to a sequel opening. Suspense and terror are paramount to *Midnight Mass* (2021), as through Flanagan's indebtedness to the longer Gothic tradition there are some adaptive features present between the two.



Fig. 6: A weary Regan (Linda Blair) battles against Pazuzu for control over the body during an exorcism in *The Exorcist* (1973).

The Exorcist. Directed by William Friedkin. Performances by Ellen Burstyn. Warner Bros Pictures, 1973.

Suspense and subsequent tension begin in the first episode of *Midnight Mass* (2021), as everything is not what it seems in and around those who inhabit Crockett Island. In highlighting the suspense and tension, following the plot of the first four episodes displays Flanagan's use of suspense and tension and how it is built upon until the big reveals at the end are shown. A hint of this foreshadowing that builds suspense is in the naming of each episode. All seven use biblical books as a title, being split into Old and New Testament books. This is shown through, "*Genesis*", "*Psalms*", "*Proverbs*",

“*Lamentations*”, “*Gospel*”, “*Acts of the Apostles*”, and “*Revelation*”. How the title of each episode functions discursively is one question we will explore. The first four episodes, before the inner workings of Monsignor Pruitt’s (Hamish Linklater) plan are shown, highlight the tension and suspense Flanagan achieves through his careful eye. The first episode of *Midnight Mass* (2021) is aptly titled “*Genesis*”. It is both the genesis of the Angel’s tenure in Crockett Island, as well as the genesis of the unusual and suspenseful as the island quickly becomes defamiliarized through the sudden happenings. *Genesis* also revolves around the creation of the fall, and just as Adam and Eve are persuaded by the devil, so too is Riley in coming back to Crockett Island as Father Hill makes his way back too. Similarly, the vampire creating a congregation of misled followers also emanates this point of the creation of the fall, this is a concept that will be touched upon in more depth in the third chapter. In *Midnight Mass* (2021) the McGuffin can be seen through the DUI scene in the beginning scene of Episode one: “*Genesis*”, which sets the plot off towards Crockett Island. The surreal is immediately shown through Riley’s (Zach Gilford) manifestation of his guilt over the death of Tara-Beth (Ebony Booth), a young student who is killed through Riley’s drunk driving, which leads Riley back to Crockett Island eventually (Flanagan, Book 1: “*Genesis*”, 4:00). Only a few short minutes later, and Monsignor Pruitt, now disguised as a substitute pastor, and the trunk containing the Angel (Quinton Boisclair) arrive on the belle (7:31). The trunk that Pruitt carries to the island is an extreme form of suspense, as it has been featured in other vampire stories to harbor and move the creature around. The long still shot at 9:50 of the first episode highlights this eerie phenomenon surrounding the box, the suspense in this

scene reaches a heightened level when Monsignor Pruitt knocks on the trunk, and the trunk promptly knocks back as night falls on Crockett Island (9:50).



Fig. 7: Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) moves the trunk containing the Angel to his home through a long still shot in *Midnight Mass* (2021).

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

When Bev Keane (Samantha Sloyan) enters the apartment midway through the episode, the elephant in the room, or rather the trunk, once again becomes the star of the show while Bev makes her presence known. Bev’s reaction to the substitute priest (who is Monsignor Pruitt) also highlights the suspense building on the island surrounding the new priest. Immediately after this encounter a cat is shown being stalked by a hungry predator in the fields of Crockett Island (28:52-29:20). The audience is bound to wonder: what is in that trunk, and what has been released upon Crockett Island?

Book 2: “*Psalms*” represents the next shift in the suspense which further heightens the tension. “*Psalms*” in the Old Testament are a sacred song or hymn, and through this episode, the ‘*Psalms*’ of the Angel’s powers are built through the omens and miracles the Angel provides the island with. The second episode starts with the mass extinction of cats on Crockett Island, each cat is drained of its blood and the bodies litter

the bay (Flanagan, Book 2: "*Psalms*", 0:30). This bad omen not only highlights the predatory capabilities of the Angel, but it also shows just how radically things are going to change on the island: within one night of being on the island the Angel has killed a bay full of cats. Sheriff Hassan highlights the neck punctures on each of the cats, and the disturbing lack of blood in each of the bodies (2:12). Several things are happening at once during the early episodes, which in turn leads to a lot of the reveals and terror that is created later in the series through the suspense and tension that is created in the early episodes. Riley's mother (Kristin Lehman) soon realizes she does not need her glasses anymore, an unknown side effect of the church communion that was spiked by Monsignor Pruitt with the blood of the Angel (19:15). The bad omens like the dead cats are immediately countered in this episode by the scenes of Riley's mother and the other island folk experiencing miracles, culminating in Leezah's miracle at the end of the episode. The omens and miracles are meant to confuse the viewer and the island folk, as they are uncertain if these are acts of God or of a malevolent force. However, it isn't until the Crockett Island potluck later in this episode that the suspense shifts to include the people of Crockett Island, as nobody can soon trust one another. Joe Collie's (Robert Longstreet) dog is poisoned at the potluck, which leads the blame to be laid on Joe's nemesis, Bev Keane (35:00). An answer is never given, but it establishes the notion that even while a creature is haunting the island the people of Crockett Island will also have their issues that may arise. Later in the episode Riley moves his AA meetings to the island with Monsignor Pruitt, through these AA meetings several loose ends are brought up within the island which further raises the tension, as it appears Riley isn't buying the

official reasonings for the mysterious omens on the island, immediately after his Bowl (John C. MacDonald) is hunted down in the abandoned house in the dark of night by the creature and subsequently killed (49:40-56:50). Despite these catastrophes, the second episode ends with a miracle as Leeza Scarborough (Annarah Cymone) can stand up from her wheelchair and take her communion on her feet: a marvel considering she has been paralyzed for many years after a hunting accident in which drunken townsmen, Joe Collie, shoots her (59:20). The omen at the beginning of the episode, followed by the subsequent miracle at the end of the episode highlights the suspense that is being built upon throughout the early episodes of the series. The townfolk do not know what is causing the strange happenings on the island, but just like the audience members watching the townfolk are starting to understand things are not how they seem on the island.



Fig. 8: Sheriff Hassan (Rahul Kohli) crouches beside a line of bloodless cats on Crockett Island in *Midnight Mass* (2021).

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

The third episode of *Midnight Mass* (2021) is titled “*Proverbs*” after another Old Testament book, the episode opens with Monsignor Pruitt providing some much-needed information which serves to satisfy some wonder while also creating further suspense.

Proverbs give us wisdom and are also considered aphorisms. In this episode, Monsignor Pruitt gives us many answers of wisdom as to how he got there while also creating questions for the audience through his story. Monsignor Pruitt highlights his stay in Jerusalem and his encounter with the Angel. This is soon hastened by the current times at Crocket Island in which Leeza's miracle has caused an influx of interest in the church on the island, and more specifically to Father Paul's aura (Flanagan, Book 3: "*Proverbs*", 1:15-12:20). Tension is built when Warren Flynn (Igby Ridley) accidentally walk-in as Father Paul tampers with the communion wine (19:16-19:30). Father Paul is seen pouring a personal flask of what appears to be wine into the communion wine chalice.

Considering Leeza's recent miracle, this scene creates an immense uneasiness in what Father Paul is doing and what he is giving to the folks of the island. Father Paul suddenly faints in church during a powerful sermon, which is intertwined with brief flashbacks to Pruitt's incident in the cave with the Angel (25:30-27:00). The episode ends with Father Paul dying, alongside the actualization of his flashback and his first feeding being infected by the Angel (59:00-1:00:30). As the episode ends, an old newspaper of Monsignor Pruitt as a young man is shown in a frame, intentionally Pruitt and Father Paul are played by the same actor and look identical (1:01:20). The reveal sets the stage for the final episode that builds the suspense for the miniseries.

The fourth episode is titled "*Lamentations*" a biblical book in the Old Testament detailing the lamentations of the destruction of Jerusalem, and this episode deals with the grief of loss and the acceptance as to what comes after, which is precisely what happens to Riley as he dies and subsequently 'comes back'. The grief and lamenting could also

come from Monsignor Pruitt's loss of innocence, as he grieves his inability to stop himself from killing Joe Collie, who was in the process of becoming a better person before his murder. The episode opens with Bev Keane and Sturge (Matt Biedel) realizing that Father Paul is Monsignor Pruitt when Pruitt comes back to life after dying in the last episode, which Bev remarks is like, "...the scales falling from our eyes" (Flanagan, Book 4: "*Lamentations*", 3:40-3:52). The omens and miracles of the island that create suspense have left the townsfolk split: some believe it is religious signs while others believe something else is at play. For example, Bev Keane remarks further that these omens and miracles as, "...what a wonderful revelation it will be to know their own dear Monsignor Pruitt was restored by an angel of God" (8:25-8:37). There is a distinct focus on science and faith in this episode, and which the miracles appear to be linked too, but this will be touched upon in the third chapter in more depth. The suspense regarding the communion and how it has physically altered the townsfolk is also brought into question as Mildred Gunning (Alex Essoe) is becoming more alert with each communion brought specially from Father Paul (14:00-14:40). Erin's (Kate Siegel) miscarriage is also another example of the communion and its suspenseful impact on the townsfolk as more terrifying revelations are revealed as the tainted communion is taken more (56:10). Monsignor Pruitt's struggles towards the middle of the episode highlight that Pruitt's illness is seemingly something other than a religious intervention, as his prayers and cross have no impact on his ailment (21:38). When Monsignor Pruitt kills Joe Collie and feeds on his blood, we see he is becoming monstrous. Pruitt is now in it for the long haul and has developed a taste for human blood (41:40). In a revealing moment, finally, the Angel is

shown on screen at the end of the episode as Monsignor Pruitt struggles with his appetite even after killing and drinking Joe Collie's blood (1:04:20). The tension is then increased when Riley, knowing Father Hill has lied, comes back to the AA meeting, to inquire on one more oddity in their conversation, Riley is suddenly attacked by the Angel (1:06:20). The tension has been built across the first four episodes, as the Angel is slowly revealed more and more, while Monsignor Pruitt's story comes together slowly. All has been revealed, and the suspense of what is happening turns into the terrifying realization that a vampiric creature is feasting on townsfolk has been revealed to the viewer. Despite this reveal, the suspense continues even after this for the characters because the characters mistakenly believe they are communicating with an angel, and this is reflected through the despicable acts they commit toward each other. This could be seen as the Eucharist for Crockett Island, gaining powers and senses unknown to the ordinary man, but instead, it is adulterated- poisoned—even though it would appear to be beneficial. Once this terrifying revelation is revealed, the horror fills the mind of the viewer with all the horrible possibilities that could be coming to the townsfolk.

In addition to the element of suspense that terror creates, horror depends on the presence of the monstrous, alien other. The monstrous other has been portrayed in a variety of ways across both literature and cinema, and despite being shown in a variety of ways the other still can pull such intrigue all these years later. As Bee Wilson states in his article, "*Psycho* completely upended audience expectations and altered the genre forever by fully establishing the modern notion that monsters are not solely relics of a sordid past that reside in gothic castles atop remote mountains or in dark dungeons, but rather are

deviant products of the nuclear family who live in the house (or motel) next door” (Wilson, “Alfred Hitchcock: From Silent Film Director to Inventor of Modern Horror”). One reason for the other’s popularity may have to do with its similarities to us as humans, or even our differences. The creature ‘resembles humanity’, the more we are captivated by it. This brings into account the uncanny valley and other psychological phenomena, as we stare into something that looks *similar to us*, but not just like us. This is further reinforced by what Dr. Simon Brown states in his article, “What a person is, what we can assume about something that we consider a person so, for example, a body with no soul... The biggest reason is that you can't reason with it... So if we see somebody stalking us and we want to say "please don't kill me, don't eat me" we can have an interaction with it under normal conditions” (Brown “What Makes Films Frightening”). Regardless of how much or how little the creature looks like us, the creature still has some semblance of the unknown as it can attack and harm individuals without remorse.

However, the creature also has connections to cultural fears that are prevalent at the time of production, which is what ultimately makes it adaptable, as Dr. Simon Brown further discusses, “You can almost chart the things that we're afraid of by looking at the ebb and flow of themes as they emerge and disappear in the horror genre in cinema particularly...” (Brown, “What Makes Films Frightening”). The creature can represent our societal fears in a large sense, but it can also have grotesque physical and psychological features that serve to bring the creature to resemble us more closely or push it further away from us. The psychology is the same, social conditions can add to the ideological approach of this fear; for instance, the fifties saw an influx in alien

invasion films reflecting fears of foreign invasion, the sixties saw fears of nuclear war highlighting fears of the Cold War, the seventies saw a rise in home invasions because of increased crime, etc. One way that we see our societal fears present today through horror is through the invasiveness of body horror, or the mutilation and evolution of the human body. This anxiety can also be shown through the mutation or addition of new physical features that are separate from humans, serving to further distance ourselves from the other lurking about.

One character who is mutated in *Midnight Mass* (2021) is Father Paul Hill. Father Paul Hill emanates the Gothic feature of the villain through Walpole's Manfred-esque downfall in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) from being the priest of the island. Manfred's abuse and perversion of power eerily emanate that of Father Paul Hill, Monsignor Pruitt's, misidentification of the holy spirit. Where Manfred became obsessed with a prophecy regarding his family's reign, Pruitt became obsessed with this 'holy spirit' he found in the sands of Jerusalem. Both lead the respective leaders towards ruin, at the cost of their unending faith in their plan. In the same way Manfred overpowers his guests, and even family, Father Paul Hill's mission becomes twisted, and he soon starts taking advantage of his church to spread what he believes to be the word of God. Father Paul Hill's lack of guilt for his actions comes from his faith in God and the reassurance of religious zealots like Bev Keane. Father Paul Hill and Bev Keane's misuse of the religious power they hold over the isolated island is another Gothic feature that is at play: the misuse of power or authority. Through the perversion of power by spiking the communion, Father Paul can amass a congregation of blood-thirsty vampires of all ages.

Father Paul infects adults and children alike. Despite Father Paul's antagonistic arc, he ultimately becomes a dynamic character seeing the fault in his actions and succumbing to the sunlight with his daughter and secret lover. Bev Keane remains static at the end of the miniseries, vainly attempting to bury herself in sand to avoid death and judgment.

Although Bev Keane and Monsignor Pruitt both display elements of the mutated other, they also display signs of the soul under duress. The possession of their values, as seen through the thirst for blood from vampirism, is another form of mutation present in the miniseries, as the unknowing host allows an invasive entity into their body which makes its biological changes to the human host.

Mike Flanagan's creature in this miniseries is not like other vampires we traditionally see in media; it is even mistaken by Father Paul to be a savior figure. These changes to the creature are paramount in the discussion of the horror in the miniseries. In Bryan Stone's article, perceptively, he states, "What evil lies within "'*The Thing*'" that a priest could exorcise" (Stone 13). Like the creature in *The Thing* (1982), the demon of *Midnight Mass* (2021) is not your standard, run-of-the-mill, vampire. Nothing is known of the demon, outside of his ability to perform various miracles that come with their own set of vices: the need to feed on blood, and sensitivity to sunlight. Because of this unknown, not only is the demon more terrifying, but he is also impervious to Christian iconography (no finger crosses will keep the demon away). This can be seen as the demon performs his miracles inside of an ordained church, even sometimes donning priestly robes such as in Book 6 during the Easter Vigil (Flanagan, "*Acts of the Apostles*", 53:40-53:46). The other comes out adorned in Christian robes, in a church full of

believers and around ample Christian iconography. The Angel is not disturbed, or even remotely impacted by things that in other adaptations have destroyed the vampire. For all intents and purposes: the demon is not impacted by Christian-exorcistic solutions like other renditions of vampires before. This will be discussed further, and in more detail, in Chapter 3. Our only knowledge of the demon is through Book 3, the discovery in the desert, in which Father Hill's delusions could also have played a major factor.



Fig. 9: The Angel (Quinton Bosclair) and an aged Father Hill (Hamish Linklater) in the hidden cave in Jerusalem in *Midnight Mass* (2021).
Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Possession is an integral part of the horror genre: evil must come into the heart and corrupt what was once pure. The possession takes many forms and has been an endearing part of the horror genre since the time of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in which Dracula makes a minion out of Lucy. The feature has been endearing, and even became an integral part of the influential film, *The Exorcist* (1973) in which young Regan is taken over by the malicious spirit Pazuzu and is forced to commit heinous acts up to and including murder. The control Pazuzu had over the child Regan horrified audiences: if the threat could invade the private home through a Ouija board, through the Christian iconography that guarded most 1970s homes, then how safe truly were we? This is

reflected further through Clint Talbott's article, when he states, "Horror is a genre built on transgression, so these films are designed to violate norms, test boundaries, question values, and complicate established truths" (Talbot, "Say Hello to our Collective Nightmares in Horror Films"). This is reinforced through the possession of Regan, the innocent, young schoolgirl: never had the threat invaded the home and even our beloved children in such a fashion. We never truly see what leads Pazuzu to Regan, or if it even is the Ouija board, but the total transformation of Regan was something previously unseen in cinema. If someone could come into your home without your permission, and hide in your daughter's soul unseen, how safe truly are we?

The possession does not have to be particular to, say, a child or any person, but has a more universal power. Seamus Heaney articulates this in his translation of *Beowulf* when Heaney comments, "In three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night-house, the infested underwater current, and the reptile haunted rocks of the wilderness" (Heaney xii). We see situations that transcend history: they are universally frightening. Through these archetypal sites of fear, we can see the different ways fear can be generated. The barricaded nighthouse that Grendel invades translates to home invasion horror films. The infested underwater cave and the reptile rocks both translate to alien territory: Beowulf must travel from the safety of his known environment and enter the enemy's territory to fight on their terms. Through this relinquishment of the safe, the character enters a portal to a new world, unlike their habitat. All three are essential towards capturing the unknown horror of a setting that is out to get you, and through the three areas literature

and film adaptations have featured countless variations of the three archetypal sites of fear.

In *Midnight Mass* we see each of these three archetypal sites of fear in different areas: the barricaded night-house through Book Seven, “*Revelation*”, and the other two archetypal sites of fear are present in a multitude of the other episodes considering the island the plot takes place on. The only time we are taken off the island is through Monsignor Pruitt’s surreal experience of discovering the vampire while simultaneously losing his mind of old age and disease. Through instances like the dead cats on the beach in Book Two “*Psalms*”, the Angel’s perceived death in Book Seven “*Revelation*”, and Riley’s demise in Book Four, “*Lamentations*”, the viewer can see the infested underwater current, and what happens near the water of the islands. Anytime the island’s wilderness is shown throughout the series it predominantly has to do with the Angel lurking about in the wilderness like in the first three Books, which correlates to the third archetypal site of fear and the wilderness.

The act of evil moving into a once safe and protected area can constitute a possession, as the area turns sour and withers into something new. The possession acts as a poison towards the host, area, or object until the possessed either dies or is freed through an outside force. Possession is not all-powerful, and often is limited by set rules that the author establishes through the progression of the plot. These rules may be altered in the future but often are the ‘means to an end’ in terms of stopping the conflict of the plot. An example of this is present in Don Mancini’s *Child’s Play* (1988) in which Chucky can only *truly* be killed if the plastic he is possessed to is destroyed. Another

example is the Angel in *Midnight Mass* (2021) burning up in the sunlight off-screen, as it is its weakness in the show. In *The Exorcist* (1973) Pazuzu promptly entering Father Karras's body upon being verbally given entry is another form of this 'rule following'.

In *Midnight Mass* (2021) we see the daily offering serve as the vehicle for the vampire disease which possesses the host's soul with a thirst for blood. This is a perverse inversion of the Eucharistic host, as we will see in the next chapter, Chapter 3. The daily offering is shown to be blood from the Angel's body in Book Three, "*Proverbs*". The blood is fast working, as in Book One, "*Genesis*", the characters already begin to transform such as through Riley's mother Annie Flynn in which Annie starts to take her glasses off and dance around the room. This is an example of the monstrous other, as seen through the drastic changes in those who become infected with the disease from the Angel's blood. When tracking the lifespan of the disease in the host, typically the host ingests the blood as seen through Book One, "*Genesis*", example above, and in Book Three, "*Proverbs*", when Father Paul randomly dies, we see the next stage in the vampirism process. There is no explanation for Father Paul's death, outside of fluttering 'ifs' like Bev's poison or the disease itself. Once Father Paul dies, and has ingested enough of the blood, he is resurrected. From this point on, Father Paul's actions are centered around the blood of others, despite his Christian leadership position, as seen through his attack on Joe in Book Four, "*Lamentations*". Eventually, if enough time were to pass without dying, it could be assumed that Father Paul and his infected congregation could turn into something like the Angel.

The disease also has several other characteristics, such as giving the host nocturnal pupils that glow in the dark. The disease also provides sensualism that is unlike anything a typical human could experience, as characters infected with the disease can see and feel senses foreign to the typical human body. It is not shown in the miniseries, but it can be inferred that if the host was able to live as long as the Angel that Father Hill finds then a true infection would take form in which you physically change such as the Angel possibly has through an extended period underground. Speaking on the Angel, another ability the Angel possesses that may be attributed to its tenure as a creature would be its ability to mimic voices for predatory purposes as seen when Bowl enters the abandoned building in Book Two "*Psalms*". Once infected the host develops superhuman healing abilities which correct any abnormalities in the body before infection such as pregnancies, paralysis, eyesight, and even cognitive diseases. The disease even completely removes any signs of Erin Greene's (Kate Seigel) pregnancy. Transformation does not impact the personality of the host, which is important to clarify, as even after infection some of the residents can see the error of their ways and put an end to the covenant forming within the church. The false faith that Father Hill and his clergy possessed allowed them to act gruesomely to others through their newfound powers. These powers that the infected host receives perfectly represent the alien other. It is not human to have superhuman healing, the ability to grow wings, or the ability to live seemingly forever. These features distance the other from human beings, and when the element of religion is added atop it becomes further complicated as the religious folk may confuse the monstrous, alien, other for a false god in a Christian world. This will be further discussed

in Chapter 3, but there is no doubt that the monstrous other is paramount to the horror in *Midnight Mass* (2021). The lack of understanding or clarity in the monstrous other's actions is petrifying: the monster clearly is aware of his actions and despite this power imbalance the humans still engage with this entity on the loose guise of religion. The lack of clarity in this area allows the audience to come to their own conclusions in terms of the creature's intentions, which is far more terrifying thought than anything the director could curate for an audience. Another area in which horror is contained and eventually released upon audiences is through the setting the terror occurs in.

The third feature of horror, the setting, is paramount to the plot. The medieval castle became a sinister scene in which the story unfolded. The first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, features a castle that serves as a maze, once inside the characters become isolated and endangered. The castle seems to almost have a mind of its own: passageways may suddenly appear or disappear, secret paths may exist, and parts of the castle may fall or break as a reaction to outside events. The castle is filled with darkness and lacks any amenities to make the castle welcoming. The nature of the castle means that sometimes people may go mad inside, or have their darkest elements brought to the light, and turn on their companions. In many ways, the setting reflects the psyche of the antagonist of *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred, as Manfred's claim to the castle is illegitimate and his use of power is borderline dictatorship. Just as the gloomy castle is falling apart, withering away, Manfred, his relationships, and his control of the castle are too withering away. This became a gothic feature through the repetition of this type of isolated setting being used in gothic literature. The setting of a Gothic plot typically

features isolation from the public, confined spaces, secret pathways, gloomy atmosphere, and the plot typically takes place at night, when something is lurking in the shadows.

Another Gothic text that features a profound sense of setting is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The setting in Mary Shelley's novel switches frequently: the tundra of the Arctic, Geneva, and Ingolstadt. Despite these varied locations, the setting is always isolated and features few people. This allows the creature ample room to scare the reader while Dr. Frankenstein attempts to avoid his creation. The terror would not be as powerful if the creature had to kill a town of people before getting to Dr. Frankenstein, and in this sense, the action and horror must take place far away from the eyes of civilians and those unaffected by the wraith of the creature. A final example is Robert Louis Stevenson's modern novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which features a disjointed London jam-packed with people in ghetto apartment buildings, a pseudo-science. Distrust and overcrowding lead to shadow personalities forming, or multiple as suggested in the case of Dr. Jekyll, which brings about a series of horrific crimes in a poverty-stricken London neighborhood.

In cinema, the ordinary can become sinister. James B. Twitchell permeates this point in his study, *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture* when he states, "The outer world reinforced this sense of foreboding: castles, ruins, cliffs, passageways, the earth opening beneath our feet, secret towers, and most of all darkness ... death, is always obsessively present, but sexual violation lurks in the shadows and plays a much more important part" (Twitchell 148). The setting often is not what it would seem, as is the case of films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) in which a Satanic cult thrives

in a seemingly normal place like an apartment building. Settings like Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) feature the commercial spaceship 'Nostromo' which harbors an unknown evil within its many nooks, crannies, and passageways. The inclusion of the unknown, along with a mysterious setting like a spaceship, allows for the audience to constantly be in suspense wherever they are on the ship: is the creature in a vent, or is he directly above me?



Fig. 10: A broadened view of the setting of *Midnight Mass* (2021), Crockett Island.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Midnight Mass (2021) updates the Gothic castle for the isolated island of Crockett Island. Whether it be an isolated island as in *Midnight Mass* (2021) or a populated ghetto like in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) the setting plays a considerable role in how the horror is shown to audiences. The setting is the creature's playground, and the different objects that inhabit this location are used to elevate or deescalate the horror that will happen on screen. Crockett Island in its current state could be described as the nap that the island never woke up from: what was once a prosperous fishing island is now a semi-abandoned remote island. A subplot point revolves around Bev Keane convincing island folk to accept settlement money from an oil company

which ultimately leads to the company poisoning the waters of Crockett Island. Between the coming of the times and the oil company's blunder, Crockett Island, "This isn't a community anymore... this is a ghost", as Riley's mother states in the first episode of the series (Flanagan, Book 1: "*Genesis*", 22:08-22:15). This 'ghost' or island homes several families that are a part of Crockett's semi-functioning economy, those who are left are desperately clinging to what was once left. Despite the decay of Crockett, people like Erin return to this 'ghost' because of ghosts of their own devices like Erin running away or Riley coming back to figure things out for himself.

Erin Greene ran away from Crockett Island when she turned sixteen, evading her abusive mother, to pursue life as a film star. Erin then ends up in an abusive relationship with her new husband she meets and subsequently returns to Crockett Island abandoning the child of the failed marriage. Despite Erin's mother dying before the show starts, Erin has quickly taken her mother's role and even her house, all while attempting to move on. Erin's abusive relationship is mirrored by the abusive relationship the Church has with the island. Similarly, Riley, Erin's high school love interest, also is returning to this 'ghost' for personal reasons: Riley was a successful trader before killing a young girl in a DUI accident, which sent him to prison. While in prison, Riley went to work on researching all Gods to find one who could alleviate his soul: he found nothing (Flanagan, Book 2: "*Psalms*", 46:00-49:00). Although Riley is raised a Christian, he does not see the point in it and often finds the human error in most religious organizations as shown through his talks with Father Paul (49:40). Both characters leave the island running from something and eventually return after their original journey does not go as

planned. The return not only gives the two characters room to grow and break free of the immaturities that once held them down but also accept their lives and past trauma for what they truly are. The return, and subsequent sacrifice, give Riley the opportunity to become the Gothic, and Byronic, hero that Crockett Island needs to kickstart the fall of the vampiric coven, instead of permanently staying a villain, in his mind, after his DUI accident.

The setting, on a large scale, is on the verge of detrimental change and so are its inhabitants before the “demon” even comes into play. An example of setting on a small scale in *Midnight Mass* (2021) would be the abandoned house that the Angel inhabits until it is nighttime. In episode 2, the Angel lures the local drug dealer Bowl into the abandoned house to never leave again. The dark location serves to hide the Angel from the island folk similar to his cave near Jerusalem. The setting of Crockett Island is pertinent to the horror of the miniseries, as it serves to isolate the cast from civilization while their religious revival occurs. The ferries into the real world are limited daily and are dependent upon transportation and fuel. Without either of these things, a person would either row to civilization, swim, or fly. The Angel’s playground is forcefully taken away from him at the end of the show which ultimately leads to his demise, as he is unable to shelter himself from the sunlight on the island after all the buildings are burned down.

The three features of horror discussed in *Midnight Mass* (2021) are suspense and tension, the monstrous other, and the setting. Through suspense and tension, the audience is reeled in allowing for the horror to be built upon across multiple episodes. The

monstrous other can secretly lurk or violently attack the cast at will, infecting and creating a congregation of vampires on Crockett Island. The setting is paramount to the horror, as shown through the example of the Gothic castle in *The Castle of Otranto*. The setting allows the different game pieces to move around, including the monstrous other who is on the prowl. These three features of horror are adaptable and have been continually shown through various works adding to their credibility in the genre.

Midnight Mass (2021) partakes in the horror genre through the specified traits, but in its insistence on perverting the religious component, like *The Exorcist* (1973), for instance, it places itself in a more select category of film.

Chapter 3: Terror and the Holy: *Midnight Mass* (2021) as a Religious Film

The previous chapter examined how *Midnight Mass* (2021) fits into the Gothic Horror genre through its use of specific characteristics: suspense, fear of the monstrous or alien other, and elements of plot and setting. *Midnight Mass* (2021) joins a more select film genre in combining horror with religious content. We first need to arrive at a general understanding of what a religious film is. We turn to S. Brent Plate who defines “religion,” and by extension a religious film: “Through their myths, rituals, and sacred texts, religions highlight, praise or condemn certain ways of Being in the world” (*Religion and Film* 2017). Another opinion on the matter comes from Douglas E. Cowan’s in his article in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, “The important concept here is yearning ... we continue to believe in the unseen order -- in supernatural phenomena, in counterintuitive agencies such as gods and demons - but we retain an equally strong inclination to believe, an equally powerful desire that these things be true” (“Horror and the Demonic” 414). From these two quotations, we can see that film includes religion to condemn certain actions and express approval for others and offers a criticism of the world as it is.

A religious film, it must also be noted, enjoys a broad spectrum of representation. It may or may not include historical persons (Moses, Christ, Joan of Arc, for instance) or religious figures (priests, nuns, rabbis, and demons, for example). Others may simply ask those ultimate questions about how we live in the world, which is how we will build an understanding of how the spiritual is expressed in film. It is convenient, then, to divide this type of film into three categories. The first consists of films that are overtly religious

through their inclusion of iconography, characters, and narratives that are recognizably associated with a religious belief or system. Overtly religious films often adapt, or at least expand upon, canonized religious stories and themes. A famous example is Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), as it features the story of Moses (Charlton Heston) through the sword-and-sandal style that was popular during the 1950s Hollywood studio system with its contract stars, elaborate costumes and sets, and big box office appeal. *The Ten Commandments* (1956) adapts the Old Testament book of *Exodus*, specifically the story of Moses, although DeMille invented and elaborated to fill in the lacunae present in his Biblical source (*Ex.* Ch. 1-40). As Rebecca Umland and Samuel Umland remark, in his voiceover "preface" to the film DeMille "claims to have depended on texts other than the Bible to construct the story of Moses: The "'ancient texts' of Philo, Josephus, Eusebius, and Rabbinical Midrash" to create what he calls the "missing years of Moses' life—a span of about thirty years from Moses' infancy to maturity that are elided in *Exodus*" (*The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film* 130).

DeMille attempts to remain true to the canonical story while infusing his adaptation with dramatic appeal for his audience. *The Ten Commandments* (1956) focuses on Moses' choice: "He must choose to be the next pharaoh and marry... or turn his back on this opportunity... in favor of remaining with his biological family, who are slaves" (Umland and Umland 134). A religious feature of this film centers on Moses's faith in God despite the obstacles to it -- obstacles that threaten to distance Moses from this faith. Religion is also shown in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) through the inclusion of other, false, religions. As both Umland's assert further, "...one religion displaces

another. The religion of the Egyptian pharaohs is a false one that doesn't acknowledge the "God of the Hebrews." Moses frees his people by demonstrating that his god is more powerful than the pharaoh's" (135). Moses' internal struggle and the trials of the Hebrew people as they traverse the desert are expanded to fit the epic formula of Classic Hollywood. Despite these innovations, the film depicts one of the more famous Old Testament patriarchs and presents the story of the epic exodus out of captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land—an archetypal religious narrative cast in an epic film style, replete with miracles to underscore Moses as the chosen leader, and the Hebrews as God's elect. Moses' staff, for instance, transforms into a snake; the Red Sea is parted to save the Hebrews from the enemy that pursues them. Finally, the burning bush and tablets testify to the reward for faith through miracles.



Fig. 11: The Hebrews look over the parted Red Sea as the Egyptians look to cross.

The Ten Commandments. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Paramount Pictures, 1956.

Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953) in which Marcellus (Richard Burton) must crucify Jesus (Donald C. Klune) after becoming interested in his teachings retains traditional Biblical characters (Christ, Pilate) and a central event (the crucifixion) but then creates its original narrative. The crucifixion is recounted in each of the gospels: *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. The Bible's accounts of the crucifixion are altered from

the original gospels, it is altered to include more entertaining scenes for film (*Mark* 15.15-47, *John* 19.16-42, *Matthew* 27. 26-66, *Luke* 23.24-56). Marcellus is the central character whose dianoia results from his recognition of Jesus's miracles, and his teachings. Eventually, he and his love interest Diana (Jean Simmons) choose to not deny Christ as their savior which results in their execution by the Roman Regime. Through the miracle of the robe, Marcellus yearns for further information. The apparent evils of the curse and of the execution are both significant, but they pale in comparison to the path the pain of the robe leads Marcellus on, as well as his salvation after his martyrdom and Diana's. This film shows a different depiction of religion in the film, as although Marcellus and Diana die for speaking for Jesus, they are seemingly sent to heaven immediately after death, which praises their actions.

A final example is Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014), which depicts another Old Testament patriarch, Noah, and an archetypal event: the Flood (*Genesis* 6:5-22). One innovation is how Noah (Russel Crowe) finds out about the approaching flood: through cryptic dreams instead of being told outright such as in the Bible by God. Noah is overtly indebted to a recognizable religious narrative, although, like *The Robe* (1953) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), it takes liberties with the tyranny of tradition represented in the Biblical text to speak to contemporary audiences. This can be seen explicitly at the end of the film, when Noah undergoes a spiritual conflict that he must resolve which alludes to that of Abraham and Isaac in *Genesis*, in which Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his only son to test Abraham's faith (*Genesis* 22.1-24). A large part of the film is Noah fulfilling God's wishes, which he is never told outright. Despite the differences

between *Noah* (2014) and its Biblical source, a similar outcome is achieved in both endings as Noah can build the arc to withstand the flood. It fuses Noah's story with that of Abraham and Isaacs, and in doing this, multiple tests of faith are shown. Noah's trust in his God, and what he thinks his God wants him to do, incorrectly leads him to almost kill his daughter's baby. Noah believes God wants Ila's (Emma Watson) baby dead after the rain stops while on the arc, but when allowed to kill Ila's child Noah is unable to bring himself to do it. God is silent throughout all of this. Upon forgiving himself for this transgression and taking himself out of the cave he hid himself in, vast rainbows light the sky highlighting a seemingly correct choice being made. Through Noah trusting his faith, despite not ever seeing God or hearing his wishes, and choosing when and when not to act for God's will, Noah depicts the virtues of a religious film through his faith. The three films in this category are examples of overtly religious content while varying in the degree to which they remain faithful to a source text or oral tradition—in these cases, a Judeo-Christian one.

A second category features films that may refer to, say, recognizable religious types and institutions, but not an authoritative historical event or person; instead, they use character typologies or religious allusions, but the plot is not an adaptation of a canonized religious text, and it does not feature a historical religious setting such as *The Robe* (1953) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). For instance, Michael Curtiz's *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), focuses on a Catholic priest, Jerry Connolly (Pat O'Brien), who must convince his one-time childhood friend, Rocky (James Cagney) to play the role of a guilty coward as he faces execution in the electric chair, thus serving as a negative model,

a deterrent for a juvenile gang, the Dead End Kids, in their neighborhood. The film predominantly deals with the underbelly of crime in East Side Manhattan, as Rocky and Jerry attempt to reconcile after a significant childhood event split them up. Rocky's lifestyle is condemned, and he must pretend a coward's death so that he does not lead the children who look up to him towards a similar path, the film intimating this is his redemption. We have a recognizable religious type—in this case, a Roman Catholic priest, and a reference to heavenly beings (“angels”) in the title. The film asks how God may be best served, a timeless spiritual question not specific to any one religion, but this is an original narrative in its particulars and not a specific Biblical one.

In this same category is a religious horror film, Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), which makes use of a known Biblical adversary and his cult following but is set in modern times and invents its narrative. Once the fact that followers of Satan manipulate a young couple to create an anti-Christ child is established, the story takes on a conspiratorial atmosphere in a sequence of events that is purely imaginative. Despite the archetypal evil featured in the film, once Rosemary (Mia Farrow) is impregnated by Satan the suspense in this religious horror film is generated by the decision she must make once the child is born: her maternal instinct (nature) or her religious conviction and revulsion for evil is what creates the dramatic tension. A related question is whether the child is innately evil or can be nurtured and turned to good. Rosemary chooses to raise her child and continue living among the cult who took advantage of her. Rosemary's situation is not fair—she is deceived by her husband, neighbors, and even her

physician—but she has longed for motherhood from the start of the film, an influence that will be apparent in *Midnight Mass* (2021).



Fig. 12: Rosemary (Mia Farrow) approaches the black crib holding her baby, knife in hand.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, 1968.

Evil incarnated in a child is not a new concept, as also seen through William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), in which the urban family is invaded when Regan (Linda Blair), her mother (Ellen Burstyn), and Father Karras (Jason Miller) must battle for Regan's soul against the demon, Pazuzu (Mercedes McCambridge). Once again, evil is shown to have profound power in the human world. As Bryan Stone articulates in his article, "The Exorcist, on the other hand, is a mere spectacle of evil, that intends (as William Blatty himself says) to communicate the notion that supernatural evil exists and that, therefore, so also must supernatural good" (Stone 25). As discussed in the first and second chapters, Pazuzu possesses the ability to do whatever the demon wants, which is terrifying considering the restraint Pazuzu shows when using his powers. Regan is shown to go through tortuous procedures through the hospitals to relieve her of her suffering, but of course, this does not work in the slightest. There are several omens in the film in the beginning scenes which signal that this is not an Earthly evil and something much worse,

such as the archeological dig scene at the start. Religious iconography is on full display in this film as crosses, priests, scripture, and all other forms of religious media are present in this film, especially during the exorcism. None of these things aid Karras and Merrin (Stellan Skarsgard) in their attempts to save Regan. The Holy Water is shown to hurt the demon, but not vanquish it. Outside of the water, the only way Karras keeps the demon at bay, and out of Regan, is through sacrificing himself: allowing the demon entry into his body so he can kill himself before the demon kills Regan. The scene depicts Father Karras's final moments as bittersweet, he now knows good and evil truly do exist. These three films employ recognizable religious types (priests, angels, satanic cults, demons), biblical allusions, and probe the nature of good and evil, faith and doubt, as do those in the first category, but in this case, their narratives are not based on specific individuals or canonical events.

The third category of religious films is broader and more covert than the other two: often films in this category may be called 'spiritual' rather than religious. They ask central questions without the use of religious allusions, characters, or specific events. A film that exemplifies this is Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993). It may not at first appear to be a religious film; yet it asks deeply spiritual questions. The protagonist, Phil (Bill Murray) is caught in a loop, as *Groundhog Day* repeats itself and he must live it over and over due to his spiritual bankruptcy and selfishness, a purgatorial stasis Phil must endure until his anagnorisis, prompted by love for a virtuous woman, redeems him. Phil spends the first half of his iterations acting out of selfishness and over-indulgence, taking advantage of the fact that his actions cannot result in consequences: he robs banks,

has one-night stands, attempts to manipulate situations and people, and even commits suicide. Despite this, Phil awakens the next morning in his hotel. Like Rocky's plight in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), Phil has been making incorrect choices; he is not living a full life. It is only when he lives the day virtuously, and helps others, showing a type of life worth replicating, that Phil can break the loop and move on to February 3rd. Phil does find redemption without help from his love interest, Rita (Andie Macdowell). In showing Phil the attractions that being virtuous can bring, and the futility of acting selfishly in the repeated loops, Phil can break this empty behavior pattern and become a better person with Rita by his side. The film thus asks: for what do we live, and how must we live? Phil learns to recognize the good, love virtue, and feel compassion for others. He becomes a good man through service to a higher ideal, all without a single overtly religious reference.



Fig. 13: Phil (Bill Murray) and Rita (Andie MacDowell) sit and converse one night before the loop resets.

Groundhog Day. Directed by Ramis, Harold. *Groundhog Day*. Columbia Pictures, 1993.

Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) likewise delivers a spiritual story without overt religiosity. It depicts prison-newbie Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) and weathered-convict-veteran Ellis Boyd Redding (Morgan Freeman) as the two survive in Shawshank State Prison. The Warden, Norton (Bob Gunton) embodies a negative

model of corruption, but the real faith and moral change in the film comes through Andy and Red's interactions, Andy changes Red through his many good deeds during his sentence. The Warden uses religion to punish and keep the inmates below himself. Despite the considerate hardships, Andy endures in prison, up to and including sexual assault, despite this Andy remains virtuous. His example transforms Red and inspires him to make a moral change for himself as seen through Red's arrival at the beach at the end of the film. In fulfilling his promise to Andy, arriving on the beach, Red has eradicated his fears of becoming an institutionalized nobody for the remainder of his life, as it had been before Andy showing up at Shawshank State Prison.



Fig. 14: Red (Morgan Freeman) sits anew on the island after following through with his end of the deal.

The Shawshank Redemption. Directed by Frank Darabont. Columbia Pictures, 1994.

Like *Groundhog Day* (1993), this film asks how to recognize the virtuous, and what is valuable in life. It emphasizes hope, the capacity to transform and find “redemption” as its title suggests, in unlikely places. It delivers this spiritual message without overt religious characters, types, or events. *Midnight Mass* (2021) may be classified as a film like those in the second category. It features a Catholic parish and priest, with its rites and rituals—especially of importance is the eucharist—and it also asks central questions about the nature of faith and doubt, sin and forgiveness, and

perhaps most importantly, free will. It examines a range of beliefs in addition to Roman Catholicism: the sheriff is a practicing Muslim, and other characters are nonbelievers. It uses Biblical allusions and characters, but its story is not tied to an authoritative event or sequence. Two other factors help us understand the appeal of *Midnight Mass* (2021). First, it is in a select category that blends the religious with the horror genre; as a mini-series, its structure and audience are also a consideration when evaluating its success, but this will be the subject of the following chapter.

In his article, Bryan Stone asserts: “From the very beginning, religious themes, stories, and metaphors were prominent in the cinema... This persistent yet ambiguous relationship between religion and film is nowhere more evident than in the case of horror films” (Stone 1). Horror contributes to religious films and vice versa because this combination asks the audience to question their own lives and their permanence. This pattern is not going away, as Stone further states, “Throughout the 20th century, horror film has relied more or less consistently on explicitly religious symbols, allusions, and themes. As we move into the 21st century, there are no indications that this reliance is diminishing; in fact, there is every reason to believe that it may be picking up new steam” (24). Horror in a Religious film reveals a multitude of specific features that are key to making the two subgenres work when combined.

Like religion, horror satisfies the urge to explain the unknowns of life. An example of this specific benefit comes from Bryan Stone’s article when he notes: “This dual movement in horror frequently reveals to us just how thin is the line that separates beauty and terror - and here, of course, is precisely its openness to the religious, what

Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Horror film both interests us and disturbs us by confronting us with the disgusting and the fascinating simultaneously” (4). This confrontation, as Stone identifies, is what makes the religious film terrifying. Stone shows four ways that this confrontation is shown in religious films when he states, “[the] four dimensions of human experience where this confrontation occurs - (1) nature, (2) the psyche, (3) the body, and (4) the supernatural” (5). Chief among the supernatural, and prominent in Christian religion, Stone highlights the influence of Satan and the demonic on horror when he states, “...the release of *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968 followed by *The Exorcist* in 1973 and *The Omen* in 1976 (as well as their inevitable sequels) marked a significant transformation in the horror genre, a new openness to the supernatural and to explicitly religious themes. More than half of all films made about Satan were released in the last twenty years, though admittedly many of these have been comedies such as the recent *Bedazzled* (2000), *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999), and *Little Nicky* (2000).

To understand the religious features of *Midnight Mass* (2021) a brief review of the plot itself will be helpful. Mike Flanagan’s *Midnight Mass* (2021) begins with the manslaughter-DUI arrest of Riley Flynn (Zach Gilford), the prodigal son of Crockett Island. After serving his prison sentence of four years, Riley returns to the island with an uncertain future. Riley’s ex-girlfriend from high school also returns to the island, Erin Greene (Kate Siegel), and takes over her mother’s old house, taking a position as the schoolteacher for the island. In the opening, Erin is pregnant but has fled an abusive boyfriend for the child’s safety. The last new identity to arrive at Crockett Island is Father

Paul Hill (Hamish Linklater), who is also the miraculously transformed elder priest of Crockett: Monsignor Pruitt. The young incarnation of Monsignor Pruitt arrives with a trunk, transporting it laboriously to his home, the rectory behind the church.

The elder Monsignor Pruitt we learn had been in Jerusalem on a pilgrimage, absent-mindedly he wandered into the desert, stumbling upon a cave that earths what Pruitt believes to be an Angel. The creature, a type of vampire, takes advantage of Pruitt's confusion, and preys upon the deluded priest, who then becomes a vampire himself. Pruitt, awakening much younger with restored health, is convinced he now has an Angel in his legion, so he returns to Crockett Island as Father Hill to spread what he perceives to be God's blessing on his flock.

The island of Crockett decays around its inhabitants. A storm that night ravages the surviving houses, keeping the folks inside, Riley believes he sees Pruitt wandering out in the storm. Awakening the next morning, Sheriff Hassan (Rahul Kohli) and the other townsfolk investigate the beachline after finding the corpses of all the island's stray cats whose blood has been drained. The event is a mystery. Under the disguise of Father Paul Hill, Monsignor Pruitt works his way around the island getting close to people he already knows, infecting the eucharist with the Angel's blood, and attempting to insert what he perceives to be 'God's blessing' upon the island. Riley and Pruitt agree to meet for Riley's weekly AA meetings on the island, so Riley can avoid having to attend counseling on the mainland.

A series of mysterious events occur. Leeza, paralyzed and unable to walk, stand, and take her communion: a miracle has been performed. Riley and Dr. Sarah Gunning are

the only people skeptical of this miracle on the island. A montage then shows the other island inhabitants unknowingly showing the effects of the tainted communion as they feel youthful and energetic. Mildred Gunning (Alex Essoe), Pruitt's secret lover who now has dementia has become specifically more cognizant and alert after partaking in Hill's special communions brought to her bedside.

Monsignor Pruitt kills Joe Collie (Robert Longstreet), a townsman, and drinks his blood through the night. Bev Keane finds him the following morning and helps him cover the crime. Another mystery, a kind of reverse immaculate conception, is that the child in Erin's womb simply disappears. Erin and Riley meet after this discovery is made and have a long conversation about the nature of death and what happens after we die. This is a key moment in what *Midnight Mass* (2021) has to say about faith, as we shall see. Following Father Hill and Riley's typical AA meeting, Riley is attacked by the Angel. When he awakens, Pruitt informs Riley of his vampirism, and what is happening on the island. Riley does not accept his new gift and instead sacrifices himself in front of Erin at daybreak, so that she will believe his story about becoming infected with the disease and try to save the island.

Erin returns and meets with Dr. Sarah Gunning and forms an alliance with those who understand the evil on the island. At a midnight mass, Monsignor Pruitt reveals his true identity, and "the Angel" appears, and mayhem begins as a result of the infected eucharist. Factions emerge: those who feast on human blood, those who resist, and the few who recognize their error and repent. Their individual fates are determined by the dawn.

There is a range of cues in film that signify whether a film can be considered religious, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter the questions asked pertain to the iconography it employs, and the ideas it uses. Unlike a religious film, a religious horror film does *not* always explicitly state or disown a way of living like Father Jerry and Rocky in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). Rosemary must make a difficult decision in fostering the devil's child after her nightmarish encounter. Father Karras must sacrifice himself to save Regan, once his faith has been confirmed through Pazuzu's evil. The 'right way' that religion often highlights is often long gone by the time the demonic has entered the lives of the cast. In the case of Regan, the evil invades her body through a pseudonym "Mister Howdy" which further reinforces the idea of not being able to distinguish what is evil and good in the modern world. This questioning is often a profound point of religious films. What is the right way in the flawed modern world?

Mike Flanagan's *Midnight Mass* (2021) has a plot structure that enables it to raise religious questions in the seven-episode miniseries. For instance, each of the seven episodes is named after a book of the Bible inviting a consideration of what connection may be made between the Biblical stories from these books and the contents of the miniseries. The specificity becomes more apparent when examining which are Old and New Testament books. The episodes of the show are titled as follows: Book I: "*Genesis*", Book II: "*Psalms*", Book III: "*Proverbs*", Book IV: "*Lamentations*", Book V: "*Gospel*", Book VI: "*Acts of the Apostles*", and Book VII: "*Revelation*". These books are split by Old and New Testament, as the first four episodes are titled after Old Testament books and the last three episodes are titled after New Testament books. In the New Testament,

the four Gospels are identified as those of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. John is also attributed as the author of *Revelation*.

How does the Biblical book chosen as a title for each episode inform our understanding of it? The titles and the books they are named after reflect each episode's trajectory and how the characters are impacted. First when reviewing the Bible, the Old Testament can be seen as prophesying the messages to come to fruition in the New Testament through the birth and death of Christ. That makes the New Testament fulfilling, as it fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. This process of prophecy followed by fulfillment can also be seen in *Midnight Mass* (2021) through the first four Old Testament-titled episodes which feature prophecies about the ending of the series, and the subsequent fulfillment that comes through the final three New Testament-titled episodes culminating in the apocalypse of the final episode. *Genesis* in the Bible marks the inception of evil, additionally, in *Midnight Mass* (2021) it also marks the return to the island. *Psalms* are attributed to being written by King David, who was once a sinner and was redeemed through his journey to the crown. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article pertaining to *Psalms*, *Psalms* are words of praise and there are roughly 150 hymns in the book of *Psalms* ("*Psalms*"). Similarly, Book II: "*Psalms*" in *Midnight Mass* (2021) marks the false praise of evil through the tainted eucharist. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* identifies *Proverbs* as "...Wisdom" ("*Proverbs*"). *Midnight Mass* (2021) depicts wisdom through the third book, "*Proverbs*" as the origin of Father Hill's arrival is revealed. The fourth book in the miniseries, "*Lamentations*" depicts Erin lamenting over the disappearance of her child from her womb. The loss of the child is highlighted through

the increased intake in the tainted eucharist. Riley and Erin lament over their pasts and their eventual demise. The fifth book of the miniseries, "*Gospel*" radiates the gospel of Father Hill's tainted eucharist through Riley's vampirism and his spreading of the gospel. Riley spreads this gospel through letters and informing Erin on the boat. In the Bible, the Gospel refers to the four Gospels, as mentioned earlier, and their depictions of the life and death of Jesus Christ. The Gospels reflect the life of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and similarly, Book V: "*Gospel*" depicts the actions of Riley before he sacrifices his life to save the island. The sixth book of the miniseries, "*Acts of the Apostles*" depicts the times immediately after Riley's sacrifice and how Erin can band together a rebellion against the vampiric congregation on the island. This book also features heavy religious allusions to the Biblical book of *Acts*. The book of *Acts* depicts Jesus Christ's ascension to heaven, and as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* notes: "To the wondering witnesses St. Peter explains the great miracle... By that great discourse many were converted to the religion of Christ and were baptized" ("*Acts of the Apostles*"). Just like Christ, Riley ascends to heaven and is forgiven by the young woman he kills in his DUI accident. Erin explains her witnessing of Riley's death, as St. Peter, but also Monsignor Pruitt reveals his identity, and the Angel's, which once again emanates that of St. Peter. Pruitt's sermon turns many towards the tainted eucharist, like St. Peter's discourse. The final book of the miniseries, "*Revelation*" depicts the end times of Crockett Island and the judgment of all on the island. Like the Biblical book of the same name, both are conclusive and serve to rectify the prophecies of the earlier episodes. The New Testament episodes fulfill the prophecies and movements of the first four episodes

which act as the Old Testament. The first four episodes build upon different miracles, omens, and events which serve to become unraveled in the final three episodes. These miracles and omens are built up, and then subsequently exposed and resolved in the last three episodes in which the townsfolk choose sides and prepare for battle for the island. This uniformity and pacing allow for the episode titles, and what is entailed in each episode, to become religious themes for the miniseries.



Fig. 15: The first of many miracles, Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) offers Leeza (Annarah Cymone) her communion from atop the steps, making her realize her powers, and stand up, to get her communion.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Religious horror films ask the viewer a variety of thematic questions which differ from the questions directors ask their audience in other film genres. Examining the questions a religious film asks its audience to answer, especially considering *Midnight Mass* (2021) and the religious questions its director Mike Flanagan proposes, highlights what makes a religious film unique. These questions become even more pointed when taking the religious horror subgenre into account. The shift from a religious film to a religious horror film constricts the topics addressed to include *punitive* depictions of religion, such as Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) as Rosemary's soul and fate are sealed the moment she decides to mother her son, the Antichrist. In showing how things

could ‘go wrong’, a religious horror film gives the viewer a depiction of how things can turn out if they are selfish and not virtuous. Where religious films often depict the protagonist acquiring selfless traits, and becoming virtuous, a religious horror film often depicts what happens when one is *not* virtuous. Although not all these questions directly relate to horror, all do relate to religion and more specifically Catholicism. These are essential questions any religion may ask, or provide input on, and interestingly these are most likely the questions Riley Flynn asked himself while in prison serving reading and ruminating on the subject, similar to Flanagan’s own experiences with religion as we will discuss later (“Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in “Midnight Mass””). These questions are often not explicitly answered, and in the case of *Midnight Mass* (2021) a few central questions are being asked across the seven-episode miniseries. What is faith, what is free will, what happens when evil appears as an apparent good, and what are the conditions of salvation and forgiveness? Various approaches and answers are considered by a range of characters, but Flanagan’s ultimate episode arrives at some closure.

Faith, the foundation of a religion, is shown in a multitude of ways throughout Flanagan’s *Midnight Mass* (2021). Another feature that works in tandem is that of doubt about faith in the miniseries. Where faith is placed is paramount for the souls on Crockett Island. Monsignor Pruitt put his faith in the Angel, believing it to be a part of God’s legion, only to be severely mistaken. Pruitt’s correction of his mistake by trying to correct the congregation he misled shows how he *truly* felt he was doing good, and once it became apparent he was not, he realigned his faith, willingly accepting the consequences of his actions. Another example of false faith comes through the Scarboroughs, and

subsequently the island's inhabitants, mistaken faith in the vampiric disease that cures Leeza. Wade Scarborough (Michael Trucco) states, in response to Dr. Sarah Gunning's (Annabeth Gish) request to see a mainland doctor for testing, "It feels wrong, doesn't it? To interrogate a miracle? Second guess a gift from God" (Flanagan, Book III: "*Proverbs*", 7:25-7:29). Bev Keane articulates a similar tune towards any attempts to investigate the happenings on the island. This false faith is punished at the end of the miniseries, in Book VII: "*Revelation*", through the Scarborough parents' demise in the sunlight through their false faith in the Angel, Monsignor Pruitt, and Bev Keane. The faith of the Scarborough parents is solely self-serving. The miniseries also takes advantage of featuring allusions to major Biblical events that inspire faith. Similar to Leeza's miracle, the miracle of Lazarus in the book of *John* also created a stir that raised faith around the miracle (*John* 11.38-44). People who lack faith see the miracles and cannot believe their eyes, whether it is a paralyzed girl walking or a dead man being raised. A final example of a miracle that inspired faith in the Bible comes through the book of *Matthew* in which Christ feeds five thousand individuals (*Matthew* 14.13-21). Although religion asks for blind faith, faith is increased through miracles as this is how the word is spread which becomes the gospel.

An example of faith shown overtly in the series comes from Riley and Erin's discussion about the afterlife in Book IV: "*Lamentations*". Their discussion talks directly about faith, and where the characters have their faith before the final act of the story as the series crosses into its New Testament 'books'. Riley expresses his *doubt* in the afterlife, articulating, "My brain activity ceases and there is nothing left of me"

(Flanagan, Book IV: “*Lamentations*”, 30:34-30:38). Riley shows doubt in an afterlife, outside of what his body produces as it sends him off into nothing. A significant portion of Riley’s monologue is spent talking about the withering of his body. Notably, Riley’s philosophy on death has an end: Riley does not believe in an afterlife. On the other hand, Erin’s faith has been tested that same day, as her child has mysteriously disappeared from her womb after being pregnant for months. Despite this, Erin describes death and entry into heaven as, “...being wrapped in a feeling of love” (34:56-34:58). Despite an abusive mother and boyfriend, she imagines the child being raised quickly to age 7 -- the age of reason. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the age of reason is, “...that period of human life at which persons are deemed to begin to be morally responsible. This, as a rule, happens at the age of seven” (“*Age of Reason*”). The Biblical allusions to Erin’s depiction of her child cannot be denied. Erin’s discussion revolves around her daughter’s entry into heaven and all of the gained family around her (Flanagan, Book IV: “*Lamentations*”, 35:01-35:12). The differences between Erin and Riley’s philosophies on faith can be broken down into whether you are alone after you die, as Erin says that in Heaven “You are loved, and you aren’t alone” (36:07-36:10).

An important distinction should be made here, as Erin’s philosophy changes drastically at the end of the miniseries in Book VII: “*Revelation*”. In a strange turn of events, as Erin lies dying after being attacked by the Angel, the conversation from Book IV: “*Lamentations*” regarding faith plays out again, but Erin and Riley have switched conversational positions. Erin’s new monologue in this episode differs heavily from what she said in the first philosophical monologue in Book IV: “*Lamentations*” (50:50-50:53).

In Erin’s monologue in Book VII: “*Revelation*”, God is not mentioned once in her monologue at the end as she lay dying, she does mention scientific terms such as electrons, matter, energy, and surprisingly Erin addresses anamnesis when she states, “just by remembering, I’m returning home. And it’s like a drop of water falling back into the ocean of which it’s always been a part” (Book VII: “*Revelation*”, 50:00-52:55). This shift is significant. In this climactic moment, Erin abandons her faith in place of anamnesis. The reason for this shift could come from editing of the script, either on Flanagan’s or *Netflix*’s part, but this has never been addressed, and seemingly never will considering Flanagan and *Netflix*’s rocky business relationship which fell out in 2023, with Flanagan moving to the *Amazon Prime* streaming platform, more on this will come in ensuing chapters. Notably, Erin’s talk of reincarnation differs heavily from what Riley says in Book IV: “*Lamentations*” when Riley discusses his philosophy on death. Erin’s shift in faith is unexpected and unaddressed. Erin does not mention her child which dominated the first conversation, and she does not mention God. Unlike Erin’s first description of heaven, filled with companionship, she now lies dying alone in the field as the chaos slowly dies down around her. Despite this, now, Erin is at peace.

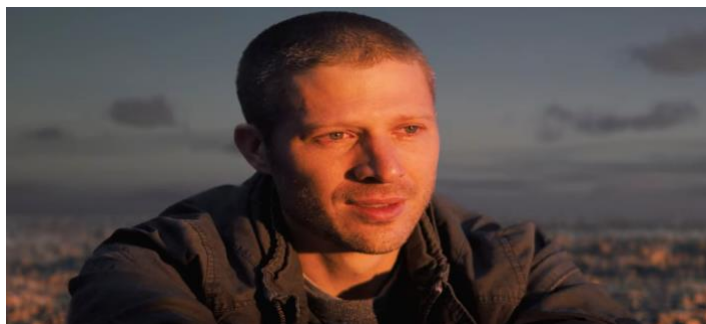


Fig. 16: Riley (Zach Gilford) sits aboard the boat as the Sun rises with Erin (Kate Siegel), he forgives himself for his past mistakes.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Free will is paramount to autonomy. Do we follow the crowd, or do we trust our judgment? Adam and Eve tested free will in the first Biblical chapter: *Genesis*. Similarly, in *Midnight Mass* (2021), the first episode titled Book I: “*Genesis*” also deals with this idea of free will, but this will not be resolved until several episodes later. In the second episode, “*Psalms*”, when having an AA meeting with Riley, Father Paul Hill states, “Alcohol isn’t good or bad. Not itself. But it’s people” (Flanagan, Book II: “*Psalms*”, 47:13-47:15). The quote itself perfectly emanates the idea of free will, as well as other things that the people end up mistaking to be a higher authority, like the Angel. People have free will to follow what they want and give power to whoever, whether it is alcohol or a vampiric entity. This is why God does not intervene on the island, it is up to the island residents to decide their fate through their choices. An example of a character who must make a choice that will impact their soul is Riley Flynn. Riley must return to his home island, the black sheep of his family after serving prison time for a DUI that killed a young girl years before. Riley’s character arc revolves around free will, and his ability to overcome the insatiable desire for blood after becoming infected with vampirism. In Book IV: “*Lamentations*”, Riley is infected by the Angel and quickly realizes the hunger for blood is hard to resist. Despite this, in Book V: “*Gospel*” Riley does exercise restraint, and finally sacrifices himself in front of Erin to ensure the island will rebel against the vampiric congregation forming on Crockett Island. From the previous conversation between Riley and Erin about faith, we know it is difficult for Riley to have faith in a divine calling, and yet, when presented with the opportunity to do the right or wrong thing Riley chooses to sacrifice himself to save everyone else. It is possible that seeing

the demon made Riley change his mind. Riley's arc displays that we have free will over our actions, Flanagan directly answers this question through Riley's choice to not partake in the vampiric delights. This choice is reflected through the many others on the island in Book VII: "*Revelation*" in which several of the inhabitants also make their choice to not partake and instead choose to die when the sun rises. Riley's father reflects this when he tells his wife, "I thought it was something they really couldn't help... But, it isn't Annie... Whatever this is, it don't change who you are" (Flanagan, Book VII: "*Revelation*", 22:48-23:12). Flanagan shows that free will is possible even when there is extreme temptation present. Although the physical bodies of those who had the vampirism in their bodies are dead, their final actions served to forgive them for their transgressions in choosing to die and not continue being a vampire. The final antagonist, the evil sophist Bev Keane, can only dig a hole, her choice was never to serve the good of others.



Fig. 17: Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) and the Angel (Quinton Boisclair) address the congregation after revealing the Angel's presence, as well as the process of transformation, to the church.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Flanagan's depiction of forgiveness is shown throughout *Midnight Mass* (2021), specifically through the drama of the inhabitants of the island. In the final episode, Book

VII: “*Revelation*”, all who partook in the vampiric sacrament burn in the sunlight, but only some suffer eternally. Those who feel remorse and act empathetically in their last moments after becoming a vampire *do not* spend eternity in hell, the characters’ supposed salvation can be seen through their acceptance of their deaths. For example, Monsignor Pruitt and his family sit and enjoy their final moments together as a family, while the manipulative Bev Keane attempts to escape her judgment. The next step in forgiveness, salvation, comes after forgiveness has been achieved and highlights the ‘correct’ way to live a virtuous life. Leeza Scarborough’s paralysis came from a hunting accident in which a drunken Joe Collie shot her in the back by mistake. In the third episode, “*Proverbs*”, Leeza *marches* into Joe’s trailer to reprimand him for being so ridden with guilt even after Leeza can walk and tells him she forgives him. Leeza forgives Joe for an unforgivable action; it is one of the first things she does with her returning autonomy. This allows Collie to find forgiveness within himself and attend AA meetings on the island before he is murdered by Father Hill.

Monsignor Pruitt also is another depiction of forgiveness in the miniseries, especially when compared to his counterpart Bev Keane, as Pruitt genuinely believes he is bringing a heavenly angel to the island to save the others just as he had been saved. In the seventh episode, “*Acts of the Apostles*”, as Pruitt looks upon the soured fruits of his congregation, he admonishes Bev, “It’s never supposed to be about me, it’s supposed to be about *God*” (Flanagan, Book VI: “*Acts of the Apostles*”, 31:27-31:34). Pruitt shows that although he was mistaken, badly, he still can recognize that this is not the true way to heaven and joins the contrite in repentance. The other congregation members who also

choose to not try and hide from the sun and instead die are also forgiven. Monsignor Pruitt experiences a moment of dianoia and makes amends for what he did wrong, in a traditional Christian faith, Monsignor Pruitt has reached forgiveness and started to live changed after acknowledging his original error. Their actions determine their outcome based on virtue. The people of Crockett Island face their Armageddon, some are contrite and we assume their souls are saved though their bodies burn.

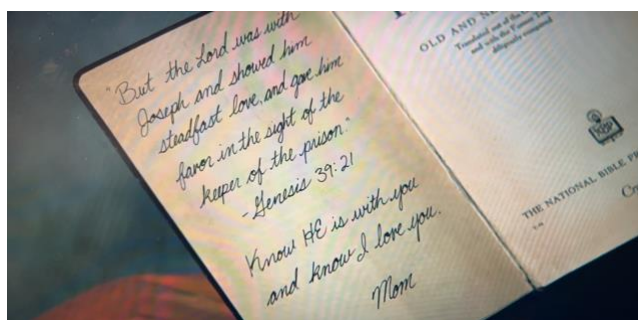


Fig. 18: The Bible that Riley's mother (Kristin Lehman) gives to Riley (Zach Gilford) in Book I: "Genesis".

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

Forgiveness is also shown through Riley Flynn, and his overarching character dynamic as the show progresses. Riley starts in a state of depression: just finishing his jail sentence, unable to forgive himself for his mistake. Riley's guilt manifests through the ghost of the young woman whom he killed, who now stares at him while he sleeps every night. The ghost is covered in glass and bloody, just like the night she died. Riley inadvertently gets infected with vampirism and has to choose whether to join Monsignor Pruitt and his vampire congregation, as their first real member, or to warn those around him. Riley chooses to write letters warning people and in Episode V: "Gospel", Riley chooses to end his own life by being outside when the sun rises in front of Erin in the middle of the water. Riley sacrifices himself to save the rest of the island and show proof

of their vampiric weakness. Upon dying, Riley is reunited with an at-peace ghost of the girl whom he killed, showing he has forgiven himself and even, perhaps, found grace.

A final example of forgiveness is visible through Riley's incarceration in the first episode of the miniseries. Riley's start in the first episode of the miniseries emanates from Joseph's struggle in the Biblical book of "*Genesis*" when the Bible states, "But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison" (*Gen* 39.21). Joseph is wrongly imprisoned and loses his high status in the process. Although Riley did indeed commit his crime, the Bible that his mother leaves to him in his cell in the first episode, Book I: "*Genesis*" highlights that neither God, nor Riley's mother has abandoned him because of his mistake (Flanagan, Book I: "*Genesis*", 3:03-3:05). The Bible in the scene even features this quote, showing Flanagan is not overt in the connection he makes between Riley to Joseph. Another example of forgiveness, in the Biblical sense, comes through the final episode, Book VII: "*Revelation*", in which judgment is cast upon the Crockett Island residents for their actions. Those who stayed true to their virtue are saved, and corrected, while those who were selfish are punished and sent to hellfire. The judgment cast on Crockett Island heavily emanates from the Biblical book of *Revelation*, written by an author who identifies himself as John. The eschatology of this final book is a vision of judgment with Christ's second coming. Those who made mistakes, and repented, are saved. Those who did not repent, or attempted to lead a virtuous life with the time they had left are sent to Hell. Examples of minimal or passing allusions are present in almost every episode, whether through the bent scripture of Bev Keane or the hymns Monsignor Pruitt preaches

through mass. The significance of the religious allusions present in *Midnight Mass* (2021) can be seen through the ending of the story and the impact it has on each character in the miniseries. One final example of this can be seen through the Adam and Eve of the new world at the end of Book VII: “*Revelation*” as Leeza and Warren Flynn (Igby Rigney) escape Crockett Island by boat to avoid infection. Leeza and Warren’s survival alludes to the fresh start Adam and Eve were given in the Biblical book of *Genesis* (*Gen 2.7*). Leeza’s miracle is reversed, she becomes paralyzed again signifying the return to normalcy. The demon is exiled.



Fig. 19: Leeza (Annarah Cymone) confronts and reprimands Joe Collie (Robert Longstreet) for paralyzing her and letting his guilt manifest in his alcoholism. She forgives him.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

An apparent good is something that detracts from the virtues that religion would encourage. Apparent goods are a major part of *Midnight Mass* (2021). Several components of the downfall of Crockett Island can be attributed to things that are not as they originally seem. Father Paul Hill, the de-aged and disguised Monsignor Pruitt, represents an apparent good through the guise of a young priest. Pruitt enters the island with complete anonymity despite his knowledge of everyone on the island. Through this disguise, Pruitt can spread his influence through the tainted eucharist the congregation

consumes at each church service. This works on many levels with Pruitt as the priest's trust in the Angel comes from the priest's first encounter with the Angel, which heavily emanated from the Biblical story of Jacob and the angel in "*Genesis*". The elderly Monsignor Pruitt finds the Angel in the Jerusalem cave in Book III: "*Proverbs*" (Flanagan, Book III: "*Proverbs*", 57:07-57:17). This scene alludes to the Biblical chapter of "*Genesis*" in which Jacob wrestles with an angel and is given a miracle. This is why the priest believes he has seen an angel, but again, it is fake.

Monsignor Pruitt's trip to Jerusalem alludes to Jacob's encounter with an angel in the Bible. In Book III: "*Lamentations*", Monsignor Pruitt views his trip to Jerusalem and his vampirism as something like the story of how Saul became Paul (*Acts* 9.18-19). Monsignor Pruitt is mistaking his vampirism as salvation from the life he was once living. This mistake is once again an ironic inversion of another Biblical phenomenon. Just like Paul, Saul wanders into the desert and is reborn as another with a new purpose. Monsignor Pruitt becomes de-aged, just as Jacob becomes healthy and full of vigor, this explains why he believes the Angel to be beneficial rather than a menace. "*Genesis*" states, "That night Jacob... crossed the ford of the Jabbok. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak" (*Gen.* 33.22-33.26). This scene is popular in Biblical scripture, it has even been painted by famous painters such as Gustav Doré in his painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. In the book of Luke an angel attempts to calm Mary's terror after revealing himself to her, this highlights why

Pruitt was not afraid of the creature upon seeing it, as it shows how an Angel has popped up and terrified religious figures before. In the book of *Luke*, an Angel states, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (*Luke* 1.30). Just as Mary was told to not fear upon seeing the Angel, Monsignor Pruitt must calm himself down with a Biblical story like this as he stands across from an actual creature. Once the Angel breaks this trust, and Pruitt understands he has made a terrible mistake, Pruitt quits working with Bev and the Angel as it is not a holy miracle.



Fig. 20: "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel." *Obelisk Art History*, www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/gustave-dore/jacob-wrestling-with-the-angel/.

The false 'miracles' represent apparent goods through the rejuvenating powers of the vampiric blood in the short term. Communion, or the eucharist, should be purifying but instead, it is creating vampires out of Crockett Island's congregation. The eucharist should heal and nourish the individual, instead, here the tainted eucharist gives off *fake* sensations of healing and nourishment as instead it is killing the victim to complete the transformation into a vampire. The disease makes the host young and corrects their physical and mental disabilities, only so that the host can become an apex predator who hunts and feeds at night. Once the victim dies, and is reborn as a vampire, they cannot go

out into the sunlight without burning to death. The first four episodes of *Midnight Mass* (2021) are prophetic, and much of the notoriety of Father Hill's work comes from his miracles through the Angel's blood. The amount of blood consumed is dependent on how 'infected' one becomes. Monsignor Pruitt drinks the tainted blood until he dies at the end of Book III: "*Lamentations*". After Pruitt dies, he is permanently locked into being a vampire and having vampiric weaknesses. Leeza, on the other hand, only takes the communion in passing and does not pass over so she can recover from her vampiric abilities, which results in Leeza regaining her paralysis after the tainted blood is out of her body. Once the tainted eucharist has left Leeza's body, she is made pure again and loses her ability to walk. The victim is revived through drinking an infected person's blood, but the victim is tainted upon resurrection. The apparent good of resurrection is tainted by the cloaked evil of the thirst for blood. The blood may be nourishing, but it is not satisfying the spiritual needs of the soul, instead, it is satisfying the physical urges of vampirism. Most of *Midnight Mass* (2021) takes place during the Lenten season which is a period of forgiveness and repentance in the Christian religion which revolves around the resurrection of Christ.

The Bible has many instances in which a divine being comes down from heaven and ministers a human being. This is why the Angel in *Midnight Mass* (2021) has such an easy time getting to Crockett Island and infecting so many people, he is misconceived as an Angel of the Lord by Monsignor Pruitt. Pruitt assisting the Angel to Crockett Island through the trunk transportation heavily emanates that of Simon of Cyrene and her assisting Jesus as he carried the cross (*Matthew 27.32*). The Bible is no stranger to

bloodshed and violence in the name of Christianity, and the Angel hides his true intentions from the religious islanders mistake his gifts of life as blessings from God. It would make sense why the islanders, especially those with Biblical knowledge, would be understanding of the Angel. Having not seen a creature so terrifying before would make them scared, but their knowledge of spiritual beings who come from heaven would ease their anxieties about meeting a strange creature. The mistaken allegiance to the vampire carries on for so long because the island thinks the creature is an Angel.

The question of salvation haunts *Midnight Mass* (2021). How does it become attainable in this corrupt world? What separates someone like Bev Keane, who practices religion devoutly and yet acts in bad faith, from someone like Riley who is not religious yet is redeemed through his virtuous actions? Flanagan proposes this question in the very first episode, “*Genesis*”, as Riley gets out of prison having served his time for this DUI manslaughter charge. With an open mind Riley went out in search of salvation in prison, searching out for all religions, having, “...read it all... figured if I was looking for God I should look everywhere” (Flanagan, Book I: “*Genesis*”, 44:43-45:05). Riley encounters many forms of faith on Crockett Island, and many forms of salvation too. Bev Keane serves as the antithesis to the spirit of faith and virtue, Joe Collie takes his version of communion daily only to wake up hungover in the Sheriff’s office, but still finds forgiveness. Riley’s family are true devout Christians in spirit and practice. The viewer gains a better understanding of salvation through Riley’s character arc. Salvation is shown through Erin and Riley’s sacrifices, and the peace they reach after doing something for others to assist in their lives.

In Book V: “*Gospel*” Riley takes Erin out in a boat to witness his death at sunrise after Riley is the first to be made into a vampire by the Angel and Monsignor Pruitt (Flanagan, Book V: “*Gospel*”, 57:54). Riley’s sacrifice ensures that the public will know about the *true* reason for the miracles on the island and that it is not an angel from God’s legion who is blessing the Crockett Island residents. Erin can band up a group of those who also are unable to follow the vampiric congregation’s demands in Book VI: “*Acts of the Apostles*”. Without Riley’s sacrifice at the end of the fifth book, the redemption of the island and its inhabitants would not have been possible at the end of book seven. If Erin had not had the warning, in secrecy, then there may have not been enough time to formulate a group to hinder the congregation’s plans to take the boats and move their false religion to the mainland. The miniseries starts with Riley’s conviction and subsequent return to his home, and the miniseries can only end after Riley’s redemption through his sacrifice as the island is saved before the Angel can assert too much control over the island and eventually the rest of the world. Riley’s sacrifice also alludes to the Biblical sacrifice Jesus makes in the New Testament. The New Testament features four books that each recount the life and death of Jesus Christ from the perspective of the author: *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*. These four books show the sacrifice Jesus makes so that everyone else can continue to live their lives without sin. Those of Jesus’ followers and Riley must sacrifice himself to guarantee that the others can make the correct choice in the future. Riley is not Christlike, but instead, he is a martyr.

For Erin, this salvation comes through her actions in the final episode “*Revelation*” in which Erin cuts holes into the Angel’s wings while he feeds on her. In

cutting holes in the wings, Erin has saved the rest of the world from having to harbor and deal with the Angel should he not make it to safety by sunlight. Erin's salvation is different from Riley's salvation despite their similarities. Erin's faith is seemingly changed just before she dies, as her final monologue shows her speaking what Riley stated from their initial philosophical conversation in Book IV: "*Lamentations*" as mentioned previously in the faith section above. Despite the philosophical change just before death, Erin seemingly dies peacefully after successfully sacrificing herself to ensure the vampiric congregation's plans are foiled. The only religious question that Erin and Riley's character arcs do not address is apparent goods hidden as evil, and through using their lives to save the lives of others, both reach the salvation that they remained faithful to in returning to Crockett Island.

Mike Flanagan combines the religion and horror subgenres to answer the spiritual questions asked in the miniseries. Through the incorporation of horror, the spiritual questions can be turned on their head, allowing the worst outcome to materialize. The question of divine miracles is asked as the islanders are infected with a mysterious vampiric disease. The confusion of the scientific with the holy highlights this worst-possible outcome regarding a spiritual question. Despite this, all is made right in the end as true faith and salvation reign supreme over the superficial status of the Angel and their congregation. Flanagan's depictions of the religious aspects, including the spiritual questions, highlight what makes the religious horror a specific subgenre compared to other subgenres. Including horror often makes the religious topics turn on their head, allowing for a new perspective on otherwise overly used source material.

Religion has been defined in several ways, especially when it is incorporated into film. Critics like Bryan Stone state that religion: “praise or condemn certain ways of Being in the world” (Stone in *Religion and Film*, 2017). The director of *Midnight Mass* (2021) Mike Flanagan himself, states on the matter of spiritualism in Darryn King’s article “Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in ‘*Midnight Mass*’”, “...you’re talking about the afterlife and the soul... We can’t help but be attracted to the idea that death isn’t the end for us... (it is) as much behind our religion as it is behind our horror fiction” (King). The categories of a religious film are what distinguish the extent and opacity at which religious themes are expressed in the film. For example, a film like *Groundhog Day* (1993) fits the third category, as it does not mention any overt religious iconography outside of its spiritualistic message through Phil’s acquisition of virtue and how it corrects the plot’s conflict. On the other hand, category one films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) feature Biblical set pieces alongside religious messages of the afterlife. The overt nature of a category one film distinguishes it from a category two, which features little religious iconography, to three which features none. Through the definition of religion, the categories of a religious film, and examining the film for its religious themes it becomes apparent how the writer/director approaches the religious and introduces spiritual questions. In discerning a director’s intention with a film, one might look to Mike Flanagan himself for what makes a Flanagan film unique to other horror films and series. His talent as a writer/director in this series and how *Midnight Mass* (2021) fits into his oeuvre will be taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: True to Form: *Midnight Mass* (2021) as a Television Miniseries

Cinema is a popular art form dependent on commercialism. Thomas Schatz in his text, *Hollywood Genres*, states: “Film genres... are the result of the material conditions of commercial filmmaking itself, whereby popular stories are varied and repeated as long as they satisfy audience demand and turn a profit for the studios” (Schatz 16). A second important point to recognize is that film is also never the product of a single genius but is dependent on several joint efforts. As such, film and television evolve to find new ways to entertain audiences through the commercialized cinema art form. From silent cinema to sound and CGI one of these creative pursuits can be seen through the televised-miniseries format. Judy and Sandra Berg discuss this recent format of the miniseries from the long-standing series in their article: “A miniseries always has a predetermined number of episodes with a defined beginning, middle, and end, while a series is developed to continue for several seasons with ongoing characters and storylines” (Berg “Rise of the Miniseries”). The miniseries format features a short-episodic style: there is a definitive beginning and end, often the series has few enough episodes to be watched in a few sittings at a time, and the pace is chosen by the viewer. There is an array of advantages and disadvantages to the miniseries formula; this chapter will highlight what makes the miniseries unique as well as why Mike Flanagan’s *Midnight Mass* (2021) is successful in this.

A brief history of cinema helps explain the later rise of the miniseries. The miniseries format has its advantages and disadvantages, differing from other forms of cinema and its unique format is one reason for its success. One way that the miniseries

formula became popular was through the rise of *Netflix*. Unlike other media platforms, *Netflix* focused on creating a diverse and accessible library of media. *Netflix* created a diverse online-streaming platform which encouraged a variety of age ranges to tune in. Reasons for the success of the miniseries become apparent when compared with the feature film, and with the television-season series.

A brief history of cinema begins with the feature film, which meant audiences saw the films at movie theaters. David Thomson notes the process of filmmaking in his book, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, “is intensely decision-based” (Thomson 541). Each decision in any film/show is pertinent and no choice is accidental. As Robert Ray continues in his book, *A Certain Tendency of the American Cinema: Classic Hollywood’s Formal and Thematic Paradigms*, “Not only do things on the screen appear at the expense of others not shown, the manner in which they appear depends on a selection of one perspective that eliminates (at least temporarily) all others” (Ray 32). These decisions determine to a large extent a film’s success. Robert Ray also discusses the various factors that contributed to the rise of Classic Hollywood, those years from the late 1920s through the late 1940s, from the advent of sound with the rise and fall of the studio system. According to Ray, external and internal factors that contributed to the power of the Hollywood studio system in the classic era, include: technological innovations (sound and color, technicolor), stylistic innovations (introduced by famous producers, directors, and editors), evolving conditions of production distribution the studio system afforded, developments in television, the popularity of other forms of entertainment, as well historical events, such as World War II during the Classical Hollywood era (28-29). Ray

continues by insisting, “Thus, these historical accidents-- the arrival of sound, intensifying economic concentration, and political crisis-- resulted in the formation of Classic Hollywood, a cinema whose deliberate evocations of traditional myths effected a new continuity with American culture” (32). Films, we see, were not just to make money, although economics is always a factor. As a commercial art, cinema aimed for broad mass appeal, but yet it clearly is a unique form of art as well. In a 1948 ruling the Supreme Court effectively dismantled the Hollywood studio system, arguing it violated anti-trust laws. The demise of the studio system brought about by this monumental decision coincided with a new medium, television.



Fig. 21: An American family sits around their television, watching the screen.

Anthony, Andrew. “A History of Television, the Technology That Seduced the World— and Me.” *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 19 Dec. 2017, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/sep/07/history-television-seduced-the-world.

The television would not have its prominence until after World War II, when more viewers could afford this new technology and had time to watch from the comfort of their couch. In J. Fred MacDonald’s *One Nation Under Television*, “Television became an acceptable, attractive and affordable national utility in 1948-1949”; he continues by noting, “...that the production of sets went from 6,476 in 1946 to 1.7 million in 1949”, and stations increased proportionately as well (Quoted in Umland *Outlaw*

Heroes 57). Television brought about the viewing of films from home, but also the episodic series, which were more long-standing than a film. The episodic format allowed for audiences to tune in and out, but you *had* to watch what was on the television at that time. Television would also feature live broadcasts, another creative spin on production formula, television would also feature live television, that allowed for TV stations to plan airings at certain times and relay these schedules to home viewers. The times shows aired were constituted by the age range that would be most likely to watch at that time, most notably mature series aired at night and terms were coined such as ‘Saturday-morning cartoons’ for young audiences. There was no way to pause, go back, or watch a previous episode through the television. One could flip the channel or turn the television off. Weekly viewership highlighted successful television shows. As Umland further notes, “The manner in which ‘Classic Hollywood’ responded and adapted to the ‘Golden Age of Television’ of the 1950s continues to be a subject of considerable discussion” (57). While some critics argue television was a threat to feature films, others insist Hollywood simply used this new medium for its own ends. One process that Umland highlights is how a medium pays homage to earlier media, “When a new medium is introduced, it pays homage to earlier media by refashioning or subsuming it” (56). This process is known as remediation. Umland continues by discussing the application of remediation to film, and eventually how television refashions or subsumes an earlier media, in this case the formats of film (Umland 56) This idea of cinematic remediation with the advent of the online-streaming service is a refashioning of the choices and developments of film and television. This is evident through the online-streaming platforms inclusion of both

mediums while also providing creative solutions to the annoyances of both media. The advent of the internet would create a new avenue for on-demand entertainment.



Fig. 22: An advertisement for televisions from the 1950s-60s.

Television Commercials in 1950s and 1960s – Carolina's Blog.

blogs.fasos.maastrichtuniversity.nl/logoimago/20162017/cesquerra/2017/05/07/television-commercials-in-1950s-and-1960s/.

Cinema experienced another change with the creation of online-streaming platforms like *Netflix*. Through *Netflix*'s creation of an online-streaming platform in 2007, audiences were given a variety of shows and films that could be watched on-demand. This catalog would only expand and increase yearly as the viewership grew. As the viewership grew, so did the catalog and target audience, which as of 2024 has now become a global target audience. Each show on the platform could be watched at the viewer's pace, with the ability to start, stop, rewind, and fast forward at any point. You can also watch multiple shows at once, with the platform bookmarking your place in each. This ability led to audiences having more control over the immediate-viewing experience. This also led to a radical change in how cinema was seen and analyzed. Creativity had always pushed cinema in new directions, *Netflix* expedited the process by providing up-and-coming directors, as well as established directors, with a non-traditional way to spread their projects to the masses. It did not matter as much if a film or series did

not perform well during its traditional television/theatrical run, *Netflix* could eventually pick it up for its streaming service down the road.



Fig. 23: An image used to advertise *Netflix* and one of its newest features: game rentals.

“About Netflix.” *Netflix*, 2024, about.netflix.com/en.

Netflix was created in 1998 when the movie-rental site was launched. The site offered a subscription service in which you could order a movie, watch it, and then return it for a low fee. It provided cheap and accessible films to subscribers. *Netflix* attempted to be more accessible than other movie-rental services at the time like *Blockbuster* through its mail-in service. According to *Netflix.com*, by 2006 *Netflix* had reached 5 million members (*Netflix.com*, “The History of Netflix”). It wasn’t until 2007 when *Netflix* would evolve the movie-rental formula through their brand new online-streaming service. The online-streaming service did away with movie rentals, instead opting for a subscription-based service featuring digitized catalogs of shows/films that could be viewed at any time. It allowed for a range of viewing experiences whether it be ‘binge’ sessions, or fragmented viewing as a viewer could start and stop the film at any time without fear of a time limit. According to the article, in 2014 *Netflix* would surpass 50 million members, an obvious result of the success of the online-streaming platform

that they created (“The History of Netflix”). The success of *Netflix*’s online-streaming platform can be attributed to the audience that watches it. Recently, *Netflix* has broken new ground in 2015 as the site began incorporating multilingual shows so that global audiences could enjoy the streaming platform’s variety (“The History of Netflix”). The platform has since added game rentals as of 2023. The inclusion of global shows and directors enabled the platform to garner a global monopoly on the streaming-platform service.

Netflix can capitalize on many audiences and their preferred viewing experience, the streaming platform features every type of motion picture from children’s movies to mature-reality shows. The variation of shows on *Netflix* is one of its biggest strengths. There is a viewing experience for every type of cinematic taste one could desire. It should be noted that *Netflix* has yet to tap into the live-streaming market, as the streaming platform does not yet include live sports or other forms of live content. Judy and Sandra Berg note *Netflix*’s variation in their article, “As a brand their intent is to create diverse and eclectic programming with the hope that—for any given subscriber—one or more of those original projects will be their favorite show to watch” (Berg “Rise of the Miniseries”). In having the power and resources to place their eggs in multiple baskets, *Netflix* stays ahead of other streaming platforms through its diversification of cinematic projects. *Netflix* also benefited from having its own platform and had the sole power to choose what was on their platform.

Another way *Netflix* was able to distinguish itself further was through its line of self-produced shows/films. According to the article which details the history of *Netflix*, in

2013 the company would take the venture into creating and producing original series for the platform. An example of one of these shows that manipulated the platform very successfully is *House of Cards* (2013-2018). *House of Cards* (2013-2018) is one of the first television season series to premiere on *Netflix*, spanning six seasons, and having a loyal following of viewers. It even launched the careers of several actors featured on show, including Kate Mara. Others that *Netflix* self-produce would go on to become popular cornerstones of the platform, earning their own recognition outside of the streaming service. *Netflix* did not have to run advertisements during their streams, all episodes could be watched back-to-back, and there was the ability to pause and rewind on demand. The ability of on-demand viewing also meant that old shows/films could be purchased and placed on the streaming service, which also raised viewership for products that had already been shown. Some examples of shows/films that did not originate on the online-streaming platform are *Friends* (1994-2004), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *That 70's Show* (1998-2006), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and *Training Day* (2001). Through including films that are not original to *Netflix* the streaming platform is able to include a wide array of media for all types of viewers to consume. *Netflix* is now able to acquire older titles to show on their streaming service because of the popularity of the platform, the money, and the potential viewers it will raise. Some earlier shows that have already had a traditional television-series run experience a second lifespan through appearing in the *Netflix* catalog. Through the acquisition of both popular and unknown shows/films, *Netflix* was able to ensure that there was something for everyone to watch regardless of preference.



Fig. 24: Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey) stands over his desk for the trailer of *House of Cards* (2013-2018).

“House of Cards Series Trailer” *YouTube*, 11 Apr. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QnMmpfKWvo. Date Accessed Mar 4, 2024.

A final reason for the success of the streaming platform can be seen through *Netflix*'s curator role; the platform does not always produce or make films but instead pays directors to feature their films on the platform. This gives *Netflix* the advantage of being able to communicate with audiences to uncover what might be viewed well on the website, with monthly additions and removals of shows that are/aren't performing well. This means that the streaming platform's shows/films are always being cycled in and out, to keep things refreshing for audiences and ensure that there is always something new and interesting to watch. *Netflix* has recently taken more measures in this area, even featuring a 'curation tab' which will select a series/film for you based on your previous viewings on the site. One could discover a new favorite show/film on the streaming platform, or view something already seen, a compliment to the vast viewing freedom the streaming platform provides. *Netflix* would be nowhere without its audience, the source of its massive profit. The reason why *Netflix* can continually retain massive amounts of subscribers can be seen through its attention to its broad audience. As seen through the diverse catalog *Netflix* boasts, the online-streaming platform does not focus on one target audience; instead, *Netflix* casts a large net through the money they are able to spend

acquiring different media to show on their platform. This broad audience ensures *Netflix* has something for every viewer, enabling it to have a leg up over competition like *Disney+* which only recently ventured into broadening their viewership range. *Disney+* has a more niche viewership when compared to *Netflix* because *Disney+* started out as a catalog of *Disney* children's shows, limiting the audiences that would be interested in watching it.

One matter that does not change from feature films and television series in the miniseries is the power of the audience. On top of audience expectations, filmmakers must analyze the criticisms of films prior when creating a new film in order to sell successfully. Thomas Schatz articulates this in their book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and Studio System*: “any theory of Hollywood filmmaking must take into account this essential process of production, feedback, and conventionalization...” (Schatz 6). All three parts of this process are pertinent towards the final product: a cinematic project. Filmmakers and businessmen work together to form key decisions for their films, referring to decisions of the past to try to predict future trends. Schatz continues, “As such, we cannot examine individual films without first establishing a critical and theoretical framework that recognizes the cinema's production-consumption process...” (vii). A show can still be considered popular, even if it does not financially sell well, but later garners a faithful cult following. The paying customer is the deciding variable in most cinematic productions. One way that *Netflix* has revolutionized this process is through its platform. Audiences do not have to pay to view an individual show; instead, they pay a flat monthly fee for access to all shows on the platform. Audience

interaction is gauged through the number of views a show garners within a period of time, this is how films/shows are cycled in and out of rotation. If the money, or views, are there then more motion pictures can be made. Filmmakers and audiences are engaged in a constant conversation as to what is appealing and what is not. Filmmakers who can tune into audience expectations and deliver often are commercially successful. One example of the impact of audience expectations is the increase in audiences gravitating towards the commercial miniseries because of its ease of viewing: miniseries are conclusive and short. This is a major selling point of the miniseries, especially with young audiences, as short videos have begun to popularize with other sites such as *TikTok* and *YouTube Reels*. The concise nature means that audiences can view miniseries quickly.

The miniseries format was first introduced through the popular series, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1976). According to John De Vito and Frank Tropea's book *Epic Television Miniseries: A Critical History*, "*Rich Man, Poor Man* was also the prime reason the epic miniseries landed on the televisual map in the first place" (De Vito and Tropea 5). *Rich Man, Poor Man* first aired on February 1st, 1976, and ran for one single season on ABC. According to the *imdb.com* web page for the miniseries, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1976) featured ten episodes that each ran for approximately 48 minutes (*imdb.com*, "*Rich Man, Poor Man*"). The miniseries has since typically followed a format of being under ten hours in length. *Rich Man, Poor Man* may have coined the miniseries, but its potential was not fully recognized until a few decades later. De Vito and Tropea continue in their book articulating how the eventual downfall of the miniseries was revived when they state, "...ultimately resurrected and reconfigured, mainly through the auspices of cable

television in general and *HBO* in particular” (De Vito and Tropea 5). Television channels like *HBO* would rekindle the miniseries format through miniseries such as *Band of Brothers* (2001). The World War 2 melodrama was released on September 9th, 2001, to critical acclaim. Rich Lyman’s *New York Times* article notes the success of the miniseries, “The heavily promoted premiere drew about 10 million viewers around the country... the next episode, on Sept. 16, still drew 7.3 million viewers” (Lyman, “Fewer Soldiers March Onscreen, Filmmakers Weigh Wisdom of Military Stories”). The success of *Band of Brothers* (2001) cannot be overstated enough. The resurrection of the miniseries would give way for a new generation of directors, as the miniseries would eventually move its way to *Netflix*.



Fig. 25: An advertisement for *Rich Man Poor Man* (1976) featuring Rudy Jordache (Peter Strauss), Nick Nolte (Tom Jordanche), and Susan Blakely (Julie Prescott).

“Rich Man, Poor Man - ABC Miniseries.” *TV Insider*, www.tvinsider.com/show/rich-man-poor-man/. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.

The miniseries has become popularized through avenues such as *Netflix* because of its specific niche. As a form of commercialized art, it is distinguished from long-standing television series and feature films through its advantages over the other structures of cinema. The result of this new subgenre of storytelling can be seen through a new niche of director, the miniseries director. As noted earlier, each decision in a

cinematic project is intentional. The film industry is a business. Things like multiple seasons and filler episodes are abandoned in miniseries in favor of shortened run times. The shortened run times often mean miniseries directors must get creative with how their information is organized and divulged to audiences. Other choices include the number of characters in the miniseries, subplot points that are explored, and even how the world around the plot is built. As mentioned earlier, these choices lead to cost-effective series which can make their money back to produce future miniseries. These decisions are paramount, as a television station may not have the same viewership for a miniseries as opposed to an online-streaming platform like *Netflix* which can afford to feature multiple shortened series, as this is one of their main-selling points. The miniseries became commercialized after the success of streaming platforms like *Netflix* and the financial risk they were able to take on shows still developing, the online-streaming platform gives opportunities for a multitude of directors who otherwise may have not gotten a chance to have their films seen by a vast audience through traditional cinematic production.

A distinct advantage of the commercialized miniseries is the budgeted cost it takes to create one, it has a shortened run time and is therefore more cost-effective, which means there is a better chance of turning a profit and creating more miniseries with the income. Another advantage is the short runtime, episodes are viewable within a short timeframe, but this also can be a disadvantage as there is less time for the plot to unfold. The shortened time can mean that some themes and plot points are explored through subtleties as opposed to being continually portrayed across multiple seasons. Most of the time, however, a shorter runtime becomes an advantage, especially when comparing

similar trends in social media such as audience gravitation towards abbreviated formats of media like *Tik Tok* and *Instagram Reels*. As Rebecca Umland observes, “The introduction of a new technology always affects complex changes in a culture’s expectations and actions” (*Outlaw Heroes* 56). This means that the miniseries can become complex in terms of symbolism, as the themes must be hidden within a shortened work. The miniseries can be commercially successful despite these downsides because the miniseries is tailored to modern demand. While it is true a movie is the shortest of cinematic experiences, the miniseries can come in at a close second with runtimes averaging anything from four to ten hours. The critical acclaim for the miniseries can be seen through *The Emmys* which are now featuring awards such as “Outstanding Miniseries” which featured five of the most critically acclaimed miniseries from the 2023 year (*Emmys.com*, “Outstanding Miniseries Nominees”). The advantages that make the miniseries financially profitable also played a role in the positive reception of *Midnight Mass* (2021).

Mike Flanagan’s *Midnight Mass* (2021) debuted on September 24th, 2021, exclusively to *Netflix*. Flanagan had previously released 3 different projects with *Netflix* and would go on to release two more, as it proved to be a mutually lucrative business partnership. These additional ventures will be discussed in the next chapter. *Midnight Mass* (2021) released all seven episodes at once, avoiding the weekly-episodic release of other series. Each episode roughly runs an hour in length, totaling seven hours. The miniseries format benefitted *Midnight Mass* (2021) in its style and delivery. Riley Flynn’s (Zach Gilford) tragedy is what immediately begins the miniseries, and Riley is

one of the two central characters of the story. Riley's arc is built up across the first four episodes, his sacrifice being crucial to the salvation of Crockett Island. Additionally, Monsignor Pruitt's (Hamish Linklater) character and story are revealed through discourse time across the first four episodes to build audience interest. The mysterious, young priest arrives in Episode I: "*Genesis*" and is the cause of immediate fascination. By the time Pruitt's situation is made clear in Episode IV: "*Lamentations*," the audience is enmeshed in this mystery with Pruitt and must finish the final three episodes to find out how these issues will be resolved. The miniseries format also benefited Flanagan's *Midnight Mass* (2021) in the sense that it was releasing directly to an online-streaming platform: there was no need to strategize a box-office release or compete with other series. Flanagan's agreement with *Netflix* ensured he was given the reins to direct a specified number of miniseries on the streaming platform. The viewership of the show after release does not impact Flanagan's payment for the show, as *Netflix* does not work this way. According to Dave McNarry's article, Flanagan would debut his feature film *Hush* (2016) on March 12th, 2016, at South by Southwest, a popular film festival, and it would quickly release on *Netflix* on April 8, 2016 when *Netflix* would acquire the rights to the film (McNarry "Netflix Buys Mike Flanagan's Horror-Thriller 'Hush' Ahead of SXSW Premiere"). This working relationship would stem in five miniseries on *Netflix*: *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) on October 12th, 2018, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) on October 9th, 2020, *Midnight Mass* (2021) on September 24th, 2021, *The Midnight Club* (2022) on October 7th, 2022, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) on October 12th, 2023. Viewership would remain steady across all five miniseries, but

despite this Flanagan and *Netflix* were unable to reach a deal as of 2022, marking Flanagan's switch to the *Prime* streaming service for future projects, as we shall see in the next chapter.



Fig. 26: Eleanor Crain (Victoria Pedretti) stands in the cinematic advertisement for *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018).

The Haunting of Hill House. Directed by Mike Flanagan. Intrepid Pictures, 2018.

The way in which Flanagan divulges information to the viewer through the episodic format is also worth note. Flanagan can weave together arcs for multiple characters, and conclude each arc, by the end of the seven episodes that are individually an hour in length. The short timeframe forces Flanagan to become creative with how he structures the plot; one example of this can be seen through how Flanagan takes advantage of discourse and story time in *Midnight Mass* (2021). Discourse and story time are pertinent to how a plot is structured and delivered, Seymour Chatman notes on story and discourse time in his article “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa),” “In realistic narratives, the time of the story is fixed, following the ordinary course of a life... But the discourse-time order may be completely different... it may start at a person’s deathbed, then end with their adult life” (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa)”). Flanagan makes use of story time through the

general procession of the plot but is able to effectively use discourse time to create more mystery surrounding the young Father Hill and his replacement of Pruitt. Episode I: “*Genesis*” starts midway through Monsignor Pruitt’s narrative, already having been transformed into the young Father Hill through the tainted eucharist. The first four episodes establish the terror on the island while concurrently providing the background information to how Hill arrived at Crockett Island. By the time the viewer learns about the entirety of Monsignor Pruitt’s time in Jerusalem in Episode IV: “*Lamentations*”, there is already an established vampire congregation in the present time. Through featuring coinciding plot points in the first four episodes, the audience learns more about the plot despite the shortened-miniseries format. This allows all the plot to become more focused in the last three episodes when all the players are gathered on the island.

The miniseries format enables *Midnight Mass* (2021) to be ambitious in its storytelling. If one were to remove the miniseries framework from *Midnight Mass* (2021) and fit the plot into the framework of a film, the amount of additional plot content would be drastically reduced. This is especially true when thinking back on Hollywood's tendency to get involved in filmmaker’s works. If one were to adapt Flanagan’s miniseries to fit the feature film, the runtime would have to be reduced to no more than about two-and-a-half hours. This means that several subplots would probably need to be omitted in favor of the main plot arcs of Riley, Erin, and Pruitt. Leeza (Annarah Cymone) and Joe Collie’s (Robert Longstreet) character dynamics may have been forgotten. Sheriff Hassan’s (Rahul Kohli) religious convictions on this Catholic island may have also been altered, or at least the whole backstory of 9/11 and his uninterrupted narrative

that goes on in a monologue for roughly four minutes (Flanagan, Episode VI: “*Acts of Apostles*”, 24:46-28:57). Additionally, several of the other side-plot arcs featuring characters of the island may have been omitted. The results of doing this would have weakened the world-building Flanagan was able to accomplish across seven hours in the miniseries format. The episodic titles suggesting a theme or idea would be omitted or introduced in another way in a feature film. The omission of suggestive episode titles would have downplayed the significance of certain scenes in the plot such as the miracles that happen during the first four episodes. The revealing of key plot details like Pruitt’s dark secret possibly would have to be rewritten to accommodate the changes in organization. In making these key changes from the miniseries format to the film format it is evident that *Midnight Mass* (2021) would have been a substantially different experience, perhaps along the lines of iconic stand-alone religious horror films discussed in the previous chapter, such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1973) and *The Exorcist* (1978). The miniseries format played a part in the success of Flanagan’s show and highlights several of the strong points of *Midnight Mass* (2021): the world building, the character development, the themes and symbolism, and the organization of plot all are shaped around the miniseries format and how it can maximize the potential of each of these areas.

One case in point that illustrates the rewards and constraints of the feature film, as distinguished from later formats like television season series and the more recent miniseries platform, is that of the Classic Hollywood film, Frank Capra’s *Lost Horizon* (1937). This film has enjoyed a restoration by Hollywood experts at UCLA because of

footage cut from the original that has been slowly reassembled. The reason for this drastic editing of the original film was that the footage was more than six-hours long. As Frank Capra states in his Dick Cavett interview, after the multiple cuts to *Lost Horizon*, “It was a totally different picture... We went right back to the cutting room, I took those two reels... and I threw them right into the incinerator” (*The Dick Cavett Show*, 8:01-8:23). Once Capra made the cuts to the film, and omitted the two beginning reels of film, audiences did not find the film so comical. Interestingly, it could be argued that the miniseries format may have benefitted Capra’s classic, but this will never be known for sure. Had the miniseries format been available this feature film may have fit that format, but on the other hand, the success of the film as it stands shows that those additional hours weren’t necessary to tell a successful story.



Fig. 27: Frank Capra posing for a photoshoot.

Lodderhose, Diana. ““Frank Capra: Mr. America” Filmmakers on Why Their Candid Doc of a Complicated Hollywood Legend Will Speak to Modern Audiences — Venice.” *Deadline*, 30 Aug. 2023, deadline.com/2023/08/frank-capra-mr-america-candid-documentary-hollywood-legend-its-a-wonderful-life-venice-film-festival-1235530356/. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the first four episodes are prophetic in nature, they are titled after Old Testament books. These books are the Biblical books of *Genesis*, *Psalms*, and *Proverbs*. The titles of these Old Testament books symbolize

prophecy and things to come. The final three episodes are fulfilling in nature, they are titled after New Testament books, answering the prophecies of the first four episodes. The New Testament books are the books of *Lamentations*, *Acts*, and *Revelation*. Book VI: “*Acts of the Apostles*” is the penultimate episode where chaos breaks loose on Crockett Island, Book VII: “*Revelation*” can be signified as an episode of divine correction through the rising of the sun over Crockett Island. All that was out of place is corrected. These books are fulfilling, and predominantly deal with the unraveling of the events of the first four episodes. The rectification of the prophecies culminates in the coda, and final judgment is released in Episode VII: “*Revelation*”. The short length of the miniseries means that symbolism must be used wherever available, even in the titles of episodes. The plot functions as it should, sequentially moving towards the conclusion, but when examining the episodes individually Biblical allusions can be tracked between the titles and episode-plot points.

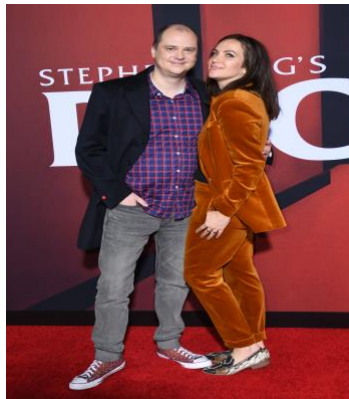


Fig. 28: Mike Flanagan posed with his wife Kate Siegel for the premiere of *Doctor Sleep* (2019).

Prahl, Amanda. “ICYMI, “the Fall of the House of Usher” ’S Mike Flanagan and Kate Siegel Are Married.” *Popsugar*, 15 Oct. 2020.

www.popsugar.com/celebrity/kate-siegel-mike-flanagan-relationship-47880549. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.

The release and reception of *Midnight Mass* (2021) highlight Flanagan's mastery of the miniseries format. *Midnight Mass* (2021) arrived on *Netflix* on September 21st, 2021. As mentioned previously, upon release all episodes were made available instantaneously. The release and the ensuing month of October is no mistake, the show's themes of terror coincide with Halloween perfectly. The unpredictable nature of releasing to television could have resulted in marketing loss for the miniseries, but instead through strategically releasing to *Netflix* Flanagan was able to make sure audiences could continually view his miniseries. Flanagan also has a long-standing tradition of releasing his horror miniseries near the month of October, this will be touched upon more in the final chapter. As critic David Fear says in his *Rolling Stone* article "'Midnight Mass' is the Most Terrifying Show on TV Right Now": "Netflix's horror series about a small island community, a visiting priest and unexplained 'miracles' is the perfect must-see mix of beautiful and bloodcurdling" (Fear, "'Midnight Mass' is the Most Terrifying Show on TV Right Now"). Flanagan's work also drew some mixed responses, such as Brian Tallerico in his *RogerEbert.com* article, "*Midnight Mass*," who gave the series two-and-a-half stars out of five, calling the plot, "a little exhausting" (Tallerico, "*Midnight Mass*"). Despite the range of responses, the reception of *Midnight Mass* (2021) would further highlight Flanagan's creativity with the miniseries format. *Midnight Mass* (2021) was nominated for two prestigious awards at *The Critics Choice Awards* in 2022, "Best Limited Series", as well as "Best Actor in a Limited Series or Movie Made for Television," which Hamish Linklater won for his portrayal of Monsignor Pruitt (*Imdb.com*, "*Midnight Mass* - Awards"). *Midnight Mass* (2021) and Flanagan's other

miniseries on *Netflix*'s platform would be enough to land him a deal with another streaming platform, *Prime*, after Flanagan's falling out with *Netflix* in 2023, as we shall see.

Midnight Mass (2021) was commercially successful in part because of its non-traditional release to *Netflix*'s online streaming platform. Through a brief history of *Netflix*, we can establish why the miniseries benefits from online-streaming platforms. Mike Flanagan released his miniseries on *Netflix* which allowed his series to be viewed by a wide audience without the issues of airtimes. If *Midnight Mass* (2021) had had a typical television run it may have not had the impact that it did. Through avoiding a traditional television-program release, and instead releasing to *Netflix*'s streaming platform, *Midnight Mass* (2021) was positioned for release right before Halloween onto a streaming platform. This generated new viewers who were not aware of Flanagan's directorial prowess, while also allowing fans of Flanagan to enjoy the release. The structure of the miniseries enabled Flanagan to weave in various Biblical allusions through unique means such as coinciding titles with episode plot points. The miniseries structure has been proven to be financially successful, and through Flanagan's directorship *Midnight Mass* (2021) was able to join the list of commercially successful miniseries featured on *Netflix*. *Midnight Mass* (2021) is one of 18 cinematic productions that Mike Flanagan has directed at the time of writing, each of Flanagan's projects features details which are exclusive only to Flanagan's work. Next, Flanagan's screen writing and directorial talent and style, and what makes a Flanagan project a 'Flanagan project' will be explored in more detail.

Chapter 5: *Midnight Mass* (2021) as a Mike Flanagan Film

Cinema is a form of art that is dependent upon multiple factors and talents, one of those being the director. The success of *Midnight Mass* (2021) rests in part on Mike Flanagan's role as co-writer and director. A stylistic director like Alfred Hitchcock, a Flanagan film is recognizable. Flanagan's filmography is extensive, including feature films and miniseries, and a brief history of his filmography highlights the features that make a Flanagan production unique. These factors can be found in *Midnight Mass* (2021), but also in other films and miniseries Flanagan has directed. The choices Mike Flanagan makes include nearly every aspect of the film, from the sounds used on set to post-production editing. This chapter will identify how these choices contributed to the success of *Midnight Mass* (2021), but first a short exploration of Flanagan's early life and cinematic interests will help explain his later career.

Flanagan was born in 1978 and grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. As a child he shot and edited short films on his VHS recorder, which continued until high school when he became heavily involved in the drama department" (*Empire.com* "Mike Flanagan Biography"). Flanagan spent his youth reading science fiction and horror by Christopher Pike and Stephen King, two authors he would go on to adapt through his films and miniseries. Pike would serve enough inspiration to even be alluded to through Joe Collie's (Robert Longstreet) dog in *Midnight Mass* (2021): Pike. Flanagan experienced his first real shock when he read the Bible for the first time at the age of twelve. In Darryn King's article with *The New York Times*, Flanagan states, "I was shocked, for the first time comprehending what a really strange book it is... There were so many ideas I'd

never heard before in church, and the violence of the Old Testament God is terrifying... It really struck me that I didn't know my faith at that point" (King, "Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in 'Midnight Mass'"). Flanagan's faith, or questioning, would lead him towards reading other religions and philosophies, very similarly to Riley Flynn (Zach Gilford) in *Midnight Mass* (2021). Flanagan had a profound desire to answer difficult life questions that affect us all: "I had more of a spiritual reaction from reading 'Pale Blue Dot' than I ever had reading the Bible...I'm fascinated by how our beliefs shape how we treat each other" (King). Religion would be a main source of conflict for the young Flanagan, and its teachings would influence the way he perceived the world around him.

One cannot begin to discuss the efforts of a director in their filmography without mentioning the controversial auteur theory that developed after critics began to analyze the work of prolific director Alfred Hitchcock, according to Steven Derosa: "It was of course the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics that first called serious attention to Alfred Hitchcock and canonized him as an *auteur*. Of those critics, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol were the first to compile a book-length study on the films of Alfred Hitchcock" (Derosa "Writing with Hitchcock: Eric Romer (1920-2010): A Pioneer in Hitchcock Criticism"). Hitchcock had such a distinctive formula for film direction that he was treated as the equivalent of a literary author, hence the term *auteur*. Before this point only authors had been given such credit for their work, film had been seen as the efforts of a conglomeration, and to some, it still is. Andrew Sarris, in his article, "Notes on the Film Auteur Theory," states, "The badness of a director is not necessarily considered the

badness of a film... Marlon Brando has shown us that a film can be made without a director” (Sarras 562). This quotation highlights the main arguments against the auteur theory: a film is made by multiple individuals and thus the results of a film are not accountable to one person alone. An actor like Marlon Brando is an example of an individual outside of the director who could impact the reception of a film. If a film is a commercial failure, it is the result of multiple groups of people not fulfilling their jobs. Since the auteur theory gives the director a similar role as that of an author, the sole creator of a work, it tends to ignore the other talents that contribute to success or failure. Whether one ascribes to the auteur theory or finds fault with it, it is clear that some directors can develop a distinct style. Mike Flanagan is such a director.

One stylistic component in Flanagan’s work is through his allusions to other popular-culture phenomena and events. For instance, Flanagan would have grown up watching Steven Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), only to eventually feature the once-child star Henry Thomas in his works repeatedly as I will discuss later in the chapter. In addition to *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), King’s novel turned film *Salem’s Lot* (1979), which depicts a well-developed vampire congregation living secretly within a small resort serves as another example. If the events of *Midnight Mass* (2021) were allowed to continue past Book VII: “*Revelation*”, the island would have become a community of vampires like *Salem’s Lot* (1979). Flanagan’s interesting relationship with King first came about after King saw *Hush* (2016), and eventually, the two would sit down together to watch Flanagan’s adaptation of *Doctor Sleep* (2019). As Jason Sechrest notes: “He was the first person outside of my editorial department who got to see the

film, and I was terrified about what he'd think. He was my hero... He loved the film, and sent me a long email about his thoughts" (Sechrest "The Mike Flanagan Interview").

Midnight Mass (2021) also features allusions to other forms of congregations, such as cults. The period Flanagan grew up in saw the rise of cults in the 60s and 70s.

Enthusiastic leaders garnered followers and created doctrine that often contrasted with traditional American life. A cult leader that was prominent around the time Flanagan was born was Jim Jones, the leader of the Peoples Temple. Jones's leadership would culminate in the fatal Jonestown Massacre: the murder-suicide of most of his cult in November 1978. Flanagan would have no doubt grown up aware of this event, and other cults of the time. The allusion is stretched further through a scene in which Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) deceives his congregation, which eerily emanates that of Jim Jones's own cult. Flanagan took inspiration from the Jonestown Massacre when filming for Book VI: "Acts of the Apostles" of *Midnight Mass* (2021), with is a scene in which the congregation is converted to vampirism through poisoned beverages (Flanagan, Book VI: "Acts of the Apostles", 52:06-1:00:05). The similarities between Jones's cult and Pruitt's congregation are shocking, the scene highlights how *Midnight Mass* (2021) reflects human conflict as much as it is a horror featuring creatures of the night.



Fig. 29: One of the vampires from *Salem's Lot* (1979) revealing himself.

Salem's Lot. Directed by Stephen King. Standard version, Warner Home Video, 1999.

A scrutiny of Flanagan's filmography is essential to understanding how he became the director he is today. His filmography is extensive, as mentioned earlier including feature films and mini-series, a brief history of his filmography highlights the features that make a Flanagan film distinctive. On top of directing films and miniseries, Mike Flanagan also co-writes his scripts. One way to group Flanagan's filmography is by his films and his miniseries, in separating the two, Flanagan's succession to his position now becomes apparent. A brief review of his feature films before his debut with the miniseries will clarify how he developed as a director. It should be noted that a few of Flanagan's films appear on *Netflix*, but they are not a part of his miniseries-streaming deal with the company and were added separately. Mike Flanagan's directorial debut would come about through *Absentia* (2011), a crowd-funded film through *Kickstart*. *Absentia* (2011) follows a pregnant woman's surprise at her husband's return after seven years. Flanagan notes in a *YouTube* interview with *Cinefix.com*, "*Absentia* was created out of desperation, I was working as a reality-TV editor... I felt if I didn't do something soon, I may never have a chance to break in as a director" (*Cinefix.com*, 1:18-1:29).

Flanagan's second feature film, *Oculus* (2013), would be his first theatrical film that would follow a traditional creation, unlike *Absentia* (2011). *Oculus* (2013) follows a family that acquires a mirror that harbors evil within. Flanagan's experience with other members of the set was uplifting: "I met a lot of people on that movie who ended up being my family, and ended up becoming this team of collaborators that has now moved with me from project to project" (*Cinefix.com*, 2:41-3:00). One of these actors from *Oculus* (2013), Kate Siegel, is featured in the film.

Before I Wake (2016), would mark the first time Flanagan would experience hardship on set. The film follows a young, orphaned boy's acclimation into a foster home while a supernatural evil lurks in the darkness. As Flanagan notes further in the interview, "It was stuck in distribution limbo for so long that a lot of people put it later in my timeline but we did it right after *Oculus*" (3:30-3:37). The limbo that the film was stuck in would delay its release, freezing any promotion the film had before release. The film would transition to *Netflix* quickly after release, a sign of the oncoming business relationship between Flanagan and *Netflix*.

It would not be until Flanagan's next film, *Hush* (2016) that Flanagan would break free of the directorial rut that had encapsulated *Before I Wake* (2016). *Hush* (2016) follows a deaf writer Maddie Young (Kate Siegel) as she lives in the wilderness after completing her first book when a stranger starts stalking her in the woods. Jason Blum and Trevor Macy would produce *Hush* (2016) at a fraction of the cost other production companies were offering Flanagan (5:58-6:07). The venture would foster an ongoing business partnership between Flanagan and Macy. Macy's production company, *Intrepid Pictures*, would have credits in films as far back as *Oculus* (2013), but Flanagan and Macy's relationship would develop in 2016 with the close-knit production of *Hush* (2016). *Intrepid Pictures*, and Flanagan's friendship with Macy, became a backbone to produce Flanagan's films. *Hush* (2016) would also mark Kate Siegel's debut as the lead actor in a Flanagan film, as well as her debut as a co-writer for the film.



Fig. 30: A true team: Mike Flanagan (Left) and Trevor Macy (Right) participating in an interview for the film *Doctor Sleep* (2019).

Stefan, Pape. "Exclusive: Mike Flanagan and Trevor Macy on Doctor Sleep." *HeyUGuys*, 30 Oct. 2019, heyuguy.com/doctor-sleep-interview-mike-flanagan-trevor-macy-king-kubrick/. Accessed 17 Mar. 2024.

The next production Flanagan directed, *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016), would feature further additions to Flanagan's growing family of crewmembers. *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016) follows a family that practices scripted paranormal readings when a real ghost enters their residence. On top of directing each film, Flanagan stands out from other directors as he also writes for all his films, albeit Flanagan enrolls the help of his crew to assist in writing duties as well.

In 2017 *Gerald's Game* (2017) would hit theaters and *Netflix*, garnering Flanagan directorial acknowledgements as well as an innumerable number of viewers from the streaming platform service. *Gerald's Game* (2017) tells the story of a wife who is handcuffed to a bed during intimacy for an extended period. Flanagan's adaptation of Stephen King's novel of the same name would not mark the last time Flanagan would adapt King, a favorite author of his from childhood. In 2018, before the next King adaptation, Flanagan would release a miniseries that would elevate his status as a director

for the rest of his life: Flanagan released each episode of *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) all at once on *Netflix* to critical acclaim.

The Haunting of Hill House (2018) follows a dysfunctional family who returned to the manor that traumatized the family years prior. This miniseries would mark a stark shift in Flanagan's reputation, as Flanagan would garner many more viewers after his miniseries first hit *Netflix*. The miniseries would propel Flanagan towards an agreement with *Netflix* which would span five miniseries and six years. After the success of *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), Flanagan would return to complete one more film adaptation of King through *Doctor Sleep* (2019). *Doctor Sleep* (2019) and *Gerald's Game* (2017) would both be accepted by King, an astounding but difficult honor, and accepted by audiences globally. Flanagan did not like directing sequels, but despite this Flanagan adapted *Doctor Sleep* (2019), following Danny (Ewan McGregor) as he battles with his 'shine' in adulthood.



Fig. 31: Jessie Burlingame (Carla Gugino) lays handcuffed to the bed in *Gerald's Game* (2017) while holding a copy of *Midnight Mass*, a reference to Maddie Young (Kate Siegel) from *Hush* (2016), as well as Flanagan's passion project *Midnight Mass* (2021).

Gerald's Game. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Intrepid Pictures*, 2017.

Returning to *Netflix*, Flanagan would release *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), another successful miniseries featuring plenty of Flanagan's unique charm, which will be discussed later in this chapter. *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) follows a family in the 1800s and the manor they inherit which harbors many spirits inside. There is no cohesion between Flanagan's *Haunting* series other than manors, brief character cameos, and a return of the silent jumpscare. The following year Flanagan would get the opportunity to create and release his most prized project he had been unable to make for years: *Midnight Mass* (2021). The difficulties in getting this project off the ground become apparent in Flanagan's interview with Nick when Flanagan notes how no networks wanted to take up Flanagan and Macy's idea (Romano, "Mike Flanagan opens up about the personal journey that shaped his buzzed-about *Midnight Mass*"). The economic nature of Hollywood often means that many projects do not get made despite having promising scripts. It would take Flanagan several years and many successful projects before a network would take him up on his idea for *Midnight Mass* (2021). As seen through the brief allusions in other works such as *Hush* (2016) and *Gerald's Game* (2017), Flanagan loved the idea of the project and was committed to seeing it actualized on screen in some capacity before its release in 2021. *Midnight Mass* (2021) was so successful that it was nominated for two prestigious awards at *The Critics Choice Awards* in 2022, "Best Limited Series", as well as "Best Actor in a Limited Series or Movie Made for Television", which Hamish Linklater won for his portrayal of Monsignor Pruitt (*Imdb.com* "*Midnight Mass* - Awards"). The success of *Midnight Mass* (2021) would cement Flanagan's status as a horror director in the industry, leading to the release of *The*

Midnight Club (2022), featuring the lives of a group of teenagers in hospice, and the scary stories they will tell each other at night to keep themselves entertained.

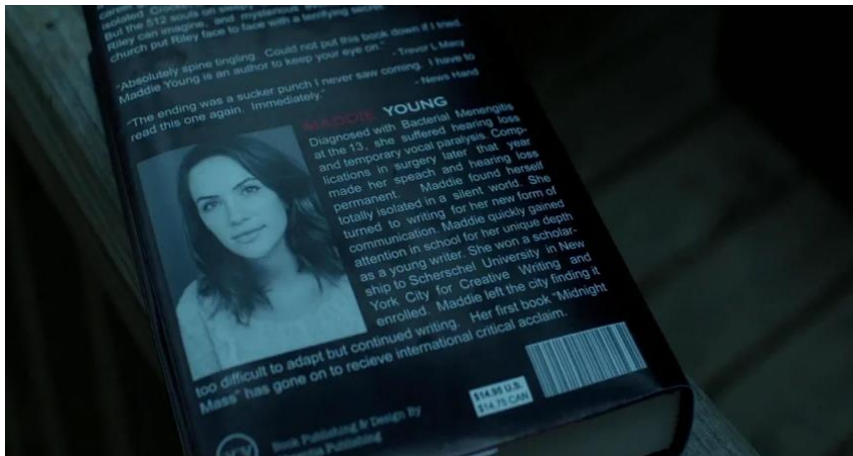


Fig. 32: Maddie Young (Kate Siegel) in the film *Hush* (2016) with her first published book, *Midnight Mass* (2021).

Hush. Directed by Mike Flanagan. Intrepid Pictures, 2016.

The series would not live up to the expectations of Flanagan’s prior work; however, this number is not attainable considering *Netflix* which does not release these statistics. The failure of *The Midnight Club* (2022) to secure a second season may be attributed to a few different reasons. Flanagan, however, was confident that it would be renewed, concluding the first season with a cliffhanger, but perhaps the jump scare formula was becoming overused. Flanagan would publish a Tumblr post that featured the proposed plot points for season 2 of *The Midnight Club* (2022) as well as the first news of his falling out with *Netflix* (Tumblr.com “*The Midnight Club* - Season Two”). This never materialized. Flanagan would finish out his final contracted miniseries, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) before announcing that he had signed a new streaming agreement with *Amazon Prime’s* streaming service, *Prime*. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) adapts several Edgar Allan Poe works to a modernized setting. *The Fall of the House of*

Usher (2023) would be a return to form for Flanagan, as the series would do significantly better than *The Midnight Club* (2022) in terms of reviews.

Flanagan's filmography, more specifically his miniseries filmography, reveals his style and cinematic tastes. For example, four out of five of the miniseries Flanagan has directed on *Netflix* have been adaptations of literary works Flanagan read as a child. For example, *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) is based on the Shirley Jackson novel of the same name. *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) is an adaptation of Henry James *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). *The Midnight Club* (2022) is an adaptation of several Christopher Pike novels, several being adapted into individual episodes under the overarching plot of Pike's *The Midnight Club* (1994). *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) is an adaptation of several of Poe's literary works. *Midnight Mass* (2021) stands as Flanagan's only work that was not adapted from a prior literary source. Flanagan is negotiating with *Prime* to direct a miniseries adaptation of the *Dark Tower* (1982-2012) book series by Stephen King (Andreeva "Mike Flanagan & Trevor Macy Reveal 'The Dark Tower' Adaptation In Works At Intrepid, Talk Leaving *Netflix* For *Amazon*, 'Midnight Club's Cancellation & More"). As someone interested in adaptation of literary sources, his success resides in the fact that he understands when moving from one medium to another certain innovations must be made. The success also highlights Flanagan's ability to deliver repeatedly that experience to his viewers.

A commercially successful film depends on several factors. The demands of this new format of filmmaking are unique when compared to the demands of traditional feature films. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, miniseries has a

lengthened runtime of around typically ten hours from start to conclusion. This differs from a film, which runs for roughly two hours, or even a longstanding television series which can run for dozens of hours. A film is considered commercially successful based on the money it earns as a result. The decisions that go into making a successful film range from the actors chosen to the types of buildings featured on set locations. As mentioned earlier, these decisions are never made by one person; instead they are the result of several people working together to create a single project.

Trevor Macy, Flanagan's close business partner and producer, is another recurring individual among Flanagan's productions. A true team, Macy and Flanagan have worked closely in the creation of Flanagan's films since *Hush* (2016). Macy and Flanagan are partners in their production company, Intrepid Studios, which produces many of Flanagan's projects. Macy even has credits for roles such as producing and co-writing in Flanagan's films. A biography of Macy notes just how integral he was, "He has produced or executive produced 21 feature films, as well as the hit *Netflix* series *The Haunting of Hill House*, created and directed by his longtime collaborator and Intrepid partner, Mike Flanagan" (*Producedbyconference.com*, "Trevor Macy"). Not only was Macy a part of the booming success of Flanagan's miniseries, but Macy also assisted in Flanagan's production of horror films in the late 2010s as well, "Among Macy's other theatrical productions are horror thrillers *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016) and *Oculus* (2013) Both films were co-written and directed by Flanagan" ("Trevor Macy"). Trevor Macy's role in Flanagan's success cannot be understated, having assisted Flanagan in the production portion of Flanagan's filmography, but Macy's credits in other aspects like the co-writing

of specific films such as *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016) and *Oculus* (2013) demonstrates his contributions to Flanagan's films.

What does it take to produce a commercially successful miniseries? A marketable miniseries has multiple distinct features from pre-to-post-production. The history of film informs these decisions too, the mistakes of past directors inform the decisions of future directors. Flanagan's history reveals his success as a director of the miniseries. Despite what was said about the auteur theory, and how film is dependent on various individuals, some of the success of *Midnight Mass* (2021) can be attributed to the various personal touches from Flanagan on the work. This is especially true when compared to other miniseries that Flanagan has directed, *Midnight Mass* (2021) is solely directed by Mike Flanagan. Flanagan has directed miniseries that have not performed well, such as *The Midnight Club* (2022), these miniseries featured other directors who oversaw individual episodes. For example, six different directors, including Flanagan himself, directed the ten episodes of *The Midnight Club* (2022). Another aspect that attributes to the success of *Midnight Mass* (2021) is Flanagan's sole role as director. Lending out directing roles for individual episodes is not a new concept in television, but it can lead to inconsistencies in intention when the director role is split across so many people. Flanagan's passion for the project may have also spurred him to take on the challenge of directing this miniseries on his own. Like Hitchcock, Flanagan's involvement in his film productions spans all aspects of its production, but he still employs his now-widespread film family to assist him. Like other extremely successful directors, Clint Eastwood for example, Flanagan has assembled a team of writers, cameramen, and actors who become extremely adept at

understanding his directorial vision. Flanagan cooperates with his team of writers to create scripts for his series. On top of pre-production duties such as script writing, a successful miniseries also features film sets that keep the mood throughout filming. Props, location, costumes, and all the visual pieces that go into fleshing out the plot have become more important as the film has continued. One look at the number of special effects in any modern film will inform this. Sound is another important feature of the miniseries. Sound covers everything from soundtracks to the musical scores that play in the background of each scene. Sound can also be used creatively through applications such as the jumpscare, Flanagan is known for having a particular format to the jumpscare which distinguishes him from other horror directors. Finally, Flanagan frequently employs the same actors in his productions which has a variety of positive benefits. The first important feature of a successful miniseries, and the first portion of pre-production, the first steps in creating a miniseries is script writing, and Flanagan's unique approach to script writing also contributes to the success of his films informs his success as a director.



Fig. 33: A priest (Mike Flanagan) tries to help Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) find his way to Jerusalem. *Midnight Mass*. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed Aug 11, 2023.

One example of this can be seen through his wife and favored lead actress: Kate Siegel. (It is also noteworthy that Siegel co-wrote *Hush* (2016) with Flanagan which was

a successful film.) Actors are essential to cinema, and the care that goes into selecting actors that ‘fit’ their roles cannot be expressed enough. Another area where Flanagan is involved in the production of his projects is through editing. The whole process goes through Flanagan, Flanagan is in the writing room co-writing before filming, he is directing on set afterward, and then after shooting wraps, Flanagan is involved in the post-production editing process. The post-production process encompasses everything from the music chosen in each episode to the special effects added after the fact. Flanagan writes, directs, and edits his films, unusual in the industry. Considering the personal connections to *Midnight Mass* (2021) it would make sense for Flanagan to want to be involved in writing the script of this miniseries to include allusions to his personal life as expressed in the following quote, “Riley is kind of my avatar in the story” (*Netflix on YouTube*, 0:46-0:51). He has appeared in his projects, as seen in *Midnight Mass* (2021). Flanagan cast himself in *Midnight Mass* (2021) as the priest who attempts to lead the aged Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater) back on the path to Jerusalem, a cameo role (Flanagan, Book III: “*Proverbs*”, 1:30-1:32). Trevor Macy notes later in that same interview, “I think Mike as writer, director, and editor, he’s expert at weaving that tapestry together” (2:07-2:19). From pre-production to filming, the objects and location of a film set can determine the success of a miniseries.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the set and setting of a film can be paramount in setting up tension. The set and its location can create a mood that actors and writers aren’t able to pull up on their own. Flanagan’s selection of location and set played into how *Midnight Mass* (2021) was able to come alive through Crockett Island. *Midnight*

Mass (2021) was shot outside around Richmond, Vancouver. According to Ra Moon, filming had to cease during the COVID-19 outbreak when the set finished completion in March 2020, and filming would finally begin in August 2020 (Moon “Crockett Island: Where Was *Midnight Mass* Filmed?”). Although the island is meant to intentionally look withered, the extended break from when the set was put up to when the filming took place could have had an immense impact on the buildings on set, leading to an extremely weathered look. Oddly, the church itself does not resemble a typical Catholic structure, lacking the ornateness and aesthetic features. As Reverend Terrance Klein states in their article “What does a Catholic priest think about *Midnight Mass*”, Rev. Klein notes, “There are no statues of the saints in Crockett Island’s St. Patrick Church, and the crucifix is mostly draped. The eternal for Flanagan has no eyes, no heart, no communion with us” (Klein “What does a Catholic priest think about ‘*Midnight Mass*’”). The church itself looks protestant in its starkness and neglected, and as Reverend Klein notes, the church represents Flanagan’s struggles with faith. This can be seen when compared to the Recreational Center. This motif stretches further when considering the physical appearances of both faith-based buildings on the island, the appearance of St. Patrick’s Catholic Church itself, but is equally sterile in its modernity Recreational Center. The Recreational Center was financed through Bev Keane’s (Samantha Sloyan) morally ambiguous donations from the residents of the island. The hymns sung within the walls of the weathered St. Patrick’s Catholic Church does not reflect the outer appearance of the church, the songs within this building and around the island reflect Flanagan’s choices within the miniseries.



Fig. 34: The withered St. Patrick's Church on Crockett Island.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed Aug 11, 2023.

Sound can be experienced in a variety of ways through cinematography. It is essential to break sound down into two categories: score and source. Score is music that is *not* heard by the characters, as in montage music. Source music is music that is heard by characters on set, an example of this could be a church hymn or a song playing on the radio during a scene. The music used on set is intentional, Valerio Sbravatti notes in her article, "Typically, story-music can be heard by the characters who give rise to it and are able to interact with it" (Sbravatti "Story-Music / Discourse-Music: Analyzing the Relationship between Placement and Function of Music in Films"). Sbravatti articulates that story music is similar to source music, as it can be heard and interacted with by the characters on set. It can be considered denotative because it acknowledges the source of sound in the scene. Sbravatti continues: "Connotation indicates the nuance that a sound can acquire, the "mood," as well as its capacity of adding the same nuance to what is being shown" (Sbravatti, "Story-Music / Discourse-Music: Analyzing the Relationship between Placement and Function of Music in Films"). Score can be considered connotative; it represents the moods shown on screen through music that is not heard by the characters.

Mike Flanagan makes use of both score and source through the sounds shown in his miniseries. In *Midnight Mass* (2021) there are two predominant uses of sound: Popular music songs by Neil Diamond and religious hymns. The songs act as a score, being used to signify omens that are being spread throughout the congregation on the island. On occasion, however, the songs are heard by the characters as in the case of Riley's parents revisiting their courtship as he plays Diamond's "Holly Holy" on the record player (Flanagan, Book III: "*Proverbs*", 15:30-15:55). The hymns represent source as they are heard by the characters in the show, but as Sbravatti notes these hymns can be connotative too as they often reflect the exact opposite that is happening on screen at the same time (Sbravatti, "Story-Music / Discourse-Music: Analyzing the Relationship between Placement and Function of Music in Films"). The Neil Diamond songs contrast the troubling omens that circulate on the island in the first three episodes: Book I: "*Genesis*" features, "And The Grass Won't Pay No Mind", Book II: "*Psalms*" features, "Soolaimon" (hello, goodbye), and Book III: "*Proverbs*" features, "Holy, Holy". These songs are crucial to understanding Flanagan's intentions in the first three episodes: creating a strong sense of tension. As mentioned in previous chapters, Flanagan is creating a foreboding feeling through the omens and miracles that happen during the first four episodes of the miniseries. The Neil Diamond songs chosen to accompany these episodes, as well as the choice in songs, reveal that all is not well on the island through the inverse brought on by the music. Neil Diamond, it would appear, is a favorite of Flanagan's just as Stephen King is a favored literary artist. For example, (as mentioned above) in Book III: "*Proverbs*", during a montage all of the islanders are shown to be

enjoying life through their activities while Neil Diamond's "Holly, Holy" plays in the background as score music (Flanagan, Book III: "*Proverbs*", 15:30-15:55). Riley is Flanagan's avatar, as Flanagan himself stated, so Riley's concerned expression during the initial part of the musical montage also reflects the general uneasiness. The music and the happiness of the characters are in direct opposition to the terrifying disease that is working through the church's congregation through the tainted eucharist. Often, Flanagan uses these songs and hymns in the miniseries to express the opposite sentiment as shown on screen. Another example of this comes through the hymns sung in the show, in Book VI: "*Acts of the Apostles*", Bev Keane (Samantha Sloyan) leads the congregation with torches to the withered church for the midnight service while singing the hymn, "Holy God We Praise Thy Name" (Flanagan, Book VI: "*Acts of the Apostles*", 40:10-40:38). The congregation believes they are heading to the church for service, and the hymn they sing reflects this. It is unknown to the congregation that they will be killed, resurrected, and forcefully transformed into vampires. The music functions in *Midnight Mass* (2021) as an ironic commentary between the religious intent of the hymns and the corruption introduced by Bev and others.

Actors are another factor that informs the plot. The stars are the center of any film production. The four most important characters in *Midnight Mass* (2021) are: Riley Flynn (Michael Gilford), Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater), Erin Greene (Kate Siegel), and Bev Keane (Samantha Sloyan). Gilford has appeared in Flanagan's miniseries prior to *Midnight Mass* (2021), but this miniseries marks Gilford's first time as the lead actor. Linklater makes his first Flanagan appearance; he is also in a leading role. Gilford and

Linklater taking on leading roles marks a first for the actors, it also marks a first for Flanagan as he would switch up his preference in lead actors. Typical leading actors such as Sloyan and Siegel took supporting roles in this miniseries. Siegel and Sloyan bolster Flanagan's vetted acting cast. As mentioned in this chapter, actors such as Siegel and Sloyan have appeared in Flanagan films since *Oculus* (2013). Sloyan's performance as Bev Keane is of special note: she is the antithesis of Christianity, a twister of doctrine. Additional supporting roles that also deserve recognition belong to Warren Flynn (Igby Rigney), Annie Flynn (Kristin Lehman), Henry Thomas (Ed Flynn), and Dr. Sarah Gunning (Annabeth Gish). Riley's family deliver strong performances that accentuate Riley's dilemma. Ed struggles to accept what Riley has done while still raising his Warren, Annie attempts to keep Riley afloat. Dr. Sarah Gunning, Pruitt's secret child, is another character with a supporting role that is acted well. Thomas and Gish have appeared in Flanagan films prior to his transition to the miniseries. Rigney and Lehman come on as first-time-Flanagan actors; however, Rigney would go on to be featured in Flanagan's two most recent miniseries. Flanagan's understanding of building a film crew is on full display: he builds up new lead actors while using already-experienced actors in supporting roles. The result generates experience for up-and-coming actors while reserving strong supporting roles for established actors. Although both Gilford and Linklater both have strong performances, only Linklater would win recognition. As mentioned previously, Linklater would go on to win "Best Actor in a Limited Miniseries or Movie Made for Television" at *The Critics Choice Awards* in 2022 (*Imdb.com* "Midnight Mass - Awards"). The miniseries would propel Hamish Linklater into

stardom. Flanagan's understanding of this phenomenon contributes to his success. Flanagan's choice of actors has a significant impact on the success of *Midnight Mass* (2021). The relationships Flanagan has made have carried with him across several film sets, and the actors an integral part of this long-standing family. The miniseries is bolstered through Flanagan's acting crew which follow him from production to production. With each successful project, Flanagan creates prolific actors which return for future productions.



Fig. 35: Olivia Crain (Carla Gugino) chats in the kitchen while an entity (circled in red) lurks behind on the right of Olivia in *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018).

The Haunting of Hill House. Directed by Mike Flanagan. Paramount Pictures, 2018.

Having discussed the factors that contribute to a commercially successful miniseries, including Flanagan's miniseries, an understanding of what creates *terror* Flanagan produces in his miniseries remains. Horror films make us feel terrified by playing on viewers' primal fears as mentioned in the first chapter. Often horror must reinvent itself to continue creating original scares. Flanagan employs a range of different techniques that allow for terror to occur. The most prominent is the silent jumpscare that is unique to Flanagan. Jumpscare follow a unique pattern as Ben Guarano notes in his article for *Inverse.com*, "What makes a jump scare work, at its core, is pretty simple: Set

up a tense, lingering scene, and then break that in half with a sudden burst of sound or motion” (Guarano “The Unexpected Physiology of Jump Scares”). Flanagan revolutionizes this pattern by omitting the sudden burst of sound for his two *The Haunting* miniseries, effectively repurposing the jumpscare. The scare is present on screen, but there is no audio indication to look for a threat: often the threat goes unnoticed. The impact of this phenomenon is that viewers often stumble upon jumpscare in initial viewings, only to rewind and uncover hidden ghosts in multiple scenes across every episode. As mentioned, the two *Haunting* miniseries feature this form of the silent jumpscare, it is unique to this miniseries that now has two entries in *Hill House* (2018) and *Bly Manor* (2020). The two are still considered miniseries because their seasons are original and only feature allusions to characters between the two. One example of this jumpscare can be seen in *The Haunting of Hill House* occurs in Episode 1, “Steven Sees a Ghost” when Olivia Crane stands in the kitchen chatting with her son as seen below (Flanagan, Episode 1: “Steven Sees a Ghost”, 50:59). As seen in the picture above, the hidden ghost is circled in red. What makes this scene so jarring for audiences is the entity behind Olivia Crain is never announced outright through visual or audio cues, which allows the entity to silently sit above her left shoulder, a departure from the jumpscare that Guarano suggests as the stereotypical jumpscare. Flanagan would not settle with his popular creation, opting to continue innovating terror.



Fig. 36: The Angel (Quinton Boisclair) (circled in red) lurks to the left of the shot, eyes glowing in the bushes, unannounced as Erin Greene (Kate Siegel) looks out her window at night in Book II: “*Psalms*”.

Midnight Mass. Directed by Mike Flanagan. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/81083626. Accessed Aug 11 2023.

Flanagan would further develop this technique of scare in *Midnight Mass* (2021), but it would not be the same form as seen in the two *Haunting* miniseries. Flanagan’s hidden ghosts were not included in *Midnight Mass* (2021). In an interview with Jennifer Maas of *TheWrap.com*, “...if you spend the show looking for hidden ghosts, you’re going to be really, really disappointed” (Maas “*Midnight Mass* Creator Warns ‘Haunting’ Fans Not to Look for Hidden Ghosts Unless They Want to Be ‘Really, Really Disappointed’”). This quote shows a turn in his work, and although Flanagan does not say he is done using the silent jumpscare in his miniseries, it does indicate that Flanagan has found other ways to scare audiences outside of using hidden ghosts.

In *Midnight Mass* (2021) the jumpscare features sound and lack hidden ghosts, which radically differs from his prior usage of jumpscare. An example of a jumpscare in *Midnight Mass* (2021) can be seen in Book II: “*Psalms*” when Erin (Kate Siegel) looks outside (Flanagan, Book II: “*Psalms*”, 52:50). As seen in the picture above, the vampire is circled in red. Flanagan continually finds ways to breathe new life into the jumpscare.

Most recently, Mike Flanagan has achieved a world record for his application of the jumpscare in *The Midnight Club* (2022). As mentioned previously, the overuse of the jumpscare may have been one of the reasons for the failure of *The Midnight Club* (2022). According to Amanda Richards of *Netflix.com*, “The series... just got the Guinness World Record for most scripted jump scares in a single episode... specifically, there are 21 leap-from-your-seat moments scattered throughout the series premiere” (Richards, “*The Midnight Club* broke a Guinness World Record”). It should be noted that this record-breaking jumpscare featured only typical jumpscares as described by Guarano.

The features that make Mike Flanagan a unique director are what inform his success in both film and the miniseries. Although Flanagan cannot be accredited as the sole author of his projects, his involvement in his projects results in his imprimatur in each. Still, despite this, involvement from business partners such as Trevor Macy and Kate Siegel among others highlights the communal effort that goes into creating a financially successful film. The filmography of Flanagan also informs this and highlights how his style has developed. What makes a Flanagan film unique is comparable to what makes a Hitchcock film recognizable. First, he has found his genre, horror, and created a niche for himself with the miniseries. Flanagan’s films are unique through their application of location, sound, and actors. *Midnight Mass* (2021) benefits from a life-like set, a powerful soundtrack, and actors that excite viewers of Flanagan’s works. Mike Flanagan’s *Midnight Mass* (2021), among his other works, informs his success as a director.

Appendix/Filmography for *Midnight Mass* (2021)

Episode 1: Genesis:

After getting behind the wheel after drinking, the prodigal son of Crockett Island, Riley (Zach Glifford) ends up incarcerated for the death of a young schoolgirl. At night Riley is haunted by the face of the deceased schoolgirl, a sign of his unceasing guilt. Four years later Riley returns to his home, Crockett Island, to live with his parents and get on his feet once again. At the same time Riley returns a mysterious priest, Father Paul Hill (Hamish Linklater), also departs the ferry carrying a trunk and heads for Monsignor Pruitt's home. Once inside the home, Pruitt kneels and bangs on the trunk, and the trunk promptly knocks back.

Warren (Igby Rigney) and some of his friends Ali and Ooker (Rahul Abburi) (Louis Oliver), head out to the northern part of the island to drink and smoke marijuana. The area is mostly inhabited by stray cats. Something watches the boys as they party.

Bev Keane (Samantha Sloan) meets Father Hill while Riley and his family have dinner. Warren jokes of Monsignor Pruitt's tendency to roam at night because of his dementia. Riley soon learns his ex-girlfriend Erin (Kate Siegel) is living on Crockett Island as well. Father Hill's once locked trunk is now unlocked as shown in a brief frame. During a hectic storm that night Riley heads outside as he believes he has Monsignor Pruitt standing in the rain, however Riley cannot locate Pruitt or the figure. The next morning, the entire Crockett Island beach lay filled with dead cats. Seagulls pick at the corpses as onlookers arrive.

Episode 2: Psalms:

Sheriff Hassan (Rahul Kohli) and other island residents awaken to a beach full of dead cats, the blood drained from their bodies through an incision in their necks. At the Crockett Island potluck Father Hill agrees to meet with Riley for his AA meetings on the island instead of having Riley travel the belle daily. Leezah and Joe's past is highlighted through a conversation which shows Joe's alcoholism and how it has impacted the island physically.

This scene is followed by Joe Collie's (Robert Longstreet) dog being poisoned and dying painfully in front of everyone at the potluck. Joe blames Bev Keane who has openly admitted to planting poison to counteract whatever killed the cats the previous night.

Riley and Father Hill's AA meeting highlights more secrets to the island and its inhabitants, but it also shows us into the psyche of both Hill and Riley, who are having battles of faith individually. The discussion of suffering and meditation emanates the suffering Joe and the cats experienced earlier in the episode.

Erin Greene looks out of her window and sees a pair of glowing eyes watching from the distance. A sound can be heard on her roof.

The episode ends with church, as during communion Father Hill demands Leezah Scarborough (Annarah Cymone) stands up takes her communion, despite Leezah's waist-down paralysis, Leezah stands to the awe of the whole church and takes her communion. The audience, and the members in the congregation are all left with the lingering question: was this an act of God?

Episode 3: Proverbs:

The episode starts with Father Paul Hill entering a confessional and delivering some much-needed clarification on his presence on the island. Father Paul Hill is Monsignor John Pruitt, a priest suffering from an undiagnosed case of dementia who was sent to Jerusalem on a Holy mission.

The action abruptly takes us back to present day Crockett Island where Leezah has just been cured of her paralysis in communion. The act has visibly shaken the congregation, who have most certainly taken this as an act from God. Father Paul Hill quickly runs back to his house amidst the commotion and becomes greatly ill, coughing blood. Bev Keane quickly runs after, the frame ends on Bev staring bewildered at the old photograph of Monsignor Pruitt while Father Paul Hill enters from the restroom.

The town marvels at Leezah's miracle. Dr. Sarah Gunning (Annabeth Gish) calls it a scientific marvel, while some of the town believe it is an act of God. A line of townsfolk meet outside Bev's house to ask for miracles of their own, clearly showing the town's raised faith. Even Sheriff Hassan's son is interested and reads the Bible. Riley and Father Hill's AA meeting revolves around the topic of Leezah's recovery, Riley thinks Father Hill knew she was recovered, Father Hill objects.

Riley's parents dance youthfully in the living room, despite being old and in pain in earlier scenes. Warren and Leezah sneak off as well. Erin and Riley also meet. Dr. Gunning's once ill mother, Mildred Gunning (Alex Essoe) can now recall information and walk fine, and her skin looks surprisingly less wrinkly. The church has an increase in

service following the miracle. The communion is spread among more people. Warren notices Father Hill putting an unknown flask into the communion before one service. At the service in question, Father Hill abruptly falls over. Back at the house, Dr. Gunning informs Hill it is as if he is fighting a virus. Leezah forgives Joe Collie.

Riley enters for his AA meeting, and Joe Collie has joined Hill and Riley for this meeting. The miracle has even led Joe Collie to seek God, as Leezah has forgiven him. At the end of the meeting, Joe and Riley leave to head home. The scene shifts to where Father Hill resides, as Bev and the Scarborough parents discuss the miracle. Father Hill falls over, spitting up foamy blood, and dying.

The narrative cuts back to Father Hill's confessional from the beginning of the episode. On his trip, and as Monsignor Pruitt had been known to do, Pruitt wound up lost in a sandstorm, stumbling into a long-forgotten tomb that earthed an unknown evil. The animalistic creature leaps on Monsignor Pruitt and feeds from him, drinking his blood. The creature cuts his own arm and feeds the blood to Pruitt, who drinks and then de-ages when he awakens. Believing he has unearthed a holy angel of God's army, who has performed a miracle on him, Pruitt takes the angel with him back to Crockett Island to produce further seemingly holy miracles on his congregation under the guise of Father Paul Hill, a young substitute to the elderly Pruitt.

Once at home, Monsignor Pruitt/Father Hill falls over and dies in his home unexpectedly.

Episode 4: Lamentations:

Erin's child is seemingly gone, as the ultrasound does not show a baby in her stomach. Erin is diagnosed with a miscarriage; she goes to the mainland for further evaluation. Bev and Sturge (Matt Biedel) form a crucial alliance over the island as they converse over the revelation that Father Hill is Monsignor Pruitt, only the higher ups of the congregation know. Pruitt is also alive, and very hungry, and seemingly unable to travel in the sunlight.

Erin and Riley share a touching moment after the revelation of her miscarriage, and both agree to pray. They both have a philosophical conversation of what it is like to die. Monsignor Pruitt struggles with his vampirism, after cutting himself he finds that drinking blood satisfies his hunger. Monsignor Pruitt experiences a multitude of new traits on his way to church that night, colors become aromas and Pruitt's eyes glow in the dark. Pruitt meets a recovered Mildred who recognizes him immediately, and their prior relationship is uncovered.

Joe Collie, a Crockett Island native, comes by Pruitt's home seemingly aware of the resemblance between a younger Pruitt and Hill's current look. Controlled by his hunger, Pruitt pushes Joe over, killing him, and drinks up his blood. Bev, Sturge, and Wade Scarborough (Michael Trucco) cover up the incident and allow Pruitt to continue feeding. Bev finds Pruitt near Joe's body, but does not care about the murder, still convinced he is a holy figure and Joe Collie was a heathen. This creates the congregation that will protect and serve Pruitt's and Bev's needs.

On the mainland the doctor thinks Erin is lying, as there is no sign of a pregnancy following the test. As far as science is concerned, there was never any baby inside of Erin. Something has taken the baby away as Erin was seemingly pregnant at the beginning of the show.

Riley and Pruitt have an impromptu AA meeting at the early hours of the morning. They discuss the peculiarity of Erin's miscarriage. Pruitt once again has no feasible answer. Joe has seemingly gone missing, as he is not at this meeting. After the meeting is over, and Riley leaves, a visibly withdrawing Pruitt can be seen pacing the rec room. Seemingly at request, the Angel enters and Pruitt bows. The Angel cuts himself and gives Pruitt more blood for himself and the congregation. Riley remembers an incorrect detail that Pruitt said, while walking home, and heads back to question him one more time on the oddity. Upon opening the door to the rec center, the Angel leaps onto Riley and begins feeding. Monsignor Pruitt shuts the door to the rec center suspiciously.

Episode 5: Gospel:

Riley is missing from breakfast with the Flynn's, and Joe Collie's sister has come to talk to Sheriff Hassan following his uncharacteristic disappearance. Mass is moved to midnight by Bev the morning before church as a congregation line up outside. Mildred Gunning aims to attend, an unseen face in the community in years. Mildred's return and de-aging marks another miracle.

As everyone gathers for mass, Pruitt puts the tainted vampire blood into the communion, detailing what has been being fed to the congregation for the entirety of Pruitt's return. Pruitt delivers a powerful sermon. Mildred reacts poorly to Pruitt's

sermon; she does not want her daughter Dr. Gunning to go near the church again. Later that night Riley meets Erin, and they have a conversation about Riley's night in a rowboat. Riley painfully informs Erin of his disease, how he was infected.

A flashback occurs to when Riley awoke following the Angel's attack. Riley awakens and tries to leave the rec center, only to have his skin burnt painfully in the sunlight, which can heal within hours. Retreating inside, Riley and Pruitt converse on the disease. Pruitt discusses how he perceives the Angel and its abilities as a blessing from God, a way to cheat death for believers. A miracle, which produces further miracles. Pruitt's identity is revealed to Riley, as both are put into their peak physical selves through the transformation. Joe's death is revealed too, spun by Pruitt as a holy act necessary for the big picture to happen. Pruitt calls the creature an Angel, and Bev Keane is shown to be in the know on Riley's resurrection. Pruitt reveals the hunger and traits of the disease, as the infected are not able to get close to non-infected people without having a desire to feast. Riley does not feel the disease and feasting is a Christian miracle, but instead something malicious and mistaken. The murder Riley and Pruitt both commit are compared, and the justifications for the two are shown. The disease and hunger are construed as tests by Bev, Sturge, and Pruitt. Sturge donates some of his blood to Riley. The marks on his arm show that this has been done before for Pruitt. Pruitt allows Riley to leave and go out. It is revealed that Bev, Sturge, Wade, and Dolly (Crystal Balint) have also been blessed with the disease.

Riley wanders at night and checks up on those he cares for while they sleep before he goes to meet Erin, which was the start of the episode.

The scene returns to the boat. Knowing that she will not believe him, he stays out until dawn with Erin so she can see him burn in the sunlight, killing Riley. Erin does not believe Riley, and thus when the sun comes up Riley dies in front of Erin's eyes. Riley is forgiven by the young girl he killed at the start, having sacrificed himself for the downfall of the tainted congregation.

Book 6: Acts of the Apostles:

A changed Erin returns to the island and immediately seeks the help of Dr. Gunning and Mildred following her discovery. The act creates the alliance of good people who will revolt against the infected congregation. They reveal that they are all infected somehow.

Bev and Pruitt find out Riley killed himself, and possibly alerted others.

While the alliance meets, the infected congregation also meets, now joined by the Riley's father, Ed Flynn (Henry Thomas), to discuss Riley's disappearance. It is revealed that in Riley's AA meeting notes to those he wrote what he had been told from Monsignor Pruitt. Ed is fed lies and leaves eager to find his son. Riley's letter to Pruitt, although Ed unaware, was an intentional message to the direct Pruitt, which Pruitt crumples up.

Dr. Gunning tries to get Sheriff Hassan into the alliance, but Sheriff Hassan is not convinced of the story Erin and Gunning are telling. The alliance looks to go off island, only to find Sturge and Bev have removed the belle so nobody can go to the mainland. The power goes out on the island as Sturge cuts the power. While Hassan and the alliance

meet in Gunning's house, Bev and the island congregation light lanterns and head for mass. All head to mass. A line of lanterns heads to the church singing songs of praise.

After a sermon relating to change, Sturge drinks from a mysterious cup and dies in front of the congregation. The Angel arrives at the church, in church robes, and stands upon the congregation. The Angel spreads his wings and shows his power, described as an Angel by Pruitt. After the violent reaction from everyone, Sturge rises anew in front of the Angel.

With the enforcement of the upper-congregation, and the Angel, cups filled with poison are passed around to the congregation to get them to kill themselves and become fully infected like Pruitt. People begin taking the poison and dying. Mildred shoots Pruitt in the head, and he falls over dead. The vampire lurches and grabs Mildred carrying her away. People begin to awaken and resurrect, and as those who did not take the drink come close to inspect, the infected begin to feast in the church. Among the chaos the alliance leaves and shoots Bev, who heals after some time. All who ate and were eaten awake anew and wander the night with their new abilities. Those who are infected are sent out to infect those who did not go to mass, while the Angel flies around also feeding.

Book 7: Revelation

Mildred and Pruitt talk at the aftermath of mass. The infected townsfolk wander, feast, and infect those who did not take their communion. The feasted then rise and do the same.

The alliance: Erin, Dr. Gunning, Leezah, Hassan, Warren, and Annie all meet at Erin's and discuss how to beat the infected and stop their eventual plan of expanding.

Bev and the upper-congregation light Erin's house on fire to get them to come outside and begin lighting other houses too to get others to quit hiding. The fires spread. Annie holds Bev and Sturge back as the others escape. Annie kills herself but is resurrected because she partook in the communion. Bev and Sturge feed on Annie, and the others escape.

Pruitt and Mildred talk and discuss how Pruitt made a big mistake. Pruitt took the Angel here to help, but it did not help. Mildred was killed by the Angel and brought back to her best self. Pruitt regrets his actions and does not take part in the final acts of violence against the alliance.

The townsfolk all battle with their hunger, and their feeling that this is not holy or right. Some feed, others hug and prepare for the worst.

Warren and Leezah find Bowl's body in the abandoned house from the second episode, and the Angel feeding. They set the house on fire, and other houses are shown to be on fire as well. The boats are also burned.

Having been changed, Pruitt rejects Bev as he sees her misconstrued attempt at their grand plan. Bev plans to go out and infect others, spreading the good word, making themselves the deciders of who is holy. This sets off Pruitt, who rejects Bev's plan. Pruitt's plan was about God, while Bev's is about them and their selection. Bev denies Pruitt at this point, calling him a false prophet. Pruitt leaves with Mildred to spend his final moments with his family and his revealed daughter, Dr. Gunning. It is revealed that the boats have been lit on fire, as well as the houses, as Warren and Leezah leave the island by rowboat, both uninfected and not having died.

A line of those who were infected meet outside of the only available cots left: the ones Bev left for the chosen. The infected outnumber the beds, as the feasting got out of hand, and there are more people than beds, and several infected whom Bev deems unworthy of infection. Those who were not chosen are told to wait outside and die in the sunlight. Dr. Gunning spreads oil among the church and the cots, being caught by Pruitt, who tells her to do it. Pruitt reveals that he is her father, Mildred being her mother. Sturge shoots Dr. Gunning, while the church burns. Bev shoots Hassan who attempts to burn the cots next, Erin is grabbed by the vampire and feasted upon. While having her blood drunk, Erin cuts holes into the Angel's wings with her knife. Hassan's son Ali (Rahul Abburi) picks up the lighter and burns the cot down.

Everyone's fate is sealed, there is no shelter and the sun will rise soon. Knowing the infected, everyone on the island will die, everyone goes off to be with those they care about in their final moments. Forgiveness is given, and acceptance comes for many of the townsfolk. The townsfolk join in hymns while the sun rises. Bev Keane attempts to dig herself into a hole on the beach to beat the sun, but is unsuccessful. The Angel is shown to be flying away, attempting to beat the sunlight as well, but unable to fly efficiently considering the holes in his wings. It is left up to the viewer if the Angel lives or dies, the only two survivors of Crockett Island are Leezah and Warren.

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