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A Creative Midterm Alternative: The Horror Author Poster Session

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Abstract: A midterm assignment affords honors students from all disciplines the opportunity for creative expression. Poster subjects cover a range of writers in the genre of horror, and the event showcases students' artistic abilities while promoting interdisciplinary socialization and a sense of community in honors. A sample list of authors and examples of document design are included.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; horror tales; interdisciplinary education; poster presentation; University of South Alabama (AL)—Honors College

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One of the most popular genre courses I teach is Horror Literature and Film, which I have offered as both a regular upper-level English elective and an upper-division honors seminar. I use the same core syllabus for each version, encompassing literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies and emphasizing breadth in the horror genre across multiple mediums. Fiction readings include *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* while non-fiction readings include texts on horror film history and production, essays on gender studies, and cultural studies in horror. Surprised students and literary purists sometimes peruse my reading list and protest: Where's Poe? Lovecraft? Matheson or King or Barker? I direct them to the midterm Author Poster Session, which has become the course's showcase event.

On the syllabus, I provide a list of authors from whom students choose on a first-come/first-served basis so that we can cover a range of writers from canonical founders to contemporary favorites, as shown in Table 1. I expand

and contract the list based on class enrollment because the regular section caps at 30 while the honors section caps at 15. I occasionally entertain off-list requests, and I plan to diversify future lists with additional LGBTQ+ and BIPOC authors, such as Stephen Graham Jones and Jewelle Gomez.

The basic physical requirement for the poster is a three-panel display board, but students can also produce smaller or larger pieces. Poster contents should highlight key biographic and bibliographic information for the author, should feature at least one sample passage of representative text, and should be presented on the poster with printouts, photos, hand-drawn text or artwork, interactive devices, and so forth. In-depth discussion and details are provided in two one-sheet handouts: a biography of the author, with a list of works cited and consulted, and a bibliography of the author's key works.

The final posters and accompanying handouts represent a variety of artistic and document design abilities, but their construction can be time-consuming and expensive depending upon the students' skills and the materials they wish to use. For example, as shown in Figure 1, a student in the 2021 honors section designed an elaborate, multi-piece project on Japanese author Junji Ito. I reassure students, however, that as long as the poster includes the required elements—biography and bibliography highlights, sample passage, and two handouts—the project will earn an A, so they do not need to worry that their grades will suffer if they cannot afford extravagant expenditures of time and money.

One takeaway from this assignment is that the poster session provides an opportunity for creative expression to honors students across the disciplines. The national shift in honors education away from liberal arts toward STEM disciplines is reflected in my recent course enrollments: the 2019 regular

TABLE 1. SAMPLE AUTHOR LIST OPTIONS

V.C. Andrews	Joe Hill	Brian Lumley
Clive Barker	James Howe	Richard Matheson
Robert Bloch	Junji Ito	Stephenie Meyer
Max Brooks	Shirley Jackson	Edgar Allan Poe
Ramsey Campbell	Jack Ketchum	Anne Rice
Tananarive Due	Dean Koontz	Dan Simmons
Dennis Etchison	Stephen King	S.P. Somtow
Neil Gaiman	Sheridan LeFanu	R.L. Stine
Charles Grant	Fritz Leiber	Peter Straub
Laurell K. Hamilton	Bentley Little	Whitley Streiber
Charlaine Harris	H.P. Lovecraft	Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow

FIGURE 1. JUNJI ITO POSTER, 2021 (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

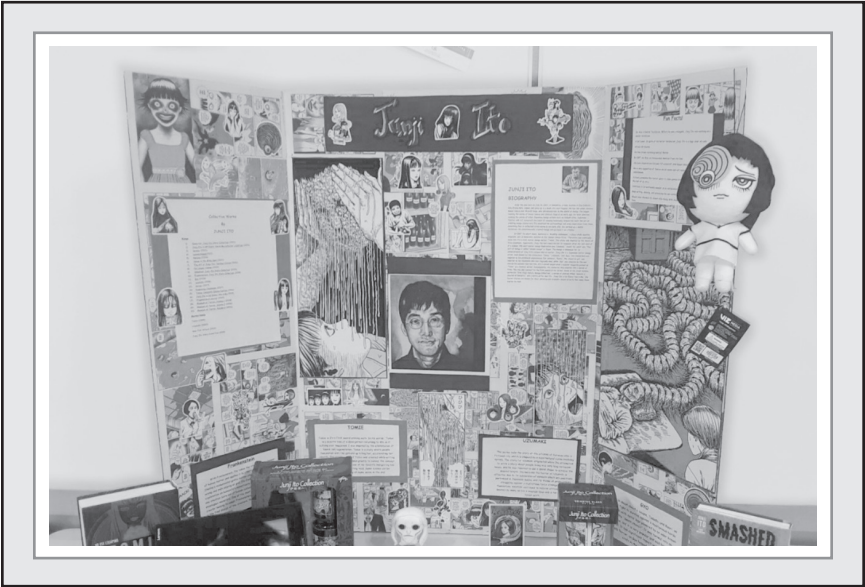


FIGURE 2. SHIRLEY JACKSON POSTER, 2021 (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)



section had 22 students, with 13 English majors (59%), five from social sciences, and one each from foreign language, natural sciences, nursing, and education; in contrast, the 2021 honors section had 13 students, with only two English majors (15%), three from natural sciences, three from social sciences, two from engineering, two from allied health, and one from foreign language. STEM majors, however, appreciate the chance to express their creative abilities just as much as students from the fine arts and humanities. For example, one 2021 standout project was from a mechanical engineering/physics double major who constructed an interactive three-story paper house to represent Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (see Figure 2).

Another takeaway is that the poster session event helps to loosen disciplinary silos and foster a sense of honors community. Invited guests have included other honors students and friends, the English department chair, the honors college staff, and honors faculty from other departments. Since honors students from the same incoming cohort may see each other infrequently once they begin upper-division coursework in their majors, circulating among the posters to collect handouts, take photos, and discuss the authors' works not only encourages students to learn about thematic breadth in horror literature but also allows them to socialize and to appreciate each other's artistic abilities in ways not afforded by the traditional midterm exam or paper. Students frequently comment that the session significantly expands their personal reading lists, and the project can be easily adapted to other genres and subjects.

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