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The Critique of the Foundations and Culture of American
Society Through the Works of Mike Flanagan

By

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Signed  _____

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the horror genre and investigates how it can be used for more than just entertainment. The horror genre has often been dismissed as mere entertainment, a way to evoke fear and excitement from audiences. However, the genre can be much more than that. It can serve as a powerful tool for exploring and critiquing ourselves as a society.

Horror gives us the means to explore ourselves by examining our fears. Horror can also be used to explore societal fears and anxieties, by doing so, horror can highlight some of the underlying issues that affect our society. By placing us in the shoes of characters who are suffering or in danger, horror films can help us to better understand the experiences of others. By presenting these issues in a horror context, filmmakers can help to create a deeper emotional connection with the audience and encourage them to take action to address these issues.

The horror genre has the potential to be much more than just a form of entertainment. By using horror as a means to explore and critique ourselves, we can gain a deeper understanding of our society and the issues that affect us. Whether it is by examining our fears, critiquing social issues, or creating empathy and understanding, horror can be a powerful tool for change and self-reflection.

“Horror affords us the opportunity to really look at ourselves and the things that scare us, that disturb us, as a society and as individuals”¹

¹ King, Darryn. “Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in ‘Midnight Mass.’” The New York Times, 24 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/television/midnight-mass-mike-flanagan.html.

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Introduction

Mike Flanagan, a prolific writer, director, and producer in the horror genre, is known for his unconventional approach to storytelling that explores the intricacies of the human experience. In his Netflix works, "The Haunting of Hill House" and "Midnight Mass," Flanagan uses his own life experiences and perspectives to critique the foundations and culture of American society.



Figure 2. Mike Flanagan - IMDB

Flanagan's narratives revolve around themes of trauma, grief, the complexity of family relationships and religion and how these issues intersect with larger societal concerns.

Flanagan exposes the underlying issues of societal structures that perpetuate trauma, pain, and social injustice. In "The Haunting of Hill House," he explores the way family trauma and mental illness are often dismissed or ignored, while in "Midnight Mass," he delves into the intersection of religion and fanaticism. Flanagan's works are a haunting reminder of the deep-seated societal issues that need to be addressed and his critiques of American society are an attempt to provoke a deeper level of understanding of the human experience. This thesis seeks to explore how Flanagan critiques the foundations and culture of American society in these two series.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Flanagan explores the theme of family, trauma, and mental illness. Throughout the series, Flanagan reveals the deep-seated issues that plague family dynamics, including generational trauma, mental illness and failure to communicate.

Similarly, in *Midnight Mass*, Flanagan explores themes of religion and addiction. As the story unfolds, Flanagan reveals the dark sides of religion that plague the community.

Flanagan's critical analysis of American society is not limited to the themes he explores in the two series. His portrayal of the characters and the setting also critique the flaws of American society. Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Midnight Mass* offer a critical analysis of American society. Through the themes, characters and setting, Flanagan critiques the foundations and culture of American society.

This thesis will explore Mike Flanagan's career and personal life and discuss how he uses the horror genre to delve deeper into his portrayal of American society from his perspective in these two series, '*The Haunting of Hill House*' focusing on individuals and families and '*Midnight Mass*' focusing on a larger community and society, highlighting the ways in which he critiques the foundations and culture of American society.

Chapter 1

Mike Flanagan

Mike Flanagan is an American filmmaker, writer and director best known for his work in the horror genre. Born on May 20th, 1978, in Salem, Massachusetts, USA soon after his family relocated and settled in Bowie, Maryland.

He is mostly known for his critically acclaimed horror films such as ‘Oculus’, ‘Hush’, ‘Gerald’s Game’ and many more but gained critical recognition for his film ‘Absentia’ in 2011. Recently Flanagan has ventured more into television series mostly known for his work on the streaming service Netflix with ‘The Haunting of Hill House’, ‘The Haunting of Bly Manor’ and ‘Midnight Mass’. He is considered one of the most promising voices in contemporary horror cinema.

Flanagan’s work is often noted for his strong character development and psychological depth which he uses to help to form the overall themes of his works.² One of the most striking aspects of Mike Flanagan’s works is the thematic continuity between them, which can be seen in how he explores similar ideas across different stories but also the commentary in which he is trying to tell.

Thematic Continuity

One of the most prominent themes in Mike Flanagan’s works is the nature of trauma and the long-lasting effects that it can have on individuals. This can be seen in his works such as ‘Gerald’s Game’ where a woman, Jessie must face the trauma of being sexually abused by her father which she had repressed deep down but finally manifests itself in the form of Gerald.³

‘Doctor Sleep’ is a sequel to Stanley Kubrick’s ‘The Shining’ where a now adult Dan Torrance must protect a young girl with similar powers from a cult known as the true knot,

² Guzman, Andres, and Andres Guzman. “The Rest Is Confetti: Mike Flanagan and Familial Trauma.” Film Cred, 4 June 2021, film-cred.com/mike-flanagan-haunting-of-hill-house-oculus-doctor-sleep-horror-movie.

³ Gerald’s Game. Intrepid Pictures, 2017.

who prey on children with powers to remain immortal as Dan struggles to face the trauma of his childhood at The Overlook Hotel.⁴

Mike Flanagan explores and examines how trauma, childhood trauma and especially generational trauma can shape a person's worldview and how it can affect their behaviour. In his Netflix series, Flanagan delves deeper into this exploration of trauma and how it affects people and families which becomes the driving force for 'The Haunting of Hill House'.⁵

Another Theme which Flanagan explores and examines through his characters is the theme of grief and loss, this can be seen in his works such as 'Absentia' where a woman and her sister begin to link a mysterious tunnel to a series of disappearances, including that of her own husband who disappeared seven years prior. 'Oculus' is where a woman tries to exonerate her brother, who was convicted of murdering their father when they were young children and tries to prove that the crime was committed by a supernatural phenomenon.⁶

These films are not only about the emotional toll of loss but also about the idea that grief can manifest itself in strange and unexpected ways which Flanagan uses to bring his characters to life and analyse how we ourselves as a society deal with grief and loss and the different ways it manifests like mental health disorders and addiction. Mike Flanagan takes this analysis of grief and loss to another level in his Netflix series 'The Haunting of Hill House', by having multiple characters dealing with the same grief and loss but examining how that grief and loss manifests itself differently in each character and how those characters then interact with each other and how they view each other's way of dealing with their grief.⁷

These are just some of the themes that Flanagan explores throughout his works and many of his films are characterized by this thematic continuity in the ways he explores Trauma, Grief, and Loss, how the past inevitably affects us and the decisions we make in the future and the

⁴ Doctor Sleep. Warner Bros. Pictures, Vertigo Entertainment, Intrepid Pictures, 2019.

⁵ Carolinehvd. "MHAM: 'The Haunting of Hill House' and the Journey of a Family Through Trauma." Flip Screen, 4 July 2020, flipscreened.com/2020/05/01/mham-the-haunting-of-hill-house-and-the-journey-of-a-family-through-trauma.

⁶ Oculus. Blumhouse Productions, Intrepid Pictures, MICA Entertainment, WWE Studios, 2014.

⁷ Carolinehvd. **Op.cit.**

similarities between these and how they can all affect or lead into one another. From this Mike Flanagan also comments on and critiques religion and the theory of what happens to us after death.

Flanagan examines these universal themes in a way that is both thought-provoking and entertaining, solidifying his place as one of the most innovative and exciting filmmakers working in the horror genre today.

Mike Flanagan's Personal Life

What makes Flanagan's exploration of these themes so strong is his ability to weave his own personal experiences, both what he has experienced and what he has dealt with and bring this into his films. Throughout his career, Flanagan has drawn from his own life, exploring themes of grief, loss, trauma, religion, and addiction all of which he has had a history with, in the past.⁸

One of the most significant ways that Flanagan uses his own life experiences in his films is through the exploration of grief and loss with many of his films centring on characters who are dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic event, such as the death of a loved one.

Flanagan has spoken publicly about his own personal experience with grief and loss, particularly in relation to the making of his films. Flanagan has stated that he has experienced loss and grief throughout his life, including those in his extended family.⁹

This can really be seen in 'The Haunting of Hill House' where Mike Flanagan crafts a deeply personal tale of intergenerational trauma and confronting the horrors or trauma of your past. What makes 'The Haunting of Hill House' so beautifully crafted is not only is it

⁸ King, Darryn. "Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in 'Midnight Mass.'" The New York Times, 24 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/television/midnight-mass-mike-flanagan.html.

⁹ Stack, Tim. "the Haunting of Hill House Creator Mike Flanagan on Hidden Clues, Major Scares, and a Season 2." EW.com, 24 Oct. 2018, ew.com/tv/2018/10/23/the-haunting-of-hill-house-mike-flanagan-post-mortem.

infused with Flanagan's own experiences with death in his family and extended family but Flanagan has also included "specific imagery"¹⁰ from his own life in the series.

When talking about making and writing 'The Haunting of Hill House' and going into this story dealing with this specific type of grief and loss within what appears to be a nuclear family dynamic, Flanagan has spoken about how personal that was to him saying that dealing with this grief

*That's a theme that's fascinated me all of my life, and it always finds its way into what I'm working on in one way or another, but this more than anything else was all about that, and particularly...each of my parents is the oldest of six kids, and so they have huge families and we've suffered various losses within those big families, and this turned into a very cathartic examination of that and a look at my own family and my own way of processing that.*¹¹

Mike Flanagan has also spoken about his own personal experiences with religion growing up as an altar boy and how he sees the similarities between religion and the horror genre.

Flanagan has often stated that he believes in the similarities between religion and horror and that it is aspects of one of them that intrigue us about the other. Flanagan has always spoken about his fascination with religion. He grew up in what he calls a "Healthy Catholic upbringing"¹² and spent 12 years as an altar boy. After these 12 years, Flanagan decided to read the bible, but he learned and talked about how much darker religion is than he first realized.

¹⁰ Mirjalili, Fatemeh. "Mike Flanagan's Fascination With Horror Fiction Comes From a Very Personal Place." /Film, 4 Oct. 2022, www.slashfilm.com/1037486/mike-flanagans-fascination-with-horror-fiction-comes-from-a-very-personal-place.

¹¹ ---. "the Haunting of Hill House Creator Mike Flanagan on Hidden Clues, Major Scares, and a Season 2." EW.com, 24 Oct. 2018, ew.com/tv/2018/10/23/the-haunting-of-hill-house-mike-flanagan-post-mortem.

¹² King, Darryn. "Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in 'Midnight Mass.'" The New York Times, 24 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/television/midnight-mass-mike-flanagan.html.

“I was shocked, for the first time comprehending what a really strange book it is,” he said.

“There were so many ideas I’d never heard before in church, and the violence of the Old Testament God is terrifying! Slaughtering babies and drowning the earth! It really struck me that I didn’t know my faith at that point.”¹³

Due to this new perspective on his religion after reading and comprehending the Bible, Mike Flanagan dived into researching and exploring many different religions. The more Flanagan studied these various religions the less he identified with them, he found much more of a relationship with “Atheism, Rationalism and science” he explains “I had more of a spiritual reaction from reading ‘The Pale Blue Dot’ than I ever had reading the bible”¹⁴

In ‘Midnight Mass’, Our main protagonist, Riley goes on a similar journey of rediscovery after suffering severe mental trauma from a car crash, having walked away from religion but then inevitably finding his way back as a way to deal with his trauma, but Riley’s story takes a different turn of course.

When talking about the similarities that Mike Flanagan sees between religion and horror and the aspects of one that intrigue us about the other has talked a lot about the afterlife and what happens to us after death “When you’re talking about the afterlife and the soul, you’re talking about ghosts,”. He also believes that “We can’t help but be attracted to the idea that death isn’t the end for us and that we’re going to see the people we have lost again, That idea is one of the things that is as much behind our religions as it is behind our horror fiction”¹⁵

Another idea that Flanagan Explores is how our differing beliefs can impact our world “I’m fascinated by how our beliefs shape how we treat each other,” and how he believes American culture is fanatical about religion and how everything has to do with God.

¹³ King, Darryn. “Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in ‘Midnight Mass.’” The New York Times, 24 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/television/midnight-mass-mike-flanagan.html.

¹⁴ King, Darryn **op. cit.**

¹⁵ King, Darryn **op. cit.**

“Looking at politics and the world today, so many of us are behaving based on the belief that God is on our side and that God dislikes the same people we do”¹⁶

Although Flanagan pulls a lot of inspiration from his religious upbringing, the other side of Flanagan’s inspirations and personal touch that he weaves into his works that we see deals with addiction which also comes from his own personal life from dealing with a severe alcohol addiction most of his life.

*I come from a long line of drunken Irishmen” and the fears that he had of what this addiction might do to him. “But my biggest fear wasn’t that I would die in a drunken car accident, it was that I would kill someone else and live. That is the beating heart of ‘Midnight Mass.’*¹⁷

Mike Flanagan has spoken about how while filming ‘Doctor Sleep’ he gained the courage to face his problem with alcohol while dealing with the character of Dan that also must face his problems.

*The story of Doctor Sleep is the story of recovery. This was something that Ewan knew very well, and why he was perfect for the part. He knew what the journey felt like. He wasn't alone, I was still drinking at the time, though it had already become obviously problematic in my life, I hadn't taken any meaningful steps to change it.*¹⁸

He talks about how those closest to him viewed him “I had people in my life tell me, ‘If you drink enough, it’s a different person that comes out, and he’s pretty terrible.’” he said. “I finally hit the point where I said if I don’t change this behaviour, I don’t know what will happen.” and the moment of realisation of the need to sober up.

*I vividly recall writing the scene between Dan and Jack at the bar. My wife pointed out to me after the fact that she could see it then, that something was changing in me when it came to drinking. Something was waking up, and I was processing a desperate need to sober up.*¹⁹

¹⁶ King, Darryn **op. cit.**

¹⁷ King, Darryn **op. cit.**

¹⁸ O'Rourke, Ryan. “Mike Flanagan on How Doctor Sleep Helped Him Kick Alcoholism.” Collider, 26 Nov. 2022, collider.com/doctor-sleep-alcoholism-mike-flanagan-comments.

¹⁹ O'Rourke, Ryan, **op. cit.**

Flanagan also spoke about going on with his life after filming ‘Doctor Sleep’ and the road to recovery

I've been sober now for over 4 years. Doctor Sleep helped me finally make that decision. I finished the shoot sober and came home to my life with a lot of uncertainty and insecurity. But with the unflinching support of my incredible wife, and some amazing friends, my life started to really blossom.

When it came to writing his Netflix series ‘Midnight Mass’ Flanagan has stated that “I wasn’t in a place where I could handle the material until now, I was writing about alcoholism but wasn’t yet sober; I was writing about atheism, but I hadn’t gotten over my anger,” but since filming ‘Doctor Sleep’ and being sober for many years and far from his religious upbringing he shared that he has “had some beautiful revelations”.²⁰

It is from all these personal experiences that Flanagan deals with but also includes specific imagery in his works that makes ‘Midnight Mass’ perhaps his most personal work yet inspired by his past relationships with religion and addiction, it is an intensely personal resonating tale of how vulnerable he believes religion can be when faced with fanaticism and fundamentalism. It is also these revelations of his history with religion and addiction that bring us the true horror and charm of ‘Midnight Mass’.

It is within these themes and personal experiences that characterize Mike Flanagan’s work, which he beautifully weaves through his stories and characters in a unique and powerful way that Flanagan uses to comment on but also critique American culture and also their societal views towards these various subjects matters but from Mike Flanagan’s own perspective. I will be looking at Mike Flanagan’s two Netflix series ‘The Haunting of Hill House’ and ‘Midnight Mass’ and discussing what Flanagan is trying to say about ourselves as individuals but also as a community and as a society from his perspective as a filmmaker.

²⁰ King, Darryn. “Mike Flanagan Explores His Private Horrors in ‘Midnight Mass.’” The New York Times, 24 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/television/midnight-mass-mike-flanagan.html.

Chapter 2

The Haunting Of Hill House

In this chapter, I will be looking at the different characteristics of Mike Flanagan's work that he explores throughout the series of 'The Haunting of Hill House' and how Flanagan uses that to critique various foundations of American Society and culture through the exploration of themes such as trauma, the family dynamic and the American dream.

The main way in which Mike Flanagan critiques these foundations of American Society is by taking these foundations or traditions and breaking them and portraying them with his own life experiences as a way to express his own perspective and views on American Society. He analyses how when these are broken they can represent the different fears that American Society might have of these foundations and how that represents their reliance on these foundations but also their reluctance to break tradition and how these foundations can ultimately fail American Society.

A metaphor for this is what sets the series of 'The Haunting of Hill House' in motion when the Crain family and their father, Hugh, who is a successful house flipper moves to Hill House with the motivation of taking this old traditional house and breaking down its literal foundations to create something new, which inevitably becomes the catalyst which sets the horror of Hill House in motion. "What's so exciting and unstoppable about the horror genre is that I view it all as metaphorical exploration. It's the safe place that we, as a culture, can deal with things that upset and frighten us - the darker side of our nature."²¹

American Dream

Mike Flanagan also uses this catalyst as a platform to critique the American dream. The American Dream is the notion that anyone can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination.²² It is the belief that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental right and that anyone can attain it. However, Flanagan's portrayal of the Crain family in 'The Haunting of Hill House' shows that this ideal is often elusive and unattainable.

²¹ Schager, Nick. "How This Horror Director Is Reinvigorating the Genre by Returning It to Its Roots." *Esquire*, 2 Nov. 2021, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/q-and-a/a49744/mike-flanagan-interview-ouija-origin-of-evil.

²² "Definition of American Dream." www.dictionaty.com, www.dictionaty.com/browse/american-dream.

Flanagan critiques the American dream by suggesting that the dream itself in reality is a false promise that American society is fed and that it often leads to disappointment and disillusionment and that true happiness and fulfilment cannot be achieved through material wealth and success.

In 'The Haunting of Hill House' Flanagan portrays this through the Crain family and how their move to Hill House is motivated by their desire to achieve the American Dream. The Crain family represent the quintessential nuclear American



Figure 2. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

family. The father, Hugh, is a successful house flipper who works tirelessly to provide for his family. The mother, Olivia, is a loving work-at-home mom who works alongside Hugh to provide for and raise their five children.

Flanagan critiques how the pursuit of the American Dream can be a trap, as it often leads to a culture of overwork and neglect of mental and emotional health. Hugh, for example, works tirelessly to flip houses and provide for his family, but in doing so, he neglects his family's emotional needs. He fails to recognize the toll that Hill House is taking on his family and fails to provide the emotional support they need to cope with their trauma. Similarly, Olivia is so focused on being the perfect mother that she loses touch with reality. Her desire to protect her children from the trauma of Hill House and the outside world leads her down a path of delusion and ultimately results in her tragic demise.

In 'The Haunting of Hill House,' Flanagan critiques the American Dream by showing that the pursuit of success and prosperity can lead to the neglect of one's mental and emotional health. He argues that this trauma can have lasting effects on individuals and their families and that healing requires acknowledgement and acceptance of the trauma that one has suffered, not just the pursuit of material success.

From this, we can see that Mike Flanagan's 'The Haunting of Hill House' is a haunting portrayal of the American Dream and its elusive nature. The show explores the impact of trauma on the individual and their families, and how the pursuit of success and prosperity can lead to neglect of one's emotional and mental health. Ultimately, Flanagan's critique serves as a cautionary tale against the dangers of chasing the American Dream at the expense of one's well-being.

Trauma

One of the central themes in the series is trauma and Mike Flanagan explores the complexities of trauma and its long-lasting impact on individuals and families. The main characters are haunted by both literal ghosts and their own personal traumas. Through these traumas, ranging from neglect to loss and grief, and masterful use of storytelling and visual elements, Flanagan critiques how society often ignores or mishandles trauma, and the profound consequences this can have on those who have experienced it. Mike Flanagan uses this as a way to critique the systemic failures of American society to address and support those who have suffered.

Profit over people

The inability of the characters to process and heal from their traumas highlights the inadequacies of the mental health system in America, which often prioritizes profits over people in a capitalist society.²³ Mike Flanagan uses the character of Steven in 'The Haunting of Hill House' to critique the prioritization of profit over people. Steven is a successful author who has made a career out of writing about the paranormal experiences of others and the trauma they suffered from it, including his own family members. From this, we can see how as the series progresses, it becomes clear that Steven's obsession with profit has prevented him from truly understanding the trauma that his family has endured.

²³ What Is Capitalism? - Back to Basics - Finance and Development, June 2015. 28 May 2015, www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2015/06/basics.htm#:~:text=Capitalism%20is%20often%20thought%20of,motive%20to%20make%20a%20profit.

By depicting Steven as a character who values money over human connection, Flanagan highlights the dangers of a capitalist society that places profits above people.

Neglect

One of the key ideas that Flanagan explores is that trauma is not something that can simply be overcome or forgotten. This is also exemplified through the character of Steven Crain, who, despite his attempts to distance himself from his traumatic past, is ultimately unable to escape the influence it has on his life. Flanagan uses Steven's character to critique the common societal belief that individuals should be able to simply "move on"²⁴ from their trauma, without acknowledging the deep-seated impact it can have on their lives. Steven's story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of ignoring or downplaying the impact of trauma.

This can also be seen through the character of Hugh Crain, throughout their time while living in Hill House. As mentioned above how the American dream can lead to a culture of overwork and neglect of mental and emotional



Figure 3. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

health, Hugh neglects the signs that his family are suffering from a mental illness. This can be seen when his wife, Olivia, tries to tell him something is wrong but he plays it off saying she is just stressed and just needs to take a break. "Maybe You should take a break, Take a little rest"²⁵ This neglect of his wife's emotional and mental health eventually leads to her paranoia and delusions overcoming her. Steven and Hugh's story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of ignoring or downplaying the impact of trauma. Flanagan uses this to critique how American Society often ignores or mishandles trauma.

²⁴ The Haunting of Hill House. Flanagan Film, Amblin Television, Paramount Television Studios, 12 Oct. 2018.

²⁵ Eulogy. season 1, episode 7, Flanagan Films, Amblin Television, Paramount Television Studios, 12 Oct. 2018.

How Trauma Can Manifest itself

Mike Flanagan also critiques how society often blames individuals for their own trauma. This is evident in the character of Theo Crain, who is repeatedly criticized for her inability to form deep emotional connections with others but Theo's behaviour is a result of her traumatic childhood, and the series ultimately serves as a critique of how society often fails to acknowledge how trauma can manifest itself in unexpected ways.

This can also be seen through the character of Luke Crain who is repeatedly frowned upon for his heroin addiction but this addiction all stems from the trauma he had suffered throughout his childhood and the lack of emotional and mental support from his family as he grew older.

The ripple effect of Trauma

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of Flanagan's critique of trauma in 'The Haunting of Hill House' is his portrayal of the impact of trauma on families. The series argues that trauma is not something that affects only the individual who experiences it but that it can also have a ripple effect on entire families. This is exemplified through the Crain family, who are all impacted by their experiences in Hill House in different ways. Flanagan's portrayal of the family dynamic serves as a critique of how society often fails to acknowledge the far-reaching impact of trauma, and the need for a collective effort to address and heal from it.

Mike Flanagan's 'The Haunting of Hill House' is a powerful critique of trauma and its impact on individuals and society as a whole. Through a masterful use of storytelling and visual elements, Flanagan highlights the dangers of ignoring or mishandling trauma and the importance of acknowledging its long-lasting impact. The series serves as a poignant reminder of the need for a collective effort to address and heal from trauma, and the profound consequences that can result when we fail to do so.

Family Dynamic

Throughout Mike Flanagan's 'The Haunting of Hill House' he touches on various subject matters from trauma to addiction all stemming from his own life and his own perspective on American culture. In 'The Haunting of Hill House' he portrays this through the several character developments and the dis functionalism of the Crain family and how a lot of their trauma comes from their broken family dynamic and how that generational trauma has affected them throughout the years. "I associate a family as the safest place in the world. So when it comes to things that scare me, introducing instability and tension into where you're supposed to be the safest really strikes a chord with me."²⁶

Mike Flanagan critiques this foundation of American society by taking this idea of the ideal American family as a source of stability and comfort and instead depicts it as a site of conflict, pain and trauma but also how toxic family relationships can perpetuate cycles of trauma and pain.

Mike Flanagan presents a nuanced critique of the family dynamic through the development of its central characters. Flanagan's use of this character development provides a lens through which he examines and critiques the toxicity of family relationships, the lasting effects of generational trauma, and the challenges of communication within familial units.

Throughout the series, Flanagan emphasizes this in how the Crain family has been fractured by their experiences at Hill House and how that has stuck with each of them throughout their adult lives. Each member of the family grapples with their own demons, ranging from addiction to mental illness to estrangement from loved ones. As the show progresses, it becomes clear that the family's inability to address these issues and communicate with one another is a major factor in their dysfunction.

²⁶ ---. "How This Horror Director Is Reinvigorating the Genre by Returning It to Its Roots." *Esquire*, 2 Nov. 2021, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/q-and-a/a49744/mike-flanagan-interview-ouija-origin-of-evil.

The main source of the dysfunction of the Crain family can be seen originating from their father, Hugh Crain. After their last night in Hill House, he was the only member of the family to truly know what happened that night as well as the suicide of his wife, the Crain family's mother, Olivia. He believed that the only way to truly protect his children from the horrors and their trauma at Hill House was to hide the truth from them and leave them to imagine a reality of their own, willing to take the blame for their mother's death upon himself.²⁷

Not communicating what happened to their mother and the supernatural experiences that they experienced at Hill House ends up being the catalyst for the family's dysfunction.

With the children all growing up having the truth hidden from them all their life and their own father not communicating with them, this inevitably led to the Crain family estranging themselves from one another. If we look at each of the Crain children and where they stood in the family dynamic in Hill House we can see how each of them relied on each other and how when that ideal family dynamic was taken away from them it began to cause problems within each of their own respective lives and the various coping mechanisms they each turned to, to help cope with their families dysfunctionality.

*Nell was delusional, depressed. Luke's an addict, Shirley is a control freak and Theo's basically a clenched fist with hair. The whole fucking family is the brink of a breakdown and seeing things that aren't there, hearing things that aren't there and that shit happened after the house. It's not the house.*²⁸

Steven being the oldest of the siblings took his responsibility as a big brother very seriously and, taking after his father, was the one always willing to help out and fix what needed fixing. Being the oldest at the time, he seems to be the one who remembers the most about what happened after the tragedy, such as appointments with his father's lawyer and the criminal media coverage of their family's misfortune which leads him to believe that what

²⁷ Witness Marks. season 1, episode 8, Flanagan Films, Amblin Television, Paramount Television Studios, 12 Oct. 2018.

²⁸ Witness Marks, **op. cit.**

caused it all was his father's failure to make his marriage work, and this leads Steve to sabotage his own.

As an adult, Steve is the one who isolates himself from his siblings the most convinced that he is the only one who didn't experience anything supernatural during their stay in Hill House, he denies its existence and blames it instead on a



Figure 4. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

hereditary condition. He harbours it all within realistic scientific rationality and abandons his big brother role, leaving it up to Shirley to fix what is broken among them and she never misses the opportunity to remind him of that. "Fine I'll just handle it, shall I? That's why everybody dumps their shit on me, isn't it, Steve? Cause I'm The oldest. It's my job. Oh, wait, that's you."²⁹

Shirley being the second oldest was solitary and independent, which her mother describes as "Shirley's space" but she was also compassionate and considerate towards her family. Due to Steve distancing himself from the family Shirley was forced to take over Steve's role as the big sister during her adult life, always trying



Figure 5. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

to fix everything and everyone slowly becoming a control freak, paying for Luke's numerous rehab visits, answering Nellie's nervous phone calls, all the while maintaining her life as a married woman, mother of two, and owner of a mortuary centre where she literally fixes dead people.

Shirley tries to keep up with the image of the perfect woman, the perfect big sister, who has her life all figured out, hoping to set an example for her siblings. She is not the kind to confide or share her feelings, following the precedent set by her father for all these years.

²⁹ Steven Sees a Ghost. season 1, episode 1, Flanagan Films, Amblin Television, Paramount Television Studios, 12 Oct. 2018.

Shirley's unwillingness to open up and own up to her mistakes stems from a feeling of being unsupported, of being the only one holding her life and the lives of the ones around her together. Fearing that it would all come crumbling down if she'd ever let herself be vulnerable, she persuades herself to keep it all hidden.

Theodora being the middle child of the Crain family, her personality was greatly influenced by her place in the family and also the struggles of that place. Growing up, she struggled with her place in the family, looking after the twins, who are sensitive and imaginative but also trying to take after Steven and Shirley, who are highly rational, mature and who lead with reason all the while trying to become her own person.



Figure 6. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

In her childhood, Theo suffered from feeling unable to express herself to her siblings being the middle child and feeling misunderstood and not daring to wear her emotions on her sleeve, leading her to put up walls and putting herself into emotional isolation in her adult life afraid to let people in. Growing up, once again, she oscillates between her two older siblings, married and settled into supposedly good lives, and the twins, young enough to still be figuring things out but too troubled to be able to.

The twins Luke and Nellie being the youngest of the Crain family each grew up in the same place in the family dynamic. Luke and Nellie being the youngest always looked up to their siblings, They became very dependent on the people around them, but as the trauma of their childhood tears their family apart and they lose the support of the people around them they each in their own use different coping mechanisms.



Figure 7. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

Luke, when faced with the trauma of his childhood, tries to reach out and find support from those around him but due to the dysfunction in his family and the lack of understanding of what he was going through fails to find any real support and inevitably turns to find anything that will help him deal with his trauma and he turns to drugs which in turn leads him down a road of addiction to heroin.

Nellie who is just as sensitive as her twin, and dealing with her own trauma in the form of sleep paralysis managed to find comfort in her husband Arthur. After the sudden death of her husband, with who she found a way to get over her past trauma, Nellie is sent spiralling back into fear and isolation. This fear she had managed to get over returns and eventually grows into paranoia and depression, but with her feeling unsupported by her older siblings who have busier lives to attend to and by Luke, who is too set on his own struggles to help her out with her own, she ends up taking her own life hoping to reunite with her husband

From this, we can see how the dysfunction of the Crain family lead to a perpetuated cycle of the trauma they suffered at Hill House and how that trauma has stayed with them through the generations. We can also see how Mike Flanagan is critiquing that this idea of American Families being the ideal nuclear family is a lie and that families in reality are a lot more complex and each individual in that family comes with each of their own problems and ways of dealing with those problems.

Although Mike Flanagan critiques the family dynamic by portraying it as a place of conflict, pain and trauma, Flanagan also highlights the positive aspects of the family dynamic. Despite their challenges, the Crains demonstrate a fierce loyalty to one another, and their love for each other is a driving force throughout the series, it is that love for one another that inevitably allows them to overcome their fears and traumas.

Through this, Flanagan suggests that while family can be a source of pain and difficulty, it can also be a source of strength and support. Overall, Flanagan's critique of the family dynamic in "The Haunting of Hill House" is a complex one. He acknowledges the many ways in which families can be damaging to their members, while also highlighting the importance of connection and loyalty in overcoming adversity. By using character development to explore these themes, Flanagan creates a show that is both haunting and deeply human.

Chapter 3

Midnight Mass

As mentioned before the series 'Midnight Mass' was one of Mike Flanagan's most personal projects to date. Having grown up in a "Healthy Catholic upbringing"³⁰ and eventually venturing on a journey to explore and discover various religions throughout his life, Mike Flanagan has expressed his various views on religion and the revelations he had along this journey³¹ and this becomes the beating heart of the horror in 'Midnight Mass'. Flanagan portrays his experiences in life with religion and addiction prominently through the character of Riley Flynn.

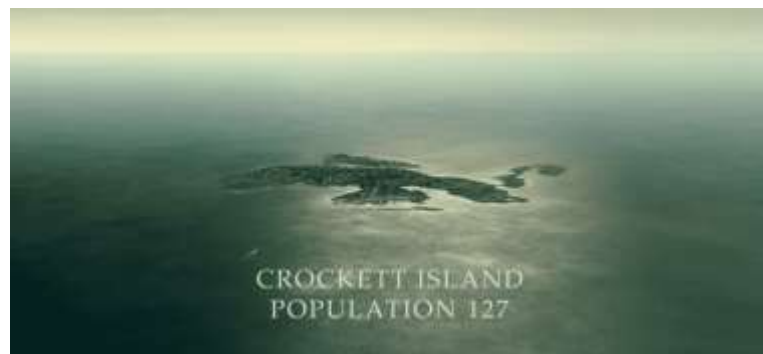


Figure 8. Midnight Mass (2021)

Religion is one of the main themes that Flanagan explores throughout the series and like in 'The Haunting of Hill House' Mike Flanagan presents a nuanced critique of the culture surrounding religion in American Society, through the development of its central characters but also the community of "Crockett Island" as a character in and of itself. Flanagan's use of this community and character development provides a lens through which he examines and critiques the flaws and the fanatical aspects of American religious culture, especially Christianity can have on American society. Flanagan's critique of religion and faith is at the forefront of "Midnight Mass." Throughout the show, he exposes the harmful and manipulative nature of organized religion, which has been a cornerstone of American society since its inception.³² Flanagan highlights the dangerous consequences of unyielding faith and explores the complex relationship between religion, power and communities.

³⁰ King, Darryn. **Op. cit.**

³¹ King, Darryn. **Op. cit.**

³² Vaughn_Admin. "What in the World Is Religious Freedom?" Religious Freedom Institute, 11 June 2022, religiousfreedominstitute.org/what-in-the-world-is-religious-freedom.

The dark side of Christianity

One of the aspects that Mike Flanagan explores in this series is how dark religion truly is, especially going back to the old testament. In 'Midnight Mass' Flanagan portrays this by blending the ideology of vampirism and religion and examining the similarities between the two. This is most prominent throughout the series in the form of Holy Communion.

Catholics believe that in holy communion they are united in a special way with Jesus Christ, that they are sharing in the body and blood of Christ the Saviour, a ritual commemoration of Jesus's Last Supper with his disciples.³³

If we then look at the mythology of vampires, also spelt vampyre, in popular legend, a vampire is a creature, often fanged, that preys upon humans, generally by consuming their blood for their eternal life.³⁴ From this, we can see how



Figure 9. Midnight Mass (2021)

Flanagan's use of religious symbolism and vampiric lore, portrays how both practices offer a sense of salvation and immortality to their followers. Flanagan uses these similarities between the two as a metaphor to critique how most of American society fails to recognise how dark and bloody their religion was and can be specifically looking at the old testament

Samuel 15:3

“Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”³⁵

³³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Eucharist | Definition, Symbols, Meaning, Significance, and Facts.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/topic/Eucharist.

³⁴ Eldridge, Alison. “Vampire | Characteristics, History, Powers, Folklore, and Facts.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/topic/vampire.

³⁵ What Does the Bible Say About Killing Children? www.openbible.info/topics/killing_children.

Religious Fanaticism

This leads to Mike Flanagan's exploration of fanaticism in American Society and religious culture in America. Mike Flanagan offers a pointed critique of the fanatical aspects of American religious culture. Through the characterizations of the inhabitants of Crockett Island, where the story takes place, Flanagan highlights the dangerous consequences of unyielding faith and explores the complex relationship between religion and power.

*"My feelings about religion were very complicated. I was fascinated, but angry. Looking at various religions, I was moved and amazed by their propensity for forgiveness and faith, but horrified by their exclusionism, tribalism, and tendency toward fanaticism and fundamentalism."*³⁶

One of the central topics of "Midnight Mass" that Flanagan explores is the potential for religious zeal to lead to fanaticism. The Crockett island's inhabitants are deeply devoted to the Catholic Church, and their faith is often used to justify oppressive and violent behaviour. Mike Flanagan portrays this through the character of Father Paul, a mysterious priest who arrives on the island, Flanagan uses him as a symbol of religious devotion and an embodiment of the potential for fanaticism. As the series goes on, his true nature is revealed and it becomes clear that his faith has driven him to commit atrocities in the name of his beliefs.

Flanagan uses this character to critique how unchecked religious zeal in American society can lead to acts of violence and cruelty and that people are often willing to ignore or justify these acts if they are committed in the name of their faith.

Flanagan also explores this idea of justification through the character of Bev Keane, a complete embodiment of fanaticism. Bev is a devout Catholic who is deeply committed to her faith, but her beliefs



Figure 10. Midnight Mass (2021)

³⁶ ---. "The Deeply Personal Horror of "Midnight Mass" – Guest Essay by Filmmaker Mike Flanagan." Bloody Disgusting!, 27 Sept. 2021, bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3684646/deeply-personal-horror-midnight-mass-guest-essay-filmmaker-mike-flanagan.

become increasingly extreme as the story progresses. She is convinced that her faith gives her the right to judge and condemn others who do not share her beliefs, which ultimately leads to her becoming a villainous figure within the community. This can be seen throughout the series with her interactions with the character of Sheriff Hassan, who is a devoted Muslim.

When Sheriff Hassan questions her behaviour and how at one point, she insisted every child in the school should be given a Bible and publicly dismisses other religions and faiths., Bev attempts to manipulate and turn the other residents against him. She insults Hassan's Muslim beliefs on several occasions and insists that her faith is the only one that truly matters. Even at the climax of the series after Bev shoots Hassan on the belief that it is God's will for him to die, and when Hassan realizes he and his son are about to die, Bev harshly insults his culture and religion calling him a "terrorist"³⁷ and showing her true colours.

Bev Keane's religious justification can be seen throughout the series of 'Midnight Mass'. This first becomes apparent when she poisons Joe Collie's dog at the Pot Luck fair, in one of the saddest moments in Midnight Mass. Bev's killing of Joe's dog is senseless and twisted but Bev convinces herself that her actions were justified by her belief in God. This becomes even more apparent after Bev discovers Father Paul with Joe's dead body and is covered in Joe's blood after he had sucked all the blood out of Joe's body.

In this violent and gruesome situation where Father Paul has committed one of the most deadly sins in the Christian religion, "You shall not murder"³⁸ Bev's first reaction is not fear or disgust but also barely questions



Figure 11. Midnight Mass (2021)

³⁷ Book VII: Revelation. season 1, episode 7, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

³⁸ What Does the Bible Say About Killing Children? www.openbible.info/topics/killing_children.

Father Paul on what happened and instead believes that Joe deserved to die and believes that it was god working through Father Paul to carry out gods will even when it means to go against god words in the bible. “God has a plan. He’s working through him.”³⁹

Bev’s religious fanaticism continues to grow throughout the series and this becomes clear at the end of the series when she turns Howard Hobbs away from finding salvation and safety in the church and practically condemning him to death as the sun rises on Crockett Island.⁴⁰ This shows us how far Bev Keane’s religious fanaticism has grown and that she believes that her faith gives her the right to judge and condemn others who do not share or follow her religious beliefs zealously.

Through the characterizations of Father Paul and Bev Keane, Mike Flanagan highlights the dangers of unyielding faith and the complex relationship between religion and power in American Society. He portrays how unchecked religious zeal can lead to acts of violence and cruelty, and people are often willing to ignore or justify these acts if they are committed in the name of their faith. Flanagan's exploration of fanaticism in "Midnight Mass" is a timely reminder of the importance of critically examining our beliefs and recognizing the potential harm they can cause when taken to extreme levels. Ultimately, the series reminds us that there is a fine line between faith and fanaticism, and it is crucial to tread that line with caution and empathy.

Capitalism

In 'Midnight Mass,' Mike Flanagan also critiques capitalism in American society and how it often damages the smaller communities in America, by exploring the intersection between religion and economics. Through the show's exploration of the consequences of unchecked capitalism on a small island community, Flanagan shows how capitalism can exploit individuals and damage small-town communities.

³⁹ Book IV: Lamentations. season 1, episode 4, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

⁴⁰ Book VII: Revelation. season 1, episode 7, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

Firstly, the show highlights how the arrival of an oil rig and how the oil rig's operations have had a devastating impact on the environment and the agriculture of Crockett Island. The waters around the island were polluted with oil, and fish populations rapidly declines, undermining the island's fishing industry which is their main source of income for the island and the livelihoods and health of its residents.

After this devastating pollution of the Islands environment and agriculture, the big companies tried to pay off the residents of Crockett Island but no amount of money could fix what was already destroyed and the fishing industry of the Island was still damaged many years later, the environment of the island had still not recovered. This can be seen when Riley Flynn is talking to Father Paul about the Pruitt Recreation Centre “It seemed like a lot of money, I guess until you hold it up against a couple of years of lost wages”⁴¹ Flanagan uses this development in the series to critique how American society often prioritises profit over people but also how these big companies and corporations in America can damage the environment and industries of small towns and businesses in their pursuit of wealth.

Flanagan also highlights how capitalism has encouraged greed and exploitation in American Society. Flanagan presents this critique through the character of Bev Keane, portraying her as the religious capitalist and Crockett Island being the small-town community. Bev uses her position of authority to manipulate and control others for her own gain and the church's gain. “She killed half the island with that fucking settlement”⁴²

This can be seen in Riley Flynn’s monologue during his first AA meeting with Father Paul in the “Pruitt Recreation Center”. They talk about how after the oil tanker crash, They then talk about how Bev Keane convinced people to take the money for themselves, by saying that it was a gift from God, But she inevitably manipulates them to give some of that money to the church with which she then builds the Pruitt Recreation Center but it is implied that she did not use all the money and kept some for herself.

⁴¹ Book II: Psalms. season 1, episode 2, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

⁴² Book III: Proverbs. season 1, episode 3, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

Bev Keane was encouraging people to take the settlements from the oil companies almost from the start, And there's Bev Keane saying, Go ahead, take the cash. It's a gift from God, and maybe give a little back to God while you're at it, and they do. Take the money, they turn around and hand some of it right to the church, which with Pruitt being sick as he was, means they were really giving it to her, and that wont look right, I guess. So lo and behold she builds this rec center. Who knows if it actually cost as much as people gave her. Catholic Church in a nutshell. All over the world, these small, starving villages with big, fancy churches. Getting bigger and fancier while the towns dry up.⁴³

From this, we can see how Flanagan used the character of Bev to portray the dangers of religion and economics intersecting and the effects that might have on small communities in American Society. Flanagan uses this as a way to critique capitalism in American society and how it often damages smaller communities, Flanagan shows how capitalism can exploit individuals and damage small-town communities but also critiques how capitalism has encouraged greed and exploitation in American Society.

Addiction and Forgiveness

Flanagan also criticizes American society's addiction to religion and faith, which often leads to the suppression of scientific and rational thought. Flanagan illustrates this through the island's doctor, Dr Sarah Gunning, who represents the scientific and rational side of society, who is often overshadowed by the religious beliefs of the inhabitants of Crockett Island.

An example of this can be seen when Sarah tries to figure out how Leeza Scarborough's paralysis healed itself and "would love to get Leeza to the mainland for some advanced testing, the more we know about what's happened with her, the more we can help other people suffering"⁴⁴. Leeza's parents shut down Sarah's motivation to understand more about what has happened and instead choose to believe that this was an act of God and scold her by saying "It feels wrong, doesn't it? To interrogate a miracle? Second guess a gift from



Figure 12. Midnight Mass (2021)

⁴³ Book II: Psalms. season 1, episode 2, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

⁴⁴ Book III: Proverbs. season 1, episode 3, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

God”⁴⁵. Flanagan uses the townsfolk's rejection of her scientific explanations and reliance on faith which ultimately leads to their downfall as a way to critique how American Society’s addiction to religion and faith often blinds them to the reality of the world.

Another way that Flanagan critiques the addictive nature of religion is by portraying the church as a form of escapism. The residents of the island are shown to be deeply unhappy and disillusioned with their lives. They are trapped in a cycle of poverty, alcoholism, and hopelessness, and turn to religion as a way of escaping their problems. The church becomes a place where they can forget their troubles and find solace in their faith. Flanagan uses this as a way to critique an addictive nature towards religion can cause one to run away from their problems and not face or confront ways in which they could find solutions to improve their lives or fix the problems they face but rather blindly choose to turn to religion and faith hoping that God will solve their problems.

Although Flanagan predominantly critiques the downsides of religion in American society he also portrays how religion can provide comfort and solace to those who are struggling, and help people to forgive others. This is represented throughout the various inhabitants of Crockett island. An example of this can be seen after Riley Flynn killed a girl in a drunk driving accident his father, Ed Flynn struggles to forgive his actions but eventually through his faith and the church finds it within himself to forgive his son and repair the relationship that was once broken.

This is most prominent tho through the character of Leeza Scarborough, who was shot and paralysed by the town alcoholic Joe Collie. In an emotionally intense scene between the two Leeza after being healed walks into Joe’s trailer and confronts him and steals her life



Figure 13. *Midnight Mass* (2021)

⁴⁵ Book III: Proverbs. **Op.Cit**

from her but the scene ends with Leeza's monologue of her forgiveness towards Joe. "If God can forgive you, and he says he can, all over the place, he says it... Then I can forgive you. And if I can forgive you, Joe Collie, Then anyone can"⁴⁶

Mike Flanagan's "Midnight Mass" is a personal and nuanced exploration of religion, faith, and fanaticism in American society. Through his use of religious symbolism and vampiric lore, Flanagan portrays how both practices offer a sense of salvation to their followers. He examines the flaws and the fanatical aspects of American religious culture, especially Christianity, by using the community of Crockett Island as a character in and of itself. Flanagan's critique of religion and faith is at the forefront of the series, as he critiques the harmful and manipulative nature of organized religion. The show explores the complex relationship between religion, power and communities, and how unchecked religious zeal in American society can lead to acts of violence and cruelty. Flanagan's exploration of fanaticism through characters like Father Paul and Bev Keane offers a warning of the potential consequences of unyielding faith. Overall, "Midnight Mass" is a thought-provoking and disturbing examination of the dark side of religion and the potential dangers of religious fanaticism.

Flanagan's portrayal of religion in American society is complex and nuanced. While he critiques its negative aspects, he also acknowledges its ability to provide comfort and solace to those in need and to facilitate forgiveness and healing. Flanagan highlights the transformative power of religion and its potential to bring about healing and reconciliation, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

⁴⁶ Book III: Proverbs. season 1, episode 3, Intrepid Pictures, 24 Sept. 2021.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mike Flanagan's 'The Haunting of Hill House' and 'Midnight Mass' are two remarkable TV series that offer a deep critique of the foundations and culture of American society. Through his masterful storytelling and intricate character development, Flanagan challenges the audience's perceptions of the supernatural and examines the underlying fears and anxieties that drive human behaviour.

In 'The Haunting of Hill House,' Flanagan explores the concept of trauma and its impact on family dynamics, mental health and American society's culture around the American dream. By presenting the Crain family's experiences at Hill House as a metaphor for the devastating effects of trauma, Flanagan highlights how the ghosts or trauma of our past can haunt and shape our future.

Similarly, 'Midnight Mass' presents a compelling critique of religion and the dangerous culture of religious fanaticism in America Society. Through the lens of a small island community, Flanagan examines the way religion can be used to manipulate and control people, as well as the consequences of narrow-minded thinking and blind faith. The series also touches on issues of addiction and the relationship between religion and capitalism and the concept of forgiveness, making it a powerful exploration of the impact of religion in American society and the culture surrounding it.

Furthermore, Flanagan's work in both series demonstrates a deep understanding of the horror genre and its potential to engage with complex social issues. Instead of relying on jump scares and gore, Flanagan uses atmosphere, tension, and character development to create a sense of dread and unease that lingers long after the credits roll. In this way, his work operates on multiple levels, both as entertainment and as a commentary on contemporary American society.

In summary, Mike Flanagan's 'The Haunting of Hill House' and 'Midnight Mass' are important contributions to the horror genre and offer a thought-provoking critique of American society's culture. Through his use of supernatural elements, complex characters, and engaging storytelling, Flanagan challenges his audience to confront their deepest fears and anxieties, while also shining a light on the systemic issues of American society. As such, these shows are more than just horror stories, they are powerful explorations and critiques of the human condition and our society as a whole.

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