

# GOTHIC NATURE



---

## GOTHIC NATURE 1

**How to Cite:** Lukancic, K. (2019) A Libertarian's House Cannot Stand: Trey Edward Shults, *It Comes at Night*. *Gothic Nature*. 1, 310-313. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

**Published:** 14 September 2019

---

### Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a double-blind process.

### Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

---

**A Libertarian's House Cannot Stand:  
Trey Edward Shults, *It Comes at Night*  
(USA: A24, 2017)**

Khara Lukancic

'Fear turns men into monsters', reads the tagline of *It Comes at Night* (2017). Indeed, this is the case in this exemplary film of ecohorror about a horrific and contagious disease that has spread into a worldwide pandemic. During the only truly revealing conversation of the film, the main character, Paul (Joel Edgerton), is sharing a drink with Will (Christopher Abbott), a man who had previously broken into Paul's house looking for shelter. In the scene, the two men are making an attempt to bond amidst the chaos around them and begin talking about their pre-pandemic lives. Will says he performed odd jobs here and there but ultimately identifies as a mechanic. After a moment of slight condescension, Paul says he had been a history teacher – a shocking revelation after seeing the horrors of which he is capable. Throughout the movie Paul's primary concern is for self and family. He shows no compassion that does not benefit his own survival. The film deploys this ugly characterisation to facilitate a critique of libertarianism, the political ideology that encourages caring about yourself and your family and not wishing to benefit those in the community beyond your immediate family.

A. David Gordon (2015) summarises libertarianism in *The SAGE Guide to Key Issues in Mass Media Ethics and Law*, noting '[a] Libertarian view [...] places a great deal of emphasis on individuals' freedom to decide for themselves—rationally—what the best course of action may be in any given situation. This personal autonomy can, of course, lead to "wrong" decisions being made, especially if the person making them has a weak or undefined sense of ethics, or lacks them entirely' (p. 43). Paul's actions throughout *It Comes at Night* evokes such questionable morality in his flawed application of libertarianism during a mortal crisis. Paul assumes the role of man of the house; he makes the important decisions monolithically, without considering the input of his family and certainly without regard to those he deems as outsiders. His decisions are made with the intention of self-preservation, and he does not hesitate to kill to protect his family from the dreaded disease. He commits atrocities while enacting his brand of libertarianism.

The film opens inside a small, boarded up home in which Paul and his family have taken refuge from the disease. Paul, his wife, and their son wear gas masks as an elderly man sans gas mask gasps for breath. The elderly man is Paul's father-in-law. The father-in-law has black lesions all over his body and his irises have turned black. These are the visible symptoms of the fatal disease featured in the film. After his breathing becomes so labored that it is affectively painful to watch, Paul wheels him out into the backyard woods in a wheelbarrow, dumps him onto the ground, and shoots him in the head. The once kind-hearted school teacher then rolls his father-in-law into a pre-dug grave, pours gasoline on him, and sets him on fire.



Figure 1. Paul's Father-in-Law infected with the disease

Gordon (2015) admits '[u]sing the Libertarian approach places a considerable burden on individuals faced with the needs to make an ethics choice and thereby become 'moral agents'. This is exactly where problems can arise' (p. 54). In fact, the case for communitarianism over libertarianism in the narratives of horror films is made in 'The Ethics of Horror' (Lukancic, 2017) which commends the community-focused decisions in *The Bye Bye Man* (2017) and criticises the selfish libertarianism in *Rings* (2017). *It Comes at Night* follows *Rings* by having

the protagonist protecting himself and ignoring the predicaments of others, but it depicts this behavior in order to critique it as evil.

Paul's selfish monstrosity continues to be foregrounded when Will breaks into Paul's house looking for shelter. Instead of providing this shelter, Paul takes him into the woods and ties him to a tree, leaving him there overnight. The next day, Paul goes to check on Will to ensure he doesn't exhibit any of the symptoms of the disease. After Paul determines that Will does not have the disease, he only invites him into their home after Will promises to share his provisions. Thus, Paul welcomes Will's family into his home only to exploit the supplies offered to his own benefit.



*Figure 2. Paul interrogates Will*

In the climax, the family dog that had wandered off earlier in the film ends up inside the house. It visually displays signs of the disease. The red door at the front of the house is the only way in or out – Paul is the only one with a key to the door. Hence, if the door was locked, how did the dog get in? The two families argue and blame each other before agreeing to sequester themselves in separate ends of the house for a few days, just as a precaution, until it could be verified that no one had contracted the disease from the infected dog.

About a day into the quarantine, Will and his family want to leave. For Paul, this is not an option. The film suggests that they wish to leave because their son has begun to show signs of the disease. The child keeps his eyes closed for the remainder of the movie, following his

parents' instructions. Thus, we never know for certain if the child is infected. When Will and his family try to escape into the woods, Paul kills them. He shoots their baby in the hands of the mother. This brutality is monstrous.

The film imparts its greatest criticism of libertarianism in its final scene. All the vicious acts Paul performs throughout the movie are in vain. He is unable to keep his family safe. After all his monstrosity, Paul is unable to guard his family from the disease. After their son dies from the disease, Paul and his wife, Sarah (Carmen Ejogo), sit across each other at the kitchen table. The film ends with Paul and Sarah silently looking at each other, both showing signs of the disease.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Bye Bye Man, The.* 2017 [DVD]. Title, S. dir. USA: Intrepid Pictures.

Gordon, A. D. (2015). Libertarian/Individual Focus. In: Babcock, W. A. & Freivogel, W. H. (eds.) *The SAGE Guide to Key Issues in Mass Media Ethics and Law*. Los Angeles, Routledge, pp. 43-59.

*It Comes at Night.* 2017 [DVD]. Shults, T. E. dir. USA: A24.

Lukancic, K. (2017). The Ethics of Horror. *Gateway Journalism Review*. 46 (347), p. 22.

*Rings.* 2017. [DVD]. Gutiérrez, F. J. dir. USA: Vertigo Entertainment.