does not deter the horror audience's interest (indeed, audiences would appear to desire that the same stories be told again and again). My aim is to introduce some of the most important plot structures in the horror genre, in order not only to illuminate their fundamental organizing principles, but also to suggest, in part, something of the origin of the pleasure that horror aesthetics find in the genre. Again, I do not claim to be able to identify every horror plot, nor, perhaps, even all of the basic plots. My findings are provisional, though I hope that they are nonetheless instructive.

One way to itemize the recurring plots of horror would be to review each of its subgenres with an eye to isolating the stories it most frequently retells. For example, the most common ghost stories involve the return from the dead of someone who has left something unsaid or undone, who wishes something unacknowledged to be brought to light, or who wants revenge or reparation. Once the living discover this secret motive, they are generally on their way to sending the ghost back to where it came from.

Likewise, tales of malevolent houses—such as Stephen King's The Shining, Jay Anson's supposed nonfiction The Amityville Horror, and Robert Marasco's Burnt Offerings—characteristically recount the possession of the home for the purpose of reenacting some past evil (haunted houses are generally haunted by the sins of the former inhabitants). That is, these stories involve a narrative of renewal, predicated upon restaging an altogether unsavory past.

However, though it appears to be the case that each of the subgenres of horror—vampire stories, zombie stories, werewolf stories, giant insect, giant reptile, and alien invasion stories—have particular tales (or, if you will, narrative themes) that they tend to rehearse again and again, it is also the case that, as well, these tales often share more abstract, deeper narrative structures with each other. Thus, while Stephen King's Cycle of the Werewolf reprises the classic narrative themes of lycanthropy, and Jay Anson's 666 once again sets in motion Satan's schemes for world dominion, both plots share crucial formal structures that are also repeated in other subgenres, which are as diverse as those of the toxic mutant, the defrosted prehistoric dinosaur, the mad scientist/necromancer, and so on.

Since my interest in this book is to speak of horror in a very general way, my focus, for the most part, will be on the abstract, narrative structures that cross and subsume the various subgenres of horror. Adopting this level of generality will also be useful when I come to suggest what it is about horror as a genre which entices people to indulge in it. This is not to deny that the study of the narrative themes of the subgenres of horror is worthwhile. Research along these lines is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, such research is likely to reveal the particular fascination exerted by each subgenre—and its compelling (repeated) myths—rather than something about the power of horror in general.

The Complex Discovery Plot

One way to approach the deep, abstract plot structures of the horror genre is to look at a fairly complicated generic plot structure in order to pinpoint some of its basic ingredients or functions, and then to see how these functions can be modified or recombined to form other generic plot structures. To that end, the first of the dozen or so structures of horror narration that I will discuss is what I call a complex discovery plot. This plot structure has four essential movements or functions. They are: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation.¹

The first function in the complex discovery plot is onset. Here the monster's presence is established for the audience. For example, in the film Jaws, we see the shark attack. We know a monster is abroad and about. The onset of the monster begins the horror tale proper, though, of course, the onset of the monster may be preceded in the narrative by some establishing scenes that introduce us to the human characters and their locales, and perhaps to their horror-relevant occupations, e.g., they're Arctic explorers or germ-warfare researchers. Generally, the onset or arrival of a monster will be set out in one of two ways, which are analogous to the two ways in which a crime might be set out in a detective fiction. That is, we often distinguish between thrillers and mysteries when discussing detective stories. In a thriller, the audience knows who the culprit is from the start—even if the characters in the fiction do not—and this knowledge has the function of generating a great deal of suspense. Or, it may be the case that neither the audience nor the characters know "whodunit"; all that is known is that a crime—often a murder—has been committed, and the reader and the sleuth review the clues simultaneously in order to solve the mystery.

Similarly, a complex discovery horror story may begin in the manner of a thriller, by immediately revealing the identity of the monster to the audience (e.g., Jaws or Guy Smith's novel Killer Crabs); or in the manner of a mystery, by only showing us the astoundingly effects of the monster—usually involving death and destruction, but also the strange behavior of the recently possessed. In the latter case, the audience, along with the characters, follows the accumulation of the evidence of monstrous, foul doings with an interest in learning what is behind all this carnage.

As well, the onset, in the sense of the manifestation, of the monster, may be either immediate or gradual. The horrific being, that is, may be identified for the audience immediately in an early or an opening scene (e.g., the movie Night of the Demon), or its presence and/or identity may be only gradually revealed. We may only learn what the monster is after encountering several of its murders or other effects, though, of course, we may learn this before any of the characters in the story does.
In this respect many horror stories employ what might be called phasing in the development of their onset movement. That is, the audience may put together what is going on in advance of the characters in the story; the identification of the monsters by the characters is phased in after the prior realizations of the audience. That the audience possesses this knowledge, of course, quickens its anticipation. Moreover, the audience often is placed in this position because it, like the narrator, frequently has access to many more scenes and incidents, as well as their implications, than are available to individual characters. For example, in Daniel Rhodes's novel Next After Lucifer, we realize that Courdeval, the hierophant of Belial, is taking possession of John McTell before he does—since we have learnt, among other things, that the crypt has been disturbed before McTell does—and we also figure out that Alyse is the virgin Courdeval's seeking before anyone else does since we, but not the characters, know the nature of the apparition that appears in her bath. This type of structure is quite common. The audience, then, often has a fuller picture of what is going down, or, to shift metaphors, the audience has more pieces of the puzzle than do the characters, which perspective results in the audience coming to its discovery in advance of the characters, and, thereby, elicits a keen sense of expectation from the reader or the viewer.

Also, onset, like many of the other functions in horror stories, can be iterated. There can, for example, be multiple onsets; in Richard Lewis's novel Devil's Coach Horse, the man-eating beetles appear in both Chicago and Cambridge, England. Also, there may be multiple temporal as well as multiple spatial onsets; the creature may arrive at different times and in different places, as in King's It. The onset function, as well, can be quite sustained; nearly the whole of Don D'Amassa's novel Blood Beast is preoccupied with the protracted process by which the gargoyles become manifest.

The onset of the creature, attended by mayhem or other disturbing effects, raises the question of whether the human characters in the story will be able to uncover the source, the identity and the nature of these untoward and perplexing happenings. This question is answered in the second movement or function in the kind of plot we are discussing; I call it discovery. That is, after the monster arrives, an individual or a group learns of its existence. The discovery of the monster may come as a surprise to the characters; or it may be part of an investigation; moreover, where the discovery is the outcome of an investigation, the investigation may progress either under the heightened assumption that human agency is responsible for the recent, nefarious happenings or under the hypothesis that some unnatural force (e.g., a werewolf rather than a rabid dog) is at large. Discovery proper occurs when one character or group of characters comes to the warranted conviction that a monster is at the bottom of the problem. Onset, loosely speaking, comprises the scenes and sequences involving the manifestations of the monster, prior to the discovery of the monster; the onset movement can become quite extended as evidence, often in the form of murders or other disturbing events pile up before anyone (living) has a glimmering of what is going on. Where an investigation into the cause of these manifestations is already underway, discovery movement in the plot emerges nearly out of the onset movement.

In what I am calling the complex discovery plot, the discovery that a monster is at the root of recent evil is resisted, often by the powers that be. That is, though an individual or a group has discovered that some unnatural being is behind a rash of gruesome killings, this information is treated skeptically by certain third parties, often authority figures such as the police, eminent scientists, religious leaders, government officials, or the army. The monster's existence has been established, both to the audience and to a small stalwart band of discoverers, but for one reason or another the monster's existence or the nature of the threat it actually poses is not acknowledged. "There are no such things as vampires," the police chief might say at this point in a horror plot. In the movie Jaws, the town council refuses to admit the presence of the shark because of the threat it poses to the tourist trade, just as Mayor Pearson rejects Chief Slaughter's proposals in David Morrell's novel The Totem, because it would endanger the sale of local livestock. The discovery of the monster, therefore, necessitates a further confirmation to the satisfaction of third parties of the monster's existence. The discovery of the monster by one person or group must be proven to yet another, initially skeptical person or group, often a person or group necessary to mount resistance to the monster.

In the complex discovery plot, then, discovery flows into the next plot movement, which is confirmation. As we will see later, it is the presence of this confirmation function in this particular type of story that makes it a complex discovery plot. The confirmation function involves the discoverers or the believers in the existence of the monster convincing some other group of the existence of the creature and of the proportions of the mortal danger at hand (some of these monsters are often said to spell the end of human life as we know it).

The confirmation section of this sort of plot can be quite elaborate. As the U.N. refuses to accept the reality of the onslaught of killer bees or invaders from Mars, precious time is lost, during which the creature or creatures often gain power and advantage. This interlude also allows for a great deal of discussion about the encroaching monster, and this talk about its invulnerability, its scarcely imaginable strength, and its nasty habits endows the beast with qualities that prime the audience's fearful anticipation of its next manifestation. Much of the audience's reaction to fictional monsters often hinges on the features attributed to them prior to their being shown.
attacking people onscreen or prior to their being described in a particular attack scene in a novel. Talking about the monster when it is not present primes the audience's reaction for those scenes where we see or read about the monster in action. And a great deal of this attribution of horrific properties to the monster takes place while the discoverers are proving their case about the monster's existence and its awesome potentials.¹

In both the discovery and the confirmation movements in horror stories, a great deal of ratiocination may be exhibited. As a character develops the hypothesis that a vampire is in the neighborhood, or strives to prove that alien invaders are taking over, argument and explanation come to the fore. In order to confirm her discovery of a monster, a character will have to demonstrate that her claim more plausibly fits the facts than the rival theories do. Much of the reasoning employed to this end will be of the sort philosophers call "hypotheses to the best explanation." For example, the vampire hypothesis better comprehends such anomalies as wolves baying in the middle of London, small bite marks on the victim's neck, and sustained anemia despite countless blood transfusions than do any of the available naturalistic accounts.²

Undoubtedly, as with the case of mystery stories, the play of reasoning in many horrific tales contributes to the cognitive pleasure the stories afford. Nor should we be surprised to find that the drama of proof plays such an important role in horror stories, since, as I argued earlier, the object of horror is that which is excluded from our conceptual schemes. Thus, the plots make a point of proving that there are more things in heaven and earth than are acknowledged to exist in our standing conceptual frameworks. One thing that is particularly interesting about this plot structure is the tension caused by the delay between discovery and confirmation. Thematically it involves the audience not only in the drama of proof. But, additionally, as the audience is denied the knowledge of the existence of the monsters with the discoverers, it places us in a delightfully superior position that is especially pronounced when the protagonists in question—generals, bishops, police chiefs, scientists, heads of institutions, bureaucrats of all sorts, and so on—are patently authority figures.

As with onset, the discovery and confirmation movements in a horror narrative can be iterated. The monster can be discovered more than once by different persons and groups, and its existence may have to be confirmed to more than one group. Stephen King's recent Tommyknockers starts the discovery/confimation process several times, though for various reasons in each the effort aborts in the fiction.

After the hesitations of confirmation, the complex discovery plot culminates in confrontation. Humanity marches out to meet its monster and the confrontation generally takes the form of a debacle. Often, there is more than one confrontation. These may assume the shape of an escalation in intensity or complexity or both. Furthermore, the confrontation movement may also adopt a problem/solution format. That is, initial confrontations with the monster prove it to be invulnerable to humankind in every way imaginable; but then humanity snatches victory from the jaws of death by concocting one "last chance" countermeasure that turns the tide. This countermeasure can be developed and theorized in a scene that occurs before its application, e.g., the scene where the mating serum is introduced in Devil's Coach Horse; or, it can be thought up during the heat of battle, at a moment of catharsis, e.g., when the police chief shoots at the explosive cylinder that the shark has in its mouth at the end of Jaws. In the majority of cases, humanity emerges victorious from its confrontation with the monster, though it is possible for us to lose—as we do in the conclusion of the remake of the movie Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Or, the monster may simply escape, as he does in the novel Next After Lucifer. Recent motion pictures, especially since Brian De Palma's Carrie, also frequently follow the victorious confrontation scene with an optional coda which suggests that the monster has not been completely annihilated and is preparing for its next onset (in a sequel, no doubt);³ for example, the heroine sees a memory reflection of Freddie Krueger at the end of Nightmare On Elm Street (Part IV).

In order to get a clear sense of the way the complex discovery plot works, it is helpful to consider how it functions in detail in a well-known work of horror. A very useful example in this respect is William Blatty's novel The Exorcist, a book that quite conceivably can lay claim to being the inaugural work of the present cycle of horror fiction. The book is rather complicated insofar as it aspires to more than mere horror—allegorically, it is an affirmation of the existence of inexplicable evil in the world (note the page of quotations that precedes the story), and it has a theory about the real purpose of demonic possession. However, despite these larger aims, the book shares with more modest horror stories the form of the complex discovery plot.

The book begins with a short prologue in Northern Iraq. This is not part of the complex discovery part proper, though it performs important functions with respect to the novel as a whole. It introduces us briefly to the exorcist, Lancaster Merrin, who has a premonition of what is to come; the demon Pazuzu, whose realm is that of sickness and disease, is going to strike again. Also, we learn something about Merrin's spiritual crisis; he has difficulty feeling (as opposed to willing) love for other people, especially when they are deformed and diseased (Pazuzu's special province). This has led Merrin to worry about his faith.

This information about Merrin's spiritual state is relevant to Blatty's conception of demonic possession; for Blatty thinks that the demonic purpose of possession is not primarily to appropriate the soul of the possessed, but to undermine the faith of all those who surround and witness the spectacle: to make them doubt and despise themselves in such a way that
they cannot believe that God could love them. Thus, when the exorcism eventuates, we find the demon taunting Merrin about his problems with loving others, just as it exploits Karras's (the younger exorcist's) guilt feelings about his mother.

*The Exorcist* moves into first gear with the section called "The Beginning." The primary function of this section is to stage very carefully the onset of the demon. The onset movement in *The Exorcist* is quite protracted. The first evidence of the arrival of the monster occurs on the second page of the first chapter; Chris MacNeil, a famous movie actress and the mother of Regan (the young girl about to be possessed), hears rappings in the attic, which she takes to be caused by rats. Other anomalies begin to accumulate: Regan hears strange noises issuing from her bedroom ceiling; her missing dress appears in an unexpected place; Regan's bureau appears to have been moved; Regan plays with an ouija board, talking to someone named Captain Howdy; one of Regan's stuffed toys is found in one of the rat traps in the attic; and Regan complains that her bed shakes at night.

The second chapter switches to Father Karras; he visits his mother in New York. This interlude establishes that Karras feels quite guilty about having left his mother in order to follow his priestly vocation. Later during the exorcism, the demon will use Karras's guilt about his mother to undermine his determination. Chapter Three, however, returns to the business of developing the onset of the demon. Evidence of the demon's presence intensifies in its frequency, its scale and its seriousness. Chris complains to a doctor that Regan is indulging in eccentric, attention-getting behavior: the rappings, losing things; complaints about furniture moving and about her bed shaking. After Chris takes Regan to a doctor, Chris learns that Regan is using extremely obscene language. By the end of the chapter, Regan's condition is rapidly deteriorating: she is uncharacteristically forgetful and untidy; she complains of nausea; there are more reports of Regan's use of unseemly language; and Regan insists that there is a foul, "burny" smell in her room, which no one can corroborate.

The signs of the demon's onset become more evident in the opening of the fourth chapter. Desecrations, recalling those of the Black Mass, have been discovered in a nearby church: human excrement has been placed on the altar, and a massive phallus has been attached to an effigy of Christ. Meanwhile, Regan's behavior is becoming increasingly stranger. She comes downstairs while Chris is giving a party, urinates on the living-room rug, and ominously predicts that one of the guests, an astronaut, will die in outer space. The conclusion of the chapter, which is also the conclusion of the first section of the book, goes out with a bang. Chris sees Regan's bed shaking violently—and inexplicably.

The second section of *The Exorcist*, entitled "The Edge," carries the onset of the demon forward to the point of its discovery. Regan is subjected to batteries of medical tests, while her symptoms become more and more lurid. She begins to undergo episodes in which her body is heaved about; in which she exhibits preternatural strength, in which her body becomes unaccountably elastic; and in which her voice changes. The doctors are mystified. Then Chris's director, Burke Dennings, is murdered in what appears to be a cult killing—his head has been rotated 180 degrees—and Regan is implicated. The doctors suggest the possibility of an exorcism as a means of countersuggestion. The section ends with the most vivid manifestation of the demon's presence so far. Chris finds Regan masturbating with a crucifix; she forces Chris's face into her bleeding crotch; and then Chris sees something completely supernatural—Regan rotates her head 180 degrees as if to admit that she has killed Burke. By this point in the plot Chris has been convinced that Regan is possessed. Chris functions, that is, as the discoverer figure in the plot. At the opening of the third section, "The Abyss," she approaches Karras for the purpose of requesting an exorcism. Karras, however, resists the idea. At this point, the plot moves into the confirmation phase. Karras is the relevant authority figure, and it is he who must be convinced, against his skeptical reservations, that Regan is possessed. This process is quite elaborate. It takes over a hundred pages before Karras is finally swayed.

The complexity of confirming Regan's possession stems from several factors. Since Karras is a psychiatrist, he immediately searches for naturalistic explanations. Also, his investigation must follow Church procedure, so he must ascertain that the established criteria for possession have been unambiguously met. As readers, we learn a great deal about what it takes to count as a genuine possession; and as Karras tests to see that each criterion is met—and that rival explanations are not available—an extended drama of proof preoccupies the text.

What makes the confirmation of Regan's possession particularly intricate is that the demon inside her is playing with Karras. At certain points, it intentionally misleads Karras; it pretends to think that tap water is holy water and withdraws when it is sprinkled over the bed. The demon wants Karras to hesitate in his conviction. It says, "We must give you some reason for doubt. Some. Just enough to assure the final outcome."

The demon teases Karras, speaking in languages Regan could not know, but refusing to carry on the conversations long enough for Karras to be utterly convinced that it is not mouthing catchphrases. Of course, by now the reader is convinced that Regan is possessed, in part because we are quite aware of the fact that the demon knows exactly what Karras wants confirmed and ingeniously frustrates Karras's strategems. Finally, however, the signs become overwhelming: It is discovered that Regan is answering Karras's questions in backwards English—a diabolical way, shall we say, to meet the requirement that the possessed exhibit facility with alien tongues—and Regan, though strapped to her bed, has etched "help me" on her stomach.
he has to identify the vampire. Initially, he thinks that it must be an Englishman (since vampires must sleep in their native soil), but eventually he discovers that it is Count Dracula. Dr. Seward resists the idea of vampires as unscientific, but Van Helsing and Harker, Lucy's lover, argue the case in a drama of proof that shows how the vampire hypothesis is irresistible. The process of confirmation is now as sustained as in The Exorcist, and by the second act Seward seems converted. The play then turns to a series of confrontations, culminating in the staking of Dracula in the secret passage between Seward's asylum and Carfax Abbey.

A striking number of films have employed the complex discovery plot during the last decade and a half of the current horror cycle. One particularly successful example is The Omen, written by David Seltzer and directed by Richard Donner. This film, like Rosemary's Baby—which as both a novel and a film prefigured the reigning horror cycle—concerns the advent of the Anti-Christ. A band of devil worshippers, mostly priests it appears, have substituted the son of Satan—called Damien—for the child of a wealthy American diplomat, Robert Thorn (played by Gregory Peck), who has presidential aspirations. Thus, it is implied that Satan is putting himself within reach of the White House.

Of course, neither Thorn nor his wife realizes that Damien is the Son of Satan. But all sorts of strange happenings begin to herald the onset of something unnatural. Some highlights: Damien's governness, seemingly in a trance, hangs herself at his birthday party; a bizarre new nanny, with a feral grin, shows up under dubious circumstances and soon after her a monstrous dog (with whom, the editing has suggested, Damien has telepathic communion) joins the household, against Ambassador Thorn's instructions; Damien has an inexplicable tantrum at the sight of a church; Damien scares away giraffes and enrages baboons at the zoo; and so on.

The role of the discoverer is distributed over two figures. The first is Father Brennan who—though he has learned who Damien really is—manages to inform Thorn of his son's nature in such a deranged and lunatic manner that Thorn discounts it (until, after Brennan's death, some of what the priest foretold comes to pass). Then the discoverer role is taken up by a photographer named Jennings, whose snapshots of people around Thorn have a tricky habit of prophesizing their deaths. Jennings has also investigated Brennan and has, more or less, come to know most of what the priest knew.

Jennings lays his case before Thorn, who is becoming somewhat rattled by all the coincidences: his wife's pregnancy, as predicted by the crazy priest; the fact that Damien was born at 6 a.m. on June six (i.e., at 666), etc. But Thorn is nevertheless skeptical. For most of the rest of the film, he remains the figure for whom the existence of the Satanic plot must be confirmed. The drama of proof and the play of ratiocination become quite sustained: not only are we treated to glosses of the Book of Revelations that are then

(earlier Karras had predicted that this sort of manifestation would disappear once Regan's hands were secured—famous last words). So, "At 9:00 this morning, Damien Karras came to the president of Georgetown University and asked for permission to seek an exorcism."

The Church authorities are not as difficult to convince as Father Karras, and the plot begins to move from the confirmation phase to the confrontation phase as we turn from the third section of the book to the fourth, entitled "And let my cry come unto thee..." This section begins by bringing us up to date on a plot complication that I have not yet mentioned in my paraphrase so far—there is a police investigation into Burke Dennings murder that has run parallel to the discovery and confirmation of Regan's possession. This is not an essential element of the complex discovery plot; however, it does enrich The Exorcist by adding yet another line of ratiocination to the text—this time displayed by Detective Kinderman—which ratiocination, with its surmises and hypotheses, ramifications the drama of proof.

The most important element of the fourth section of The Exorcist is the arrival of Father Merrin, accompanied by some background information about him, which is then followed by the exorcism itself. Depending on how you count them, the exorcism involves several confrontations with the demon. The demon renders the room icy cold; Regan levitates; but most importantly, the demon attacks the assembled—most notably the exorcists—where their psyches are most vulnerable. In the penultimate confrontation, Merrin dies, which vexes Pazuzu immensely since he/she/it thought he/she/it was on the verge of winning Merrin's soul; Pazuzu, one guesses, thinks this is a piece of cosmic dirty pool. Then Karras enters the room for the last confrontation, which heats up to the point where the priest calls the demon into his own body and, with his last ounce of willpower, hurls himself (and the demon) from Regan's bedroom window. Regan is cleansed and Karras lives just long enough to be absolved of his sins. At this point, the narrative is effectively over, though there is a brief epilogue that sketches the return to normalcy.

This sort of complex discovery plot—comprising onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation—is exemplified in innumerable horror stories of all sorts. Another very well-known example of it can be found in the widely used theatrical popularization of Dracula, adapted by Hamilton Deane and John Balston. The onset of the vampire is signaled in the opening scene of the first act, where we learn that Lucy has been stricken by the same mysterious disease that has recently killed Mina. Medical science is stymied and Dr. Seward, Lucy's father, has called his old colleague, Professor Van Helsing, onto the case.

Van Helsing is the quintessential discoverer figure. Though it appears that he already comes to England suspecting that the problem is a vampire, he sets about piecing together the evidence to support his view and, of course,
correlated to Damien's circumstances, but we learn that Damien's mother appears to have been a dog, and that Thorn's natural child had been murdered. The telltale evidence keeps piling up.

At certain moments—for example, after the attack at the cemetery and then after his wife's death—Thorn seems convinced. But he keeps backsliding. In Israel, he refuses to kill Damien; but when Jennings says he'll do it, Jennings is beheaded. Understandably, this unnerves Thorn, so he picks up the ritual knives again and heads for London. But, even in London, he must perform one more test to confirm Damien's diabolism. As instructed by an Israeli exorcist, he cuts the child's hair and uncovers an incriminating birthmark (666). This is the last piece of evidence; the Anti-Christ hypothesis is finally confirmed to Thorn's satisfaction. And no sooner is it confirmed, then the first confrontation explodes: Thorn is assailed by the demonic governor with the feral grin, who seems to function rather as Damien's familiar. Thorn must also confront the household hound from hell. But despite his heroic efforts, he is gunned down before he can kill Damien on hallowed ground. Humankind loses this confrontation with Satan, and Damien seems to have become a ward of the President of the United States.

The complex discovery plot is one of the most frequent horror plots in use in recent literature and film, though it is also in evidence in earlier horror cycles. The giant insect films of the fifties, as well as alien invasion films, make quite wide use of this format as do earlier horror novels like Carmilla. However, it is not the only plot structure to be found in the genre, and, at this juncture, it will be instructive to look at some other alternative plot structures.

Variations

One way to track down other operative horror plots is to note that many horror stories do not employ all of the functions or plot movements sketched in the account of the complex discovery plot. Often one observes that one can arrive at the characterization of the plot structure of a given horror story by subtracting various of the functions or plot movements from the complex discovery plot. For example, one quite common alternative plot structure is the discovery plot (as opposed to the complex discovery plot). This comprises three basic functions (though each may be iterated). These are: onset, discovery, and confrontation. That is, one very frequent horror plot is the complex discovery plot sans the confirmation function.

An example of what has just been called the discovery plot would be Charles Grant's novel The Hour of the Oxrun Dead. The novel begins with the savage murder of Ben. It is not the last murder, and it is supplemented by other strange doings. Natalie, eventually in concert with Marc, the newspaper reporter, performs the discovery function; and the discovery of the coven takes up most of the novel—in the manner of a mystery story's fitting together pieces of evidence—until the final confrontation, where Toal is defeated by means of the missing ring. There is no confirmation in the face of objections by third parties.

In terms of the internal structure of this novel, there is an obvious reason for this: all the powers that be—all those to whom one might wish to confirm the existence of the coven—belong to the coven. The discoverers, that is, must deal with the supernatural encroachments on their own. Clearly, any horror story that involves such conspiratorial take-overs of the everyday world will not have complete confirmation movements in them since the discoverers can only ultimately consult themselves. Of course, one variation here will be that the discoverers will approach someone who, unbeknownst to them, is complicit in the conspiracy; however, this will yield only further discovery of the nature of the enemy on their part, perhaps leading directly to confrontation.

Of course, the discovery plot can be found in horror stories where there is no overarching, supernatural conspiracy. After the onset of a horrific being, the hero or heroine may have no alternative—there's no time; there's no opportunity; there are no other living humans; the locale is too isolated; and so on—except to confront the monster on his/her/their own.

In M.R. James's "Casting the Runes," the onset of the demon and the necromancy of Karswell are established through the report of the death of John Harrington and the series of strange events befalling Edward Dunning, including the invasion of his household by some vaguely described monster. Dunning approaches Henry Harrington, and together they identify both Karswell as the source of their problem and the means by which his executions are brought about. Armed with this information, they inflict Karswell's spell upon Karswell without attempting to confirm their findings to a third party. Thus, the plot moves from the discovery phase to the confrontation phase with no stopover for confirmation.

King's novel Cycle of the Werewolf represents a fiction whose plot somewhat straddles the distinction between the complex discovery plot and the discovery plot. The reason for this is that the final confrontation scene has the moment of confirmation as a constitutive part. After the onset of the werewolf, Marty Coslaw, who has blinded the werewolf in one eye, infers that a local preacher is the monster; Marty lures him to his home, where he is armed with the requisite silver bullets, in order to destroy the creature. Prior to the confrontation, Marty does confide his suspicions to his Uncle Al because he needs Al to get him some silver bullets. Al is skeptical, but nevertheless helps Marty. Thus, when the werewolf is finally blasted, Marty's hypothesis is vindicated, to Al's (and everyone else's) astonishment. In this case, the confirmation function is piggybacked, so to speak, on the confrontation function.