

Inquiry into the Macabre  
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The word *macabre*, meaning a disturbing, even horrifying, fascination with death and morbidity, is certainly an adjective that could apply to much of contemporary American culture, whether in the continued appeal of violence in popular entertainment, or in the forensic examination of violence in crime fiction and television drama. The attraction of things macabre has its roots in the Middle Ages and the Black Death; the epidemic that nearly wiped out the people of medieval Europe also spawned a widespread obsession with mortality, morbidity, and the meaning of dying. In this course we will investigate both the historical origins of the macabre, and its modern manifestations in a range of cultural artifacts, including literature, film, medical science, and holiday celebrations. We will combine cultural and historical analysis of the cultural meaning of morbidity with an attempt to understand the possible benefits or pleasures of the fascination with death in contemporary society.