

## Inevitable Madness: The Horror of Heredity

The Human Genome Project, established in 1990 and completed in 2003, carried with it the promise of unlocking the secrets of human genetics to recognize, treat, and prevent hereditary illnesses. Yet, twenty years into the so-called “genetic revolution” of health care, the focus on the genome lends itself to the fear of genetic predetermination, the idea that individuals’ lives are controlled solely by their genetic blueprint. From the werewolf to Mr. Hyde, the fear of losing control of the body and mind has been frequently represented in horror literature. Recent horror has revived the age-old fear of losing control of one’s mind, though now instead of killer viruses, brainwashing, and other external invaders, these new texts focus on danger that lurks within. This paper will focus on a selection of horror texts featuring adolescent boys who find their lives upended by mental illness.

Ari Aster’s 2018 film *Hereditary*, the television serial *Bates Motel*, and Justine Larbalestier’s 2016 novel *My Sister Rosa* all evoke the dread of a hidden terror, incubating undetected until its unavoidable emergence. Each examines the anxiety surrounding a sense of inevitability and predetermination, reflecting Jason Colavito’s assertion that primary source of fear in contemporary horror is not the abject monster nor the evil villain, but instead the “horror of helplessness,” or the “failure of free will.” What could leave one more helpless than his own genetic makeup? Each text features a young man navigating emerging mental illness, apparently inherited from his parents, and despite the proactive attempts of each family to manage and treat the impending condition, the illness becomes an insidious force in the characters’ lives.

As our understanding of the role of genetics in mental illnesses becomes more complete and our desire to be more compassionate grows, our narratives of mental illness have shifted to reflect these changes. As the “madman” image of mental illness falls out of acceptability, a new spate of media presents mental illness in a more complex light. And yet, despite the larger social push for greater empathy and understanding of neurodiverse individuals, the threat of insanity carries with it a lingering stigma linked to the ideas of danger, volatility, and violence.