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Doctoral Dissertation

**The Metafictional Narrativization of the Traumatized Body and
Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King's Horror Fiction**

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Table of Contents

| | | |
|---------|--|-----|
| 1 | INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND | 9 |
| 2.1 | Historical Overview of the Genre across Various Media and Noël Carroll's Cognitive Philosophy of Horror | 9 |
| 2.2 | Emotions Engendered by Horror, Criteria for Monstrosity and Recurring Plot Types | 18 |
| 2.3 | Potential Pitfalls of Theoretical Frameworks | 26 |
| 2.4 | Horror as Social Criticism: a Reflection of Cultural Anxieties..... | 33 |
| 2.5 | Horror and the Myth of Procreation | 40 |
| 2.6 | Community Construction and Exclusionary Tactics | 49 |
| 2.7 | Stephen King: A Conservative Romantic Bestsellasaurus Rex of Horror | 65 |
| 2.7.1 | King's Style and Themes: Colloquial Poetics and Protean Monsters | 71 |
| 2.7.2 | Violated/Violent Women, Malevolent Machines and the Bachman Books | 76 |
| 2.7.3 | Weird Talents: a Gift or a Curse? | 81 |
| 2.7.3.1 | Resisting the Role of Monster | 82 |
| 3 | CASE STUDIES | 86 |
| 3.1 | The Monstrous Female Body and Communicational Crisis: <i>Carrie</i> | 86 |
| 3.1.1 | Abject Border-Crossings | 88 |
| 3.1.2 | (Sub)Versions of Female Monstrosity in <i>Carrie</i> | 92 |
| 3.1.3 | Communal Exclusion and the Textual Construction of Monstrosity | 100 |
| 3.1.4 | Bonding via Telepathy | 106 |
| 3.1.5 | Failed Feminine Attempts at Empowerment by Authorship | 111 |
| 3.2 | The Castrating Mother as Terrible Muse: Writing as a Way out of Misery | 116 |
| 3.2.1 | The Shifting Power Dynamics in <i>Misery</i> | 118 |
| 3.2.1.1 | Victim-Victimizer..... | 118 |
| 3.2.1.2 | Reader-Writer | 121 |
| 3.2.1.3 | Body/Mind..... | 136 |
| 3.2.1.4 | Mother-Child | 139 |
| 3.2.2 | Truth is Stranger than Fiction | 143 |
| 4 | CONCLUSION | 146 |
| | BIBLIOGRAPHY | 160 |
| | APPENDIX..... | 175 |

1 Introduction

“A man sees further looking out of the dark upon the light than a man does in the light and looking out upon the light.”¹

Probably there is no other genre which has prompted so much discussion as to its *raison d'être* as horror literature. Over the past two-hundred years, scholars have repeatedly examined the curious nature of horror fiction, posing the question of how we can find pleasure in something so horrifying. Beginning with Anna Laetitia (Aikin) Barbauld's essay “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (1773), various scholars have offered differing solutions to the paradox of horror, which Barbauld described as “a paradox of the heart.”² Is there any other genre wherein we feel the need (either as authors or as consumers of such fiction) to justify our choice? Buttressing ourselves with psychoanalytic, sociological or even philosophical arguments, we feel better-equipped to defend our chosen genre from its critics. Strange, weird fiction somehow presupposes weird tastes and weird personalities. Stephen King has been repeatedly asked the question of how he became attracted to this genre, whether he experienced some childhood trauma which somehow warped his psyche/mind forever.³ As he remarks in *Danse Macabre*, his highly autobiographical survey of the genre, “secretly or otherwise, there is the feeling that the taste for horror fiction is an abnormal one.”⁴

During a train journey where I made a casual acquaintance and I revealed my book preference to my fellow traveler, I myself was told: “Are you really reading such stuff? You just don't look like the type.” The type? Are horror fans typical in any sense? Are they easy to separate from the rest of fiction readers? Does it show? Do we bear the traces of our strange taste on our bodies? The supposition is absurd, of course, but it is equally true that had I said I was interested in Keats or Shakespeare, I would not have received the same comments.

The aim of my dissertation is to provide the reader with a critical overview of the horror genre, followed by an in-depth analysis of two novels by Stephen King, probably

¹ William Faulkner, “Ad Astra” in *The Portable Faulkner*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 467.

² Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 9. This was originally published in a collection of essays co-authored with her brother, John Aikin, entitled *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (1773).

³ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley Books, 1981), 83.

⁴ King, *Danse Macabre*, 82.

the best-known representative of this field. The organizing principle during the first part was to highlight a wide range of thought-provoking critical approaches, focusing on less widely-known literary historians, whose ideas I explored in parallel with more canonized theoreticians' propositions. My goal was not to take sides with any of the approaches, but rather to outline the impressive variety of interpretive takes on horror which prove to perfectly illustrate the challenging heterogeneity of the genre. This methodological attitude, by shedding light on the multiple possible ways of uncovering various textual strata of the multilayered horror narrative, also helped to undermine the common devaluation of horror as a low literary genre. Its popularity proves to be a sign of its complexity and not its simplicity, since horror fiction seems to transmit a message to readers of all kinds.

One connecting point between the diverse approaches was the primary texts chosen: these founding texts of horror literature, namely, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) were employed to illustrate how various critical approaches could be utilized, always highlighting different aspects of the same story.

Horror is famous for its richness in meaning, and the same applies to its probably most notorious figure, the monster, who is not anchored to a single referent: it is a polyvalent entity, which changes its meaning periodically, serving the needs of a different audiences, embodying the free-floating anxieties of the given place and time. Regarding the concept of monstrosity, I deliberately refuse to adopt any restrictions, and avoid any single notion as the ultimate definition of monstrosity. I believe that this methodological decision is in line with the malleability of this open-ended concept.

The first part of my dissertation will set the genre of horror in a literary and historical context, complemented by filmic references with an introduction into the oeuvre of the master of horror. Then, primarily relying on current King scholarship but also employing an array of diverse theoretical approaches (ranging from feminist psychoanalysis to reader-response criticism and trauma studies), I proceed to offer a close reading of two texts by Stephen King, where the traumatized body receives major emphasis. I chose novels where the monsters are not supernatural creatures: both in *Carrie* (1974) and in *Misery* (1987), the protagonists are human beings, who, either owing to the manipulation of society or because of a debilitating sickness of the mind, end up becoming veritable monsters. I argue that Carrie's monstrosity does not stem from her weird talent, her telekinetic ability: instead, it is her environment, the school system and her community

which have constructed her as the Other, deploying various demarcation strategies to exclude her from the fabric of society. This work is paradigmatic in the sense that it perfectly illustrates the template for which King has become famous: colloquial prose, small town setting and the sudden irruption of the supernatural into the everyday. The second novel, *Misery*, is devoid of supernaturalism. It is a mainstream work detailing the captivity of a writer at the hands of a crazed female (inverting the situation of John Fowles' *The Collector* [1963]), a claustrophobic drama unfolding in front of our eyes, slowly heading towards its gruesome ending. Its originality lies in the fact that King reversed the usual formula of a female victim held captive by a male, and the reversal of this power dynamic can also be observed in other aspects of the novel. However, the role allocation proves not to be ironbound, and each protagonist also assumes the position of the other, discovering their ability to exchange their roles easily. King has a tendency to weave an intertextual web around his texts, so most of his stories enter into a dialogic relationship with one other. Thus, during the course of my analyses, I will not limit myself to an examination of only these two texts, but I will also examine further relevant titles from his oeuvre.

The conservative distinction between high culture and popular culture has become less pronounced in recent years, yet, there is still reluctance to insert the products of popular culture into the school curriculum, for example. One main objective of my dissertation is to engage in the ongoing controversy regarding "horror's cultural valorization or devaluation"⁵ and thereby prove that King's works deserve to become the subject of serious scholarly analysis.

The horror genre often occupies the same marginalized position in the academic establishment as that occupied by the monstrous beings represented within the texts. Horror novels, doubly condemned because of their blood-chilling content and their belonging to popular literature, are often the objects of prejudice. This problem is further complicated by moral issues, since horror is often theorized by its radical opponents as a source of "moral pollution."⁶ These critics often designate the pleasures found in such texts as sick, abnormal or unhealthy. To defend horror aficionados' curious taste and seemingly unhealthy attraction to representations of our fragility, horror grand master Clive Barker claims that "valuing our appetite for the forbidden rather than suppressing it,

⁵ Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), xii.

⁶ Hills, op.cit., 3.

comprehending that our taste for the strange, or the morbid, or the paradoxical, is contrary to what we're brought up to believe, a sign of our good health."⁷

As I mentioned, in the first part of my work, I offer a brief introduction to this genre, surveying from a bird's-eye view the most important critical approaches and opinions. I have attempted to include all the major theoreticians whose works inspired the study of the horror genre (Freud, Todorov, Jackson, Douglas, Kristeva, Lovecraft). I begin with a short historical overview, tracing the development of the genre both in literature and cinema, starting with the progenitor, the founding text of Gothic fiction, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765). The major developmental phases are referenced as we follow the evolution of the genre up to the present. Horror is a slippery genre with fuzzy boundaries, its various features overlapping with neighboring ones.⁸ Consequently, other major genres (fantasy, sci-fi, thriller) will be included in my discussion.

One of the first theoreticians to devote sustained critical attention to a genre usually relegated to the periphery of the field of literature was Noël Carroll, whose *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) constitutes the backbone of the first chapter. Carroll uses a cognitive approach and sets up various useful categories during his discussion. He places special emphasis on the underlying deep structure of horror narratives, claiming that in spite of surface variations, the stories often bear a strong resemblance to each other. He distinguishes between two major plot variations, "the complex discovery plot" and the "overreacher plot", supporting his claims with various examples.⁹

Carroll surveys all the major theories when searching for an explanation of the attraction of the horror genre. Although he finds them lacking and not comprehensive enough to account for all the texts belonging to the genre, his method is useful because thereby we are given a brief introduction to all these critical accounts (theories ranging from psychoanalysis to structuralism, to theories of subversion and containment). In his conclusion, he accounts for the attraction of the genre by tying it to an intellectual pleasure, the satisfaction of curiosity (a little surprising, in light of the fact that we are dealing with a genre organized heavily around bodily experiences).

⁷ Clive Barker, "Surviving the Ride," in *Kingdom of Fear: The World of Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (Kent: New English Library, 1990), 57.

⁸ Wishing to offer an illuminating, comparative research into the genre of fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn utilizes a similar term when characterizing the various critical definitions surrounding the object of her study: she describes them as a "fuzzy set." Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xiii.

⁹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 99.

I have previously claimed that I do not wish to engage in a critical debate with the literary historians whose views I have presented, since I have found all their different approaches to be useful, enlightening and exciting. However, there is a crucial point where I differ from the position held by Carroll: this concerns the human monster, which figure has come to occupy a prominent position with the advent of slasher films and various books/films detailing the deeds of serial killers. Admittedly, Carroll devotes ample attention to monsters and considers them to be the ‘protagonists’ of the genre. However, by defining them as categorically contradictory, interstitial, or impure creatures, he excludes human monsters, who, in my opinion, are a major constituent of the genre. In spite of this blind spot, the various groups Carroll creates for the different types of monsters are quite convincing.

In addition to Carroll’s cognitive approach, I introduce three theoreticians whose views upon the genre differ significantly from one another. Martin Tropp’s *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)* (1990), can be best described as defined by social criticism, since he inserts his analysis within a wide historical, social framework. He limits his attention only to a one-hundred-year span, but his wide-ranging examples succeed in casting new light upon horror. He argues that the widespread presence of such literature in society influenced the way people looked upon their world, serving as a coping mechanism, a filter through which to view and interpret experiences. Horrifying images, however, were not only used to describe traumas (the memoirs of soldiers is a case in point), but Tropp also traces their presence in philosophers’ or sociologists’ works. Images originating in horror literature are often utilized when giving voice to the fears and anxieties of a given culture, and I chose to include the aforementioned three undisputed master texts of Gothic/horror literature, namely, *Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula* to exemplify how horror can be viewed as a vehicle carrying social criticism and commentary.

The same seminal texts also feature in the next part of my dissertation, where I introduce the work of James Twitchell, who, in his *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985) and *Preposterous Violence* (1989), claimed that these “fables of aggression”¹⁰ are essential in the education and socialization of the young. He relies upon two important terms during his research: procreation and ritual. Essentially, he claims that the major horror myths

¹⁰ James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

could all be interpreted as revolving around the important question of procreation, and thus he calls them “fables of sexual identity.”¹¹ His other term, ritual, coming from the field of cultural anthropology, emphasizes the cultural function of horror tales. They are seen as rites of passage, guiding adolescents on the bumpy road towards adulthood. Twitchell also offers various explanations for the endurance of the popularity of the genre, and details the functions it fulfills in society (overcoming objects of fear, liberating people of unsavory feelings and pent-up aggression).

The last theoretician I mention is Linda Holland-Toll, who narrows her focus upon contemporary American horror texts and examines them from the point of view of community construction and how they reflect the values of community and society in her *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (2001). She defines a spectrum ranging from affirmative to disaffirmative texts, and carefully places the novels under scrutiny along that scale. Affirmative fictions tend to be of a conservative nature, and a reestablishment of order usually follows the irruption of disorder and chaos. These texts tend to reflect a positive, optimistic view of people and society. Disaffirmative fictions, on the other hand, leave the reader disturbed and haunted because they do not offer easy solutions and the problems highlighted by the books stay in place.

Holland-Toll argues that horror’s task is to reveal the unpleasant realities and truths, offering us a warped-but-true image of ourselves (like a carnival house mirror), thus shocking us into a reappraisal of our complacent self-image. A journey on the dark side could be illuminating, bringing clarity of vision. She selects various texts to illustrate her theories and also changes the perspective from which these are examined: the viewpoint of the individual, the community and the government are all utilized during her discussion. Her book proved to be especially useful since she examines contemporary American texts, among them several King novels. Another reason for her inclusion is that she deals with the type of monster almost completely neglected by Carroll: the human monster. Serial killers, horrible mob behavior, man’s inhumanity towards his fellow beings are at the center of her attention, and the overriding theme connecting the texts is community construction. Hence, strategies of exclusion are detailed (demonization, scapegoating,

¹¹ James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

demarcation)¹² and the so-called process of monsterization is described, during which a community ‘breeds’ its own monsters, further complicating its guilt by not admitting to its role in creating them.

As an ending to the first part of my dissertation, I inserted a brief introduction to the work of Stephen King, describing his stylistic characteristics, typical themes, recurring characters and his position regarding the conservative v. subversive nature of horror.

Following this theoretical part, I offer critical analyses of two Stephen King texts. The first novel, *Carrie*, shows us the tragic consequences of “casual demonization”¹³ and details the mechanism of Othering through the sad life of an abused teenager. Carrie could be considered a representative of the monstrous feminine, and to detail the ubiquitous presence of this figure in horror narratives, I utilized Barbara Creed’s groundbreaking study, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), since Carrie’s monstrosity is intrinsically linked to her being female.

Object substances are often given ample attention in horror fiction, and in *Carrie* blood is a dominant image throughout. Sexuality, monstrosity and femininity are all strongly linked. The book does not close on a note of hope, there is no redemptive message: figures of authority, the school system, parents and classmates all fail to understand Carrie’s story, or her paranormal ability, which casts her in the role of the monster. Her society conveniently forgets that her monsterization, her categorization as an outsider both started a long time before the blooming of her telekinetic powers and her destructive unleashing of these forces in order to strike back at her tormentors. I also examined Carrie from the viewpoint of her being an author and linked the theme of authorship (not only in the narrow sense of writing) to all the major female characters in the book (writing will figure more markedly in the other text I examine).

The second novel I analyze is *Misery*, which also features a monstrous female as its protagonist. Although in the case of *Carrie* I argued against her monstrosity, in *Misery* we have a psychotic character, whose actions are hard to defend. *Misery* is different from other King novels since it lacks any supernatural phenomena: it is a mainstream novel, very restrained (basically we only have two characters) yet full of tension, almost like a chamber play. The monstrosity of Annie Wilkes, who holds writer Paul Sheldon captive after rescuing him from a car crash and then forces him to write a book just for her, seems

¹² Linda Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001), 13.

¹³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 77.

to mirror the fears of many popular authors, who feel their artistic freedom compromised by the incessant demands of the reading public.

I propose to analyze the novel from three different aspects: Annie and Paul's curious relationship could be examined as a victim-victimizer, reader-writer or mother-child bond. The body/mind dichotomy could also be added as another lens through which to interpret the novel. The shifting nature of these relationships is demonstrated, how easily the characters exchange places with one another. Paul, the writer, becomes a reader, and Annie, Paul's number-one fan, in turn becomes an author. Annie could be seen as the embodiment of the castrating mother, another guise in which the monstrous female often appears in horror fiction.

While in *Carrie*'s case bodily sensations, pain and immense power are linked to the female protagonist, in *Misery* we examine the same topics through the male hero. Through his systematic torture, mutilation and eventual liberation from captivity, Paul learns that he cannot free himself of the bodily dimension of existence and even learns how to turn this suffering to his advantage. In the concluding part of my analysis of *Misery*, I detail a real life incident in author Stephen King's life, which directly connects it to Paul Sheldon's trauma.

Following the conclusion, I have inserted a short analysis of a novella, "The Body", to illustrate how this research could be carried on. These three texts are all related due to their particular emphasis on corporeality, the physical dimension of existence, the various traumas and sufferings the body can go through and how (and whether) these experiences can be communicated and how this process of narrativization contributes to the healing process of the traumatized subject and whether it can fulfill a "restorative purpose."¹⁴

This final text also features a writer protagonist, though he is at the tender age of only 12. The bodily focus of the story is already signaled by its title: essentially, it is a rite of passage, detailing the journey of four young friends to find the dead body of a missing boy. The story is set within the framework of a mythical quest narrative, during which the hero's development and his maturation are closely followed. It is a highly autobiographical, very gentle work by King, once more lacking supernatural details but constantly directing our attention to the perishable nature of our bodies, and to the fact that however much we pride ourselves on being creatures of the mind, our existence is grounded in physicality.

¹⁴ Laub and Podell, quoted in Ganteau and Onega, op.cit., 2.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Historical Overview of the Genre across Various Media and Noël Carroll's Cognitive Philosophy of Horror

Noël Carroll offers one of the most exhaustive critical analyses of the genre in his *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), so his theory, although later its blind spots will be pointed out, warrants our attention. His major focus is the printed narrative form, but horror films are also frequently alluded to, since, to quote his word, there is an “intimate”¹⁵ relationship between horror literature and horror films. Putting aside the high number of adaptations and the obvious influence of classical horror movies upon generations of writers (manifest in their imagery, references and cinematic style), the importance of horror films becomes clear when we consider their reverberations. People who had never previously opened a horror book, after having seen, for example, *The Exorcist* (1973), sought out the source material and bought the book. Movies introduced horror into the mainstream and convinced people there are products offered by the genre which are worthy of their attention. Blockbusters such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) or *The Omen* (1976) led to an expansion of the horror audience, not just in the movie sector, but also among the reading public. Publishers became less reluctant to employ horror writers after they witnessed the upsurge in interest in this marginalized genre. Thus, the consumption of horror literature was boosted by the films. Horror imagery began to permeate popular culture, even invading breakfast tables in the form of fancily-named cereals like Count Chocula and Franken Berry.¹⁶

Carroll starts his investigation of the horror genre with a historical overview, during which he points to the Gothic novel as its immediate source.¹⁷ Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) is considered to have inaugurated this peculiar genre, the main aim of which was to terrify its readers – hence its other designation: novel of terror. Walpole's work is considered highly flawed by today's critics (a few of the shortcomings listed: confusing plot, insufficient character development and stilted dialogue)¹⁸ but it

¹⁵ Carroll, op.cit., 2.

¹⁶ David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 82. The current popularity of animated feature films in the entertainment industry, such as Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005) or *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), further illustrates the ubiquitous presence of horror imagery (in a diluted form) meant for the young.

¹⁷ Carroll, op.cit., 4.

¹⁸ Jessica Bomarito, ed., *Gothic Literature*, vol. 3 (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2006), 432.

contains innovations which later became the standard features of the genre.¹⁹ What elements did Walpole deploy which proved to be so influential?

Salvatorian landscape evoking the primordial battles of good and evil; wild weather and lonely ruins evoking the puniness of human powers; [...] a castle which oppresses, intimidates and frightens, [...]; a tyrant that ruins the lives of the young but whose dominion is broken by the uncontrolled excesses of his own passions; the villain more interesting than the hero.²⁰

His novel also proved to be a storehouse for possible themes pertaining to this new genre: “usurpation; the discovery of obscured family relations; incest; monastic institutions, charnel houses or mad-houses; death-like trances or uncanny dreams; enclosed, subterranean spaces where live burial is a metaphor for human isolation.”²¹ Stock elements, such as ghosts, the mysterious manuscript, the ancestral portrait, dark prophecies, bursts of thunder, and flight through dark vaults and damp corridors were emulated by later practitioners of the genre.²² While the book is read today mostly for its value as a genre-founding work, and readers are more likely to be amused than terrified by the ridiculous use of supernatural machinery and cannot find much satisfaction in the colourless characters, in Walpole’s day it “satisfied a real craving for the romantic and marvellous.”²³ As Edith Birkhead concludes, “*The Castle of Otranto* is significant, not because of its intrinsic merit, but because of its power in shaping the destiny of the novel” and Walpole himself is “honoured rather for what he instigated others to perform than for what he actually accomplished himself.”²⁴

By 1796, a critic had already complained that Walpole’s “Otranto Ghosts have rather propagated their species with unequalled fecundity. The spawn is in every novel shop.”²⁵ People recognized the novel as being “of a new species”,²⁶ an innovation in the field of literature. Various features of the book serve as proofs for its importance to the future development of this genre: its antagonist, Manfred, as the prototype for the Gothic

¹⁹ Brendan Hennessy, *The Gothic Novel* (London: Longman, 1978), 10.

²⁰ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: 400 Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1998), 141.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Devendra P. Varma, “Walpole, Horace (1717-1797),” in *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, ed. Jack Sullivan (New York: Viking, 1986), 448.

²³ Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 19.

²⁴ Birkhead, op.cit., 20, 23.

²⁵ Ellis, op.cit., 27.

²⁶ Ellis, op.cit., 31.

villain-hero, “seductive in his excess”²⁷ (foreshadowing the Byronic hero),²⁸ the centrality of the castle itself, which amounts to being the protagonist of the novel,²⁹ and “the way the supernatural comes to represent the past, whether psychological or historical, rising up to reassert its power within the present.”³⁰ In one text after another, the past and its relentless hold over the present, often imagined as a crippling weight stunting people’s growth, are recurring motifs in Gothic and horror fiction (Hawthorne, Poe, Lovecraft, King). The social relevance of this new genre could already be observed in the first Gothic stories: they often reflected class tensions in a changing society (describing the travails of the poor peasant boy discovering his noble ancestry, claiming his true ownership) or the generational tensions in the patriarchal family (with the father as the unquestioned authority figure).³¹

For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be emphasized that Walpole also contributed, to a large degree, to the liberation of the word ‘gothic’ from its negative connotations. In the second edition of 1765, where he admitted authorship (famously, the first edition claimed to be a translation from a medieval Italian manuscript), the novel is significantly subtitled “A Gothick Story”,³² and his avowed intention was to blend

the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the greater resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life.³³

In the 17th and 18th centuries the word ‘gothic’ connoted barbarity, lack of civilization and primitivism: it “was merely a term of reproach and contempt.”³⁴ By the middle of the 18th century, however, a new interest was born in things ‘gothic’ and a

²⁷ Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 3.

²⁸ Varma, op.cit., 448.

²⁹ As remarked by Eino Railo: “The haunted castle plays an exceeding [sic] important part in these romances; so important, indeed that were it eliminated the whole fabric of romance would be bereft of its foundation and would lose its predominant atmosphere.” Quoted by Steven J. Mariconda, “The Haunted House,” in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 271.

³⁰ David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 178.

³¹ Martin Tropp, *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)* (Jefferson: McFarland Classics, 1990), 26.

³² Punter and Byron, op.cit., 177.

³³ Punter and Byron, op.cit., 178.

³⁴ Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 37.

gradual re-evaluation started. By turning his villa,³⁵ Strawberry Hill, into a miniature Gothic castle (complete with Gothic ornamentation, hidden stairways and stained-glass windows),³⁶ Walpole set the perfect example for “Gothic architectural revival.”³⁷ Owing to his high social position, he lent respectability to a previously despised architectural style.³⁸ The villa even became a destination of choice for day-trippers.³⁹ Behind Walpole’s architectural feat stands the same antiquarian spirit which inspired his novel:

[...] Strawberry Castle—“my child Strawberry”—was infinitely precious to him, it was his own creation, the summum of his own life, the actual and external embodiment of his own dreams. Here he had built his love of Gothic, as he understood it, his romantic passion for old castles and ruined abbeys, his dreams of a mediæval world. [...] *The Castle of Otranto* is Strawberry in literature.⁴⁰

For a couple of years, no worthy book followed Walpole’s groundbreaking product, but then the genre started to flourish between 1790 and 1820. Anne Radcliffe and Matthew ‘The Monk’ Lewis are much too important contributors to the genre to neglect: they exemplify the two different directions which the Gothic took. Radcliffe, with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), represents the so-called ‘supernatural explained’ method, where the seemingly supernatural occurrences are followed by the revelation that every uncanny event can be traced back to natural causes. As opposed to this level-headed attitude, Lewis dives headlong into the supernatural, with malefic forces and demonic creatures loosed upon unsuspecting victims.

Apart from the visually arresting settings (ruined abbeys, monasteries, feudal castles, dark corridors, underground vaults and dense woods), what most often engages our attention in Gothic fiction is the figure of the villain. For the most part, the heroes or heroines are insipid, feeble characters who pale behind their antagonists, full of energy and devious plans, bereft of moral considerations. In this we can presage the later interest in the monster figure of horror fiction, or see the attraction of serial killer narratives where often

³⁵ When first setting eyes on it, Walpole gushed in a letter to his cousin that “[i]t is a little plaything-house” and “the prettiest bauble you ever saw.” In John Iddon, *Strawberry Hill & Horace Walpole* (London: Scala, 2011), 4.

³⁶ Bomarito, op.cit., 430.

³⁷ Punter and Byron, op.cit., 169.

³⁸ Walter Kendrick, *The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 42.

³⁹ Emma J. Clery, “Walpole, Horace, Earl of Orford (1717-98),” in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 247.

⁴⁰ Summers, op.cit., 181.

it is our interest in the psychopath, his personality, deeds and motivations that compel us to read such narratives, and not so much the figure of the victim or that of the detective.

This twofold division between ‘supernatural explained’ and ‘supernatural accepted’ will also be utilized when illustrating Todorov’s theory regarding the genre of fantasy. Actually, there is a fourfold division in the earliest critical approaches to Gothic fiction: in Montague Summers’ classification, the above-mentioned “supernatural gothic”⁴¹ (which he calls “terror-Gothic”⁴² [Lewis]) and the “natural or explained gothic” (Radcliffe) are supplemented by two other categories: the “historical-Gothic”,⁴³ in which there is no suggestion of the supernatural, it being simply a tale set in the imaginary past, and the “equivocal gothic”, where “psychologically disturbed” characters render the narrative events ambiguous (here the novels of Charles Brockden Brown are cited).⁴⁴ This device of the unreliable narrator is later picked up by various authors, and the consequent ambiguity is a defining factor of the genre of fantasy as well. Obviously, for our purposes of tracing the birth and evolution of the horror genre proper, the most significant contributor to the genre is the category headed “supernatural gothic.”

At the end of the heyday of Gothic, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was published (1818). Since it occupies such a central position in the literature of terror (and, one could argue, also in science-fiction), I will examine it more thoroughly in forthcoming chapters. For the greatest part of the 19th century, works belonging to the Gothic tradition were eclipsed by the realist novel, which was the dominant form of the period. However, a major shift happened at the end of the Victorian era, which no doubt reflected a similar change in the realist novel.⁴⁵ This entailed an inward-turning in fiction: for the Gothic it meant that there was a shift in emphasis from physical fear to psychological fear, and more attention was devoted to the psychological elaboration of characters. The “haunted psyche”⁴⁶ was scrutinized more thoroughly, the best exemplars for this new direction being Poe and Hawthorne. In these stories, we often observe the persecution or torture of “ordinary, innocent victims”⁴⁷ instead of witnessing the fall of classic gothic overreachers (the likes of Victor Frankenstein).

⁴¹ Carroll, op.cit., 4.

⁴² Summers, op.cit., 29.

⁴³ Summers, op.cit., 31.

⁴⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 4.

⁴⁵ Carroll, op.cit., 5.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin Fisher quoted by Carroll, op.cit., 5.

⁴⁷ Carroll, op.cit., 6.

A major resurgence of the Gothic occurred around the turn of the century, when Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) were published. There is widespread critical consensus concerning which texts proved to be lastingly influential: Stevenson's and Stoker's masterpieces enjoy the same pride of place as *Frankenstein* (so these texts will also receive more detailed treatment later on). As Stephen King claims:

[...] these three are something special. They stand at the foundation of a huge skyscraper of books and films – those twentieth-century gothics which have become known as “the modern horror story.” More than that, at the center of each stands (or slouches) a monster that has come to join and enlarge [...] the myth-pool – that body of fictive literature in which all of us, even the nonreaders and those who do not go to the films, have communally bathed. [...] the Vampire, the Werewolf, and the Thing Without a Name.⁴⁸

Following the First World War, the newly-born cinematic art proved to be such a fertile ground for the creation of horror pictures as to become the primary medium through which horror images were communicated and produced, so my focus concerning this century is primarily on films, the visual representatives of the genre.⁴⁹

German Expressionism left its indelible mark upon movie history with F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), while the year 1931 seems like an *annus mirabilis* for American-produced horror: this was the year when Universal Studios and Paramount contributed to the genre with a cycle of three movies: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931). These films are more responsible for bringing the three archetypal horror monsters (“the Thing Without a Name, the Vampire, and the Werewolf”)⁵⁰ to the mass consciousness than any other cinematic work of art.

These early masterpieces also deserve attention because they succeeded in creating images and set designs (Victor's laboratory or Castle Dracula's impressive staircase) that have lodged in the public's mind ever since, and define modern horror's iconography. Béla Lugosi's identification with his onscreen role as the charismatic, suave Count was so

⁴⁸ King, *Danse Macabre*, 50.

⁴⁹ One major exception who needs to be mentioned is Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who could be described as an example for “the cosmic wing of horror writing” (Carroll, op.cit., 6). He will be referred to repeatedly later on, not only due to his works published in the pulp periodicals of his times (*Weird Tales* being the best-known example), but also because he penned a treatise on his chosen genre, entitled “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927).

⁵⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 77.

complete that on his death he was buried in full Dracula regalia.⁵¹ Boris Karloff's monster might have exerted an even more powerful hold than Lugosi's over the audience's imagination, since the mechanically-inspired, bolt-through-the-neck creature with the shambling walk⁵² was able to win the sympathy of the viewers, even though he was stripped of the capacity of speech. In Shelley's original, the monster was an eloquent, reasoning creature, so the decision to make him inarticulate was a radical departure from the text, but Karloff's sensitive portrayal, full of pathos, conveyed the underlying innocence and goodness in the creature's heart.

The next major cycle is made up of the sci-fi horror films of the 50s, which no longer depended upon literary sources and placed horror in "the context of the modern world."⁵³ They usually focused on a menace coming from outer space: such alien invaders were often stand-ins for the communist threat in the era of Cold War. Later, in the 60s, the English Hammer Films dominated the screen with their reinterpretations of the classic myths, linking violence and sexuality quite explicitly (with the magnetic Christopher Lee's libidinous Dracula embodying the aristocratic vampire for cinematic audiences [*Dracula* 1958]).⁵⁴

While the content to many of the Hammer films was reminiscent of the original Universal classics, the overall look was radically different. Now there were expensive sets, intelligent screenplays, sophisticated acting, brilliant direction, rich and beautiful colors (instead of the dull, achromatic black and whites), as well as an emphasis on sex, which was designed to attract adult viewers as well as children.⁵⁵

Horror movie theorist Robin Wood argues that 1960 can be looked upon as a watershed: prior to that year the monster was an external threat and the source of horror was located somewhere outside society.⁵⁶ In *Psycho* (1960), however, the monster is the

⁵¹ Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (New York: Hodder, 2002), 91.

⁵² For his role, Karloff had to wear insulated boots weighing eight pounds each, which made him move like he was barely able to lift his feet. "The result is Karloff's famous shuffle – "my little walk", he called it." Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 196.

⁵³ Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (Great Britain: BPCC, 1992), 62.

⁵⁴ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1996), 109.

⁵⁵ James F. Iaccino, *Psychological Reflections of Cinematic Terror: Jungian Archetypes in Horror Films* (Westport: Praeger, 1994), 26.

⁵⁶ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 2003), 78.

product of the basic unit of society, the family.⁵⁷ Robert Bloch's novel, of the same title, was published the same year as another defining text of the genre, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959): the source of madness and horror is the family in both cases.⁵⁸

In the late 70s and early 80s, a new subgenre of horror appeared: the slasher (John Carpenter's *Halloween* [1978]⁵⁹ is regarded the first one). These films usually detail how a psychopath methodically murders a group of teenagers, without offering any explanation for his psychosis.⁶⁰ It is considered to be a conservative genre, since youngsters engaging in pre-marital relationships are eliminated by a killer, fulfilling the role of the superego, "avenging itself on liberated female sexuality or the sexual freedom of the young."⁶¹ As it tends to rely heavily upon subjective camerawork, it is also assumed to be encouraging identification with the murderer. Slashers are often accused of misogyny since victims are primarily female. However, the audience's process of identification with the characters is shifting and unstable, and owing to this fluidity, they can put themselves in the position of both killer and victim.

A significant contribution of the slasher to the horror genre is the emergence of the female hero, nicknamed the Final Girl by Carol Clover.⁶² She dispatches the killer without relying on male help: she is resilient, self-sufficient, virginal and smart.⁶³ She refuses to be victimized and fights back, appropriating certain masculine attributes in the process.⁶⁴ The Final Girl is her own savior, the sole survivor, who triumphs because she has "transcended the assigned gender."⁶⁵ Clover welcomes the films' willingness to represent the hero "as an

⁵⁷ Hitchcock famously suggested putting horror back "where it belongs, in the family." Gina Wisker, *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 151.

⁵⁸ However, Barbara Creed offers a somewhat different reading. She points out that these texts are not really critical of patriarchal families but reinforce them, assigning the blame to the dominant maternal figure (whom she calls the "monstrous feminine"). The father is absent in both stories, and according to the traditional Freudian approach, he is entrusted with the task of ensuring the separation of the child from the mother. Children stuck in pre-Oedipal bonds with the mother do not develop a fully-fledged identity. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

⁵⁹ The self-referential nature of horror films is nicely illustrated by the fact that *Halloween*'s protagonist is played by Jamie Lee Curtis, daughter of Janet Leigh, who played the unfortunate Marion in *Psycho*. Darryl Jones, op.cit., 115.

⁶⁰ Jancovich, op.cit., 105.

⁶¹ Wood, op.cit., 173.

⁶² Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35.

⁶³ Clover also points out that these girls often have boyish or non-gender-specific names like Stretch, Sidney, Stevie, Will, Joey or Laurie. In op.cit., 40.

⁶⁴ Jancovich, op.cit., 108.

⁶⁵ Clover, op.cit., 107.

anatomical female” and interprets the self-saving figure as the genre’s contribution to the popular culture of the women’s movement.⁶⁶

The last category which should be mentioned is that of body horror, which came to the fore in the 1970s, its most noted contributors being author Clive Barker and Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg.⁶⁷ The transformation, mutation or disintegration of the human body is a given in their texts, and often reflects a crisis of identity.⁶⁸ However, these changes are not necessarily for the worse: they might be seen as a form of liberation, breaking free of the confines of the self/body.⁶⁹

For some the transformative journey resolves the chronic uncertainty of their precarious identity – often by simply allowing the (monstrous) buried true self to emerge. The journey to “a new kind of life”, with death or reconfiguration of the body as a common rite of passage, ends in post-human states of being that are clearly preferable to the desolate banality of twentieth-century middle-class society [...].⁷⁰

The phenomenal success of Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973) played no small part in paving the way for the resurgence of the horror genre in the printed form in the early 70s. Owing to these, Anne Rice and Stephen King found a more receptive environment for their works.⁷¹ It seems slightly unjust but it was the film versions of the respective novels of Ira Levin (1967) and William Peter Blatty (1971), which achieved the breakthrough and helped the rise to fame of the next cycle of authors specialized in the macabre. The same happened to *Psycho* (1959) author Robert Bloch, whose name is almost totally eclipsed by auteur director Alfred Hitchcock. A similar fate awaited the famous founding texts: while most people are familiar with the stories of Frankenstein, Dracula and Doctor Jekyll, only a few have read the actual novels themselves. In a visually-oriented culture such as ours, horror seems to

⁶⁶ Clover, op.cit., 60, 162.

⁶⁷ Jancovich, op.cit., 112.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jancovich, op.cit., 115.

⁷⁰ Stephen Jones, comp., *Clive Barker’s A-Z of Horror* (London: BBC Books, 1997), 206.

⁷¹ Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), the first in her series of vampire novels (*The Vampire Chronicles* [1976-2014]), revolves around the figure of Louis, who is in a curious “liminal position between the human and the vampiric” (Punter, op.cit., 162). He is a seeker, searching for answers, curious about his origins and desirous of companionship. Rice depicts the vampire’s world as “rich, glowing, lustrous [...] the realm of sensual pleasure” offered in “compensation for the agony of immortal life at the service of an unintelligible drive” (Punter, op.cit., 161).

thrive better in the movies: “the principal form today of the ‘literature of terror’, in terms of audience, is film.”⁷²

2.2 Emotions Engendered by Horror, Criteria for Monstrosity and Recurring Plot Types

Besides giving a historical overview of the genre, Carroll proposes to examine horror from the point of view of the emotional effects it engenders in its audiences. He believes that the genre is specifically designed to have a particular emotional effect, which he calls “*art-horror*.”⁷³ This emotion he defines as the “identifying mark of horror.”⁷⁴ He carefully distinguishes art-horror from *natural horror*, in which category he places Nazi atrocities and natural disasters. He admits that horrific imagery can already be found in classical literature and that it has persisted through the ages (he cites Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Dante’s *Inferno*), but he claims that its function was not the same as in horror literature proper. Pre-modern monsters acted like foils to the heroes, illuminated the virtuous qualities of their opponents or simply engaged the audience’s attention before the acts of the hero were presented (Grendel’s primary function is to be destroyed by Beowulf).⁷⁵ Horrific images were invoked in order to highlight the superiority of the hero: “[p]re-romantic monsters were in the text [...] to show by their destruction the power of *virtù*.”⁷⁶ A curious shift of attention has occurred in modern times as the figure of the monster has come to occupy center stage.

Carroll carefully distinguishes *terror* from *horror*: tales of terror (with Poe being its best practitioner) also achieve a frightening effect, but they do so by focusing upon psychological matters, without the presence of monsters. As far as the issue of the human monster is regarded, I disagree with Carroll, for whom this creature does not qualify as a real monster.⁷⁷ He places tales of abnormal psyches under the rubric of terror and claims that real horror requires the presence of monsters. While monsters are described as a

⁷² Punter, op.cit., 149. This phenomenon is also shown by the number of scholarly books published on the topic of horror films, as opposed to those on horror literature.

⁷³ Carroll, op.cit., 8.

⁷⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 14.

⁷⁵ A possible exception to this general observation could be Milton’s Satan. There is something definitely modern about him and a case could be made that “modern monsters have Milton’s Satan as their great progenitor.” Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, op.cit., 304.

⁷⁶ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 25.

⁷⁷ The human monster features prominently in the critical theory of Linda Holland-Toll, in her *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001).

necessary condition for horror, alone they are by no means sufficient to create a horror text. The other vital ingredients are the attitude and reactions of the fictional characters to the monsters.

Monstrous creatures pervade various kinds of literary genres, fairy tales being one of their most natural habitats. However, in the world of fairy tales, monsters are accepted as part of the everyday world and while they might engender fear in whoever encounters them, there is no trace of wonder, surprise or amazement, since they are part and parcel of the fairy tale world.⁷⁸ Human characters inhabiting that world do not evince the sort of reactions which we would feel upon encountering a troll or a dragon. In the cosmology of fairy tales, these creatures do not violate any laws governing reality, they are not unnatural, while in our world, they are. Our basic assumptions about the world we inhabit and its governing laws are questioned, and undergo a severe crisis when there is the sudden eruption of the supernatural into our world. Here, monsters are considered abnormal, as “disturbances of the natural order.”⁷⁹ To illustrate the difference further, with a play upon words, Carroll states that while a monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world, in fairy tales it is an ordinary creature in an extraordinary world.⁸⁰

Carroll also mentions a peculiar mirroring-effect, which he deems to be a standard feature of the genre. He claims that the emotional responses of the audience parallel those of the positive human characters. Maybe this is more obvious in the case of the cinema, where the audience’s reactions often repeat the ones witnessed on the silver screen: people scream, shudder or jump in their seat from fright. Horror is a genre organized heavily around physical reactions, and frequently described as a “body genre” (the biological nature of the genre is thoroughly investigated by Jack Morgan).⁸¹ Nevertheless, Carroll rejects character identification: the character in the story/film has beliefs, while we (as readers/viewers) only entertain thoughts: we are art-horrified. We often have more information, we are outsiders, while the character is an insider, horrified by the prospect of imminent death. We just share the characters’ evaluation of the monster, considering it a dangerous and impure being.

According to Carroll, along with fright, the other key aspect of the emotional reaction triggered by the appearance and presence of the monster is revulsion. Revulsion

⁷⁸ Todorov labels these worlds of myths and fairy tales as “the marvelous.” Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

⁷⁹ Carroll, op.cit., 16.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

and disgust characterize our reactions to monsters, since they are often unclean, filthy creatures, or downright impossibilities.⁸² The indescribability of horrific creatures is a recurring feature of such fiction – suffice it to think of Lovecraft’s otherworldly beings, which often unite the features of several species: “*It was a octopus, centipede, spider kind o’ thing.*”⁸³

Elaborating on the emotion of art-horror, Carroll makes a distinction between a “dispositional emotional state” (like envy) and an “occurrent emotional state” (like a flash of anger), into which category art-horror belongs.⁸⁴ An occurrent emotional state has both a cognitive and a physical dimension (a feeling of agitation, manifested, for example, by an increased heartbeat). The cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions holds that it is our beliefs and thoughts which give rise to physical agitation, and cognitive states are those which differentiate one emotion from another.⁸⁵ Although we (as readers or viewers) do not actually believe in the existence of the horrific beings which engender in us the feeling of art-horror, we can be frightened by the concept of such fictive beings. According to the Thought Theory of emotional responses to fictions, thought contents can generate genuine fear: it is the thought of the impure and threatening monster which gives rise to the feelings of horror. Here Carroll relies upon Descartes’ distinction between objective and formal reality. In the latter case, the being really exists, while the objective reality of a being is “the idea of the thing *sans* commitment to its existence.”⁸⁶ (I can think of dragons and werewolves without thinking they really exist.)

To further clarify what he means by impurity (a necessary feature of monsters apart from the obvious threat they represent), Carroll cites Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, which ties the notion of impurity to the idea of transgression.⁸⁷ This would cover violations of cultural categories, when the boundaries of normative, culturally sanctioned schemata are not respected. Monsters are often interstitial creatures, belonging to several categories at the same time. The dividing lines between living and dead are transgressed by zombies, mummies, ghosts and vampires, while doppelgängers violate the basic distinction between

⁸² Feelings of nausea, disgust and revulsion also occupy a central place in Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, and in Mary Douglas’s anthropological researches, detailed in *Purity and Danger*.

⁸³ H. P. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 244.

⁸⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 24.

⁸⁵ Carroll, op.cit., 27.

⁸⁶ Carroll, op.cit., 29.

⁸⁷ Carroll, op.cit., 31.

me and *not me*. These categorical oppositions help us to divide the world surrounding us, they orient us in our daily lives. To quote Douglas,

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.⁸⁸

Douglas also places into the category of impurity those objects which are “incomplete representatives of their class”,⁸⁹ by being either formless (e.g. dirt) or disintegrating. A good example of the formless monster appears in King’s short story “The Raft”,⁹⁰ where four teenagers are threatened, and later devoured, by a formless oil slick floating on the surface of a deserted lake.

Thus, we consider an object or a being impure “if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless”⁹¹ (we could refer to a severed hand or head, or zombies with missing body parts as incomplete). Monsters resulting from the conflation of different species (Dr. Moreau’s island hosts many such creatures), or which fuse the animate and the inanimate (living dolls/toys, haunted houses, or King’s demonic car, *Christine*⁹²), also meet the requirement of impurity.

Often the fictional characters are at a loss as to how to designate these creatures, because they are not classifiable according to cultural categories. This incapacity as to how to refer to a being so far undiscovered, is reflected in such titles as John Carpenter’s film *The Thing* (1982) (an otherworldly visitor from outer space, which can clone itself to assume the shape of any living organism), King’s *It* (1986) (a devious shapeshifter), or Lovecraft’s “The Unnamable” (1925). In the last example, the protagonist initially scoffs at the idea of the existence of creatures for which we have no names (“he was almost sure that nothing can be really ‘unnamable’”), but then has a traumatic confrontation with something indescribable: “It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime—yet it had shapes, a

⁸⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001), 4.

⁸⁹ Carroll, op.cit., 32.

⁹⁰ Stephen King, “The Raft” in *Skeleton Crew* (New York: A Signet Book, 1986), 278-307.

⁹¹ Carroll, op.cit., 32.

⁹² Stephen King, *Christine* (Kent: New English Library, 1984).

thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, *it was the unnamable!*”⁹³

These monsters represent a threat not only to the characters’ physical well-being, but also to their mental health. They imply a “cognitive threat”,⁹⁴ a cognitive dissonance, because they challenge the mind’s capacity to create order around itself and find a proper place and category for everything. Hence the cliché ending of many horror narratives, which leaves the character mad, deranged or traumatized beyond recovery after the encounter with the monster. In Lovecraft’s fiction, we often witness this dramatic change after the horrifying confrontation: “Danforth refuses to tell me what final horror made him scream out so insanely—a horror which, I feel sadly sure, is mainly responsible for his present breakdown.”⁹⁵ “Briden looked back and went mad, laughing shrilly as he kept on laughing at intervals till death found him one night in the cabin.”⁹⁶ When a cultured, restrained gentleman like Doctor Lanyon, in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), bears witness to Jekyll’s transformation and the beast within is revealed in front of his eyes, offering him a “glimpse into a primitive heart of darkness”,⁹⁷ he dies from the shock he has undergone.

Carroll’s definition of horror is “entity-based”,⁹⁸ not event-based, which means he focuses upon the object responsible for the creation of the emotion of art-horror: the monster. Although at first he admits into his definition of monsters only “creatures not countenanced by contemporary science”,⁹⁹ he later modifies his criteria and states that if the creatures seem to be endowed with supernatural abilities, even though they are normal entities, they qualify as monsters (e.g. the preternaturally intelligent sharks of the *Jaws* [1975] series). He also includes the arguably most famous of all psychopaths, Norman Bates, claiming that even though he is a human being, he is interstitial in a certain sense: neither a boy, nor a man (Norman), caught between the living and the dead (inheriting the role of the dead mother as punisher), between woman and man, both victim and aggressor, uniting two personalities in one body: thus, he amply meets the requirements of the impure being. Although Carroll is willing to make an exception with Bates, overall, he does not

⁹³ H. P. Lovecraft, “The Unnameable” in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 83, 89.

⁹⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 34.

⁹⁵ H. P. Lovecraft, “At the Mountains of Madness” in *The Thing*, 338.

⁹⁶ H. P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 168.

⁹⁷ Tropp, op.cit., 103.

⁹⁸ Carroll, op.cit., 41.

⁹⁹ Carroll, op.cit., 37.

consider serial killers as belonging to the category of monsters, which view I contest, and will shortly return to in more detail.

Carroll also considers various ways in which monsters are created and how their impurity is portrayed. One method is *fusion*, in which case categorical divisions are not respected, and the creature unites attributes which should be kept separate: living/dead (zombies), human/insect (David Cronenberg's film *The Fly* [1986]), flesh/machine (Universal Studio's version of the Frankenstein monster, equipped with metal parts, and more recent blockbusters like the *Terminator* [1984] movies).¹⁰⁰ The other possibility for monster-creation is *fission*, in which case examples include doppelgängers and werewolves.¹⁰¹ However, Carroll introduces a slight differentiation into this category: there are temporal and spatial fissions. Temporal fission means that the same body is occupied by two entities sequentially: this covers the case of werewolves. They are only spatially continuous, but not in time: one is either a man or a werewolf. The other version is that of spatial fission: in this case a multiplication of character occurs, with the various selves representing various aspects of the original personality (parts which are either denied or repressed). The portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or doppelgängers from King's *The Dark Half* (1989) or Poe's "William Wilson" (1839) belong to this category. Lastly, Carroll mentions *magnification* (like the giant ants and spiders, which were especially popular in the 50s cycle of radiation movies, e.g. *Them!* [1954]) and *massification* (of cockroaches, for example) as further means of creating horrific monsters: usually these are phobic objects or creatures to start with, and these two methods simply increase their power.

When linking the origin of the horror genre to its precursor, the Gothic novel, Carroll emphasizes the historical, philosophical, cultural and intellectual background of the era: it was the Age of Reason, the period of the Enlightenment. Natural science dominated the thought system and religion became a source of distrust. Emotions, the supernatural and superstitions were all subordinated to the rational faculties. In a certain sense, the Gothic novel was "the return of the Enlightenment's repressed."¹⁰² However, Carroll is careful to point out the necessity of the Enlightenment's scientific world-view and its emphasis on order: it supplied readers with a concept of the norm. There can be no

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, op.cit., 43.

¹⁰¹ Carroll, op.cit., 46.

¹⁰² Carroll, op.cit., 56.

violation of nature (a characteristic of monsters) if we are without a clear concept of nature (where monsters are clearly regarded as un-natural).

Next I would like to present Carroll's findings in connection with the frequently recurring narrative structures of horror fictions.¹⁰³ He asserts that the plots are repetitive with surface variations, but with the same deep narrative structure. The first type of plot he identifies is the so-called "Complex Discovery Plot", comprising four movements: onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation.¹⁰⁴ The first movement might include some establishing scenes which introduce the main characters and the setting, but wherein the major focus is upon the monster. Its identity might be immediately revealed (we witness the shark attacks in *Jaws*), or we might be shown only the effects of its predations without its identity being revealed. In the second phase, entitled "discovery", the characters discover that a monster is the cause of the horrifying events. Although its existence is established to them, they still have to convince others of this fact. Usually, this information is received skeptically, and the main aim of the third movement, "confirmation", is to convince various authority figures (religious leaders, scientists, the police or the army) of the reality of the monster. In this part, reasoning and argumentation come to the fore, so the story offers ample cognitive pleasure. Carroll describes this phase as the "drama of proof."¹⁰⁵ The last movement is the confrontation between humanity and the monster, which, in the majority of cases, concludes with humanity emerging victorious.

One trick frequently employed by directors in the horror genre is to attach a coda at the end of the narrative, which reveals that the monster is still at loose, so there is the possibility of return in the future. This explains the serial nature of many horror films: *Scream* (1996) has 4 parts, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) has 5 parts, while *Friday the 13th* (1980) has in fact 8 parts. This device is often employed by writers as well: during the final confrontation, in which the monster seems to be defeated, it might escape, only to make a reappearance in the final coda (*The Stand* [1978] or *Needful Things* [1991] by Stephen King). The persistence of evil is signaled by this technique: humanity cannot be complacent and must always be on guard.

¹⁰³ In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp created a similar typology of fairy tales, identifying those basic plot structures which are recurring elements of the genre (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

¹⁰⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 99.

¹⁰⁵ Carroll, op.cit., 102.

Several variations of this first plot type are possible, for example, the confirmation phase might be left out: these are stories where the discoverers have to deal with the monster on their own (there is simply no time to notify the authorities). Another variation is when we are not shown the confrontation between people and the monsters, so we only have the onset/discovery/confirmation sections (the 1956 film version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* ends with the protagonist heaving a sigh of relief after he has succeeded in convincing the police of the existence of the pod people [creatures who terminated and then cloned most of his townspeople], but the film ends abruptly before humans attack the enemy). As an extreme example, a horror narrative might be comprised of one single movement: King's aforementioned "The Raft" is a pure onset plot.¹⁰⁶

The second plot type Carroll lists is that of the "Overreacher Plot."¹⁰⁷ Here belong the mad scientist plots, revolving around the topics of forbidden knowledge and pacts with the devil. The Overreacher Plot also consists of 4 parts: the first is the preparation of the experiment, the gathering of the requisite material for its execution, with the scientist often offering some justification for his deed. This phase is followed by the experiment itself. In the third part the experiment turns out to be a failure: the creature is dangerous, the scientist realizes he has unleashed forces he cannot control. The last part is confrontation. The underlying topic in most cases is the pursuit of knowledge, and *Frankenstein* is cited as the classic example.

These two patterns identified by Carroll reveal something about the curious nature of the pleasure offered by such fiction. Knowledge and the unknown figure prominently in both versions, so we might claim that the genre is primarily concerned with revealing that which is unknown or hidden. Frequently, the message of a tale of horror boils down to what Lovecraft admonishes us against in his "At the Mountains of Madness": "it is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth's dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ The functions listed above need not necessarily follow each other in the order described.

¹⁰⁷ Carroll, op.cit., 118.

¹⁰⁸ H. P. Lovecraft, "At the Mountains of Madness" in *The Thing*, 339.

2.3 Potential Pitfalls of Theoretical Frameworks

In the final part of his book, Carroll embarks upon the task of enlisting the major theories regarding horror fiction (its classification, attraction, characteristics) – and then dismantles all of them. First he details Todorov's theory regarding the fantastic (a neighboring genre of horror), the hallmark of which is hesitation. The pure fantastic occurs quite rarely: only when the hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation for the uncanny event is sustained by the reader throughout the narrative. In Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the reader is offered two alternative readings but no definite answer to the dilemma of whether Bly is really haunted (the supernatural explanation), or the governess is a psychologically disturbed hysteric (the naturalistic explanation). Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is another pure fantastic plot, where ambiguity plays a crucial role in the narrative. (Is the protagonist possessed by some evil force, or is she more prosaically mentally unstable?)

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a practitioner of the genre, also attempted to account for the curious attraction of horror in a treatise entitled "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1945). His theory is based on the ideas of cosmic fear and dread, and the feeling of awe (akin to a religious feeling), which is born in the reader while perusing supernatural horror fiction. He claims that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."¹⁰⁹ In the majority of his fiction, he takes his readers to unknown parts, confronting them with hidden, undiscovered regions of the universe, alternate realities or impossible beings.

Regarding Lovecraft's approach, Carroll admits to awe being one possible effect of the horror genre, but not a distinguishing sign of it.¹¹⁰ He deems Lovecraft's classificatory method (for a tale to be considered supernatural horror) to be too narrow to cover all the writings in the genre.

Carroll then proceeds with an account of psychoanalytic approaches: he states that they do not offer a "*comprehensive* account of horror",¹¹¹ but they might be useful when analysing certain works or patterns within the genre. For example, he criticizes the work of film critic Robin Wood, claiming that the allegorizing tendency of the defenders of the

¹⁰⁹ H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" in *Dagon and other Macabre Tales* (London: Panther Books, 1985), 423.

¹¹⁰ Carroll, op.cit., 164.

¹¹¹ Carroll, op.cit., 168.

genre pushes the repellent nature of the monsters into the background.¹¹² In Wood's reading, monsters stand for the repressed in society, a standard psychoanalytic interpretation.

In "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", Freud propounded the theory that popular fiction originates in wish-fulfilment fantasies. Significantly, he focused on writers with a mass appeal, not on those belonging to the literary elite. "The artist dreams aloud and in public", sharing his/her anxieties and longings with the reader.¹¹³ The artistic need for self-expression can be seen as a way of keeping your sanity in an insane world. This view attributes a therapeutic effect to writing which is also shared by Stephen King, who expressed similar concerns:

Writing is necessary for my sanity. As a writer, I can externalize my fears and insecurities and night terrors on paper, which is what people pay shrinks a small fortune to do. In my case, they pay me for psychoanalyzing myself in print. And in the process, I'm able to "write myself sane" [...] A Freudian exorcism.¹¹⁴

Freud also observes the curious fact that "many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of phantasy, and many excitements which, in themselves, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer's work."¹¹⁵ This statement reflects Edmund Burke's and Barbauld's views: they made similar comments in their theoretical works regarding the nature of the sublime and the horrific respectively.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Carroll, op.cit., 160.

¹¹³ Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), 420.

¹¹⁴ Eric Norden, "Playboy Interview: Stephen King," in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 68. Furthermore, King jokingly remarked that he has "a marketable obsession." In Stephen King, *Night Shift* (New York: Signet, 1979), xiii.

¹¹⁵ Freud, op.cit., 421.

¹¹⁶ In her essay entitled "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" (1773), Barbauld offers various arguments regarding the nature of terror in Gothic literature: the paradox to be 'solved' is "the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror, where our moral feelings are not in the least concerned, and no passion seems to be excited but the depressing one of fear" (In *Gothic Literature* Vol. 1., edited by Jessica Bomarito [Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2006], 4). One possible explanation she provides for the pleasure deriving from the reading of such fiction is "the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity" (Barbauld, op.cit., 5), which idea is also backed up by Carroll. The other explanation is the pleasure and excitement experienced when encountering new objects: "A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced [...], our imagination [...] explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers" (ibid). She further adds that "the more wild, fanciful, and extraordinary are the circumstances of a scene of horror, the more pleasure we receive from it" (ibid). The attraction of the strange

Unsatisfied wishes are postulated by Freud as the motivating force behind fantasies, and he claims that “every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality.”¹¹⁷ A further comment of his might prove useful for our purposes of highlighting the curious pleasures of horror literature: he claims that the reader’s “actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds.”¹¹⁸ The idea of getting rid of unhealthy urges, pent-up energies and frustrations while perusing a work of fantasy, appears in various guises in comments made by numerous writers, directors, and theoreticians working in the field of horror. Acclaimed horror author Clive Barker stated that “[b]athing for a time in the red rivers of violence and retribution that feed the heart of this fiction may indeed wash away some part of our insanity; discharging our anger by indulging our private monsters.”¹¹⁹

Many horror monsters lend themselves easily to a psychoanalytic interpretation, but not all of them reflect repressed material or psychic conflict (hence Carroll’s criticism of Wood). The concept of repression occupies a central position in psychoanalytic approaches, with the theory of the “return of the repressed” frequently cited in the analysis of horror fiction. Freud’s 1919 essay, “The ‘Uncanny’”, also touches upon the notion of repression: the uncanny is defined as something familiar and known, but for some reason this knowledge has been repressed only to reemerge later.

However, Carroll has problems with the overemphasis of most psychoanalytic theories concerning sexual desire and counters by claiming that horrific figures can equally represent other types of anxieties not of sexual origin (relating to a loss of identity or aggression, for example). Consequently, he finds the Freudian position too narrow to include all the writings belonging to the genre.

Rosemary Jackson’s theory, which relies heavily upon the notion of subversion, is also found lacking by Carroll. She claims that fantastic literature “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible.”¹²⁰ Uncovering repressed or unarticulated feelings and desires, fantastic literature is deemed a subversive mode,

and the exotic is also pointed out by Joseph Addison, who remarks in his “On the Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712) that “[e]very thing that is new or uncommon, raises a pleasure in the imagination because it fills the soul with an agreeable surprise, gratifies its curiosity [...] whatever is new or uncommon contributes a little to vary human life, and to divert our minds, for a while, with the strangeness of its appearance. [...] It is this that bestows charm on a monster.” In *The Works of Joseph Addison*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1837), 139. See footnote 214 for details of Burke’s notion of the sublime.

¹¹⁷ Freud, op.cit., 423.

¹¹⁸ Freud, op.cit., 428.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 19.

¹²⁰ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 4.

because it challenges the dominant discourses of society. The literature of the fantastic (Jackson considers horror as a subcategory of the fantastic) challenges or defies certain conceptual schemes which govern reality and which are taken for granted. These categories Jackson characterizes as repressive and states that fantasy problematizes them in such a way as to call our attention to their repressive nature. For instance, the idea of a unitary self (the traditional way of viewing the human subject), is frequently subverted within horror literature, where divided selves, doppelgängers often appear. These creatures violate the cultural category of the unitary self. Carroll responds to Jackson's ideas by saying that the divided figures she alludes to (werewolves, or Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde) are literal embodiments of the widespread view of people as being torn between good and bad, human and animal. These weird creatures articulate "the culture's conceptions of personhood" and do not subvert them.¹²¹ In Carroll's view, Jackson is mistaken in thinking that our culture entertains only the idea of a unitary self.

Thus, Carroll rejects Jackson's repression hypothesis, once again arguing that it does not account for all horrific figures: there are monsters who are not repressive and so he does not consider Jackson's theory universal enough to include all the examples he cites.¹²²

When attempting to understand the appeal of the genre and propose a theory of his own, Carroll emphasizes the aesthetic pleasure derived from the satisfaction of our curiosity.¹²³ We are confronted with a narrative structure at the centre of which stands a monster, an impossible being, a "classificatory misfit."¹²⁴ The monster engages our attention: we find it attractive and repulsive at the same time. It provokes our curiosity because it defies and violates our culture's classificatory schemes by being interstitial, categorically contradictory or incomplete. The narrative pattern of most horror fiction is organised around the idea of discovery, confirmation, confrontation, as detailed beforehand. This structure is also prominent in the case of mysteries, thrillers and detective fiction, but with a significant difference concerning the object of our curiosity. In horror fiction, it is an entity which challenges our cognitive abilities, while in the other genres it is usually a human being. Granted, this being is different from the rest of us (usually someone with violent urges), but not something which defies our cultural classificatory

¹²¹ Carroll, op.cit., 178.

¹²² Carroll, op.cit., 176.

¹²³ This point was also highlighted by Aikin, who was cited previously ("the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity").

¹²⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 191.

schemes (and even if the perpetrator is not a human being, as in Poe's "The Murders in Rue Morgue", it is not an impossible being, or a supernatural creature, but a simple orang-outang).

In the last section of his book, Carroll examines the role ideology plays in horror fiction. Interestingly enough, scholars hold very differing positions concerning this question. Stephen King, Terry Heller, Walter Kendrick and others claim that horror fiction is a conservative genre, "an agent of the norm",¹²⁵ which represents the status quo. It upholds conservative values, and "not only stands foursquare for the Ten Commandments, it blows them up to tabloid size."¹²⁶ King ventures so far as to claim that "the concept of monstrosity"¹²⁷ serves the purpose of reaffirming order. In the absence of monsters or disruption, it proves to be more difficult to establish a sense of order. Carroll gives voice to a similar opinion when he states that the "horror story can be conceptualized as a symbolic defense of a culture's standards of normality."¹²⁸ The conservative nature of this genre is also reflected in the typical three-movement structure of such fictions: normalcy—disruption—return to normalcy. The monster is defeated at the end of the narrative: after the temporary return of the repressed, the cycle of repression begins anew. Thus, this structure suggests that most horror fiction is in the "service of the established order",¹²⁹ because there is a return to normalcy after the irruption of the supernatural.

However, this hypothesis does not cover those texts lying at the disaffirmative end of the spectrum, but I will return to this theme in the chapter devoted to Linda Holland-Toll's approach to the genre (she claims that horror is a subversive genre, intent on upsetting cultural norms, disrupting the placid surface of our self-satisfied world and confronting us with the skull beneath the skin and the "monster under the man"¹³⁰ instead of reassuring us that all is well with the world).

Monsters are often employed as figures representing the Other, imagined as threats to the social order, people who should be expelled from the community since they are perceived as undesirable (e.g. witches). 'Othering' varies with historical periods: the object of the attack might be singled out on the basis of class, race, nation or gender.¹³¹ Lovecraft, for example, is often accused of racist, xenophobic subtexts and a closer look at a tale like

¹²⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, 48. See Terry Heller, *The Delights of Terror: An Aesthetic of the Tale of Terror* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

¹²⁶ King, *Danse Macabre*, 396.

¹²⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, 39.

¹²⁸ Carroll, op.cit., 199.

¹²⁹ Carroll, op.cit., 199.

¹³⁰ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 251.

¹³¹ Carroll, op.cit., 196.

“The Horror at Red Hook” does not dispel this charge. The tale was inspired by a visit to one of the worst slums in the New York metropolitan area,¹³² and the unfortunate result of the visit was this “viciously racist story”,¹³³ in which Lovecraft vented his race-hatred, expressing his protest against the influx of foreigners.

Horror images can be drafted into the service of furthering progressive purposes as well. George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) (part of his *Night of the Living Dead* [1968] cycle) is explicitly critical of the widespread consumerism in American society.¹³⁴ The frightful, disgusting figure of the zombie is utilized to create an analogue to the insipid, bored consumer, compelled to stroll down the supermarket aisles by the incessant bombardment of advertising and social pressures. People’s empty lives, devoid of emotion are represented by the empty-souled zombies. Similar criticism of materialist society can be found in King’s *Christine*, where objects (in this case a car) threaten to take the place of human relationships, replacing love, friendship and family.

In horror fiction the boundaries of society are drawn, the consequences of transgressing these are shown, the standards of normality are depicted. Carroll mentions carnivals as serving a similar purpose: they are conceived of as spaces where the usual laws governing society are inverted and turned upside-down. Taboos, rules of decorum and moral injunctions can be pushed into the background – but only for the duration of the festivity. The carnival functions as a safety valve, giving people a chance to release tension and to vent their frustrations and their repressed anger – but only within certain limits.¹³⁵ However, it is extremely important to remember that such rituals end with “the reinstatement of social order.”¹³⁶

So Carroll posits horror texts to be analogues to such “rituals of rebellion”,¹³⁷ and claims that they provide the opportunity for otherwise unacceptable desires and thoughts to become manifest for the duration of the fiction, with the condition that the disruptive forces are expunged or punished at the narrative closure. Nevertheless, he admits the existence of counter-examples: in disaffirmative texts the threat is not definitely eliminated, so the norms of the dominant cultural order are not reaffirmed (according to the aforementioned Holland-Toll, these are the most effective horror texts).

¹³² H. P. Lovecraft, *Dreams*, 422.

¹³³ S. T. Joshi, *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* (San Bernardino: The Borgo Press, 1996), 104.

¹³⁴ Carroll, op.cit., 198.

¹³⁵ For a more extended analysis of carnivals, see Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival in his *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹³⁶ Carroll, op.cit., 200.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

While Carroll accepts the importance of the use of horror fiction as a vehicle for the expression of ideologically-motivated themes, he claims these themes are not sufficiently general, so this argument cannot explain the persistence of the genre throughout the ages. In his opinion, the ideological account of horror is not comprehensive enough and the “ideological allegiance”¹³⁸ of horror fiction is not sufficient in itself to explain the endurance of the attraction of the genre (whether conservative or progressive in nature).

One feature which characterizes Carroll’s approach is that he strives for an explanation of the universal appeal of horror fiction. For this reason, he repeatedly rejects theories which might apply only to a limited number of texts (Lovecraft’s theory built around the concept of the “cosmic awe”, analogous to a religious feeling; the psychoanalytic approach tying the appearance of the monster to the idea of the return of the repressed; the politicized view which links such fiction to an ideological position, whether it be in the service of a repressive or a progressive social order). Such theories might serve the purpose of explaining the attraction of certain texts, but not of all of them.

Another theory Carroll alludes to in passing is the social anxiety model, which draws our attention to the fact that horror seems to enjoy a heightened popularity during times of social distress, so it possesses a cyclical nature. This theory of horror cycles claims that the genre has the primary function of expressing the anxieties, fears and terrors of a given era. For example, Universal Studios’ and Paramount Studios’ cycle of movies of 1931 (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) are explicitly tied to the Depression. The alien invasion and sci-fi horror cycle of the early 50s corresponded to the paranoid early phase of the Cold War (the red menace was represented through bug-eyed aliens equipped with death-rays), while the fears of the atomic age were reflected in various radiation monsters (*Godzilla* 1954).¹³⁹ Social changes (such as the shift from extended to nuclear families) resulted in the peculiar category of “family horror”, which spawned stories of dysfunctional families and monster babies (*Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*).

Carroll’s desire to find a theory which would cover the entire field of horror is a difficult one to meet. As previously mentioned, he regards the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity (piqued by the monsters in such fictions) as being responsible for the attraction of the genre. He rejects various approaches on the grounds that they are not universal enough,

¹³⁸ Carroll, op.cit., 205.

¹³⁹ *Godzilla* “pointedly symbolized the destruction wreaked on Japan by the atom bomb” with its radioactive breath and earth-shattering footfalls. Steven Scheuer quoted by Iaccino, op.cit., 31.

but the same accusation could be levelled against him, too, since he refuses to consider texts having ‘only’ human monsters. I think a purely human monster, like Patrick Bateman or the enigmatic (and charismatic) Hannibal Lecter also engender fright, and they also pique our curiosity even though they are not “classificatory misfits” or interstitial in Carroll’s sense of the term. They are human, yet they are also monstrous (to such an extent that Lecter is sometimes looked upon as the very incarnation of the devil, especially in *Hannibal*, where the superstitious Italian malefactors talk about his red eyes and call him a “fiend”).¹⁴⁰ In a certain sense, their being human might render them even more interesting: that a vampire or a werewolf commits monstrous acts is part of his nature, and we are not much surprised. In fact, in their case, the surprising turn is the departure from the norm – recently illustrated by the upsurge of romantically-inclined fictions detailing the monsters’ amorous adventures with humans – when they endeavour to lead a calm, peaceful life in the community, even reverting to ‘vegetarianism’ (abstaining from human blood).

A series of thought-provoking questions emerges as we strive to understand what goes into making a human monster, to see the way the human psyche works and what forces can interrupt healthy maturation, to discover whether there are culprits, and whether society or parents can be held responsible. I will attempt to rectify this omission on Carroll’s part with the inclusion of the critical approach of Linda Holland-Toll, who focuses upon the so-called human monsters and their formation.

So in the next part of my work I detail three possible approaches, which more or less focus on the same problem areas circumscribed by Carroll. The answers they provide might be slightly different, but the organizing principles are quite similar. The major dilemmas touched upon are the following: the attempt to find an answer for the attraction/repulsion double bind of horror; the question of what constitutes monstrosity; and horror as the fulfilment of some ideological function (educational role, horror as social criticism, horror as a reflection of the times).

2.4 Horror as Social Criticism: a Reflection of Cultural Anxieties

In the following chapter, I would like to detail the sociologically-inspired approach of Martin Tropp, who, in his *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)* (1990), analyzes how literature and culture interact and intersect. He

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Harris, *Hannibal* (London: Arrow Books, 2000), 470.

focuses upon the birth of the modern world and how the scientific, social and industrial revolutions of the 19th century led to its emergence. Concentrating on the century preceding the first World War, he follows the migration of certain images of fear into the mass consciousness to see how these images shaped the way people saw the world and how they related to certain topics or concerns of the age (such as urban crime or new technology). He claims that in the period 1818-1918, horror travelled from fiction, from a safe distance, to a “frightening immediacy”, to “objective reality.”¹⁴¹

As Leslie Fiedler remarks, “[p]opular fiction responds to the shared dreams and hidden fears of its audience”¹⁴² and Tropp suggests that the writers of the period, when analyzing the real dangers or problems of the era, often relied upon the imagery, language and narrative patterns of the tale of terror. The reading public’s familiarity with the rules of the genre could almost be taken for granted and writers often resorted to this method as a way to communicate disturbing material more easily. Images coming from the tale of terror were utilized to give form, shape and meaning to the surrounding frightening events: horror fiction provided the necessary tools for people to ‘read’ experiences which were particularly hard to communicate.¹⁴³ The inexpressible becomes ‘digestible’, and, to a certain extent, understandable, if filtered through such a screen, and this offered readers some protection, acting as a kind of buffer.

Tropp cites Tobias Smollett, who defined fear as “the most violent and interesting of all the passions”,¹⁴⁴ when attempting to account for the attraction of the horror genre. While reading such fiction, the fear-emotion is safely remote, we are not in immediate danger, we just participate vicariously in the fear of others. Tropp also points out the similarities between fairy tales and tales of terror, claiming that both provide their audiences with “a safe way to exorcise their fears by entering a parallel world.”¹⁴⁵ According to child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, fairy tales reflect wishes and fears, always echoing universal problems (separation anxiety, sibling rivalry or the pains of growing up).¹⁴⁶

It is common knowledge that tales of terror might be inspired by real life events, reflecting back upon the general zeitgeist. What distinguishes Tropp’s method from other theoreticians of the genre, however, is that he claims that following the externalization of

¹⁴¹ Tropp, op.cit., 5.

¹⁴² Tropp, op.cit., 1.

¹⁴³ Tropp, op.cit., 5.

¹⁴⁴ Tropp, op.cit., 4.

¹⁴⁵ Tropp, op.cit., 7.

¹⁴⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *A Mese Bűvölete* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1985), 12.

certain fears and phobias and their manifestation in horrifying creatures, there is a secondary process, during which these images are reutilized, with people attaching their incoherent fears to them (in the same way as children rely on the figures of dragons, cruel witches or stepmothers to give shape to their inchoate fears). When reacting to the horrors of everyday life, people were conditioned in their response by their reading experience of horror fictions. Tropp's examples for Gothic imagery influencing writers' responses to contemporary events include politicians, philosophers, sociologists and soldiers (writing letters from the Front).

Edmund Burke, in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795-7), writes that "out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France, has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre."¹⁴⁷ This image clearly resonates with the ending of *The Castle of Otranto*, where the giant ghost of Alfonso appears amidst the ruins to proclaim his true heir ("the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins").¹⁴⁸ Tropp ties another much-cited work to the figure of the ghost, namely, the *Communist Manifesto* (1847), in the first line of which Marx and Engels describe the spectre of Communism haunting Europe.¹⁴⁹ We are indebted to Marx for another potent simile, in which he draws a parallel between capitalism and vampirism: in *Das Kapital* (1867) he states that "capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour."¹⁵⁰ In these works, Gothic imagery is employed to give voice to political fears.

Richard Davenport-Hines argues similarly when he states that the gothic genre is suited to moments when "human experience reaches the limits of intelligibility."¹⁵¹ To describe the destructive horrors of the French Revolution, for example, new images and a new language were necessary. To offer the public an image which their imagination could easily relate to (and which was already associated with horrors), Frankenstein's monster was often employed when depicting the atrocities of the Revolution.¹⁵²

Examining the major fictions of the period, Tropp details the various phobias and anxieties which gave rise to these masterpieces, where the secret fears of the audience are cloaked in fantasy.¹⁵³ In *Frankenstein*, the Victorians' ambiguous feelings towards technology are reflected, while *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* might be read as a warning

¹⁴⁷ Edmund Burke, "The First *Letter on a Regicide Peace*" in *Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 256.

¹⁴⁸ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 108.

¹⁴⁹ Tropp, op.cit., 27.

¹⁵⁰ Davenport-Hines, op.cit., 252.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Davenport-Hines, op.cit., 154.

¹⁵³ Tropp, op.cit., 27.

against anonymous crime and the dangers of urban living. *Dracula* dealt with a different kind of anxiety, which emerged at the end of the century: Victorian men were filled with a peculiar dread at the prospect of women aspiring for equality.

The image of the monster Victor Frankenstein created resonated deeply with the reading public at a time when, due to the Industrial Revolution, they were experiencing the substitution of machines for manpower.¹⁵⁴ Modern technology appeared to be a monstrous entity whose power they did not clearly understand, and this aversion to machines also haunts the texts of naturalistic writers like Thomas Hardy. The confusion between man and machine¹⁵⁵ was also fuelled by such features of the age as the Victorian invention of the treadmill as a form of punishment: in this case, man indeed became a “cog”,¹⁵⁶ an organic part of a huge machine. The image of the monster also influenced political cartoons: the unruly masses were often depicted as an ugly monster rising to destroy its master, evoking the spectre of revolution (in England or Ireland).¹⁵⁷

Stevenson’s novella about the double life of Doctor Jekyll is partly indebted to the anxieties created by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Hyde is seen as an atavistic creature, a reminder of a brutal past. Cesare Lombroso’s view of the criminal as a degenerate,¹⁵⁸ a figure driven by instincts characteristic of primitive humanity, might also have influenced the image of Hyde.

Two years on the heels of the book, the infamous Jack the Ripper sent Victorian people into sheer panic: his acts were random, purposeless and irrational, instances of utterly incomprehensible, unprovoked violence. The connection with the fictional story of Jekyll and Hyde was established in many people’s minds: Stevenson wrote about the animal within, hiding under the respectable surface, a creature without civilization which erupts after being repressed for too long.

Both stories were looked upon as mysteries, and people relied upon the pattern of Stevenson’s story to put together a narrative from the pieces of evidence, the letters and mocking notes left behind by the Ripper.¹⁵⁹ In a sense, the book and later the stage play

¹⁵⁴ Tropp, op.cit., 32.

¹⁵⁵ The concept of man as machine, coupled with a slightly deterministic outlook, can also be seen in Stephen King’s *The Shining*, where the protagonist muses in the following way: “It had nothing to do with willpower, or the morality of drinking, or the weakness or strength of his own character. There was a broken switch somewhere inside, or a circuit breaker that didn’t work.” (New York: Signet, 1978), 109.

¹⁵⁶ Tropp, op.cit., 33.

¹⁵⁷ Tropp, op.cit., 39.

¹⁵⁸ Tropp, op.cit., 91.

¹⁵⁹ The Ripper was desperate for notoriety, advertising himself and his acts in several letters, with “The Dear Boss” and the “From Hell” letters being the most famous.

were used as models to explain the inexplicable.¹⁶⁰ The perpetrator was elusive, killing four of his victims in open streets, even committing a double murder one night,¹⁶¹ seeming to carry an aura of supernatural menace around him (a frequent characteristic of the psychopaths of the slasher genre, cf. Michael from *Halloween*, who seems to be indestructible). People constructed fictions about the Ripper, trying to explain his motivation and how he escaped, with the police receiving more than 14,000 letters detailing various theories.¹⁶² As James B. Twitchell remarks, the Ripper was “the first serial killer popularized in the tabloid press” and eventually he became “the modern paradigm of senseless murder.”¹⁶³

The chilling parallel between the real-life Whitechapel murders (1888) and Stevensons’s story (1886) was so striking that for a while the American actor Richard Mansfield, who starred in the stage adaptation of the novel (it was performed on the London stage in 1888), was the prime suspect.¹⁶⁴ This was the first time that popular culture was blamed for aberrant social behavior, unfortunately, this would happen more frequently in the twentieth century (cf. the crusade against comic books in the 1950s or the video nasties controversy in the 1980s). In the end, the theatre production was closed due to the murders.¹⁶⁵

The third ur-text of the genre, *Dracula*, is concerned with the liberation of women, reflecting the changes occurring in women’s status in society at the turn of the century. The term “New Woman” originates from this period, and it described those middle-class women who asserted their rights in marriage and in the job market as well.¹⁶⁶ The changes involved their economic, social, educational and marital status.¹⁶⁷ The place of women in society was slowly changing, with marriage and divorce laws being modified, causing serious problems for the self-definitions of men. Previously accepted gender stereotypes were being questioned and challenged; predetermined roles were being rejected.

What better example for this than Lucy, the newly turned vampire, who is a different creature from her past self. She acquires power with this transformation and there

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Frayling, *Nightmare: The Birth of Horror* (London: BBC Books, 1996), 160.

¹⁶¹ Richard Jones, “The Dear Boss Letter: Yours Truly Jack The Ripper,” in *Jack The Ripper 1888. The Whitechapel Murders History Resource*. 2014. Webpage. <http://www.jack-the-ripper.org/dear-boss.htm>. Accessed: 11 January, 2015.

¹⁶² Tropp, op.cit., 113.

¹⁶³ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 294.

¹⁶⁴ Frayling, op.cit., 158.

¹⁶⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), 84.

¹⁶⁶ Tropp, op.cit., 133.

¹⁶⁷ Tropp, op.cit., 160.

are two specific sides of Victorian gentlewoman life that she objects to. The first is her rejection of traditional motherhood: it is more a case of the perversion of maternal instincts, since she feeds on the blood of children. The other novelty in Lucy is her sexual awakening, which is all the more shocking since she was initially presented to the reader as a symbol of Victorian purity. She becomes sensual and voluptuous, harbouring strange desires in her heart, advancing to her fiancé with a “wanton smile.”¹⁶⁸ The acknowledgement of sexual desire in females seemed a horrible vision to Victorian males.¹⁶⁹ All these social changes appeared to be undermining the stability of society. Stoker was at pains to underline the fact that Dracula was a foreigner, an outsider, who infected the others with new ideas which spread like a disease.

Mina, the other major female character of the novel, was also considered threatening from a traditional male point of view: she upset gender stereotypes by establishing a close-to-equal, balanced relationship with Jonathan (with the balance of power even tipping in her favour, occasionally). While Jonathan is lying feverishly ill in Budapest, she travels to visit and nurse him (calling to mind the opposite situation of Lucy lying in bed, feeble, being attended to by her suitors). Mina is depicted as the gatherer and bearer of knowledge, a helpmate, an efficient typist and stenographer, who transcribes Jonathan’s journal and who knows how to put together strands of evidence (concerning Dracula’s real nature), and later holds together the group of vampire hunters. Indeed, she becomes an indispensable part of the all-male-group when they are tracking down the Count.

Mina’s fierceness of mind and spirit is further emphasized by the fact that Jonathan is sometimes described as occupying the position of a helpless woman: the most famous example is the ‘attack’ of the three female vampires. During this encounter, Jonathan, seemingly stripped of his will, acts the part of the subordinated one, filled with a hazy longing, unable to put up any resistance to the alluring fair girl kissing him. Significantly, this titillating meeting is halted not because of Jonathan regaining his senses, but by the intervention of Dracula, who claims Jonathan for himself: “This man belongs to me.”¹⁷⁰

The novel is famous for its peculiar structure, being a patchwork of diary entries, letters, and newspaper articles: this method of presenting the story was similar to the way the contemporary reading public learnt about reality from newspapers. Everyday

¹⁶⁸ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 253.

¹⁶⁹ Tropp, op.cit., 151.

¹⁷⁰ Stoker, op.cit., 53.

happenings were presented similarly to the story of the Count, thus the lines between fiction and fact were blurred (much in the same way as Stevenson used real street names in his novella to further enhance the verisimilitude of the story).¹⁷¹

As additional examples for writers relying on Gothic techniques or imagery to communicate unpalatable truths, Tropp cites the reports of sociologists who attempted to uncover the misery lying beneath the greatness of the Victorian period. It is worthwhile to quote Thackeray at this point, who, when reading such a report, effectively treated the material as if it were fiction: a “man travels into the poor man’s country for us, and comes back with his tale of terror and wonder.”¹⁷² Victorian audiences wished for reform and social change, and demanded realism: however, they preferred it couched in the language of Gothic fiction. This way they felt to be at a safe distance from the matters portrayed and could treat it with a certain detachment. The writers might have also found the language of realism to be inadequate to communicate the horrifying revelations. So reports detailing the working conditions in factories and mines, or the living conditions in urban slums, often used the language and imagery of the Gothic novel.¹⁷³ Authors intent on shedding light upon problematic areas of the period, such as children’s employment or the sanitary conditions among the poor, discovered that this was a more efficient way to communicate the truth than presenting dry facts and statistical data.

The last example Tropp cites to prove his argument is that of soldiers writing back home from the Front. In their letters, diaries and memoirs of the first World War, they repeatedly echo Gothic literature: to be able to communicate the uncommunicable, the soldiers relied upon the borrowed images and language of the literature of terror.¹⁷⁴ The maze of trenches running across Europe¹⁷⁵ was similar to the labyrinthine passages through which Gothic heroines escaped: sometimes the soldiers, aimlessly wandering, lost their way. Daylight meant danger, so the soldiers slept by day and went on patrol or tended to the trenches only at night: the surrounding darkness only enhanced the feeling of being trapped underworld, as if in the dungeons or catacombs of a medieval castle or in a torture chamber. The labyrinth became a symbol for the hopelessness and loss of direction experienced by the battle-weary soldiers, caught in the midst of a struggle the meaning of which was beyond their comprehension.

¹⁷¹ Tropp, op.cit., 96.

¹⁷² Tropp, op.cit., 75.

¹⁷³ Tropp, op.cit., 97.

¹⁷⁴ Tropp, op.cit., 180.

¹⁷⁵ The trenches occupied by the Allies extended for 12,000 miles (Tropp, op.cit., 188).

2.5 Horror and the Myth of Procreation

The similar features of fairy tales and tales of terror have already been mentioned, and next I would like to proceed with the presentation of a critical approach which uses the term “fables of aggression”¹⁷⁶ to designate works belonging to the horror genre. James B. Twitchell, in his *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985) and *Preposterous Violence* (1989), put forth the theory that horror fiction serves a clear social purpose: it plays a role in educating the young, namely, these fables take part in the socialization and enculturation of adolescents.

Teenagers are liminal creatures, caught in a no-man’s land between childhood and adulthood, where they feel confused and vulnerable. Their confusion and anxiety are directed especially towards the vital issue of reproduction, and Twitchell argues that all the major horror texts revolve around this topic. Following a detailed and exhaustive analysis, he points to procreation as the common denominator of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which he calls “fables of sexual identity.”¹⁷⁷ *Dracula* exemplifies unnatural reproduction: the vampire infects the living, thus multiplying his numbers (while at the same time also desiring certain women to be his brides); *Frankenstein* is set on creating new life, albeit via an alternative method, which excludes women from the process. The monster is fuelled by the desire to find a partner (it is the fear of their possible propagation that prompts Victor to destroy the female monster), and *Hyde* is also motivated by lust (here the author concentrates on the stage and film adaptations).

Twitchell argues that violence is endemic to human nature and is part of our biological heritage. He cites cave-paintings as one of the oldest examples of man’s need to externalize his fears and vent his aggression. The spear-marks on the walls of the caves prove that warriors ‘rehearsed’ the chase and the killing of the beasts, or celebrated their victories in reliving such potentially fatal confrontations.

Ritualized displays of violence are an integral part of the animal world, whereby the objective is not to kill the opponent, but to prove your valor and attract a female’s attention. Among humans, medieval tournaments corresponded to this need, as did gladiatorial games and dueling, which were relatively safe ways of getting rid of pent-up aggression.¹⁷⁸ Historically speaking, people always had various ‘outlets’ at their disposal

¹⁷⁶ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 8.

¹⁷⁷ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 7.

¹⁷⁸ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 37.

(well before the appearance of the horror genre), which served their needs for violent spectacle, and played a role in stabilizing society.

Public hangings, tortures and executions were part and parcel of medieval life. Blood sports involving animals (cock-fights, bear-baiting) also appealed to man's violent side. Seemingly funny spectacles, like the hand-puppet Punch and Judy shows (a standard feature of fairs from the 19th century), were also deeply concerned with violence. Punch was Everyman, acting out the latent desires of many spectators by turning against family (child, wife), state (represented by the constable who arrests him), and church (he even defeats the Devil).¹⁷⁹ These shows were especially shocking, since they revealed the fragility of the nuclear family (Punch beats up his wife and throws his baby out). Yet contemporary audiences found these crude jokes, which Twitchell describes as a "burlesque of family strife",¹⁸⁰ to be entertaining.

Similar outlets for repressed violent urges are still available, and George Romero's zombies, for example, also upset and disrespect such cherished institutions as the family. Famously, in *Night of the Living Dead*, the infected daughter turns on her mother and is even shown devouring her, while a brother attacks his sister, illustrating familial tensions and the instability of this basic unit of society.

Like other theoreticians of the genre, Twitchell draws a careful distinction between terror and horror, but interprets them differently. In his classification, terror is external, short-lived and always has an ending, while horror is internal, long-lasting and without a satisfying closure.¹⁸¹ The origin of terror is tied to context, to actuality: whether we fear the Germans, the Russians, or terrorists, is dependent upon historical circumstances, and changes with time. We are confronted with real, objectifiable enemies of known origins: mutant creatures resulting from atomic testing or psychopaths coming from dysfunctional families. Horror, on the other hand, is removed from reality and originates in dreams: figures of horror, like the vampire or the werewolf, are fantastic, marvelous beings.¹⁸² Such texts are characterized by indeterminacy and lack a definitive closure. We are thwarted in our attempts to classify or categorize horror creatures, which would mean gaining control over them. Instead, we are denied this relief. They challenge and undermine our classificatory and ordering systems, posing a cognitive threat as well as a physical one.

¹⁷⁹ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 83.

¹⁸⁰ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 9.

¹⁸¹ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 16.

¹⁸² Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 19.

According to Twitchell, “horror novels, horror movies, horror myths are never really satisfying intellectually, for we never get them under control.”¹⁸³ What a surprising remark in light of Carroll’s thesis, which ties horror’s pleasures to the intellectual pleasure of having our curiosity satisfied. Twitchell’s statement seems to refer to open-ended, disaffirmative texts (cf. Linda Holland-Toll), and to Todorov’s category of the pure fantastic, which is marked by the experience of hesitation.

Next, I would like to proceed with the application of Twitchell’s argument to the defining texts of the genre. He claimed that the organizing principle of these books is their underlying concern with the theme of procreation: birth, male-female relationships, marriage and creation are at the centre of their attention.

The vampire myth largely revolves around seduction and temptation, and sexuality oozes out of certain pages of *Dracula*. I have already mentioned the erotically charged encounter between Jonathan and the three female vampires, with the fair girl going on her knees and Jonathan closing his eyes “in a languorous ecstasy”,¹⁸⁴ as if in a swoon, waiting to be kissed. Stephen King succinctly points out that Jonathan here is about to be orally raped.¹⁸⁵ However, since the novel presents an outside evil,¹⁸⁶ he cannot be deemed responsible: he suffers an attack (more precisely, a sexual invasion) through no fault of his own. In a highly moralistic society like Stoker’s, this excuse provided “a psychological release valve.”¹⁸⁷

Another provocative scene to consider is the one where Dracula incises his chest to feed Mina. This act is highly disturbing: on the one hand, it mimics breastfeeding, with Dracula placed in the role of the nurturing mother, implying rather a corruption, a perversion of motherhood (for which the other example is Lucy’s definitely non-maternal feelings manifest in luring and attacking children). On the other hand, the scene is suggestive of fellatio: “His right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare chest which was shown by his torn-open dress.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 16.

¹⁸⁴ Stoker, op.cit., 52.

¹⁸⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, 65.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Rosemary Jackson’s careful distinction between inside and outside evil: the source of the threat is either in the self (*Frankenstein*), or “fear originates in a source external to the subject” (*Dracula*). In op.cit., 58.

¹⁸⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, 65.

¹⁸⁸ Stoker, op.cit., 336. The interpretation of this scene as fellatio is suggested by Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 134.

Twitchell points out that blood and semen, as vital fluids of the body, are essentially linked and are often interchangeable. Transfusion of blood is a central experience in vampire stories and can be easily interpreted as a substitute of coitus.¹⁸⁹ This statement renders the ‘medically applied’ blood transfusion scene quite titillating. In stealing the victim’s blood, the creature transfers life to himself and depletes the energy of his prey. So when Lucy’s condition worsens because of the Count’s nocturnal visitations, the valorous and selfless heroes of the book all volunteer to become blood donors to save the beloved girl’s life. All four men (Doctor Seward, Van Helsing, the American Quincey and her fiancé, Arthur) have their blood “introduced” into her veins, which act, coupled with her previous wish to be able to marry three men,¹⁹⁰ plus the final execution scene in which all the men participate (with Arthur driving the phallic stake into her heart, reasserting the patriarchal law of the father, with huge wax candles dripping “sperm”¹⁹¹ in the background) evoke ideas of polygamy, group sex and gang rape. After the burial, the devastated Arthur consoles himself with the thought that “the transfusion of his blood to her veins had made her truly his bride”¹⁹² and “that he felt since then as if they two had been really married, and that she was his wife in the sight of God.”¹⁹³ However, this sweet thought provokes a fit of pure hysterics in Van Helsing, who realizes the implications of their act: all of them are husbands of Lucy, with her being a “polyandrist”,¹⁹⁴ and himself a bigamist (with a hint of incest dropped in for good measure, since Van Helsing acts as a father figure to all the young people in the novel).

Twitchell looks upon the vampire story as a “fable of sexual initiation” and states that Stoker’s novel reinforces certain social and sexual taboos which protect “established reproductive patterns”: the vampire is “orally cannibalistic”, which type of sexual behaviour is non-productive.¹⁹⁵

In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King also remarks that

the sexual basis of *Dracula* is an infantile oralism coupled with a strong interest in necrophilia [...]. It is also sex without responsibility, and in the

¹⁸⁹ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 131.

¹⁹⁰ This scene could be directly linked to Tropp’s analysis, emphasizing Lucy’s rejection of traditional womanhood. We might venture to say she already carried the seeds of resistance within, when, upon receiving “THREE proposals in one day”, she expressed her wish to Mina in the following way: “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her [...]?” Stoker, op.cit., 73, 76.

¹⁹¹ This word is used in a previous scene when Lucy’s coffin is opened for the first time. Stoker, op.cit., 236.

¹⁹² Stoker, op.cit., 211.

¹⁹³ Stoker, op.cit., 209.

¹⁹⁴ Stoker, op.cit., 212.

¹⁹⁵ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 126, 139, 135.

unique and amusing term coined by Erika Jong, the sex in *Dracula* can be seen as the ultimate zipless fuck. This infantile, retentive attitude toward sex may be one reason why the vampire myth, which in Stoker's hands seems to say "I will rape you with my mouth and you will love it; instead of contributing potent fluid to your body, I will remove it," has always been so popular with adolescents still trying to come to grips with their own sexuality. The vampire appears to have found a short-cut through all the tribal mores of sex . . . and he lives forever, to boot.¹⁹⁶

Twitchell opines that the conclusion of Stoker's story is a conservative one, due to the final victory of the superego over the id and its dark desires unleashed. Repression is called for and, with the execution of the Count and the sanctity of marriage and motherhood reinforced in the final pages of the book (Mina bearing a child), traditional values are reaffirmed.

Frankenstein, the definitive text of Gothic and horror literature, can also be examined through the lens suggested by Twitchell. The work itself is full of meaning, burdened with possible interpretations: A technophobic narrative warning against the dangers of science? A parable cautioning against hubris and usurping the role of God? Expression of fears regarding revolutionary violence? Reflection of anxieties, guilty feelings surrounding birth?¹⁹⁷ A treatise upon the importance of education and the responsibilities of parents? A simplified approach, limiting itself to the sexual aspect of the story, might be welcome to the reader.

Victor Frankenstein chooses the wrong path when he decides to exclude women (more specifically, Elizabeth, his fiancé) from creation: this renders the whole process unnatural. He is guilty not of choosing the wrong partner (we might bring this charge against people consorting with vampires), but of choosing no partner – and of not dealing with the consequences. The motherless monster's miseries are only exacerbated when he is rejected by his father: deprived of love, he transforms from "prelapsarian Adam into Satan."¹⁹⁸

Victor is fiercely protective of his 'masculine space', isolating himself from Elizabeth, family and friends. In his book dedicated to the genre of horror, Mark Jancovich also warns of the dangers resulting from "the separation of spheres" prevalent in Victorian

¹⁹⁶ King, *Danse Macabre*, 66.

¹⁹⁷ Ellen Moers interpreted the work along these lines, claiming that it is about the horrors of childbirth. "Female Gothic," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, eds, George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 77-87.

¹⁹⁸ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 166.

times.¹⁹⁹ In his view, the atrocities committed by Lewis's Monk Ambrosio can also be traced back to his total ignorance of the feminine world. On the other hand, being kept in the dark regarding the male world of work renders women more naïve and vulnerable to the attacks of evil characters. This unhealthy social organization was indirectly criticized by the Gothic novel.

Twitchell emphasizes the hints of incest in *Frankenstein*, which might partly explain Victor's aversion to getting married. He calls Elizabeth "my more than sister",²⁰⁰ and, in a prophetic dream, holds her in his arms only to have her transform into his dead mother.²⁰¹ Elizabeth is imagined as a substitute mother, taking over the place of the dead one, hence falling into the category of a tabooed object of desire.

The poor monster has no bride, his request to have a partner is rejected, so he threatens Victor that he will be with him on his wedding-night. Interestingly, Victor misunderstands this promise, mistakenly thinking that he is the object of the monster's evil intent, that the monster would target him, not his wife. The creature intends to mirror Victor's act of destroying his partner, and, in retaliation, kills Elizabeth, thus taking bride for bride. The transformation of sexual frustration into acts of aggression occurs frequently in the horror genre, where slashers are often portrayed as sexually dysfunctional or impotent, acting out their libidinous desires through violence.

Victor's ambivalence towards his creation, a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion, mirrors the ambivalence generally surrounding sexuality. Through the eyes of inexperienced adolescents, sexuality might evoke a sense of dread while still retaining its alluring aspects.²⁰²

Retracing contemporary examples to this great "progenitor" text, Twitchell claims that the psychopaths of slashers (Freddy from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Jason from *Friday the 13th*, Michael from *Halloween*, Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]), are similar to the creature: fundamentally awkward, insecure figures in spite of being strong and threatening. He calls them "Frankenstein monsters",²⁰³ since they are clumsy, powerful, confused and unmothered.

¹⁹⁹ Jancovich, op.cit., 24.

²⁰⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 34.

²⁰¹ "[...] I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms." Shelley, op.cit., 56.

²⁰² Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 203.

²⁰³ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 214.

The last major work analyzed by Twitchell revolves around acts of wish fulfilment. Doctor Jekyll, in keeping with the rules of decorum and propriety, buries all his desires deep within. With the help of the potion, however, he is able to ‘split off’ that previously denied aspect of his personality, and his “devil”, caged for a long time, comes out “roaring.”²⁰⁴ The novel is conspicuous in its lack of female characters and Stevenson is reticent about the exact nature of the thrills Jekyll enjoys when in the form of Hyde. However, later stage adaptations and film versions restored sexual content to the work. Almost all of these are based on a simplified family romance: “boy loves girl, intended father-in-law disapproves, boy turns bestial and kills older man.”²⁰⁵

Darryl Jones points out that the conflation of the story in the public mind with the case of Jack the Ripper might have played a part in turning Hyde to what he was never portrayed as in the book: a heterosexual sex killer.²⁰⁶ The Ripper is subsumed explicitly into Hammer’s *Doctor Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971) with the doctor disembowelling women (to extract a hormone from the pancreas necessary for the potion), clearly evoking the removal of organs perpetrated by the Ripper.

Apart from “procreation”, the other key term Twitchell relies upon in his research is “ritual.” He states that all the aforementioned violent spectacles (tournaments, duelling, gladiatorial games) are indeed rituals, “male displays of aggressive behaviors”, which serve to safely vent aggression, and have a “stabilizing force.”²⁰⁷ Rituals enact a so-called “pantomime violence”,²⁰⁸ thus protecting us from the eruption of real violence. According to René Girard, “[v]iolence too long held in check might overflow its bounds”,²⁰⁹ so in this sense rituals serve a vital purpose in safeguarding society.

French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep studied the significance and function of social rituals, and he claims that rites of passages are essential parts of the personality’s development: “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another.”²¹⁰ People undergo certain transitions during their life, passing from one stage of maturation to another: these turning points are birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood and death. In primitive societies, rites of passages are integral parts of an individual’s life,

²⁰⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 64.

²⁰⁵ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 242.

²⁰⁶ Darryl Jones, op.cit., 110.

²⁰⁷ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 38, 33.

²⁰⁸ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 45.

²⁰⁹ Quoted by Twitchell, *ibid.*

²¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

where “progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts [...] ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally defined.”²¹¹ In civilized societies, vestiges of these rites can be found in, for example, the Boy Scouts or the Prom celebration (the latter marking the end of high school years and adolescence, and the start of adulthood for an average American teenager).

The transitional period inside the passage is called “liminal.”²¹² Often the novice is sent away from the group into temporary exile (together with his peers): in this limbo stage, they lack a definite identity. There might be a test of manhood, in which they have to kill a beast or undergo some test of courage to prove their worth, and then they are reintegrated into the group upon the completion of the assigned task. Sometimes their bodies are scarred to provide an external mark of their newly acquired status.

Twitchell utilizes this theory to illustrate the cultural function of horror tales. The passage between childhood and adolescence is fraught with confusion and anxieties, and might result in violence, especially for boys. Adolescent years are characterized as particularly violent: criminal justice experts claim that eighteen is “the peak year for this aggression to find violent expression in our culture.”²¹³ Such potentially dangerous behavior should be deflected or rechanneled, so “fables of aggression”²¹⁴ are told them: in these stories, horror monsters symbolize the adolescents’ fears and anxieties, which they successfully overcome.

Twitchell belongs to that school of theorists which deems horror art to be a conservative genre: he claims that while in the short run horror emphasizes degeneration, insanity, fragmentation and instability, in the long run it drives towards stasis.²¹⁵ Slasher movies, Stephen King novels, or the grotesque exaggerations depicted in EC Comics²¹⁶ all seem subversive enough: yet underneath the gory surface, they uphold the moral order, they are “articulations of the norm.”²¹⁷ Twitchell also attempts to rationalize our attraction to his peculiar genre by mentioning three key terms: the first one is “counterphobia”,²¹⁸ by which he means that we can overcome objects of fear through experiencing artificial fear.

²¹¹ Genep, op.cit., 3.

²¹² Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 34.

²¹³ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 33.

²¹⁴ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 98.

²¹⁵ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 50.

²¹⁶ At the height of their popularity, the most famous were *Tales from the Crypt* (1950-55), *Vault of Horror* (1950-55) and *The Haunt of Fear* (1950-54).

²¹⁷ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 262.

²¹⁸ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 65.

Through confronting objects of phobia, we resolve tension: this is a way of controlling anxiety, during which we vicariously experience what we are afraid of.²¹⁹ Counterphobia is a kind of purging, and afterwards we emerge with a healthier state of mind. Being frightened without running any risk of getting hurt and experiencing a kind of “ecstatic dread”²²⁰ is reminiscent of Burke’s notion of the sublime, where a safe distance is also a pre-requisite to the appreciation of otherwise dangerous scenes.²²¹

Twitchell concurs with the psychoanalytic approach and, as a second explanation, he mentions the widespread “return of the repressed” notion, or the “projection of objects of sublimated desire.”²²² Repressed urges are liberated, and fiction functions as an escape valve, making it possible for people to shed their uncivilized feelings. Stephen King makes a similar comment in *Danse Macabre*, his nonfiction overview of the genre, where he states that “much of the horror story’s attraction for us is that it allows us to vicariously exercise those antisocial emotions and feelings which society demands we keep stoppered up under most circumstances, for society’s good and our own.”²²³ Society demands repression, and horror can be seen as having the cultural function of a “discharge system for pent-up energy.”²²⁴ In the horror modality, we confront taboo subjects and experience a kind of catharsis, purging our souls of unhealthy urges. To paraphrase King, we sometimes need to raise the trapdoor of the civilized forebrain and feed the alligators swimming down in the subconscious to prevent them from getting out.²²⁵

²¹⁹ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 6.

²²⁰ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 10.

²²¹ Burke provided “a psychological justification for the Gothic tale of terror” (Alison Milbank, “The Sublime,” in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts [London: New English Library, 1990], 227); in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) he stated that “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. [...] When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958, 39). During the early part of the 18th century, the term *sublime* denoted “all the emotions and literary effects unacceptable to the dominant neo-classical virtues of balance, order and rationality” (Milbank, op.cit., 227). Various writers (among them Burke and Joseph Addison) emphasized the importance of emotions, such as the sublime, terror, horror or melancholy. The culmination of this is Burke’s above-cited treatise, in which he highlights the close connection between fear and the sublime and he regards the human mind’s “capacity for experiencing terror” a distinguishing feature of our humanness (Punter and Byron, op.cit., 11). He considers death the greatest source of fear, which idea is later echoed by King, who similarly claims that “[a]ll our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear [...] And the great appeal of horror fiction through ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths” (King, *Night Shift*, xvi.).

²²² Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 65.

²²³ King, *Danse Macabre*, 66.

²²⁴ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 77.

²²⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, 177.

Twitchell's third point is what brings novelty to his approach. He states that horror fables function as rites of passages: in today's world, culture fulfils the function of rituals for people (in place of duelling, for example). Their aim is to help youngsters reach the stage of reproductive sexuality, since the transition from individual to reproductive sexuality is fraught with anxieties.²²⁶ Basically, these stories communicate the rules of socialization, much like fairy tales do for children.²²⁷ They illustrate "the <<do's>> and <<don't's>> of adolescent sexuality", a certain "code of sexual behaviour",²²⁸ (what mistakes to avoid, who to select as a mate etc.). Thus, the wisdom of centuries is passed on to younger generations, and, as it is pointed out by researchers of mythography (such as Jung, Frazer, Campbell and Frye), stories aid us in finding order in the world.²²⁹ A cinema audience made up of teenagers undergoes a kind of ritual while viewing the latest slasher flick. We are not conscious of the cultural work these "fantasies of disorder"²³⁰ accomplish, but we should not underestimate the informative nature of these myths and horror sagas.

2.6 Community Construction and Exclusionary Tactics

The approach that I would like to present in the following bypasses the Gothic masterpieces and focuses entirely on contemporary horror texts. Linda Holland-Toll, in her *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (2001), examines a wide range of texts, and emphasizes how the stories presented therein reflect the way communities are constructed. After detailing the various methods employed to achieve cohesion within communities (scapegoating,

²²⁶ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 15.

²²⁷ Recurring elements in both genres are monsters, beasts and damsels in distress (Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 66). Instruction, socialization, and the transmission of cultural values are further linking points between fairy tales and horror stories. Furthermore, through our exposure to such fiction, we effectively resolve fear: that is why these two genres could be described as "siblings in the literary world" (Laura Colmenero-Chilberg, "Stephen King: Evil in Its Many Forms – Children Beware!" in *A History of Evil in Popular Culture: What Hannibal Lecter, Stephen King and Vampires Reveal about America*, eds, Sharon Packer and Jody Pennington [Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014], 30). In a conscious nod toward its progenitor genre, King begins *Cujo* in the following way: "Once upon a time, not so long ago, a monster came to the small town of Castle Rock, Maine." (New York: Signet, 1982, 2)

²²⁸ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 65, 66.

²²⁹ Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, 66.

²³⁰ Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 284.

demonization, demarcation), she concludes that these are forged as a result of strategies of exclusion and not of a coming together.²³¹

She also endeavours to define the problematic genre of horror: according to her, horror fiction is characterized by extreme emotions (terror, horror, revulsion), the presence of supernatural phenomena (or characters with uncanny talents), and the ability to generate a feeling of dis/ease in the reader.²³² She coins the neologism “dis/ease” to describe the heightened level of discomfort and sense of unease prevalent in these texts (this word conveys a “sense more active than un-” and more effectively describes the greater number of horrific emotions created in such fiction, in her opinion).²³³ If a text generates dis/ease in the reader, this feeling lingers, with the reader not being able to completely disconnect him/herself from the book and entertaining potentially unpleasant ideas and new insights. We tend to comfort ourselves with certain ideas and convictions (regarding the basic humanity and decency of man; cohesion within communities; family as a cherished institution endowed with good purposes; governments with no hidden agendas, bent only upon the welfare of their people), but horror fiction likes to strip away the veil and confront us from time to time with the unpalatable truths of everyday reality which we generally prefer to avoid. A healthy dose of uncomfortable truths might shock us into alternative ways of thinking, causing us to re-evaluate our opinions e.g. regarding minority groups (through the revelations of the mechanisms of Othering).²³⁴ In fact, as pointed out by horror film director George Romero, one of the primary functions of such literature is to shake our belief systems and shock us into a new way of thinking: “Horror is radical. It can take you into a completely new world, new place and [...] say, wait a minute – look at things differently. That shock of horror is what horror’s all about. [...] shock you into an alternative place.”²³⁵

The use of the term dis/ease calls to mind Terry Heller’s theory regarding open-ended texts with no resolution (its example par excellence would be *The Turn of the Screw*). In *The Delights of Terror* he claims that these works “haunt” the readers, leaving them unable to close the book with a satisfying thud, instead, they are “entrapped in the

²³¹ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 13.

²³² Holland-Toll, op.cit., 6.

²³³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 253.

²³⁴ Exclusionary strategies of identity formation.

²³⁵ Steven Jones, op.cit., 245.

reading”²³⁶ process, suspended between alternate readings, striving, yet unable to construct an ending in order to leave the fictional world behind.

Holland-Toll, furthermore, claims that horror fiction can be arranged across a spectrum ranging from affirmative to disaffirmative texts: she establishes three broad categories during her analysis.²³⁷ Several texts are cited to illustrate this idea and what is especially intriguing about her approach is that she employs further differentiating factors when creating her categories. She examines community construction, cohesion and exclusionary tactics from three different points of view: individual, community and government. She provides an example for an affirmative, a mid-spectrum, and a disaffirmative text for all these perspectives. There is no need to delve into the particulars of each and every subgroup, but I would like to briefly illustrate the viability of her theory.

Her first category includes affirmative texts, where the conflict portrayed achieves a full resolution, i.e. the monster is killed or contained, the forces of order carry the day, the threat is definitely eliminated. The order-disruption-order cycle is adhered to, and the ending is usually comforting for the reader. Maybe s/he is shaken a bit and some of his/her blind faith is questioned (in positive human/societal values) but there is a reaffirmation of order in the end. This group supports the stance of those theoreticians who believe in the basic conservative nature of the genre.

Stephen King’s *The Dead Zone* (1980) is placed at the affirmative end of the spectrum. The book examines community construction from an individual’s perspective, through the life of Johnny Smith (an archetypal Everyman figure), who becomes a pariah due to the emergence of a weird psychic ability. Following a car accident, Johnny goes into a coma, and once he emerges (after four years), he has a so-called second sight: he is able to predict the future of anyone he touches and also possesses an uncanny knowledge about the past. While this ability renders him useful (in unravelling murder cases, for example), people eye him with suspicion, and he is slowly pushed to the periphery of society. On one occasion, Johnny warns a woman that her house is on fire, thereby saving it from total destruction, but when she later thanks him for his help, the expression on her face is one of “superstitious dread.”²³⁸ Demarcation strategies escalate when during a press conference a reporter questions, with harsh words, his uncanny ability and demands a demonstration.

²³⁶ Heller, op.cit., 195.

²³⁷ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 8.

²³⁸ Stephen King, *The Dead Zone* (New York: Signet, 1980), 150.

Johnny's doctor, trying to protect his patient, exclaims: "This man is not a carnival performer, sir!"²³⁹ But Johnny is willing to demonstrate he is no fake. In the wake of his incontestable evidence (which makes the doubting reporter faint from shock), one of the journalists shrinks away from him with a "cramp of fear" passing over her face, while another literally steps back, repeating "don't touch me"²⁴⁰ three times as if this were a charm serving to protect him from contact with the 'mutant.'

Strategies of exclusion are often utilized when confronting inexplicable or incomprehensible events and such a mechanism serves to reassure people of their normality. Johnny, although he acts only with good intentions, is ostracized, since he fulfils the role of a seer, a prophet, a bringer of bad news (often unpopular figures in history). Furthermore, he sees through the masks of others, the façade behind which many hide their real nature.

He solves a murder mystery, identifying a serial killer, the Castle Rock Strangler, but it seems people resent him for revealing the truth and would have preferred it to be hidden away. It turns out that the rapist is the sheriff's protégé, a police officer, a sworn protector of law and order. Although King supplies the almost de rigueur 'monstrous mother' cliché to account for his heinous murder spree, a troubling question remains unanswered: how is it possible that no one recognized the 'monster' within the community? His position in society as a policeman complicates the matter further, since we do not expect danger coming from that group. So when this comfortable illusion (members of the police are trustworthy) is deconstructed, it creates the absurd situation where Johnny is almost blamed for robbing people of this illusion (the sheriff, in particular, resents Johnny for the revelation, since it implies a serious case of misjudgement on his part).

Johnny also unmasks an amoral politician, Greg Stillson, whose future presidency would bring nuclear war to America. During the act of attempting to assassinate Stillson, Johnny dies of a haemorrhage, so the book has a compromised ending: he wins (the true nature of the candidate is revealed), but he loses his life. The reader feels sorry since what happens to Johnny is unfair: he selflessly sacrifices himself for the public good, convinced he has a moral duty to act upon his intuitions and thereby prevent tragedies in the future.

²³⁹ King, *The Dead Zone*, 155.

²⁴⁰ King, *The Dead Zone*, 158.

He feels like he is confronting the age-old dilemma of “*if you could jump into a time machine and go back to 1932, would you kill Hitler?*”²⁴¹

He comes to understand that his weird talent places a huge responsibility upon his shoulders, and this is further reinforced by the dying words of his mother, who explicitly connects him with Old Testament figures:

What a power God has given you, Johnny! [...] “He has a job for you,” she said. “Don’t run from him, Johnny. Don’t hide away in a cave like Elijah or make him send a big fish to swallow you up. [...] You’ll know the voice when it comes. It’ll tell you what to do. [...] And when it does, Johnny ... *do your duty*.”²⁴²

Thus *The Dead Zone* probes questions related to morality, sacrifice, responsibility and the perception of human monsters.²⁴³ Uncharacteristically for King, except for Johnny’s paranormal ability, the book is devoid of supernatural phenomena. Yet, monsters we do have, if only of the “human” variety. Two thoroughly evil persons are contained, thanks to the accursed hero, however, he himself is seen in a similar light, as a monstrous creature. He is a good man “with a terrible, Godlike power – perhaps a curse”,²⁴⁴ which sets him apart from the rest of mankind. He even loses his job as a consequence of this difference, since he is deemed “*too controversial to be effective as a teacher*.”²⁴⁵ The sheriff, after witnessing the true nature of Johnny’s talent, cannot refrain from remarking: “If you can really see such things, I pity you. You’re a freak of God, no different from a two-headed cow I once saw in the carnival.”²⁴⁶ An even more telling example of the unfair treatment Johnny receives occurs when he enters the house of the serial killer, whom he has identified during his investigation of the crime scene. He briefly touches the mother and has a ‘flash’ which reveals that she knew about the murders and covered for her son. Paradoxically, it is the mother who screams at Johnny: “You’re a devil! [...] You’re a monster.”²⁴⁷ So even though Johnny actively contributes to the restoration of order and the

²⁴¹ King, *The Dead Zone*, 327.

²⁴² King, *The Dead Zone*, 167.

²⁴³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 38.

²⁴⁴ King, *The Dead Zone*, 397.

²⁴⁵ King, *The Dead Zone*, 257.

²⁴⁶ King, *The Dead Zone*, 247.

²⁴⁷ King, *The Dead Zone*, 251. An almost identical phrase occurs in Harris’s *Red Dragon*, where the serial killer accuses the hero of being a monster.

well-being of the community, he is perceived as a mutant, an Other, against whom people define themselves by drawing up clear demarcation lines.²⁴⁸

Maintaining the perspective of the individual, but shifting to mid-spectrum horror texts, Thomas Harris's *The Red Dragon* (1981) is an excellent starting point. Compared to affirmative texts, like the aforementioned *The Dead Zone*, this novel is of a more compromised nature. The human monster is contained in the end; the serial killer is eliminated and presents no further threat to the community. However, the monster-catcher, the FBI agent entrusted with safeguarding society and its people, becomes tainted during the process.

Harris's series (comprising four novels thus far) are mostly noted for the character of Hannibal Lecter, but I would like to focus on his antagonist, Will Graham, whose strategy consists of placing himself in the shoes of the killer he is tracking down. Synchronizing himself with the mindset of the psychopath, Graham tries to understand his motivation and thereby predict his next move. However, this uncanny ability exhausts and depletes him to such an extent that he suffers a nervous breakdown. To make matters even worse, people look at him with the same "superstitious dread" which they accorded to Johnny.

At the beginning of *Red Dragon*, Graham visits Lecter (previously captured by Graham and confined for life in the Chesapeake State Hospital for the Criminally Insane) in order to consult him regarding a serial killer he is trying to locate: "There was an opinion he wanted. A very strange view he needed to share; a mindset he had to recover."²⁴⁹ A paradox presents itself immediately: the monster-catcher calls for the assistance of the monster himself. One of the feats of the Lecter novels, as pointed out by Holland-Toll, is the blurring of the line between the detective and the killer.²⁵⁰ The demarcation lines, usually very distinct in the case of detective and horror fiction, are no longer easy to discern. Monstrosity no longer bears a conspicuous external sign, it is not written upon the body (the only nod Harris makes towards this tradition is to put a sixth finger on Lecter's left hand,²⁵¹ which subtly marks him as the Other). It is not just Lecter who, on the surface, appears absolutely normal; so do the active killers in the series. As

²⁴⁸ Issues of Othering, their role in identity-construction and exclusionary tactics as basic modes of community construction are going to be touched upon in more detail later, when interpreting King's *Carrie*.

²⁴⁹ Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* (London: Corgi Books, 1992), 57.

²⁵⁰ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 54.

²⁵¹ Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: Arrow Books, 1999), 14.

Judith Halberstam remarks, the postmodern monster is no longer the “hideous other”: it is a human who has become the locus of horror through his careful construction of “the façade of the normal.”²⁵²

Lecter is clearly aware of his resemblance to the man who captured him, and he delights in taunting the investigator: “The reason you caught me is that we’re *just alike*.”²⁵³ Graham, sickened by the assumption that he shares the mindset of a dangerous psychopath, has “the absurd feeling that Lecter had walked out with him”²⁵⁴ after his visit to the asylum. The connection between the two men is also underscored by the fact that Graham was briefly hospitalized in an asylum for depression, following a confrontation with a murderer whom he had been forced to shoot. Lecter also projects his own murderous impulses onto Graham: “When you were so depressed after you shot Mr. Garrett Jacob Hobbs to death, it wasn’t the *act* that got you down, was it? Really, didn’t you feel so bad *because killing him felt so good*?”²⁵⁵ This remark touches a vulnerable point in Graham, who feels he is looked upon as a freak – even by his co-workers.

Graham has “an uncomfortable gift”²⁵⁶ – the uncanny ability to place himself in the shoes of the killer. “He can assume your point of view, or mine – and maybe some other points of view that scare and sicken him.”²⁵⁷ He tries to see with the killer’s eyes, to understand his desires through establishing a psychic bond with him. However, this process takes its toll psychologically. As David Punter observes, “overidentification with the killer”²⁵⁸ might eventually destabilize the boundaries between the pursuer and the pursued. Graham is aware of the danger posed to his stability, which is the reason why he chose early retirement (after capturing Lecter). He returns only on the insistence of his boss, Crawford, who maintains that “there’s nobody better with evidence.”²⁵⁹ However, Crawford also knows that Graham has “the other thing too. Imagination, projection, whatever. He doesn’t like that part of it.”²⁶⁰ This ability gains Graham respect (after all, due to it, he succeeded in catching three killers), but people also feel uncomfortable around him. As Holland-Toll claims, he is “tarred with the monster brush”,²⁶¹ which has turned

²⁵² Halberstam, op.cit., 162.

²⁵³ Harris, *Red Dragon*, 67.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Harris, *Red Dragon*, 270.

²⁵⁶ Harris, *Red Dragon*, 152.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Punter and Byron, op.cit., 266.

²⁵⁹ Harris, *Red Dragon*, 8.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 63.

him into a pariah. He is contaminated, as if monstrosity were a virus which affects anyone who comes close.

Francis Dolarhyde, the serial killer in *Red Dragon*, clearly perceives his enemy in this way: “Graham knew. The son of a bitch was a monster.”²⁶² This sentence sums up nicely the skewed perception surrounding the FBI agent: it almost seems that ‘monstrosity is in the eye of the beholder.’ This role reversal, pointed out by the murderer, for whom Graham almost rises to a mythical status, hits the reader hard, and also illustrates the ‘relativization of monstrosity.’²⁶³

We might also feel unease because of the attitude of Crawford, who knows well how demanding this work is for Graham. Yet he places society’s well-being above the interests of the individual, sacrificing the agent in a way, using him as bait and exploiting his uncanny talent – while, at the same time, also being disturbed by it. While they are examining the first crime scene and Graham is trying to reconstruct the events of the night of the killing, he says: “Mrs. Leeds was a good-looking woman [...] I’d want to touch her skin in an intimate situation, wouldn’t you?” “*Intimate?*” Distaste sounded in Crawford’s voice before he could stop it. Suddenly he was busy rummaging in his pockets for change.”²⁶⁴

Graham succeeds in eliminating the murderer, but not before he is seriously wounded: his face is ‘carved up’ with a knife. Paradoxically, then, and in a quite unfair way, it is the detective who ends up looking like a monster. The reader feels considerable unease because, by disfiguring Graham’s face, Harris further connects him to the hare-lipped serial killer whom he was trailing. Thus, the ostensibly clear dividing line between the hunter and the hunted is again shown to be fuzzy.²⁶⁵ In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the next installment of the series, we learn that Graham was left by his wife because of the hideous events and dangerous nature of his job. The following comment underlines (almost deconstructs) the compromised affirmation of *Red Dragon*: “Crawford had organized successful hunts for three serial murderers. But not without casualties. Will Graham, the

²⁶² Harris, *Red Dragon*, 313.

²⁶³ The term “relativization of normality” is used by Marc Jancovich when discussing Richard Matheson’s modern vampire novel, *I am Legend* (1954). It describes the process during which the last human on Earth, bent upon the systematic destruction of all the infected around him, attains a legendary status and is perceived as the ultimate monster in the eyes of the “newborn” vampire society (op.cit., 69).

²⁶⁴ Harris, *Red Dragon*, 21.

²⁶⁵ Further examples for the contamination of the hero (because of contact with the criminal he is chasing) can be found in the male revenge films, like Clint Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry* series, where the name of the police officer already signals his “tainted” status. Barbara Creed, op.cit., 129.

keenest hound ever to run in Crawford's pack, was a legend at the Academy; he was also a drunk in Florida now with a face that was hard to look at, they said."²⁶⁶

In conclusion, we can state that in mid-spectrum texts affirmation and dis/ease exist in a precarious balance: more sacrifice is demanded if the protagonist is to succeed in defeating the monster and re-establishing order. The reader is placed in a "discomfort zone" since bad things are happening to good people who clearly do not deserve it and we long for some poetic justice (but are ultimately denied it). Holland-Toll claims that the majority of Stephen King's fiction can be placed into this group.²⁶⁷ There is always a price to pay, and even if the protagonist survives, s/he will not escape unscathed. To illustrate this thesis, it is enough to recall Wendy Torrance from *The Shining* (1977), who, after surviving the murderous rage of her late husband and the explosion of the haunted hotel, is described as "a human being who had been dragged around to the dark side of the moon and had come back able to put the pieces back together. But those pieces [...] never fit just the same way again. Never in this world."²⁶⁸

The last category proposed by Holland-Toll comprises disaffirmative texts. If we still keep to the individual point of view, a perfect illustration could be Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), notorious for its gruesome, protracted sadism, with its nihilistic worldview and black humor, affirming nothing in exchange for destroying almost everything (values of love, friendship, work, individuality, art). It is a bleak world offering no solace or happy ending but confronting the reader with troubling issues regarding the consumer society, dehumanization, alienation, lack of identity and the interchangeability of people. The human monster is never revealed for what he is, no explanation is offered for his psychosis, his acts go unnoticed and he is never caught. Add to this "the distanced and indifferent authorial stance",²⁶⁹ and the result is a text which Holland-Toll describes as "the apotheosis of disaffirmation."²⁷⁰

In contrast to the previously mentioned texts, which focus on the perspective of the individual, next I would like to offer an example for disaffirmative fiction employing the point of view of the community. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) lends itself naturally to an examination of society, the interrelationships of people and conflicts

²⁶⁶ Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs*, 71.

²⁶⁷ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 21.

²⁶⁸ Stephen King, *The Shining*, 443.

²⁶⁹ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 101.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

between individual and communal interests. It is a chilling depiction of what happens when a community employs strategies of exclusion and it also shows how fragile are the demarcation lines which separate people standing on the right and the 'wrong' side of the border.

"The Lottery" takes place within the closed structure of a small village and is concerned with scapegoating mechanisms and man's inherent need to lay blame.²⁷¹ The logic of this mechanism dictates that scapegoats should be chosen for the good of the entire community. They are identified as sources of pollution and their removal from within the body politic through execution brings about a "ritual cleansing."²⁷² Jackson claimed she wanted to examine man's inhumanity toward his fellow men²⁷³ and the savage impulses lurking beneath the veneer of civilization.²⁷⁴ She also criticizes blind obedience, illustrated by the villagers following a tradition the original significance and meaning of which have already been lost. The breakdown of societal and familial relationships can also be observed: during this ritualized savagery, friends and neighbors rush forward to cast the first stone at the victim, and, at the last chilling moment, someone gives a few pebbles to the victim's small child.

The reader is highly disturbed by the words uttered during Tessie's last moments ("It isn't fair, it isn't right"),²⁷⁵ since they encapsulate the meaning of the story, which, from an individual aspect, focuses on the character's realization, too late, of life's unfairness. Danielle Schaub claims that Tessie's final words show "her sudden awareness of human irrationality and injustice."²⁷⁶ She acquires a sharper focus of life's reality and society's unfairness only when there is nothing she can do about it. The insights which she gains are not shared by the others who stand on the sidelines: i.e. the ones who 'lose' in the lottery (thereby saving their lives). It seems that the price of enlightenment is to stake one's own life.

The people in her village live without giving much thought to existing traditions or political systems; they do not question bizarre forms of entertainment.²⁷⁷ These traditions

²⁷¹ Helen E. Nebeker, "The Lottery: Symbolic Tour de Force," *American Literature* 46, no. 1 (1974): 101.

²⁷² Patrick J. Shields, "Arbitrary Condemnation and Sanctioned Violence in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"," *Contemporary Justice Review* 7, no. 4 (2004): 413.

²⁷³ Shields, op.cit., 412.

²⁷⁴ Nebeker, op.cit., 100.

²⁷⁵ Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery," in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, ed. Ronald Verlin Cassill (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 675.

²⁷⁶ Danielle Schaub, "Shirley Jackson's Use of Symbols in 'The Lottery'," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 14 (1990). Accessed: September 10, 2010.

²⁷⁷ Regarding the scandal surrounding her shocking story, Jackson confided to a newspaper that most people who wrote her letters "were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know

are simply accepted because there has “*always* been a lottery”²⁷⁸ and although it is pointed out that other villages have already quit this barbaric custom, people are reluctant to let go of it because on some deep-seated level they probably realize that there is another function to it: the ritual also provides a channel for the release of repressed feelings.²⁷⁹

This is not a life-affirming but a death-dealing story, where there are no guarantees: all it takes is a simple black spot to irrevocably place someone into the category of the Other. Minutes before, Tessie was a mother, a wife, a neighbor, immersed in the amicable chit-chat of the village, but her previous status as an integral, accepted member of the community is obliterated as soon as the ominous piece of paper is drawn from the box. “Myths of community, marriage and family”²⁸⁰ are all deconstructed: they no longer function as safety nets. When she protests, saying they “ought to start over”,²⁸¹ people even resent her for being so selfish as not to act the part of the docile victim happy to further the prosperity and welfare of the village. The villagers are purchasing “their economic security [...] with the unwilling sacrifice of an ‘outsider’.”²⁸² She functions as a guarantee against poor crops, a blood sacrifice offered to appease some higher power.²⁸³ Based on the way the story ends, we are to assume the horror is going to continue, since no one questions the validity and authority of the tradition, which places the text even more firmly within the land of disaffirmative texts.

A slightly different version of the underlying structure of the “Lottery” occurs in King’s dystopic texts *The Long Walk* (1979) and *The Running Man* (1982), where ritualized violence is offered to the masses – but with the difference that it is spectacularized. In *The Long Walk* we have a marathon comprised of 100 adolescent boys, who literally walk until they drop dead (the last one left standing being the winner). Set in a military dictatorship in an alternate America of the future, this cruel entertainment is offered to the public (broadcast on television) to deflect their attention from more urgent matters. Mob instincts, blood lust, the desire to participate vicariously in the suffering of

was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch” (Shields, op.cit., 412). This remark reveals a great deal about the mob instincts lurking within seemingly ordinary people.

²⁷⁸ Shirley Jackson, op.cit., 672.

²⁷⁹ Nebeker, op.cit., 102.

²⁸⁰ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 148.

²⁸¹ Shirley Jackson, op.cit., 673.

²⁸² Holland-Toll, op.cit., 146.

²⁸³ Stephen King also penned an unnerving tale revolving around a similar topic. “Children of the Corn” describes a community consisting solely of children, who make blood sacrifices to a mysterious entity known as the Corn God, to ensure a good harvest. The savagery of the children, who murder both adults and their own peers, the open-endedness of the tale, offering neither resolution, nor affirmation (only the continuation of horror), qualify the text as disaffirmative. In *Night Shift*, 250-58.

others are presented through the portrayal of the spectators lining the road, betting on the boys.

In *The Running Man*, there is a televised nationwide manhunt for a man desperate enough to put his life on the line in exchange for a financial reward. Techniques of Othering are mobilized against him (he is depicted as a working-class monster) to turn citizens into hunters: along with professional hunters, civilians volunteer to turn the runner in.

In both stories, there is a public display of suffering, with a higher degree of participation than in Jackson's text. This might indicate the extent to which these societies are rotten to the core: we do not have simply an isolated instance of ritualized violence (a backward village, still keeping its bloodthirsty ancient customs), rather an entire country participating willingly in the extermination of its people. The spectacles are absorbed by show business and social media, they have entertainment value, but the citizens do not realize it is just a tool in the hands of a repressive government. Similarly to "The Lottery", the clear vision, with which one can see through the system and discover the truth, is gained only by the 'insiders': but these revelations are bought at the price of their lives. There is no sense of closure or catharsis at the end of the texts: the protagonists are sacrificial victims that ensure the stability of the society (and do not simply ensure a good harvest).²⁸⁴

Another text that amply fulfils the requirements of disaffirmative fiction, as established by Holland-Toll, is King's "The Mist", which depicts the deconstruction and fragmentation of every decent value when a seemingly cohesive community is placed under enormous pressure. It breaks down under stress, and eventually threatens the lives of its members. This is clearly a "non-affirmative paradigm of community",²⁸⁵ where the familiar pattern of scapegoating and Othering emerges.

After a particularly violent thunderstorm, a strange mist descends upon a small Maine town. The novella follows the fates of a number of people who are trapped in a supermarket and are threatened by various unearthly creatures (resembling prehistoric beasts), which lumber out of the mist to attack and devour them. It is suggested that the strange mist is somehow linked to the Arrowhead Project, a nearby government facility which engages in secret experiments (calling to mind the iconic figure of the mad scientist,

²⁸⁴ It might be interesting to point out how these future dystopias eerily foreshadow certain reality TV shows, such as *Survivor*, which is a test of endurance, but also a game show competition. Furthermore, a similar topic is thematized in the popular young adult dystopia series, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*.

²⁸⁵ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 158.

in “pursuit of forbidden knowledge”).²⁸⁶ In techno-horror stories, reckless tinkering with science and nature often results in unforeseen consequences: in this novella, the scientists seem to have opened up a conduit or gate into another dimension, thus letting in a horde of murderous beasts to prey upon unsuspecting humanity. Those responsible for the catastrophe remain as faceless as the mist: the disaster actually occurs offstage and we never see the grounds of the facility.

The Mainers in the store, representing a microcosm of society, react in different ways to the changed world. King is more concerned with depicting their responses to the situation and to this ‘brave new world’ than with detailing the exact cause of the disaster. Placing some ordinary people into extraordinary situations is a recurring motif of horror fiction: the writer is thus given a chance to examine a small group and the interaction among people.²⁸⁷ Consequently, the reader is less concerned with the potential threat represented by science and technology, and more with the nature, dynamics and workings of community. As noted by Tony Magistrale, while the outside world is concealed by the mist, in the world inside the supermarket people reveal their real selves as the veneer of civilization is being peeled off them.²⁸⁸ Echoing the creatures outside, people’s bestial nature rises to the surface and a kind of devolution takes place with humans resorting to primitive behavioral patterns, as if mirroring the “primordial life forms” outside.²⁸⁹

There is a chilling parallel established between the persons who have come to the store to obtain food and the prehistoric beasts who visit the place for the same reason. Thus, a frightening role reversal seems to be occurring here: consumers end up being consumed.²⁹⁰ At one point, the building itself is compared to “a piece of meat.”²⁹¹ With the onslaught of the monsters, mankind’s precarious position as master of this world is radically subverted.

Edward J. Ingebreetsen calls our attention to the fact that the color white has a peculiar significance in American literature: citing the example of Melville and Poe (suffice it to recall the conclusion of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* [1838]), he claims that “whiteness and inscrutability are two points of a triangle [...] whose third point

²⁸⁶ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 157.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* cycle (people taking refuge in a farmhouse, a shopping mall, or an underground bunker).

²⁸⁸ Tony Magistrale, *Stephen King. The Second Decade: Danse Macabre to The Dark Half* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 89.

²⁸⁹ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 90.

²⁹⁰ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 157.

²⁹¹ Stephen King, “The Mist” in *Skeleton Crew* (New York: Signet, 1985), 106.

is the futility of interpretation.”²⁹² The weird phenomenon of the mist fits into this triangle perfectly. It is inscrutable both literally and figuratively: human eyes cannot see through it, the mist hides its hellish creatures until the final moment. Its purpose, origin and exact nature are likewise shrouded in mystery. The narrator speculates that it is not natural: “I felt very strongly that I had never seen a mist exactly like this one. Part of it was the unnerving straight edge of its leading front. Nothing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges.”²⁹³

Supporting Ingebretsen’s opinion, Magistrale states that the mist is “a metaphor for the clouded vision”²⁹⁴ that was the motivating force behind the shady research carried out at the Arrowhead Project (where the scientists never considered their inability to control a calamity). This same clouded vision engulfs the supermarket-dwellers, obscuring their clear-sightedness and compromising their morality.

The mist leads to the stripping away of vision (our primary mode of orientation in the world), but to counterbalance this loss, a new kind of vision is acquired by those willing to face the new reality. As the protagonist remarks: “Terror is the widening of perspective and perception.”²⁹⁵ People are shocked into a reappraisal of their place in the universe. As pointed out by Dennis Rickard, what they have to face *outside* bears a similarity to Lovecraft’s cosmic horror, especially in its indifference to mankind.²⁹⁶ The evil represented by the beasts is impersonal and people are forcibly reminded of their puniness. They have to accept their insignificance and vulnerability compared to the beasts who reign over this new world.

They also acquire a keener perception of their fellow beings, who show their true colors during the crisis. Many simply break down as the “hard cement of reality”²⁹⁷ comes apart beneath their feet, yet there is one character who thrives on the chaos. This woman interprets the disaster in a medieval fashion, saying that it is God’s punishment which has descended upon sinful humans: “*We have been punished for delving into secrets forbidden*

²⁹² Edward J. Ingebretsen, “Cotton Mather and Stephen King: Writing/Righting the Body Politic,” in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, eds, Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 20.

²⁹³ King, “The Mist,” 46.

²⁹⁴ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 91.

²⁹⁵ King, “The Mist” 116. This might remind one of Ann Radcliffe’s famous assessment of terror, which claims that terror “expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life.” Quoted in David Stevens, *The Gothic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 53.

²⁹⁶ Dennis Rickard, “Horror Without Limits: Looking into THE MIST,” in *Reign of Fear: The Fiction and Film of Stephen King (1982-1989)*, ed. Don Herron (London: Pan Books, 1981), 188.

²⁹⁷ King, “The Mist,” 111.

by God of old! [...] It's expiation gonna clear away this fog!"²⁹⁸ She gathers followers through her preaching and soon demands a human sacrifice as a form of atonement. Theoretically, "the ritual of sacrifice is employed in the interests"²⁹⁹ of the community: the objective is to ensure its survival, just like in the Jackson novella. However, what this strategy reveals is man's inhumanity to his fellow beings. The community disestablishes itself in part owing to this preacher's influence, so the characters face menace not just from the outside but also from the inside: the "purely human horror" of madness.³⁰⁰ Consequently, the protagonist decides to flee the supermarket because he realizes that the 'monsters' inside pose as great a threat as the ones prowling outside.

In the end, four people escape from the 'safe place' in a car. They engage in what Douglas E. Winter has called a "night journey",³⁰¹ a quest-like adventure, traveling down the road in the thick mist, barely avoiding collision with stranded vehicles and huge beasts crossing the highway. However, we never find out if the mist ever ends and they survive, or whether they lose their lives in a desperate fight against the monsters – but with their humanity intact.

The novella is open-ended, and while the very last word is "hope",³⁰² this is scarcely enough to counterbalance the horrors faced within. Holland-Toll claims this novella belongs to that category of horror fictions where there is not even "a partial resolution of the dis/ease generated by the text."³⁰³ Even though the reader closes the book, s/he is haunted by the text because of its anti-closure.

I have dedicated an entire chapter to Holland-Toll's approach because I think it fills a gap left by Carroll's understanding of the genre. By focusing on human monsters and the bestial ways of common men and women, she covers an important territory of horror neglected by Carroll.

Her multi-leveled method, which involves arranging texts on a wide spectrum ranging from affirmative to disaffirmative texts, and further separating them on the basis of their emphasis on individual, community or government issues, makes it possible for her to present her thesis in a convincing manner. Disagreeing with more conventional,

²⁹⁸ King, "The Mist," 141, 142.

²⁹⁹ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 158.

³⁰⁰ Rickard, op.cit., 179.

³⁰¹ Douglas E. Winter, *The Art of Darkness. The Life and Fiction of the Master of the Macabre: Stephen King* (Great Britain: New English Library, 1989), 111.

³⁰² King, "The Mist," 154.

³⁰³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 145.

conservative approaches (which posit horror fiction as the defender of the social order, upholding societal norms),³⁰⁴ she claims that horror fiction's function is to place the reader into a discomfort zone, create a feeling of dis/ease and to prompt people into questioning cultural models and values which they have previously taken for granted.

Regarding her main concern, the construction of communities, she concludes that they are produced and kept alive by the mobilization of certain strategies of exclusion. In several texts which she examines, what comes to the surface is the "inability of communities to maintain cohesive bonds without some sort of exclusionary ritual."³⁰⁵ In the often-quoted words of cultural historian David J. Skal, one place the American dream (of upward mobility, endless opportunities, economic improvement, acceptance and inclusion) is "permitted to perish [...] is in horror entertainment. The American nightmare, as refracted in film and fiction, is about disenfranchisement, exclusion, downward mobility, a struggle-to-the-death world of winners and losers."³⁰⁶

Horror fiction confronts us with the nightmarish versions of ourselves. If we discover that evil is not "other-positioned", that the monster is in us, "monsters-r-us",³⁰⁷ not easily demarcated, otherworldly Lovecraftian creatures, it is all the more effective, more shocking: we cannot go on pretending there are no problems with man, society and humanity. A greater amount of dis/ease is generated when encountering human monsters since the relation between us and them is based on "commonality, not difference."³⁰⁸ Holland-Toll refers to true crime accounts, where the "seeming normality",³⁰⁹ the boy-next-door quality of psychopaths is constantly emphasized. Traditional horror fiction is less dis/ease provoking because of the nature of its monsters: vampires, werewolves, zombies or mummies are 'defined' monstrous already by their appearance – monstrosity is inscribed upon the body.³¹⁰

³⁰⁴ Represented by various critics, among them: Edith Birkhead, Terry Heller, Walter Kendrick, Stephen King. It is interesting to note that King himself works against his professed theory: he claims that the intrusion of Dionysian forces is only temporary, but he has written many stories where there is no affirmation in the end: his theory simply cannot assimilate such texts (like the aforementioned "The Mist"). King, *Danse Macabre*, 396.

³⁰⁵ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 122.

³⁰⁶ Skal, op.cit., 354.

³⁰⁷ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 3, 251.

³⁰⁸ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 30.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Dani Cavallaro also refers to the Western notion of the monster, according to which evil inclinations and moral aberrations are reflected by the physical deformities exhibited by such creatures. He connects the etymology of the word "monster" to the Latin "demonstrare" (to show, reveal, disclose), implying that the horrifying appearance is a testament to an underlying bestial nature. In *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002), 171, 172.

The horror genre is ‘burdened’ with an important role to play in society; it is always “concerned with a lot more than being scary.”³¹¹ By revealing certain social constructs to be “agenda-ridden”³¹² (always to someone’s benefit), by laying bare problems and daring to criticize much-respected institutions, it uncovers unpleasant realities. Holland-Toll warns of the dangers inherent in agendas: they are exclusionary devices, which “demarcate boundaries, limit participation, and often demonize other points of view.”³¹³ Horror fiction does not refrain from questioning value systems or cultural models, sometimes even deconstructing the rules of the culture (in the manner of the carnival). It offers a reflection of the social order and examines belief systems while at the same time reflecting cultural anxieties. These texts take us on a journey to the dark side, “tearing away the veil”³¹⁴ with which we try to protect ourselves from hard reality.

2.7 Stephen King: A Conservative Romantic Bestsellasaurus Rex of Horror

The second part of my dissertation is devoted to a case-study of two texts by one of the major practitioners of the horror genre, Stephen King. Although his name and his works have already been mentioned on several occasions, I would like to offer a brief introduction to his oeuvre before delving into the textual analysis.

Stephen King is a prolific writer who has contributed vastly to the field of fantastic literature. According to Don Herron, “King’s immense popularizing of standard horror themes has been a major economic boost for the field, perhaps the greatest since Hollywood began optioning horror novels for film.”³¹⁵ Most of his works fall into the category of supernatural horror fiction, but he has also made forays into the genres of dystopia, science fiction, and mainstream literature. His editor warned him, quite early on, that he ran the risk of being typecast as a horror writer in the public mind: at the time, King’s publishing history included novels about a telekinetic girl, vampires and a haunted hotel.³¹⁶ King, however, had no wish to dissociate himself from the designation: “I thought about all the people who *had* been typed as horror writers, and who had given me such

³¹¹ Hills, op.cit., 211.

³¹² Holland-Toll, op.cit., 10.

³¹³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 15.

³¹⁴ Linda Badley, *Writing Horror and the Body* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 75.

³¹⁵ Don Herron, “Horror Springs in the Fiction of Stephen King,” in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 68.

³¹⁶ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 41.

great pleasure over the years – Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, [...], Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, and Shirley Jackson [...]. And I decided [...] that I could be in worse company.”³¹⁷

Although *horror* is the first word most people associate with King’s name, critics remark that there is a certain “generic indecisiveness”³¹⁸ in connection with some of his works, “an unwillingness or inability to be confined to singular generic categories.”³¹⁹ Stephen J. Spignesi claims that

Stephen King created his own hybrid of literary genres [...], smoothly assimilating into one seamless (and occasionally indefinable) genre the trappings and characteristics of several narrative styles, including fantasy, horror, westerns, the coming-of-age tale, science fiction, crime fiction, epic poetry, the quest novel, and contemporary mainstream fiction.³²⁰

King is credited with being “the writer who made horror respectable”,³²¹ “a one-man shock wave in the publishing industry, who took horror literature out of the dark and into the light of mainstream, popular fiction.”³²² His unique contribution to American fiction has been the creation of a special “blend of gritty social realism and supernatural horror.”³²³ As pointed out by Collings, “horror writers are an intrinsic and essential part of understanding late-twentieth-century American culture” since they have penned works that have grappled “with the fundamental social problems we face today, and have explored them through the *metaphor* of the monstrous and the horrific.”³²⁴

According to Joseph Citro, “to deny King’s worth [...] is to deny the society in which we live”,³²⁵ while Burns remarks that “the vast popularity of this body of popular

³¹⁷ Stephen King, *Different Seasons* (New York: Signet, 1982), 501.

³¹⁸ Michael R. Collings, *The Many Facets of Stephen King* (Washington: Starmont House, 1985), 17.

³¹⁹ John Sears, *Stephen King’s Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 5.

³²⁰ Stephen J. Spignesi, “Beyond Fear,” in George Beahm, *Stephen King: America’s Best-Loved Boogeyman* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998), x. Probably the best example of this hybridization of genres is his *Dark Tower* series (1982-2012), which combined horror with the Western, the action-adventure thriller, the epic quest, heroic saga, apocalyptic fantasy and the alternate universe with touches of romance. Michael R. Collings, “A Chronological Look at the Books,” in *The Stephen King Companion*, ed. George Beahm (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995), 234.

³²¹ George Beahm, *The Stephen King Story* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 9.

³²² Beahm, *Stephen King*, 43. He reluctantly acknowledges his influence in the publishing sector: “I have grown into a Bestsellasaurus Rex – a big, stumbling book-beast [...] I started out as a storyteller; along the way I became an economic force.” Collings, “Chronological Look,” 29.

³²³ Burton Hatlen, “Stephen King and the American Dream: Alienation, Competition, and Community in *Rage* and *The Long Walk*,” in *Reign of Fear: The Fiction and Film of Stephen King (1982-1989)*, ed. Don Herron (London: Pan Books, 1981), 20.

³²⁴ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 186.

³²⁵ Joseph A. Citro, “Foreword: The King and I,” in *The Dark Descent*, ed. Tony Magistrale (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), xiv.

culture suggests an area for investigation by the social scientists as well as the literary critic.”³²⁶ King’s typical characters are small-town Americans, but their problems are universal, so in spite of the supernatural elements, it is easy to identify ourselves with this familiar world. Those factors which enhance reader identification are the average, middle-class heroes, the transparent, easy-to-understand prose and the use of brand names. Though sometimes King is strongly criticized for his use of brand name products, he is not the first to rely on this technique in order to establish a stronger attachment with contemporary reality.³²⁷

His “fondness for pop-cultural imagery” is strongly tied to his “subject-position as a male baby-boomer steeped (or trapped) in the American popular culture of his period.”³²⁸ Born in 1947, King is “a war baby, one of the millions of baby boomers. A demographic anomaly, his generation would find its collective identity in popular culture: popular films, pop music, and television.”³²⁹ He grew up during the period of post-war affluence, which produced a “boom in consumerism and popular culture,” which naturally found its way into his fictional universe.³³⁰

When defending himself against this charge, King quotes Henry James, who remarked that “a good ghost story must be connected at a hundred different points with the common objects of life.”³³¹ King claims that brand name identification helps in evoking a sense of the real world: “the first thing you have to do is create any kind of environment that the reader can identify with totally. [...] There are certain things that run through society. Anywhere in New York, anywhere in the country, somewhere there’s going to be a Coke sign. People identify with Coke.”³³² He further adds: “I am a social creature; I am a creature of my time. The consistent beat that comes through a lot of the reviews is my use of brand names, and the ‘mass-cult’ surface of my novels. But that’s because these things

³²⁶ Gail E. Burns and Melinda Kanner, “Women, Danger, and Death: The Perversion of the Female Principle in Stephen King’s Fiction,” in *Sexual Politics and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Raymond (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 159.

³²⁷ Ben P. Indick refers to the example of James Jones. Ben P. Indick, ““Come Out Here and Take Your Medicine!” King and Drugs,” in *Reign of Fear: The Fiction and Film of Stephen King (1982-1989)*, ed. Don Herron (London: Pan Books, 1981), 149.

³²⁸ Darryl Jones, op.cit., 139.

³²⁹ Beahm, *The Stephen King Story*, 19.

³³⁰ Darryl Jones, op.cit., 137.

³³¹ Norden, op.cit., 81.

³³² Martha Thomases and John Robert Tebbel, “Interview with Stephen King,” in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 279.

are part of my life, and because I refuse to deny either my times or my interest in my times.”³³³

Jancovich contends that the frequent use of lists of brand name products is not a sign of a lack of imagination on the part of King, who makes a deliberate use of this technique to illustrate how consumer culture “shapes the consciousness of his characters.”³³⁴ He wishes to show that people living in contemporary society often “think through images and language drawn from consumer culture”: employing images and phrases originating from films, television shows, advertisements, songs or literature, they attempt to give meaning to events.³³⁵ Relying on these items, King establishes “shared terms of reference between characters”,³³⁶ which are mirrored by real life, since such images or catchphrases often end up becoming a part of everyday life.

King has achieved such a high level of recognition (even for people who have not read his books), that scare quotes based on his books crop up everywhere. The infamous bloodbath scene in *Carrie* seems to be in top position,³³⁷ but there are traces of King even in cartoons. The notorious “Here’s Johnny” phrase of the raging Jack Nicholson from the film version of *The Shining* is echoed by the “Here’s Brucie” yell of the fish-friendly shark when chasing the hero in *Finding Nemo* (2003), while the mysterious word *redrum* is referenced in *Toy Story* (1995), where it is uttered by a creepy, broken doll, scaring the film’s antagonist.³³⁸

To further delve into the features of King’s fiction, I now wish to introduce an adjective which might appear surprising in juxtaposition with the word ‘horror’ in this context: romantic. Explaining his views on the infamous EC Comics, King emphasizes the ‘rough justice’ aspect of those horrible stories, depicting the idea of retribution as a highly moral concept.³³⁹ Typically, in those tales, a corpse comes back from the grave to avenge his/her wrongful death. So, although at first it seems that bad people get away with heinous crimes, in the end, there is the reaffirming message that eventually everyone gets his/her just deserts: “Horror fiction has always been, in that sense, very romantic fiction.”³⁴⁰

³³³ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 101.

³³⁴ Jancovich, op.cit., 98.

³³⁵ Jancovich, op.cit., 99.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ An ingenious use of this occurred when the rock band Foo Fighters recreated the scene during their Ice Bucket Challenge. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE95Xo_uue4

³³⁸ This famous unintelligible word is from *The Shining*: it keeps on haunting the little protagonist, until he finally sees it reflected in a mirror, whereby its meaning is revealed: it is *murder* spelled backwards.

³³⁹ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 139.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

King is not surprised by our attraction to this genre which specializes in images of death: he claims that “[w]e have a history of being drawn to horror. Maybe it’s because we’re mortal and we keep trying to fit our minds around the concept of dying.”³⁴¹ He emphasizes the psychological benefits of reading such fiction, claiming it helps us deal with the problems of prosaic reality: “we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones”³⁴² because when “you’ve got a lot of free-floating anxieties, the horror story or movie helps to sort of conceptualize them, shrink them down to size, make them concrete so they’re manipulable.”³⁴³

Deborah L. Notkin also observes that

King emphasizes the often-overlooked benefits of living through the very worst of situations. Terror becomes a force which forges bonds though its purpose is to break them, which teaches love while it loosens bowels. King holds out hope that, if fear doesn’t kill you, it leaves you with something invaluable which you could not otherwise attain.³⁴⁴

If his heroes survive these trials by fire, they emerge, indeed, stronger, if not unscathed. They (re)discover the value of friendship and family bonds, which might have been neglected beforehand. They also learn about themselves, and Douglas E. Winter is quick to point out this often disregarded aspect of horror: “Along with its obvious cathartic value, horror fiction has a cognitive value which helps us to understand ourselves and our existential situation.”³⁴⁵

Ambiguity surrounds this genre which we find “alternately repulsive and seductive; the closer our familiarity with reality, the greater our need for escape. King’s horror fiction is conscious of this paradox, operating with one foot firmly within waking reality. If anything, his horror fiction draws the reader *closer* to reality.” This is something which also King acknowledges: “[T]he tale of horror and the supernatural *is* an escape, but the reader must never believe that it is only an escape outward, into a kind of never-never land

³⁴¹ Barker, op.cit., 51.

³⁴² King, *Danse Macabre*, 13.

³⁴³ Randi Henderson, “Stephen King Is Cashing In,” in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 260.

³⁴⁴ Deborah L. Notkin, “Stephen King: Horror and Humanity for Our Time,” in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 134.

³⁴⁵ Douglas E. Winter, “The Night Journeys of Stephen King,” in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 187.

...; the tale of terror and the supernatural is also an escape *inward*, toward the very center of our perceived humanity.”³⁴⁶

King has always been very adamant in his conservative views regarding the life-affirming aspect of horror. This is further supported by his remarks upon horror films:

[t]hey do not love death [...]; they love life. They do not celebrate deformity but by dwelling on deformity, they sing of health and energy. By showing us the miseries of the damned, they help us rediscover the smaller (but never petty) joys of our own lives. They are the barber’s leeches of the psyche, drawing not bad blood but anxiety ... for a little while, anyway.³⁴⁷

He states that the “the writer of horror fiction is neither more nor less than an agent of the status quo,” an “agent of the norm”, and asserts that the “purpose of horror fiction is not only to explore taboo lands but to confirm our own good feelings about the status quo by showing us extravagant visions of what the alternative might be.”³⁴⁸ He argues that “[t]he melodies of the horror tale are [...] melodies of disestablishment and disintegration ... but [...] the ritual outletting of these emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive state again.”³⁴⁹

What is intriguing about his approach is that he appears not to realize that some of his own works belie this view. As it was already suggested by Holland-Toll, most of King’s fiction belongs to the category of mid-spectrum horror texts, which are not totally affirmative in their nature. *Carrie*, *The Dead Zone*, “The Mist” all contain seeds of dis/ease. Fellow horror-writer Clive Barker’s assessment also points in this direction: “In his [King’s] fiction, even love’s power to outwit the darkness is uncertain.”³⁵⁰ Barker is also careful to detect subversive elements, stating “there is also much in King’s work which is genuinely subversive: imagery which evokes states of mind and conditions of flesh which, besides exciting our anxieties, excites also our desires and our perversities.”³⁵¹

³⁴⁶ Winter, “The Night Journeys,” 225.

³⁴⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, 198.

³⁴⁸ King, *Danse Macabre*, 39, 48, 282.

³⁴⁹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 13.

³⁵⁰ Barker, op.cit., 54.

³⁵¹ Barker, op.cit., 56.

2.7.1 King's Style and Themes: Colloquial Poetics and Protean Monsters

In addition to King's penchant for brand names, the other characteristic often identified by critics is his cinematic style. He continually uses "filmic devices, or literary devices in a cinematic way, his favorite being the flashback."³⁵² He also relies on "the equivalent of voice-over narration at times, typically in italicized phrases which pop into the middle of otherwise complete sentences. These sometimes have the feel of [...] a 'shock cut,' as a dissimilar and surprising shot 'bursts' into another scene."³⁵³ Other techniques employed are flash-forwards, "cameralike shifts of point-of-view between characters, and scenes that cut and dissolve."³⁵⁴

This should come as no surprise, since King spent long hours in the movie theater during his formative years: "What I cared about most between 1958 and 1966 was movies. [...] Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about losers on motorcycles."³⁵⁵ According to a childhood friend, "King, in effect, learned *how* to write from what he saw on the screen at the Ritz – the place where parents sent their kids on Saturday."³⁵⁶ Don Herron also remarks upon "the interdependence of King's success and the popularity of contemporary horror films",³⁵⁷ which may have further reinforced this cinematic style.

His accessible prose should also be mentioned, since it makes his books available not just to the highly-educated but to everyone, effectively attracting both young and old, academics and popular readers.³⁵⁸ Fellow writer Peter Straub summed up King's writing style in the following way: "It made a virtue of colloquialism and transparency. The style could slide into jokes and coarseness, could lift into lyricism, but what was really striking about it was that it moved like the mind itself. It was an unprecedentedly direct style, at least to me, and like a lightning rod to the inner lives of his characters."³⁵⁹ A King book offers a lot more than action sequences, or scenes of violence and gore. In fact, Jancovich designates those books where the characters' thought processes are closely followed

³⁵² Bill Warren, "The Movies and Mr. King," in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 105.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Don Herron, "King, Stephen (1947-)," in *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, ed. Jack Sullivan (New York: Viking, 1986), 244.

³⁵⁵ Stephen King, *On Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 44.

³⁵⁶ Beahm, *Stephen King*, 3.

³⁵⁷ Herron, "Horror," 60.

³⁵⁸ Jancovich, op.cit., 98.

³⁵⁹ Peter Straub, "Meeting Stevie," in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 10.

(usually placed in parenthesis with lower-case I's) "interior novels."³⁶⁰ King is often praised for "strength of character",³⁶¹ which enhances reader identification. This in turn makes possible what King considers to be the most important element of an effective horror story: love of characters.

You have got to love the people. That's the real paradox. There has to be love involved, because the more you love ... then that allows the horror to be possible. There is no horror without love and feeling ..., because horror is the contrasting emotion to our understanding of all the things that are good and normal. Without a concept of normality, there is no horror.³⁶²

His works are typically set in small-town communities, within contemporary settings. He utilizes a recognizable, familiar iconography with thought-provoking subtexts (political and social) underlying his fantastic stories. The books abound in both intratextual and intertextual references: one of the best examples of this "cross-pollination"³⁶³ is the novella "The Body" (1982), which references the rabid Saint Bernard from *Cujo*, Shawshank prison (from "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" [1982]), and Castle Rock's Sheriff Bannerman (who appears both in *The Dead Zone* and *Cujo*). These intratextual references bind his oeuvre together more tightly, solidifying connections within his fictional universe. Occupying a prominent position is the imaginary town of Castle Rock, Maine: this is a small New England mill town, which serves as the setting for "The Body", *Cujo*, *The Dark Half*, *Needful Things* and parts of *The Dead Zone*.³⁶⁴ The town functions as "a scale model of contemporary American society",³⁶⁵ within which the author examines communities, group dynamics and personal interrelationships. Intertextual references, according to Sears, place the specific text in relation to other texts (written, filmic): these citations from fictional and poetic texts, or from popular music and film offer the reader insights into how "King's writing negotiates its own literary and cultural

³⁶⁰ Jancovich, op.cit., 99.

³⁶¹ Howard Wornom, "An Interview with Harlan Ellison," in *The Stephen King Companion*, ed. George Beahm (London: Warner Books, 1989), 219.

³⁶² Stephen King quoted by Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 56. The importance of love is also emphasized by King when asked what makes a good horror story. "Character, I think. You care about the people [...] You don't get scared of monsters; you get scared for people." Paul Janeczko, "An Interview with Stephen King," in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 112.

³⁶³ Stanley Wiater, Christopher Golden and Hank Wagner, *The Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of the King of Horror* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 2001), 177.

³⁶⁴ "King took the name Castle Rock from a favorite novel of his youth, William Golding's 1954 classic *Lord of the Flies*. The name in turn was used by Rob Reiner, director of *Stand by Me*, as the name of his production company," which later produced the 1990 film version of *Lord of the Flies*. Wiater, op.cit., 132.

³⁶⁵ Wiater, op.cit., 131.

inheritances.”³⁶⁶ Connected to the idea of inheritance and placing oneself in relation to one’s forebears is the fact that King often presents himself as a horror fan, a part of the reading public. Displaying his thorough knowledge of the genre, playing with its “codes and conventions”, King calls attention to the “shared terms of cultural reference between himself and his readers”, thus achieving a level of intimacy rarely found in other writers’ works.³⁶⁷

King’s works usually depict the struggle between good and evil, the evil power manifesting itself under different guises. It could be a traditional monster (a vampire in *’Salem’s Lot* (1975), a werewolf in *Cycle of the Werewolf* [1985]), or a mythic level of darkness (*The Stand*, *The Dark Tower* series).³⁶⁸ However, more often than not, the real monsters are human beings: destructive, unloving parents, school bullies, uncaring teachers, indifferent neighbors, corrupt politicians or amoral scientists. As pointed out by Winter, King’s stories usually “celebrate the existence of good, while graphically demonstrating its cost.”³⁶⁹ Even if the book has a happy ending (the forces of evil are destroyed), there are almost always casualties.

When King was 14, he was confronted by his school principal regarding a piece of fiction which he had authored. “What I don’t understand, Stevie,” she said, “is why you’d write junk like this in the first place. You’re talented. Why do you want to waste your abilities?”³⁷⁰ According to Darryl, this constituted a kind of “primal scene” for King and the dominant themes of his later fiction can be presaged from this conversation: “encounter between wise child and uncomprehending authority-figure” and “distrust of adult authority.”³⁷¹ Often in his fiction, the children can only rely on help from their friends, with the adult community turning a deaf ear to their pleas. In fact, Nina Auerbach argues that a consequence of King’s “passionate allegiance to pre-adulthood” was that he helped in shifting the focus of horror to adolescence in the 1980s.³⁷²

There are two groups which occupy a prominent place in King’s oeuvre: children and writers. “The Body”, *Carrie*, *Christine*, *The Eyes of the Dragon* (1987), *Firestarter*

³⁶⁶ Sears, op.cit., 7.

³⁶⁷ Jancovich, op.cit., 99.

³⁶⁸ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 192.

³⁶⁹ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 110.

³⁷⁰ King, *On Writing*, 49. As an adult, he is better prepared to answer the annoying question of “Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?” He usually retorts by asking: “Why do you assume that I have a choice?” King, *Night Shift*, xii.

³⁷¹ Darryl Jones, op.cit., 137.

³⁷² She claims that his influence can be seen in a series of vampire films for and about adolescents, like *The Lost Boys* (1987) and horror cycles like *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampire, Ourselves* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 159.

(1980), *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999), *It*, *The Shining* and *The Talisman* (1984) all feature child protagonists. Pitting children against monsters is a formula he employed “successfully in novel after novel, while at the same time offering devastating critiques of contemporary American society.”³⁷³ King claimed that he considered his novel *It* a “final summing up of everything I’ve tried to say in the last twelve years on the two central subjects of my fiction: monsters and children”³⁷⁴ and that the book “isn’t really about *It* or monsters or anything. It’s about childhood.”³⁷⁵

King believes that children are often wiser than grown-ups: they are able to synthesise “‘real’ and ‘imagined’ experience without question” and they know “instinctively that imagination can tell the truth the way the senses never can.”³⁷⁶ This ability proves vital when one is confronted with supernatural creatures, and his fiction is full of children who grasp and recognize the impending horrors long before their elders.

Adults are surrounded by an “ossified shield of ‘rationality’”,³⁷⁷ which is not yet developed in children. In *‘Salem’s Lot*, adulthood is described as “the eventual ossification of the imaginary faculties.”³⁷⁸ In this book, it is a young boy, Mark Petrie, a dedicated fan of horror movies, monster magazines and a collector of plastic monster figures, who realizes his town has become the target of a vampiric invasion. In Ken Gelder’s words, Mark is saturated with low cultural knowledge, but this knowledge, although disturbing, also proves to be “salvational.”³⁷⁹ Being steeped in the vampire myth, and knowing all there is to know about these creatures, provides Mark with a survival kit. He is familiar with the rules of the game, so he is better equipped to defend himself when a former-friend-turned-vampire scratches his window, begging to be let in: “*Of course. You have to invite them inside.* He knew that from his monster magazines, the ones his mother was afraid might damage or warp him in some way.”³⁸⁰ The wise child survives the encounter,

³⁷³ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 180.

³⁷⁴ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 263.

³⁷⁵ Frank Miller, “The Author Talks: King on *It* and Childhood,” in *The Stephen King Companion*, ed. George Beahm (London: Warner Books, 1989), 348. I think in *It* King also succeeded in creating the most horrifying monster of his career in the figure of Pennywise the clown, a killer and devourer of children: a demonic shapeshifter, “a polymorphously perverse thing” who “manifests itself as the deepest childhood fears of those who encounter ‘It’, and therefore as a multitude of things, uncontrollably diverse in appearance, as various in its meanings and grammatical functions as the word ‘it’.” Sears, op.cit., 12.

³⁷⁶ Barker, op.cit., 61.

³⁷⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, 89.

³⁷⁸ King, *‘Salem’s Lot* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 363.

³⁷⁹ Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1994), 127.

³⁸⁰ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, 359.

while his parents, who entertained groundless fears regarding monster magazines, perish.³⁸¹

For King, writers are the adults who best preserve the “lessons of childhood”,³⁸² and he claims that the “job of the fantasy writer, or the horror writer, is to bust the walls of that tunnel vision wide for a little while [...]. The job of the fantasy-horror writer is to make you, for a little while, a child again.”³⁸³ Writers constitute the other major group of recurring characters in King’s fiction: Mike Noonan in *Bag of Bones* (1998), Gordon Lachance in “The Body”, Thad Beaumont *The Dark Half*, Scott Landon in *Lisey’s Story* (2006), Paul Sheldon in *Misery*, Ben Mears in *‘Salem’s Lot*, Mort Rainey in “Secret Window, Secret Garden” (1990) Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, are all professional authors. King, an unpretentious man, is very open when it comes to his craft: he is often willing to reveal the “tricks of his trade.”³⁸⁴ He shows genuine interest in the process of writing and shares many anecdotes and lessons gathered from this side of his life in his autobiographical *Danse Macabre* and *On Writing* (2000), also providing interesting information in his fictional novels like *Misery* (regarding the job of editors, the differences among various types of typing paper, or how to solve the problems of cliff-hanger endings).

King is often described as a socially conscious writer: he has “*always* written novels with political and social overtones – from *Carrie* on he has tackled issues including education, parenting, socialization and maturation, religion, politics.”³⁸⁵ His trenchant criticism also covers such cherished institutions as the home, family or the school. Herron traces the reason for King’s popularity through the fact that “[t]he wellspring of horror in King’s fiction has nothing to do with the supernatural [...]. Horror springs in King’s stories from contemporary social *reality*.”³⁸⁶ This statement is confirmed by the writer himself:

When you read horror, you don’t really believe what you read. You don’t believe in vampires, werewolves, trucks that suddenly start up and drive themselves. The horrors that we all do believe in are [...] hate, alienation,

³⁸¹ King thought of this novel “as a form of literary homage”, so it “bears an intentional similarity to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” (*Danse Macabre*, 25). Breathing new life into an old tradition, he transplanted the story of the Count into small-town, rural America, carefully recreating *Dracula*’s mood and atmosphere.

³⁸² Darryl Jones, op.cit., 138.

³⁸³ King, *Danse Macabre*, 407.

³⁸⁴ Darryl Jones, op.cit., 141.

³⁸⁵ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 180.

³⁸⁶ Herron, “Horror,” 74.

growing lovelessly old, tottering out into a hostile world on the unsteady legs of adolescence.³⁸⁷

On a closing note, before proceeding with a more detailed look into some thematic groupings of King's fiction, I would like to insert a quotation from *On Writing*, wherein he touches upon the issue of theme and how it stems from personal interests.

I don't believe any novelist, even one who's written forty-plus books, has too many thematic concerns; I have many interests, but only a few that are deep enough to power novels. These deep interests (I won't quite call them obsessions) include how difficult it is—perhaps impossible!—to close Pandora's technobox once it's open (*The Stand*, *The Tommyknockers*, *Firestarter*); the question of why, if there is a God, such terrible things happen (*The Stand*, *Desperation*, *The Green Mile*); the thin line between reality and fantasy (*The Dark Half*, *Bag of Bones*, *The Drawing of the Three*); and most of all, the terrible attraction violence sometimes has for fundamentally good people (*The Shining*, *The Dark Half*). I've also written again and again about the fundamental differences between children and adults, and about the healing power of the human imagination.³⁸⁸

2.7.2 Violated/Violent Women, Malevolent Machines and the Bachman Books

One of the most severe criticisms brought against King came from fellow writer Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, who remarked that “[i]t is disheartening when a writer with so much talent and strength and vision is not able to develop a believable woman character between the ages of seventeen and sixty.”³⁸⁹ To rectify the matter, King consciously set out to repair this ‘deficiency’ and published three novels where the female voice is in the centre of the narration: *Gerald's Game* (1992), *Dolores Claiborne* (1993) and *Rose Madder* (1995). As a result of these efforts, he was also lauded for combining “familiar aspects of the horror genre with larger issues of gender inequities and power imbalances.”³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ King, *Night Shift*, xvii.

³⁸⁸ King, *On Writing*, 207.

³⁸⁹ Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, “Cinderella's Revenge – Twists on Fairy Tale and Mythic Themes in the Work of Stephen King,” in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 49.

³⁹⁰ Amy Canfield, “Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*: A Literary Backlash against Domestic Violence,” *The Journal of American Culture* 30:4 (2007): 397. Domestic abuse already formed part of the fictional landscape of *Carrie*, *The Shining*, and *It*.

Gerald's Game details the physical and emotional ordeals of a woman whose husband suffers a fatal heart attack while they are engaged in bondage games in an isolated cabin. She is left handcuffed to the bed for twenty-eight hours, and the book follows her attempts to escape from this literal prison while, at the same time, describing her striving for independence and empowerment. King examines those forces which interfere with a woman's life and shape her identity and personality, before she discovers her power – in this case, the narrative voice.

The other source of power originates in her body, when she realizes how it can contribute to her escape: blood, one of horror literature's defining images, plays the crucial part. Without blood, there is no escaping: cutting her wrist with a broken piece of glass, she uses her blood as a lubricant to be able to slip her hand through the handcuff, thus turning her own body into a means for release. Furthermore, blood is also connected to birth and in fact, during the course of the novel, we witness the birth of a new identity. In her extreme isolation, she re-evokes past traumas repressed until now (she was a victim of sexual molestation as a child), and undergoes the painful construction of her new ego. The book closes on an affirmative note, since she frees herself both from the metaphorical chains of the past and the very literal handcuffs of the present.

Dolores Claiborne's primary focus is the mother-daughter relationship. It is the story of a working-class mother who was forced to take the extreme measure of killing her husband in order to protect her daughter from sexual abuse. This novel is a departure from King's usual style, not just because of its topic (wordly horrors, not supernatural: domestic and child abuse, alcoholism), but because of its narrative method. King breaks away from his typical, third person singular technique and lets the heroine dominate the fictional landscape: there are no chapter divisions, just a single, uninterrupted monologue where no other voices intrude.³⁹¹

The novel reflects accurately the society and the times (1963) during which most of its action takes place, especially the social restrictions imposed upon women. It was a depressingly masculine world where women had little power and where domestic violence was referred to as "home correction."³⁹² Dolores's figure can be seen as a monstrous hero, a destroying mother, who calls motherly love "the strongest love there is in the world" and "the deadliest": her maternal instincts prove to be stronger than the wifely obedience and

³⁹¹ Dolores is the narrator for 368 pages in a 372-page-long book.

³⁹² Stephen King, *Dolores Claiborne* (New York: Signet, 1993), 89.

submissiveness expected from women.³⁹³ In fact, during that era, the maternal role was the only one which permitted women to step out of their socially conditioned passivity.³⁹⁴

Rose Madder, the last novel belonging to this trio of female-centered narratives is slightly different, since it integrates the supernatural, King's trademark feature, into the midst of the real world. The book confronts the issue of domestic violence and the cycle of abuse to which the heroine, Rosie, is repeatedly exposed. After being terrorized for years, she finally gathers enough courage to break free, to escape from her psychopathic husband and sets out on a journey of self-discovery, ultimately leading to "female empowerment."³⁹⁵

To counterbalance the brutal images of reality, King establishes a fantasy world, which Rosie enters through the portal of a painting acquired in a pawn shop. There she meets her double, Rose, tottering on the brink of madness, who is "the embodiment of all the rage Rosie suppresses."³⁹⁶ To repay a favor Rosie has done her, Rose dispatches the abusive husband when he is drawn into the fantasy world so that Rosie can start a new life.

The next thematic grouping which should be pointed out in King's oeuvre includes writings concerned with a form of evil which has become a staple of twentieth-century horror fiction: malevolent machines turning against their makers. The genre of 'techno-horror' maps the relationship of humans and machines, exploring the dire consequences of irresponsible tampering with science. It stresses contemporary society's overreliance on technology and our precarious position as the ones in control. These stories depict fantastic scenarios, such as machines rising against their former owners, or mankind unleashing eerie creatures or deadly viruses upon the world through careless experimentation.³⁹⁷

It is easy to find examples of the "anti-technological slant"³⁹⁸ of King's writing: stories wherein the familiar world is dislocated, machines dictate to their previous masters,

³⁹³ King, *Dolores Claiborne*, 365.

³⁹⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1963), 39.

³⁹⁵ Beahm, *Stephen King*, 184.

³⁹⁶ Wiater, op.cit., 360.

³⁹⁷ In his postapocalyptic novel *The Stand*, almost the entire human race is wiped out when a superflu is accidentally released from a secret biological testing site which is engaged in germ warfare research. The previously analyzed dystopic text, "The Mist", also belongs to this category: the conduit to the parallel universe in all probability was opened up by careless researchers. Another novel which should be mentioned is *Firestarter*, in which scientists alter the genetic makeup of the subjects of an experiment. A more detailed analysis of this novel will follow, approaching it not as a techno-horror text, but concentrating on the techniques of Othering employed by society, the figure of the child hero with the wild talent and the category of human monsters.

³⁹⁸ James Egan, "Technohorror: The Dystopian Vision of Stephen King," *Extrapolation* 29, no. 2 (1988), <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003763&v=2.1&u=szegedi&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=0f3e008f2aec6d82f4cdeaa5f86f5372> Accessed: 19 April, 2007. King admitted in an interview that he is "scared by machines. Machines frighten me because I don't know how they work in a lot of cases. And I'm

lifeless objects become animate,³⁹⁹ or scientific research leads to the collapse of civilization. One notable example is the short story “Trucks” (1978), where a small group of people in a diner is besieged by enormous flatbeds, eighteen-wheelers and pickups, which suddenly acquire mass consciousness and attack people, reversing the power dynamic: humans become their slaves, not vice versa.⁴⁰⁰ “The Mangler” (1978) presents a demonic variation upon the “machinery-run-amok” theme: an industrial speed ironer and folder, through a weird combination of coincidences, becomes possessed, and kills several people working in the laundry. When two men attempt exorcism, something misfires and the machine frees itself, and goes in search of human prey. “Battleground” (1978) details the attack of murderous toy soldiers against a hit-man, while “Uncle Otto’s Truck” (1985) is the story of a presumably haunted truck, which, in order to take revenge on a murderer, creeps, year by year, closer to the man who used it to kill his business partner. Interestingly, in the last two cases, the animated pieces of machinery have a moral ‘mission’ to complete.

A more rewarding readerly experience is *Christine*, which describes a teenager’s obsession with a car. He is hoping to rise above his ‘loser’ status at high school with his newly-acquired automobile (called Christine), but ultimately this weird bonding alienates him. By sucking out his energies, and trying to possess his very soul, the car, “technology as the femme fatale”,⁴⁰¹ comes alive and sets out on killing rampages. The novel is a rich source for interpretative analysis: focus can be placed upon its coming-of-age storyline, upon the twist given to the haunted house formula,⁴⁰² or the exploration of the complex relationship between machines and humans, with particular attention given to the symbolic meaning attached to cars within contemporary culture.

Jancovich suggests that *Christine* can be seen as an implicit criticism of consumer culture, where people’s identities are tied so strongly to certain goods that eventually those

fascinated by them because they do so much of my work. [...] Machines make me nervous. [...] Because I live in a world that’s surrounded by them. It’s impossible to get away from them.” “An Evening with Stephen King at the Billerica, Massachusetts Public Library,” in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 37.

³⁹⁹ Lifeless objects becoming animate has always been considered to produce an uncanny effect: Freud included waxwork figures, dolls and automata as objects capable of arousing a feeling of the uncanny in people in his 1919 essay devoted to the topic. “The ‘Uncanny’,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 226.

⁴⁰⁰ The movie *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), based on this short story, is the only instance when Stephen King directed his own work (garnering mostly negative reviews).

⁴⁰¹ Tony Magistrale, *Hollywood’s Stephen King* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 153.

⁴⁰² Winter points out that the car shares similarities with the infamous Overlook Hotel of *The Shining*: they both have an unsavory history (involving suicides and horrible accidents), and both are haunted by ghosts. In fact, Christine could be viewed as a mobile haunted house. In *The Art of Darkness*, 142.

products come to dominate them, substituting for relationships as well. However, attaching too much value to objects might strip people of their humanity and spirituality – leading to an issue frequently raised in techno-horror texts: dehumanization. The more we rely on machines and enter into dependence with them, the more we come to resemble them in our insensitivity.⁴⁰³ Among the unwelcome products of the technological age we have to embrace alienation, depersonalization and social estrangement.⁴⁰⁴

Certain mass anxieties crystallize in these stories, and King's remark on the subtext of the techno-horror film is relevant here: "we have been betrayed by our own machines and processes of mass production."⁴⁰⁵ Citing the example of 1950s mutant and radiation movies, he claims these films gave a concrete shape to people's vague fears surrounding unchecked experimentation, technology developing at an unprecedented rate, and the almost incomprehensible mysteries of atomic technology. By showing us the awful consequences of losing control over our machine-ruled world, King implies there is no "link between technological development and human progress."⁴⁰⁶ What is more, he opines that "our technology has outraced our morality."⁴⁰⁷ This statement not only applies only to scientists engaged in unethical or potentially dangerous research, but also to people who have become "literal slaves to their machines."⁴⁰⁸

For a couple of years during his career, King resorted to the use of a pseudonym, Richard Bachman, under which name he published seven novels. The main reason for Bachman's invention (complete with fake biography and a photo on the dust jacket of the books) was the concern of King's publisher who did not want him to saturate the market. King also felt the need to release his literary demons and, under this pseudonym, he was able to publish works which were different from the supernatural horror fiction which has become his trademark.⁴⁰⁹ He wanted "to do something as someone other than Stephen King."⁴¹⁰ The Bachman books all depict grim worlds and usually do not venture into the

⁴⁰³ Tony Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 50.

⁴⁰⁴ Anthony Magistrale, *The Moral Voyages of Stephen King* (Mercer Island: Starmount House, 1989), 28.

⁴⁰⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, 157.

⁴⁰⁶ Egan, op.cit.

⁴⁰⁷ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, 51.

⁴⁰⁸ Jonathan P. Davis, *Stephen King's America* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 70.

⁴⁰⁹ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 63.

⁴¹⁰ King, *The Bachman Books*, viii. As he explains it in his introduction to the second edition of *The Bachman Books* (1996), he discovered that a fellow writer "had written his exceedingly grim and violent" novels under his pseudonym "on what he termed his 'rainy days.' On 'sunny days' he authored books" using his real name. This clearly reflected King's sentiments: "Bachman [...] was a rainy-day sort of guy if there ever was one." Wiater, op.cit., 386.

supernatural. They represent the pessimistic side of King's psyche, where an unrelentingly dark world appears, never redeemed by the power of love, which is the antidote to darkness in the majority of his canon.

In these depressive, hopeless worlds, the characters' isolation and loneliness are emphasized. Usually, a frustrated male protagonist decides to commit a desperate act, often involving violence, placing him at the center of media attention. In *Rage* (1977), for example, a teenager takes his entire class hostage, while in *The Running Man* there is a televised manhunt, wherein citizens are encouraged to capture a man, who is on the run, for financial reward.

The Bachman characters are helpless: they feel entrapped, they seem to have no control over their lives and they are lost in situations from which there is no way out. They fight against forces which are overpowering: a repressive government, the army, the media – they stand almost no chance of winning these battles. Should the protagonists win, at the point of victory, victory itself loses its value and significance. Their meaningless, unfair existence is unchanged by winning: they realize their struggle has been pointless. Therefore, these are pessimistic books, pervaded with a sense of despair and alienation. In these bleak worlds, inimical to individuality, society itself becomes distorted. In fact, it seems there are no viable societies presented in the Bachman novels.

2.7.3 Weird Talents: a Gift or a Curse?

Several King novels feature protagonists with uncanny abilities falling within the domain of parapsychology: telekinesis, pyrokinesis and telepathy. In each instance, the main character is treated as the different one, the Other, a pariah, not an integral part of the social fabric. Judith Halberstam states that Gothic fiction abounds in such “deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known.”⁴¹¹ When society is confronted with such people, its exclusionary tactics awaken and a process of ‘monsterization’ takes place. According to Edward Ingebretsen, this signals a given “social order’s need to repudiate at all costs that which it can neither understand nor manage, its fears of radical instability and boundarylessness.”⁴¹² With the help of these strategies (demonization, demarcation), community is constructed and cohesion is

⁴¹¹ Halberstam, op.cit., 2.

⁴¹² Ingebretsen, “Cotton Mather and Stephen King”, 23.

attained.⁴¹³ This process is quite transparent in *Carrie* and in *Firestarter*, which shares certain thematic similarities with *Carrie*. Though both novels feature a girl-hero, they cope very differently with society's alienation: Carrie finally succumbs to the evil role assigned to her, while *Firestarter*'s protagonist successfully resists 'monsterdom.'

In his depiction of children with paranormal abilities (Danny, the telepathic little boy from *The Shining* must also be considered here), King seems to suggest that the possession of such qualities *per se* is neither good nor bad. If a child is deprived of a loving home, family members and friends to rely upon, then s/he might be tempted to use their double-edged powers to cause suffering or to take revenge, especially if s/he was made to suffer unjustly beforehand. The talent might also trigger society's exclusionary tactics, because being different has always made a person easily ostracized. As I have previously pointed it out, demarcation strategies play a vital role in establishing the cohesion of a community.

However, if the child feels love and acceptance (in spite of her/his difference), this usually proves to be enough to 'rein in' the secret talent, to resist the urge to use it in a destructive way. Carrie never experienced unconditional love, not even from her mother, so it is no wonder that after her repeated efforts towards acceptance all fail, she resorts to destruction as the only way to break free from her oppression.

To utilize the terms introduced beforehand, *Carrie* could be placed at the disaffirmative portion of the spectrum (focusing upon the individual), while *Firestarter* is at the affirmative pole. In the latter novel, which Holland-Toll considers a dystopia, the analysis of society and community is approached in such a way as to involve the level of the government as well. Although the text has an uplifting ending, the basic problems presented are not eliminated, so we might wonder whether the same thing could happen again. The life-affirming aspect of the novel lies in the resilience of Charlie, and her steadfast rejection of the monster status which society tries to force upon her.

2.7.3.1 Resisting the Role of Monster

The protagonist of *Firestarter* (1980) is an eight-year-old girl, Charlie McGee, whose parents participated in a secret government experiment while still in college. A new drug was tested on the volunteers, their dormant psychic abilities being awakened, as a

⁴¹³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 25.

result. The drug further caused a genetic mutation in their chromosomes, leading to unforeseen consequences when two of them married and had a child. The little girl was pyrokinetic, capable of starting fires with the power of her mind.

Firestarter details Charlie and her father being on the run, from a sinister government agency called “The Shop”, which has murdered her mother and which later captures them both in order to use the little girl’s strange abilities for military purposes. By threatening to kill her father, The Shop blackmails Charlie into cooperation, urging her to use her terrible power in a secret government facility where she is treated as a guinea pig. In fact, the man behind the operation considers her “a useful monster.”⁴¹⁴ Eventually, Charlie manages to escape, but when she engulfs the entire compound in flames, her father dies in the conflagration. Following this destruction, an elderly couple takes the girl in and the story ends with her walking into a newspaper office to reveal her tale.

The main focus of the novel is its distrust of government agencies which endanger civilians, but it also has a strong flavor of antitechnology: it is an attack upon scientific experiments, the nature and ultimate consequences of which are not properly understood by the researchers conducting them.

Charlie’s fate parallels that of both Johnny Smith (in *The Dead Zone*) and Carrie, in a sense: they are endowed with a special power which can be seen both as a gift and a curse. She has no responsibility for her talent, it being hereditary and the result of a scientific experiment. She ends up becoming a murderer, but her act of revenge on The Shop is presented as justified or, at the very least, understandable. Readers are reluctant to condemn her in the way society does (as it also happens in Carrie’s case). Charlie is also seen as belonging to the ‘human monster’ category. At one point, she is explicitly described this way by a character who witnesses her strange talent and who then turns to her father with the following words: “Take your monster and get away.”⁴¹⁵

However, Charlie, when accusations are leveled against her, is keen to point out her innocence: “None of it was my fault [...] and I won’t take the blame.”⁴¹⁶ In spite of her youth, she realizes that, through no fault of her own, she must suffer the consequences of an unethical experiment for the rest of her life. It is already difficult for her to lead a normal life with such abilities, but she is unwilling to make society’s conscience easier by assuming the role of the ‘monster.’ She refuses to be categorized as such, and in her

⁴¹⁴ King, *Firestarter* (London: Macdonald Futura Publishers, 1980), 253.

⁴¹⁵ King, *Firestarter*, 156.

⁴¹⁶ King, *Firestarter*, 484.

decision to turn to the media her aim is to clear herself of the blame and to seek out the real culprits behind the monolithic power represented by The Shop. Compared to other ‘wild talent’ novels, Charlie’s story can be seen in a more optimistic light, since she survives the ordeal: tested by fire, she emerges more powerful and the ending is hopeful. Yet, there is no definite closure, and a lingering unease remains with the reader, who contemplates whether a single newspaper can uncover and bring down a whole corrupt system (most of the problems highlighted by the text remain in place: secret organizations, funded by taxpayers’ money, carry out unethical experiments, abuse justice, threaten law-abiding citizens, or eliminate people who are no longer useful to them).

Holland-Toll claims that the best affirmative fictions carry within them a seed of compromise, so they do not always end on a happy note. At an individual level, Charlie fares better than her fellow heroes Johnny and Carrie, because she stays alive, but she becomes orphaned during the story and is cursed with a dangerous talent which would easily place her in the monster category, should people find out about it. Her utility as a weapon of mass destruction might not escape the attention of secret military organizations, which might try to capture her like The Shop did.

Another example of a ‘gifted’ child successfully resisting the monster category and surviving into adulthood is Danny Torrance from *The Shining*. Danny, unlike Carrie, who could share her ‘cursed gift’ with no one, is not alone in being different. He meets ‘fellow shiner’ Dick Hallorann, with whom a curious bond is forged. The “shining” thus proves to be a kind of glue, a strong link connecting these special people. Danny is anxious to know whether there are others with similar abilities, and he is relieved to discover he is not alone. “Get you kinda lonely, thinking you were the only one?”⁴¹⁷ — Hallorann asks the boy. “The relief in being able to talk about these things—to someone who *knew*—was indescribable.”⁴¹⁸ Thus, Danny acquires a friend, a kind of mentor and also takes a crash-course in the nature of shining, during which he receives answers to the questions he has been unable to ask from anyone else. In a sense, his social network is extended owing to the shining, beginning with the benign Hallorann, who acts as a father figure for the little boy.

In *Doctor Sleep* (2013), the sequel to *The Shining*, it is revealed that Danny, now in his forties, never started a family of his own. However, once again, his uncanny ability helps him establish a very strong bond with a “shining” twelve-year-old girl, Abra, towards

⁴¹⁷ King, *The Shining*, 81.

⁴¹⁸ Stephen King, *Doctor Sleep* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), 15.

whom he acts as a kind of tutor, following in Hallorann's footsteps by guiding the child in her discovery of her immense powers.⁴¹⁹ "For the first time in her life Abra felt unconditional pleasure—joy, even—in the talent that had always puzzled and sometimes terrified her. Thanks to this man, she even had a name for it: the shining. It was a good name, a comforting name, because she had always thought of it as a dark thing."⁴²⁰

While the use of supernatural elements and esoteric phenomena might appear to be simply a magician's trick in the repertoire of a horror writer, in King's fiction they are always tools employed with an ultimate goal. Horror is a genre with a diagnostic function, because under the guise of fictional horrors, and relying upon such symbols as haunted houses or children with uncanny abilities, King is able to metaphorically discuss everyday horrors, exposing problem areas and contradictions in the social, familial or political fabrics of our lives.

⁴¹⁹ Later it turns out that Danny is Abra's uncle, for real, but were it not for the shining, the two of them would never have met each other in the first place.

⁴²⁰ King, *Doctor Sleep*, 211.

3 Case Studies

3.1 The Monstrous Female Body and Communicational Crisis: *Carrie*

With the possible exception of pornography, there is no other genre so closely bound up with corporeality and the sensations of the body as horror literature and films. In fact, according to Gary Wolf, horror is “the only genre named for its effect on the reader.”⁴²¹ Its readers/viewers are continuously assaulted by images foregrounding the fragile, perishable nature of our bodies: we are forcefully reminded of our biological nature, which we tend to ignore in the present information age with its emphasis on cyber-reality.⁴²²

The horror genre is notorious for its continued dedication to exploring “the various things that can happen to a human body”⁴²³ and its emphasizing of our bodily dimension. We are repeatedly shocked by images of bodies invaded, possessed, torn asunder, stabbed, dismembered, slashed and mutilated. Consequently, horror films are often accused of desensitizing the viewers to the “realities of suffering.”⁴²⁴ However, the pain and suffering witnessed on the screen might actually draw audiences closer to the characters – paradoxically urging identification not only with the victims, but the monsters, too. The physical or psychological tortures, abuse and persecution endured by some of them (prior to their killing rampages) might trigger sympathy in readers/viewers alike (suffice it to think of Frankenstein’s creature or ambiguous contemporary monsters, such as Harris’s charismatic cannibal, Dr. Lecter, whose murderous predilection can be traced back to a childhood trauma).

In the following, I examine a text by Stephen King, *Carrie*, where the body, its functions, sensations and fluids receive major emphasis, and where a female character is assigned the role of the monster. The novel presents a typical King formula (colloquial prose, small town setting and the intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday) with an ambiguous monster/heroine, who invites both dread and sympathy.

However, before expanding upon the novel, I would like to briefly touch upon the frequency with which the monster is depicted as female within the horror genre. Barbara

⁴²¹ Badley, op.cit., 3.

⁴²² Morgan, op.cit., 21.

⁴²³ Aviva Briefel, “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film,” *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 16.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) challenges the dominant view that women are, first and foremost, portrayed as victims in such narratives, and examines the various manifestations of women through their terrifying aspects. Indeed, she also questions the widely-accepted Freudian notion that woman engenders fear because she is castrated, stating instead that woman is primarily feared because of her castrating potential (King's *Misery* corroborates this assertion).⁴²⁵ Her novel approach attributes an active role to women, who are clearly seen as agents and not merely as sufferers of actions. In the Freudian scenario, they remain firmly within the passive victim category since they appear to have been subjected to castration: this leads to the male child's fear that he might have to endure the same punishment (with the threat coming from the father). Female genitals thus inspire terror merely by their appearance, suggesting former castration.⁴²⁶ According to Creed, it is the reproductive potential of the female body which produces anxiety (especially in males), since pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation all point to the indissoluble link existing between women and the animal world, and emphasize womankind's debt to nature.⁴²⁷ Menstruation is considered a very potent image of horror because the sight of this blood calls to mind the terrifying image of the vagina dentata.⁴²⁸ The culturally widespread myths and legends of the toothed vagina reflect male anxieties (the fear of being deprived of power), and fears of being eaten and castrated by female genitals.⁴²⁹

The list of female monsters that Creed offers include the vampire, the witch (King's Carrie falls within this category), the castrating mother (Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*), the beautiful but lethal killer (*Basic Instinct* [1992]), woman as possessed body (Regan in *The Exorcist*), and woman as *femme castratrice* (the literal castrators of rape-revenge films and the symbolic ones of slasher films, the self-reliant Final Girls who finish off the killer).⁴³⁰ In the construction of female monstrosity, gender is of the utmost importance: being a woman is inseparable from being a monster.

In her essay "When the Woman Looks", Linda Williams suggests a curious affinity between monsters and women, claiming that both are constructed as biological freaks

⁴²⁵ Creed, op.cit., 7.

⁴²⁶ Creed, op.cit., 109.

⁴²⁷ Creed, op.cit., 7.

⁴²⁸ King confessed in an interview that his greatest sexual fear is that of the vagina dentata (Bob Spitz, "Penthouse Interview: Stephen King," in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller [London: New English Library, 1990], 256).

⁴²⁹ Creed, op.cit., 106.

⁴³⁰ Creed, op.cit., 1.

because of their “sexual difference from the normal male.”⁴³¹ Upon seeing a character who is similarly marginalized and rejected by society, sympathy is evoked in the woman (along with the typical fright reaction), because she “recognizes” herself in the hideous creature, who acts like a “double” for her.⁴³² She perceives their “similar status”⁴³³ and looks upon the monster as the embodiment of her own difference, a “horror version of her own body.”⁴³⁴ During her analysis, Williams cites films exemplifying the bond generated between the male monster and the heroine (*The Phantom of the Opera* [1925], *King Kong* [1933], *Beauty and the Beast* [1946]). In King’s *Carrie*, as we will shortly see, this relationship evolves between two females, yet the “sympathetic identification”⁴³⁵ and ‘the monster as a freak’ statements of Williams apply perfectly to that text as well.

3.1.1 Abject Border-Crossings

The importance of borders and clear dividing lines has already been highlighted when discussing Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*. Relying on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, Creed also devotes attention to ‘borderline’ cases. Her starting point is that the abject is something which crosses the border.⁴³⁶ The abject also evokes the transgression of taboos, and a disturbing corporeal intimacy – all the while being characterized by ambiguity: a double helix of attraction and repulsion, “a vortex of summons and repulsion”, which “places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.”⁴³⁷

Drawing parallels between the abject and monstrosity, Creed mentions several ‘types’ of monsters who are considered abject because of border-crossing.⁴³⁸ Stevenson’s Hyde is placed together with more obvious monsters, like King Kong, because they occupy the fuzzy line separating men from beasts, the human from the inhuman (in fact, Hyde is

⁴³¹ Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 20.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Williams, op.cit., 18.

⁴³⁴ Williams, op.cit., 22.

⁴³⁵ Williams, op.cit., 21.

⁴³⁶ Creed, op.cit., 11.

⁴³⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

⁴³⁸ Shelley Stamp Lindsey approaches monsters in a similar way, stating that they “typically disrupt and challenge the presumed homogeneity of human identity by confusing or transgressing boundaries between the human and nonhuman” (“Horror, Femininity, and Carrie’s Monstrous Puberty,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996], 283).

repeatedly described as “ape-like”).⁴³⁹ Characters endowed with both normal and supernatural features are also placed into the monster category, like many of King’s “wild talent”⁴⁴⁰ heroes (*The Dead Zone*’s clairvoyant Johnny, *Carrie*’s telekinetic teenager or *Firestarter*’s pyrokinetic Charlie). Their uncanny talents separate them from the rest of mankind: paranormal ability is a double-edged sword, functioning more like a curse than a boon, since it marks out their difference and renders them vulnerable to ostracism.⁴⁴¹

Those cases where a struggle is waged within a single person, either between a normal and a supernatural entity fighting for supremacy (possession narratives), or the age-old war between the good and evil sides of a personality, also qualify as border-crossings (cf. Doctor Jekyll remarking upon “the perennial war among my members”⁴⁴²). This fight might actually take a literal form, wherein buried tendencies, repressed wishes and latent desires are manifested in a physically distinct body, as in the case of doppelgängers (in King’s *The Dark Half*, a writer’s pseudonym comes to uncanny life and desires to “remain embodied”,⁴⁴³ replacing the “parent” figure who called forth his existence: the two of these clearly represent the warring tendencies between the conflicting sides of the protagonist).

Invasion narratives are also pertinent here, where the boundaries between self and other are transgressed: for example, aliens seeking to subdue the human race (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) or possession stories like *The Exorcist*, where a demon inhabits the body of a teenage girl.⁴⁴⁴ In this case, the natural borders of the human body are not respected, the evil entities disrespect autonomy and individuality and seek to rule the host.

Creed also counts among problematic borderline cases those where the subject fails to take up his/her “proper gender role”:⁴⁴⁵ the most famous example is Norman Bates from *Psycho* (dressing as his mother when he murders), but the transvestite psychiatrist from the film *Dressed to Kill* (1980), or serial killer Jame Gumb from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), famous for making himself a ‘woman-suit’ (a patchwork sewn of murdered females’ skin), can also be cited.

⁴³⁹ Stevenson, op.cit., 22, 69, 70.

⁴⁴⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 174.

⁴⁴¹ Mark Browning comes to the same conclusion when he claims that the various psychic gifts possessed by King characters are “more of a curse than a gift”, referring to the unjust death of Johnny, the exclusion of Carrie, and the exploitation of Charlie (*Stephen King on the Big Screen* [Bristol: Intellect, 2009], 32).

⁴⁴² Stevenson, op.cit., 55

⁴⁴³ Badley, op.cit., 55.

⁴⁴⁴ Creed, op.cit., 32.

⁴⁴⁵ Creed, op.cit., 11.

The last type of border emphasized by Creed is that between “the clean and proper body”⁴⁴⁶ and the abject body (or the body which has lost its form). *The Exorcist*’s little girl, Regan, is a classic case for this type of border-crossing, because she is constantly surrounded by abject substances: urine, vomit, blood, bile and pus. All these images of corporeal waste allude to the fragility of the symbolic order.⁴⁴⁷ She regresses to the stage preceding the entry into the symbolic, to “a state of infantile pre-socialization.”⁴⁴⁸ Her monstrosity is in large part given form by her body which provokes disgust in readers and viewers alike.

Probably the best-known exemplars of the subgenre of body-horror (where the human body becomes a site of horror), are author Clive Barker and film-maker David Cronenberg, who repeatedly confront the theme of bodily violation.⁴⁴⁹ Barker claims that “[h]orror fiction is over and over again about the body.”⁴⁵⁰ In his stories, the pain, torture, suffering and physical alterations of the body and the various mortifications to which the flesh is subjected (the skin pierced by needles and hooks) are often a means of achieving a sort of transcendence, a different level of existence. Physical shape-shifting, symbolizing a kind of rebirth, often mirrors an internal change in the character. Barker’s demonic Cenobites (extradimensional beings from his novella “Hellbound Heart” [1986], which served as the basis for the popular *Hellraiser* [1987] films) revel in the pain and transformations of the body: the most notorious examples include the iconic Pinhead, but there is also a skinless woman appearing in the sequel to *Hellraiser*.

Barker transfigures, re-sexes, de-evolves, or reintegrates the corporeal form into bizarre post-human configurations that are often barely recognizable as once having been a man or woman. Character after character willingly [...] sheds the familiar contours of the human for the shapes of nightmare and so gains entry to a new life and, perhaps, a new community.⁴⁵¹

Thus, in Barker’s world, bodily changes, even if horrifying to all appearances, are not necessarily negative, and might indeed carry a potential for enlightenment. In the author’s words: “I write a fiction of transcendence, metaphors of transcendence. The upside is that people get new information about the way that they are in relation to their

⁴⁴⁶ Kristeva, op.cit., 72.

⁴⁴⁷ Kristeva, op.cit., 70.

⁴⁴⁸ Creed, op.cit., 83.

⁴⁴⁹ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 175.

⁴⁵⁰ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 184.

⁴⁵¹ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 201.

flesh, their desires, their vulnerability, their spiritual potential. The bad news is, this stuff will kill you.”⁴⁵²

Before proceeding with the analysis of *Carrie*, I would like to return briefly to *The Exorcist*, because it shares certain similarities with King’s novel. The story has already been placed firmly within the category of the abject: it concerns a possession, and is a kind of invasion narrative. This amply fulfills the requirement of border-crossing, but Regan’s case is further complicated by other factors: it is a male demon which invades her body, so the border-crossing between self and other also involves other binary oppositions (male-female, purity-impurity, innocence-corruption).⁴⁵³ Regan is 12 years old, so the weird manifestations which happen to her are also associated with the onset of puberty: her transformation from little girl to mature woman, a threshold event, coincides with being subdued by a demon.

Regan is a prisoner, literally “trapped inside her own body”,⁴⁵⁴ which eventually becomes her means of communication: at one point, a written message (“Help Me”) appears on her stomach, as if someone had drawn the letters from the inside. This might be seen as a potent illustration of the “frustrated desire to speak”⁴⁵⁵ which manifests itself on a corporeal level (as we will later see, this line of thought applies to the case of Carrie, as well). Regan’s body is described as being “in revolt”⁴⁵⁶ with sores appearing on her skin, mirroring the internal turmoil and the war waged inside. As pointed out by Creed, Regan’s revolting, “unsocialized body”⁴⁵⁷ shows the precarious nature and fragility of the laws and taboos of the symbolic order, which aim to establish the clean and proper body since, to quote Kristeva, “[t]he body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic.”⁴⁵⁸ Regan’s story can be seen as “a ‘ritual’ of purification”, following the traditional order-disorder-order rhythm of most horror fiction (the middle phase allowing the spectator to participate vicariously in “normally taboo forms of behaviour”, denied to us in adulthood).⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵² James Van Hise, *Stephen King and Clive Barker: The Illustrated Guide to the Masters of the Macabre* (Las Vegas: Pioneer Books, 1990), 129.

⁴⁵³ Creed, op.cit., 32.

⁴⁵⁴ Creed, op.cit., 36.

⁴⁵⁵ Vivian Sobchack, “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 162.

⁴⁵⁶ Creed, op.cit., 40.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Kristeva, op.cit., 102.

⁴⁵⁹ Creed, op.cit., 37.

The examination of the family unit (with absent fathers); the utilization of abject substances, including menstrual blood; a monstrous female protagonist in pubescent years; the dread/disgust such bodies provoke in their environment; the strict rules society employs to banish uncivilized forms of behavior from sight (Regan urinates on the carpet; Carrie has her period in a communal setting [a gym shower]) are all further connections between the two heroines endowed with supernatural powers.

3.1.2 (Sub)Versions of Female Monstrosity in *Carrie*

King's first published novel, *Carrie*, was an immediate success, and this might have played a part in perpetuating the formula for which he is famous: a realistic, contemporary setting, often small-town communities, and the intrusion of supernatural phenomena.⁴⁶⁰

This is the story of Carrie White, a much put-upon, socially awkward, sixteen-year-old girl, whose latent telekinetic powers bloom once she reaches biological maturity. Her life has been plagued by the crazed religious fanaticism of her mother, and the scorn and hatred of peer groups who make a sport of humiliating her. Her desperate attempts to find her place in the social hierarchy — as represented by the high school — are doomed, since society needs outsiders to be able to construct its own sense of identity in relation to them. High school is presented as a microcosm which reflects society at large, a “place of almost bottomless conservatism and bigotry, a place where the adolescents who attend are no more allowed to rise ‘above their station’ than a Hindu would be allowed to rise above his or her caste.”⁴⁶¹ From the outset, Carrie is presented as different: she is unappealing, clumsy and naïve in the ways of the world. Her mother, a religious zealot, has not prepared her for the real world. She is relegated to the status of victim, the butt of every practical

⁴⁶⁰ *Carrie* has particularly high recognition value and has been referenced in various forms of popular culture (horror novels, comic strips, parodies, TV sitcoms). As remarked by Michael R. Collings, “it has provided an icon for specific elements in American culture” (“A Chronological Look at the Books,” 190). A recent testament to its widespread presence comes from a comment made in reference to the immensely popular *Game of Thrones* TV series. When characterizing Brienne of Tarth, the loyal warrior, Price Peterson remarks: “Basically, a long time ago she got Carrie’d! At a ball her father had thrown for her, all the boys pretended to be fighting over her until she realized they were all just kidding and made her feel like she was super heinous.” “*Game of Thrones*’ Recap: Power Flowers. Webpage. <https://www.yahoo.com/tv/game-of-thrones-recap-high-sparrow-117480022920.html>. Accessed: 28 April, 2015.

⁴⁶¹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 171.

joke (“the pinches, the legs outstretched in school aisles to trip her up, the books knocked from her desk”): her peers vent their anger and frustrations by ‘torturing’ her.⁴⁶²

The novel charts a child’s struggles to break away from her mother, to become a separate subject: if Carrie remains trapped in a dyadic relationship with her dominating parent, she is threatened with a loss of identity since her subjectivity will be incorporated by the all-devouring mother (another archetype of the monstrous-feminine). In Creed’s formulation, the dyadic mother is “the all-encompassing maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal period who threatens symbolically to engulf the infant.”⁴⁶³ Kristeva also clearly sees this as posing a serious threat to the subject: “being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss [...] of the totality of his living being.”⁴⁶⁴

In the opening scene of the novel, Carrie has her first period, while in the girls’ shower, at school.⁴⁶⁵ Since her mother has kept her in the dark about menstruation (considering it to be a sin, a sign of female desire), Carrie is frightened out of her mind and thinks she is bleeding to death. Her classmates react in a nasty way, bombarding her with tampons, showing no sympathy for the poor girl. This communal attack on Carrie seems to be fuelled by resentment, anger and disgust. Carrie is guilty of bleeding in public: something which should stay hidden inside the body has come to the surface.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell points out that menstruation is considered a taboo subject in most societies, and girls having their first period in primitive tribes are often physically separated from the rest of the community to emphasize “the privacy of the act.”⁴⁶⁶ Many cultures surround menstruating women with various prohibitions and taboos. The fear which motivates such strategies (usually exclusionary, demarcating) stems from the assumption that “a woman is polluted or possessed by dangerous spirits” during her period.⁴⁶⁷ Due to these beliefs, menstruation is seen as an exceptional state, “hovering on

⁴⁶² King, *Carrie* (Kent: BCA, 1993), 14.

⁴⁶³ Creed, op.cit., 109. The fear of “psychic obliteration”, of being swallowed up, of the identity sinking into that of the mother, are recurrent motifs in horror texts (cf. *Psycho*, *The Haunting of Hill House*).

⁴⁶⁴ Kristeva, op.cit., 64.

⁴⁶⁵ This setting posed quite a challenge for King, and were it not for the encouragement of his wife, who actually fished out the crumpled-up pages from the wastebasket, he would not have continued with the novel. “I was in a totally foreign environment – a girls’ shower room – and writing about teenage girls. I felt completely at sea. The opening scene revolves around the [...] arrival of Carrie White’s first menstrual period, and as I arrived at this – on page two – I suddenly realized that I (1) had never been a girl, (2) had never had a menstrual cramp or a menstrual period, (3) had absolutely no idea how I’d react to one.” Stephen King, “On Becoming A Brand Name,” in *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976-1982)*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: Pan Books, 1982), 20.

⁴⁶⁶ Quoted by Alex E. Alexander, “Stephen King’s *Carrie*. A Universal Fairytale,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 2 (1979). 284.

⁴⁶⁷ Lindsey, op.cit., 284.

the edge of the supernatural.”⁴⁶⁸ Referring back to Creed’s border-crossing as a typical feature of the abject and horror, we are again confronted with a being who uneasily sits astride the borderline separating the natural from the supernatural. As film theorist Shelley Stamp Lindsey states, “the menstruating adolescent girl occupies a liminal state.”⁴⁶⁹

In a sense, the girls who witnessed Carrie’s rite of passage are forcibly reminded of their own carnal nature and their body’s vulnerabilities. They have been conditioned by society, which has taught them to feel “revulsion” and “disgust”⁴⁷⁰ at the “sight of their female natures.”⁴⁷¹ Women are encouraged to keep their bodies under control at all times, and to hide from the world the unattractive aspects of femininity.

In point of fact, their attitude reflects Kristeva’s theory of the abject, which claims that images of bodily wastes, such as blood, vomit, urine or pus, always fill the subject with disgust and loathing: “Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles.”⁴⁷² These are the products of our bodies which “undermine our identity by their presence as both not-us and us.”⁴⁷³ By demonstrating the fragility of the stable ego, they conjure up the threat of its collapse. Menstrual fluid is seen as a form of defilement, making us recoil. Such “signs of bodily excretions” should be “cleaned up and removed from sight”⁴⁷⁴ because their abject status disturbs identity and order. The construction of the clean and proper body is of the utmost importance because it is a means of separating out “the fully constituted subject from the partially formed one.”⁴⁷⁵

In an article on the importance of pain and masochism in the portrayal of cinematographic monsters, Aviva Briefel points out that, in adapting King’s *Carrie* to the silver screen, director Brian De Palma intentionally structured the opening scene to parallel perhaps the most famous horror sequence of all times, the shower scene from *Psycho*.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ King, *Carrie*, 12.

⁴⁷¹ Douglas Keeseey, “Patriarchal Meditations of *Carrie*: The Book, the Movie, and the Musical,” in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, eds, Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 32.

⁴⁷² Kristeva, op.cit., 102.

⁴⁷³ Clive Bloom, “Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition,” in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 164.

⁴⁷⁴ Creed, op.cit., 38.

⁴⁷⁵ Creed, op.cit., 8.

⁴⁷⁶ The filmic allusion is remarked upon by several critics (eg. Keeseey, op.cit., 39; Browning, op.cit., 34; Lindsey, op.cit., 282; Michael R. Collings, *The Films of Stephen King* [Washington: Starmont House, 1986], 31).

Even the school Carrie attends is called Bates High School (in the film version), undoubtedly as an homage to the genre's masterpiece.

In both *Carrie* (1976) and *Psycho*, the shower is initially presented as a safe haven, a "refuge from external anxieties",⁴⁷⁷ a private place where solace is available for the persecuted heroines. The body is treated as a fetish; it is shown in fragmentary shots, first focusing on the moment of pleasure and then that of pain. In De Palma's film, the scene is charged with eroticism and is accompanied by languorous, sensual music: the camera lingers on Carrie caressing her breasts and thighs, and on the expression of innocent joy on her face. Suddenly, the dreamy atmosphere is interrupted in a shocking manner with the appearance of blood. According to Briefel, the spectatorial position is rendered even more uncomfortable by the heavy intertextual link with *Psycho*: when blood starts to flow from between Carrie's legs, it seems to come from wounds inflicted on the body, rather than being the sign of biological maturity.⁴⁷⁸

De Palma further signals the sudden shift from dream to nightmare via an abrupt change from slow to regular motion. Slow motion camera work has lulled our senses, creating a false sense of security; then we are suddenly torn from this blissful, innocent world and thrust into cruel, noisy, hard reality, as is Carrie. The change is radical. Her days of sexual innocence and ignorance have ended: she acquires a new kind of knowledge about her body; she becomes one of the initiates. Carrie's mother maintained what she viewed as Carrie's prelapsarian state as long as she could, but she has no control over bodily functions. The daughter's body will not obey the mother's dictates, and the arrival of the period is seen as an act of rebellion against her dominance.

The shower sequence turns to horror for both heroines: Marion in *Psycho* is brutally murdered, while Carrie has to suffer the psychologically devastating, heartless attack of her peers. One might even associate this scene with Jackson's "The Lottery", and particularly its grisly ending: the communal stoning of a female cowering in fear (King's concern with community construction and scapegoating mechanisms in *Carrie* reinforces this mental leap). Although not making the connection explicit, Douglas Keesey's remark that the girls in the shower "pelt her [Carrie] with tampons like stones"⁴⁷⁹ also suggests stoning, and the loss of control that is characteristic of mob mentality.

⁴⁷⁷ Briefel, op.cit., 22.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Keesey, "Carrie", 39.

The girls are guilty, not just because of their cruel behavior, venting their hatred on a social ‘misfit’, but because they do not fulfill the role which naturally falls upon them. As pointed out by Alex E. Alexander, “it is the duty of those who know to instruct those who are coming of age.”⁴⁸⁰ The classmates should educate Carrie about the mysteries of womanhood. The gap between the innocence of Carrie and the knowledge and experience of the other girls is glaring.⁴⁸¹ Yet, from their status as the initiated ones, they only try to reinforce the gap, further pushing Carrie away, not admitting her into their circle. Her moment of rite of passage is turned into “a defilement ritual”,⁴⁸² entailing a vicious attack.

The intervention of the gym teacher is needed to create order in the chaotic locker room. Miss Desjardin has some mixed feelings upon arrival: as a teacher, she knows she has to help the girl but, as a woman, she also feels repelled and disgusted by the sight of the weeping, bloody, hysterical Carrie. As she later reveals to the assistant principal, “[m]aybe there’s some kind of instinct about menstruation that makes women want to snarl.”⁴⁸³ Getting over her initial reaction, she tries to soothe the terrified Carrie and enlighten her about female biology, providing guidance to the ignorant girl. Thus, she assumes a maternal role: telling a daughter about menstruation is a role that would naturally belong to the mother, but not within the White family. Margaret White, a widow, is a religious fundamentalist, a fanatic who has filled her house with religious icons and paintings and placed an almost life-size crucifix of the bleeding Jesus in agony in the middle of the living-room. She has not taught her daughter anything about sexuality, as if she thought that by keeping Carrie ignorant, she would remain innocent and free from sin.

Carrie’s suffering continues when she is sent home from school: home, which she approaches with a “hate-love-dread”⁴⁸⁴ feeling, instead of being a place of refuge, brings only further pain, since her mother equates sexuality with sin. Margaret demonizes her daughter’s body and is convinced Carrie could have willed away the ‘curse’ if she had restrained from sinful acts or thoughts: “O Lord, [...] help this sinning woman beside me here see the sin of her days and ways. Show her that if she had remained sinless the Curse

⁴⁸⁰ Alexander, op.cit., 284.

⁴⁸¹ Magistrale emphasizes the marked contrast between the purity and budding sexuality of Carrie and the corrupted sexuality of the ringleader of the attack, a girl called Chris. She knows well how to take advantage of her good looks, and uses them shamelessly to manipulate men: for her, sex is a means to an end (later in the novel she persuades her boyfriend into doing her bidding by either seducing him or withholding sexual favors: “Chris Hargensen has him tied around her finger” [King, *Carrie*, 94]). Magistrale, *The Moral Voyages*, 45.

⁴⁸² Clare Hanson, “Stephen King: Powers of Horror,” in *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*, ed. Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), 141.

⁴⁸³ King, *Carrie*, 24.

⁴⁸⁴ King, *Carrie*, 28.

of Blood never would have come on her. She may have committed the Sin of Lustful Thoughts.”⁴⁸⁵ Margaret hinders Carrie’s growth and maturation in every possible way and forcefully attempts to repress her budding sexuality. Instead of enlightening her daughter about this threshold event, she resorts to physical abuse and locks Carrie up in a closet, “the home of terror”,⁴⁸⁶ where the girl is ordered to get down on her knees and pray for forgiveness. The dark, cramped space (filled with frightening religious images) is like a symbolic womb and Carrie soon reverts to a childlike state inside it, crying, feeling helpless, subordinated to her mother’s rule, not an agent of her own life.

This terrible day, however, also marks the beginning of a slow process of claiming more and more control over her life and distancing herself from her domineering mother. She consciously starts to devote attention to her body, testing its limits, carefully experimenting with her re-discovered telekinetic abilities, even doing weird “exercise sessions.”⁴⁸⁷ The internal changes her body experiences during these moments are carefully detailed by King: “Respiration had fallen to sixteen breaths per minute. Blood pressure up to 190/100. Heartbeat up to 140 [...]. Temperature down to 94.3°.”⁴⁸⁸ Linking the supernatural to its physical symptoms, citing numbers and approaching it in a scientific way, as if reading the documentation of a regular visit to the doctor, enhances the credibility of the scene, and also manages to make it less threatening, less a piece of the unknown. After all, although its origins remain clouded in mystery, telekinesis is a force which Carrie will eventually learn to control and subdue (unlike Regan). There had already been sporadic occurrences of her telekinetic powers during her childhood, but she fully repressed these memories: “but now there was no denying the memory, no more than there could be a denying of the monthly flow.”⁴⁸⁹

Relying upon this “wellspring of power”,⁴⁹⁰ her attempts to break free from the confines of her home intensify. The turning point arrives when she is invited to the school’s Spring Ball, a highly important ritual in the adolescent world. This event triggers a clash of wills between mother and daughter, during which Carrie refuses to back down. Probably for the first time in her life, she says ‘no’ to her mother, meanwhile clearly expressing her will: “I want to try and be a whole person before it’s too late”, adding “I

⁴⁸⁵ King, *Carrie*, 54.

⁴⁸⁶ King, *Carrie*, 53.

⁴⁸⁷ King, *Carrie*, 75.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ King, *Carrie*, 87.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

only want to be let to live my own life. I ... I don't like yours."⁴⁹¹ She warns Margaret that "things are going to change around here",⁴⁹² signaling that she will refuse to be trodden down in the future and that the previously unbalanced power relations will be tipped in her favor, from now on.

One of the girls who participated in the shower room cruelty, Chris Hargensen, decides to take revenge because, when she refuses to comply with the school punishments for what they did to Carrie, she is barred from attending the Prom. This ball is a pivotal event in the novel, since it provides the occasion for another classmate, Sue Snell, to make reparation for her participation in Carrie's humiliation by behaving unselfishly. A change is occurring in Sue's soul and she starts to view herself, her acts, her place in the world and in the school system in a different way. However, this enlightenment, indirectly caused by Carrie, is not something Sue relishes.

She realizes the 'otherness' of Carrie, an atypical teenager, unmolded by peer expectations and society's pressure on women. Sue comes to understand how much they depend upon Carrie, and victims like her, because they use their kind to define and construct their own identities. By humiliating and alienating her at every step, and by distancing themselves from her very markedly, the other girls hope to distance themselves from her fate and the roles associated with Carrie, who "looked the part of the sacrificial goat, the constant butt [...] and she was."⁴⁹³

As an act of atonement, Sue decides to 'lend' her boyfriend, Tommy, the most popular boy in the school, to Carrie as her date for the night (this has a clear, fairy-tale-like ring to it, and many critics have pointed out the similarities between King's novel and Cinderella⁴⁹⁴). It is a brave gesture because, in a certain sense, she runs the risk of losing

⁴⁹¹ King, *Carrie*, 89, 92.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ King, *Carrie*, 10.

⁴⁹⁴ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 34; Badley, op. cit., 67; Yarbro, op.cit., 46. King seems to have re-introduced some of the gory elements of the older versions of the tale which Perrault was careful to omit (the stepsisters cut off parts of their feet and pigeons pluck out their eyes). Bettelheim claims that Cinderella details the various phases in the development of the personality, which an individual has to pass if s/he wants to achieve self-realization (Bettelheim, op.cit., 357). The final stage, that of the fully developed human being, is something which Carrie is never going to achieve. What are the parallels then with the famous tale? We have a gentle, humble heroine who seems to occupy the lowest caste in the school hierarchy. The cruel stepmother is replaced by a cruel mother, and the cruel stepsisters of Cinderella are Carrie's classmates, who torture her persistently. Sue could be the fairy godmother, providing her with the Prince Charming instead of the carriage and the glass slippers. The ball occupies a central position in both narratives, and while Carrie does not have to return by midnight, her enchantment is also temporary: she has to give Tommy back to Sue. As she returns home after the Prom night, she loses both of her slippers, which clearly shows that King was conscious of writing a dark Cinderella story, a "fractured fairy tale" as it is referred to by Winter.

Tommy in the process, as remarked by Joseph Reino.⁴⁹⁵ The fact that Tommy acquiesces to Sue's request is proof of his love for the girl but it also shows that he has no ego problems, his self-image is not overly determined by other people and their opinions or reactions: "He apparently had a high enough tolerance to verbal abuse and enough independence from his peer group to ask Carrie in the first place."⁴⁹⁶

At the Prom, we are witness to Carrie's transformation from ugly duckling to a beautiful swan (another fairy tale motif),⁴⁹⁷ and the long-desired acceptance from her peers seems to be being realized. One of her classmates, upon meeting this new version of Carrie, admiringly exclaims: "You look so DIFFERENT. [...] You're positively GLOWING."⁴⁹⁸ Later, she muses upon what has happened in the following way: "It was as if we were watching a person rejoin the human race."⁴⁹⁹ However, only short-lived happiness is Carrie's lot, and her dream soon turns to nightmare.

Thanks to Chris' manipulation of the votes, Carrie is elected Prom Queen. At the very moment of her triumph, during her coronation, Chris dumps two buckets of pig blood on her, eerily replaying the shower scene: Carrie, once more drenched in blood, "her interior made exterior",⁵⁰⁰ is horribly exposed in front of spectators who are watching her humiliation. Another parallel between the two blood-soaked scenes is the jarring juxtaposition of a pleasurable moment with one of horror. In the shower, Carrie was enjoying a moment of quiet intimacy and peace, relishing her body under the water, and her coronation ceremony similarly assumed a dreamlike quality. In both cases, the sudden appearance of blood signals the destruction of the magic of the moment: "now the fairy tale was green with corruption and evil."⁵⁰¹

Carrie becomes an embodiment of the abject: a human being literally covered in blood. Time seems suspended; the students stand transfixed for a moment, watching the scene with "the mingled fascination and horror with which we view the abject."⁵⁰² One of the survivors recalls her reaction upon seeing the blood-soaked Prom Queen: "It was either laugh or cry [...]."⁵⁰³ This might remind us of Kristeva's observation on how the 'I

⁴⁹⁵ Joseph Reino, *The First Decade, Carrie to Pet Sematary* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 15.

⁴⁹⁶ King, *Carrie*, 85.

⁴⁹⁷ There is a description at the beginning of the novel which likens Carrie to a "frog among swans" (10), further reinforcing this connection with the Andersen tale.

⁴⁹⁸ King, *Carrie*, 134.

⁴⁹⁹ King, *Carrie*, 155.

⁵⁰⁰ Lindsey, op.cit., 289.

⁵⁰¹ King, *Carrie*, 168.

⁵⁰² Hanson, op.cit., 141.

⁵⁰³ King, *Carrie*, 155.

oscillates between a “pole of attraction and repulsion” when encountering the abject.⁵⁰⁴ With the eruption of the first laughter, however, the fates of the students are sealed: Prom Night turns into utter horror as Carrie’s repressed rage erupts with frightening force and with her telekinetic powers she sets the school on fire, killing almost everyone.

Destruction and death follow in her path as she wreaks havoc on a large part of the town, on her way home. Margaret, completely deranged by this time, awaits her daughter with a butcher’s knife. She seriously wounds Carrie, but she still has time to stop her mother’s heart with the power of her mind. The dying Carrie is subsequently found by Sue in a deserted parking lot. A telepathic connection is established between them, and Sue witnesses Carrie’s death in a very intimate way: “Sue tried to pull away, to disengage her mind, to allow Carrie at least the privacy of her dying, and was unable to. She felt that she was dying herself and did not want to see this preview of her own eventual end.”⁵⁰⁵ What Sue glimpses seems to suggest there is no Heaven, no light, no redemption for Carrie, only “the black tunnel of eternity.”⁵⁰⁶ Readers of the novel are disturbed by this dark dénouement since, having had direct access to Carrie’s mind, they feel only sorry for her and cannot join in society’s condemnation of her (condemnation which, ultimately, goes unchallenged).⁵⁰⁷

3.1.3 Communal Exclusion and the Textual Construction of Monstrosity

During the course of the novel, Carrie is variously referred to as “Typhoid Mary”, “witch”, “monster” or “devilspawn.”⁵⁰⁸ Her witch-like status, her ungovernability, her obvious otherness, all present a threat to the purity and stability of the community. According to Dani Cavallaro, societies strive to “classify and explain the abnormal so as to reassert by implication their notions of normality and stability”,⁵⁰⁹ and in the aftermath of the tragedy, Carrie’s case is analyzed ad infinitum by the authorities. What the girls did (forcefully distancing themselves from Carrie and what she represented, in order to construe their identity in relation to the abhorred Other) is repeated, on a major scale, by

⁵⁰⁴ Hanson, op.cit., 140. Carrie’s reaction itself is rendered via an oxymoron: she “tasted the plump, fulsome bitterness of horror.” King, *Carrie*, 167.

⁵⁰⁵ King, *Carrie*, 211.

⁵⁰⁶ King, *Carrie*, 212.

⁵⁰⁷ These feelings are also reflected by the author: in an interview with Douglas E. Winter, King explicitly stated that “I never viewed Carrie as evil. I saw her as good. When she pulls down the house at the end, she is not responsible” (Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 37).

⁵⁰⁸ King, *Carrie*, 96, 88, 133, 88.

⁵⁰⁹ Cavallaro, op.cit., 173.

the society, which has subjected her to the same “strategies of exclusion”⁵¹⁰ that were employed during the Salem witch trials. Ingebretsen claims those trials served as “a socialized rhythm by which a community defined the parameters of the acceptable by repudiating the unacceptable”⁵¹¹ and describes witchcraft as being “functional rather than personal.”⁵¹²

It is important to stress to what extent the larger community is implicated in Carrie’s ultimate tragedy. Holland-Toll calls attention to the fact that “we live within concentric spirals of community”,⁵¹³ starting with family, friends, neighborhood and workplace and extending to city, county and country. The tightest circle, the family, is diseased in Carrie’s case: she has a mentally unbalanced woman for a mother. Margaret clearly foreshadows the long line of destructive parents in King’s works, all bent upon the annihilation of the happiness and well-being of their children (suffice it to think of the physically, emotionally or sexually abusive parents in *The Shining*, “The Body”, *Christine*, *It*, *Gerald’s Game* or *Dolores Clairborne*), a trait succinctly worded in *Christine* as “part of being a parent is trying to kill your kids”.⁵¹⁴

One problematic issue raised by King’s text is why the ‘next’ level of circle (supposedly protecting and safeguarding the individual) does not take over the role of the first one (i.e. the family) when it fails. All the neighbors know that Margaret White is deranged and that she probably poses a threat to her child, yet no one intervenes. Questions of communal responsibility emerge. The politics of non-intervention are revealed to be disastrous in the long run, since later on Carrie’s only way to remedy her untenable situation is to lash out indiscriminately at the world around her.

There is an important scene, early in the novel, which clearly illustrates that if they had wanted to, people would have had ample opportunity and reason to intervene and rescue the little girl from her mother’s encroaching madness. When Carrie was three years old, she glimpsed her neighbor sunbathing in the garden. The accidentally exposed breasts of the girl next door were a fascinating sight for Carrie, since ‘female assets’ were taboo objects in Margaret’s distorted world. The wide-eyed innocence of the little girl is superbly

⁵¹⁰ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 80.

⁵¹¹ Ingebretsen, “Cotton Mather and Stephen King”, 28.

⁵¹² Edward J. Ingebretsen, *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory from the Puritans to Stephen King* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 62. He also points out in his article “Cotton Mather and Stephen King” that the names of Martha Corey and Martha Carrier, both executed in Salem, resonate in Carrie’s name (20).

⁵¹³ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 105.

⁵¹⁴ King, *Christine*, 30.

captured as she points at Stella's breasts, asking: "What are those?"⁵¹⁵ Stella, who describes Carrie as "[s]weet and bright and innocent",⁵¹⁶ strikes up a conversation with the little one. It turns out that Margaret taught Carrie that only bad girls 'grow' breasts, which she calls "dirtypillows."⁵¹⁷ Stella, still a youngster, has her heart in the right place, and her first instinct (upon hearing the horrible indoctrination Carrie is receiving at home) is to "grab that sad little scrap of a girl and run away with her",⁵¹⁸ before further damage is done to her psyche. Unfortunately, the story takes another turn, as Margaret comes out of the house.

For a minute she just goggled as if she couldn't believe it. Then she opened her mouth and whooped. That's the ugliest sound I've ever heard in my life. [...] She just *whooped*. Rage. Complete, insane rage. Her face went just as red as the side of a fire truck and she curled her hands into fists and whooped at the sky. She was shaking all over. I thought she was having a stroke. [...] I thought Carrie was going to faint – or die on the spot. [...] she looked back at me and there was a look ... oh, dreadful. I can't say it. Wanting and hating and fearing ... and *misery*. As if life itself had fallen on her like stones, all at the age of three.⁵¹⁹

Dreadful screaming and crying are heard from the White house following this incident, but no one dares (or cares?) to interfere. Then a weird thing happens: stones start to rain from the sky, hitting nothing else but the White property. People leave their houses and rush into the street to gawk, but no one runs into the house to see if anyone is hurt. This is the first instance that a manifestation of Carrie's telekinetic power is mentioned in the book.⁵²⁰

In the local newspaper, a short article is dedicated to the bizarre incident, but no one cares enough to investigate the causes or to explore the dynamics of the White family. Everyone is aware that Margaret is a religious 'nutcase', yet they leave a little girl in her care as if there was a tacit agreement that by not recognizing the problem, it can be denied and made to disappear. Material damage is done only to the White property, so people keep their distance, thinking it is not their concern, they want no part of it.

⁵¹⁵ King, *Carrie*, 32.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ King, *Carrie*, 33.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Only later is it revealed that the little girl resorted to the preternatural intervention as a defense mechanism, since her mother was actually trying to smother her in a fit of rage and madness. However, terror struck Margaret as soon as she witnessed what Carrie was capable of doing.

The adult Stella, interviewed following the Prom tragedy, muses upon the bikini incident and clearly blames others for what happened at the Ball, not Carrie. She seems to suggest that if people had interfered and taken Carrie into custody when a child, she could have been saved. Education, parental responsibility and the importance of friendship are all recurring topics in King's fiction. Often, when institutions (such as the school system or the government) fail to function in the right way, or horrible family members render a child's life a living hell, friends are offered as a kind of social network, a safety net which can save a person from being destroyed (the sustaining and redeeming power of friendship is thoroughly examined in *It*, *Christine* or "The Body"). Yet, due to the callous attitude of all around her, Carrie is offered no help in rendering her life easier. Keeping in mind all the missed opportunities which might have averted Carrie's fate, we can state that many people are implicated in the catastrophe that resulted.

In her book on disaffirmative horror fiction, Holland-Toll claims that King's text is "one of the most effective depictions of the consequences involved in casual demonization."⁵²¹ She further argues that a so-called "human monster", like Carrie, is the product of the community which is responsible for forcing "monsterhood" upon her.⁵²² By Prom Night, society's demarcation lines are so entrenched that it is impossible for Carrie to cross them. Her attempts to conform, to be accepted by her peers, to become an integral part of the social fabric, donning the "angelic robes of Acceptance",⁵²³ result in tragedy. However, since her status is imposed upon her from the outside, readers also feel pity along with the horror. When she lashes out to punish the people who have made her life miserable, she succumbs to her assigned role and deliberately chooses to act as a monster.

Of particular interest in Carrie's construction as a monster is how firmly her monstrosity is grounded in her body. Her peers reject her partly because of her physical unattractiveness: being slightly overweight, having ugly skin, not wearing make-up or fashionable clothes, she is far removed from the embodiment of ideal femininity. According to Lindsey, Carrie's monstrosity is "explicitly associated with menstruation and female sexuality."⁵²⁴ Nevertheless, her body is also the source of her power and mystery: her telekinetic abilities are related to bodily functions, since they reach their full potential

⁵²¹ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 77.

⁵²² Holland-Toll, op.cit., 76.

⁵²³ King, *Carrie*, 169.

⁵²⁴ Lindsey, op.cit., 284. Her statement is corroborated by King, who stated that "*Carrie* is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality." *Danse Macabre*, 171.

as she reaches her full feminine potential, i.e. child-bearing age. Yet, it is precisely *her body* which is excluded when she uses her wild talent. Telekinesis separates the body from physical action, since it is the ability to move objects solely with one's mind, without any physical mediation. It represents an "attempt to deny the body and its actions" by circumventing "the body's agency in the material world."⁵²⁵

King read an article which speculated that "at least some reported poltergeist activity might actually be telekinetic phenomena",⁵²⁶ and in most cases it occurs in adolescent girls on the threshold of puberty. He used this pseudoscientific theory as the premise of his novel. All throughout the narrative, he aims at establishing a degree of verisimilitude, quoting from journals, articles, news items, eyewitness testimonies and investigative reports to lend his fantastic tale a scientific basis. In the end, the seemingly occult power is reduced to a "genetic recessive occurrence",⁵²⁷ dominant only in females. When couched in such terms of scientific jargon, Carrie's power is made to seem less threatening and imminent. Such wording also reflects society's efforts towards rebalancing itself after its having been upset and the techniques of victimization laid bare.

This plethora of documents also serves the purpose of alienating the reader from the heroine. As pointed out by Douglas Keesey, "most print derealizes people",⁵²⁸ so when reading the dry words of a death certificate, or the succinct wording of a wire report, a distance is created between the reader and the hero. These documents only offer a "refraction of reality."⁵²⁹ To counterbalance this alienation technique, King inserts long passages in which we are offered glimpses into Carrie's thoughts and feelings via her stream of consciousness (this has become a trademark of King: to deliver the "fluid language of the unconscious",⁵³⁰ he uses parenthetical sentences with lower-case I's). These "differing prose textures" are interwoven, continuously clashing in a constant game of counterpointing: objective vs. subjective, rational vs. irrational, scientific vs. horrific.⁵³¹

The aim of those documents interrupting the main narrative is to establish the veracity of the story and to enhance an illusion of reality, but they have an altogether different function from the point of view of society. The need to understand what happened, to clear itself of any blame and be able to categorize Carrie are some of the

⁵²⁵ Lindsey, op.cit., 285.

⁵²⁶ King, *On Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 75.

⁵²⁷ King, *Carrie*, 95.

⁵²⁸ Keesey, "Carrie", 38.

⁵²⁹ Keesey, "Carrie", 37.

⁵³⁰ Keesey, "Carrie", 38.

⁵³¹ Collings, *The Many Facets of Stephen King*, 44.

motives of her community. However, what is lost in this fury of interpretation is her essence as “a human being [...] with hopes and dreams.”⁵³² By the end of the novel, she has approached an almost mythical status and her name has even entered a slang dictionary: “*to rip off a Carrie*” is “to commit arson.”⁵³³ The dictionary entry denotes an act, not a person, so she is remembered for what she did in her final desperation, not for who she really was.

An official government body, The White Commission, is set up to investigate the tragedy and find culprits, since scapegoating is a necessary tactic of communities. They question Sue’s selfless motives, ridicule her altruism (“it is hardly typical of high-school-age adolescents to feel that they have to ‘atone’ for anything”⁵³⁴) and even suspect her of having played a role in the dark scheme. The experts characterize adolescents as monsters, apt to dispatch “quickly and without mercy”⁵³⁵ the low bird in the pecking order, so the novel does not offer a very reassuring view of human nature.

The White Commission’s final report interprets Carrie’s case as an isolated phenomenon and refuses to entertain the possibility of its recurrence. Though the autopsy did reveal strange malformations in her brain, this is not accepted as a final proof of the existence of telekinesis. In the multiplicity of voices which threaten to submerge the main narrative, there are two contrasting viewpoints regarding the scientific status of telekinesis: one is represented by the skeptical White Commission (intent upon finding human culprits and denying the reality of the telekinetic phenomena), and the other is that of the scientific community (bent upon warning the world of the possibility of other people having such powers). The Commission’s verdict (“we find no reason to believe that a recurrence is possible or even likely”⁵³⁶) is subverted by the last document in the book, a letter detailing the telekinetic abilities of a two-year-old girl, whose mother has no conception of the significance of this ‘gift.’ Some critics interpret this as signaling a kind of rebirth of Carrie, an “implicit reincarnation” in the infant Annie.⁵³⁷ It has probably more to do with the return of the repressed: whatever authorities had done to erase Carrie’s terrible power from people’s memory, assuring them it would never occur again, this letter, penned by an almost illiterate mother, discredits official discourse, upsetting its hegemony.

⁵³² King, *Carrie*, 123.

⁵³³ King, *Carrie*, 220.

⁵³⁴ King, *Carrie*, 83.

⁵³⁵ King, *Carrie*, 84.

⁵³⁶ King, *Carrie*, 221.

⁵³⁷ Sears, op.cit., 42.

3.1.4 Bonding via Telepathy

The book offers few instances of sincere, loving human relationships: instead, we are repeatedly confronted with perverted ones. A mother terrorizing her child and denying her personality the space it needs to develop; a father threatening and belittling a teacher who is honestly trying to teach something to the students (the scheming Chris Hargensen's father threatens the school with legal action when he learns about his daughter's being barred from the Prom); classmates jostling for status; school authorities not being perceptive enough to detect the fermenting hatred which is about to erupt, and not knowing their own student body (the school principle cannot remember Carrie's name during the interview following the shower incident: he calls her "Carrie Wright" or "Cassie"⁵³⁸ in turns); callous neighbors not taking action when hearing a three-year-old scream and cry.

To counterbalance this long list of unhealthy relationships, there is the truly deep love between Tommy and Sue, and their sincere efforts to share some of the joy in their lives with Carrie. In her aforementioned article on the relationship between woman and monster, Williams claims that the "strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be [...] a flash of sympathetic identification",⁵³⁹ which statement is amply supported by King's text. Focusing on Sue, and the hard-gained knowledge she acquires, I would like to analyze the final moments in Carrie's life, in which we vicariously participate via Sue's consciousness, since a telepathic connection becomes established between them. The scene moves on a trajectory from utter horror, incomprehension and revulsion, to a bond born of sympathy. Albeit forged too late, this is the only time when Carrie experiences a relationship approximating the idea of sisterhood.

When Sue stumbles upon Carrie's body in the deserted parking lot, she effectively objectifies it, being "reminded of dead animals she had seen on 495."⁵⁴⁰ Carrie is not yet dead, but is beyond saving, hanging to life by a thread. "[C]ompassion for Carrie broke through the dullness of her shock"⁵⁴¹ as Sue sits beside her, gently turning her over. During the following moments, the apparently meaningless, dying body, this "bleeding freak",⁵⁴² acquires meaning in all its awfulness and pain – all because of companionship. Carrie regains consciousness and offers Sue a glimpse of her essence, in effect placing Sue in the

⁵³⁸ King, *Carrie*, 20.

⁵³⁹ Williams, op.cit., 21.

⁵⁴⁰ King, *Carrie*, 208.

⁵⁴¹ King, *Carrie*, 209.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

position of being the only character who understands Carrie's personality: for a short time, "[t]hey shared the awful totality of perfect knowledge."⁵⁴³

Carrie's first reaction is to accuse Sue of having played a part in her Prom humiliation, "[t]he latest dirty trick in a long series of dirty tricks."⁵⁴⁴ Sue receives a taste of Carrie's life and past, her sad story of suffering and victimization, with images flashing by in a dizzying fashion, making Sue's "mind reel helplessly, hopelessly."⁵⁴⁵ For a schizophrenic second, Sue is even confronted with her own image: assuming the identity and position of the target during the heartless attack in the shower room, she sees herself through Carrie's eyes ("ugly, caricatured all mouth, cruelly beautiful"⁵⁴⁶).

To defend herself against the accusation, she lets Carrie invade her mind.

(look carrie look inside me)

And Carrie looked.

The sensation was terrifying. Her mind and nervous system had become a library. Someone in desperate need ran through her, fingers trailing lightly over shelves of books, lifting some out, scanning them, putting them back, letting some fall, leaving the pages to flutter wildly

(glimpses that's me as a kid hate him daddy o mommy wide lips o teeth bobby pushed me o my knee car want to ride in the car we're going to see aunt cecily mommy come quick i made pee)

in the wind of memory; and still on and on, finally reaching a shelf marked TOMMY, subheaded PROM. Books thrown open, flashes of experience, marginal notations in all the hieroglyphs of emotion, more complex than the Rosetta Stone.

Looking. Finding more than Sue herself had suspected – love for Tommy, jealousy, selfishness, a need to subjugate him to her will on the matter of taking Carrie, disgust for Carrie herself,

(she could take better care of herself she does look just like a GODDAM TOAD)

hate for Miss Desjardin, hate for herself.

But no ill will for Carrie personally, no plan to get her in front of everyone and undo her.

The feverish feeling of being raped in her most secret corridors began to fade. She felt Carrie pulling back, weak and exhausted.⁵⁴⁷

In spite of the strong word "rape", telepathy is presented as the purest form of communication, with no secrets, lies, distortions coming between people, as if the soul were stripped down to its essence, standing naked in front of the other. If we consider the

⁵⁴³ King, *Carrie*, 210.

⁵⁴⁴ King, *Carrie*, 209.

⁵⁴⁵ King, *Carrie*, 210.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

“cacophony of perspectives”⁵⁴⁸ vying with each other (which might remind us of the great Gothic predecessors, since *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Doctor Jekyll* are all “composite texts”,⁵⁴⁹ made up of fragments, building blocks of different genres), this scene stands out as the only instance of Carrie revealing her inner reality to someone else. The scene, an almost Kristevan scenario, concludes with presenting Sue with the “vision of the abject corpse.”⁵⁵⁰ “Sue was suddenly overwhelmed with terror, the worse because she could put no name to it”,⁵⁵¹ the all-too-familiar incapacity of many characters in horror narratives upon encountering something which, in being so awful, exceeds their ability to describe it.

As Sue staggers away from the dead Carrie, her period arrives, which further links the two girls together. The book started with the arrival of Carrie’s menstruation and concludes with that of Sue, constituting a curious framework to the novel. Blood almost always connotes sacrifice, and this last potent image condenses the blood shed by the little town, which, it is strongly implied, will never recover from the losses it has suffered: “The over-all impression is one of a town that is waiting to die.”⁵⁵²

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the deeply shaken Sue takes it upon herself to clear Carrie of the monstrous image that has come to be attached to her name, but learns the hard way that the truth is sometimes not allowed to be revealed. The short-sighted adult community, and the so-called experts sitting in The White Commission, are not interested in finding out the truth: they need a scapegoat, they need to close down the case and are not willing to face their own responsibility for what has happened. What is more, Susan receives the same kind of treatment which was Carrie’s lot previously: the investigative committee subjects her to strategies of exclusion (“The White Commission [...] used me as a handy scapegoat”)⁵⁵³ and turns a deaf ear to her heartfelt appeals when she tries to make the world understand the truth behind Carrie’s story. This aspect of the story further places it at the disaffirmative end in Holland-Toll’s categorization of horror texts. The adult world’s rejection of the possibility of doing some soul-searching, and the scathing criticism King directs towards unfeeling teenagers and the unethical behavior most of them display, offer little in the way of redemption. There is no real resolution to the story, with the downbeat ending bringing death to many, including the ambiguous monster/victim heroine.

⁵⁴⁸ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 33.

⁵⁴⁹ Sears, op.cit., 36.

⁵⁵⁰ Hanson, op.cit., 144.

⁵⁵¹ King, *Carrie*, 211.

⁵⁵² King, *Carrie*, 219.

⁵⁵³ King, op.cit., 76.

In an intriguing article focusing on teen hierarchical structures and “popular girl cliques”,⁵⁵⁴ Alison M. Kelly uses Rachel Simmons’s book *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (2002), which probes cinematic instances of the manifestation of underlying female anger and frustration. Kelly claims that although males also figure in *Carrie*, the tragedy originates, is orchestrated, and is fulfilled via females.⁵⁵⁵ Relying on Rosalind Wiseman’s study of teens and power, *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (2002), Kelly sets up a table showcasing the hierarchy of Bates High. At the top, we have the so-called “Queen Bee”,⁵⁵⁶ the reigning goddess of the high school world. According to Kelly, this role is fulfilled by Chris, owing to her “charisma, force, money, looks, will, and manipulation.”⁵⁵⁷ However, she acts more like a female bully than a benevolent queen. Mention has already been made of her manipulative skills and how she does not shy away from exploiting people and using her body to achieve her goals. She is like a puppet master, an apt simile in view of the fact that the fateful buckets of blood are held in place with a cord, high up on a beam above the podium where the coronation takes place, and it is Chris who pulls the rope, releasing the buckets to dump their awful contents upon Carrie.

Lower in the hierarchy is Sue, who corresponds to Wiseman’s “Torn Bystander”, “[c]onstantly conflicted between doing the right thing and her allegiance to the clique ... she’s [...] caught in the middle of a conflict between two girls.”⁵⁵⁸ In the natural course of things, she belongs to an upper caste, to the ‘elite’ of high school society: a popular, good girl, beloved both by her peers and teachers. However, when things go out of control in the locker room, Sue feels her ethical principles have been violated. Musing upon the event afterwards, she “thought herself suddenly loathsome”,⁵⁵⁹ and she begins her journey towards becoming wiser, to developing more empathy, and to freeing herself from the

⁵⁵⁴ Simmons quoted by Alison M. Kelly, “The Queen Bee, the Prom Queen, and the Girl Next Door: Teen Hierarchical Structures in *Carrie*,” in *The Films of Stephen King: From Carrie to Secret Window*, ed. Tony Magistrale (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11.

⁵⁵⁵ Tony Magistrale arrives at the same conclusion: “With its emphasis on prom queens, menstruation, tampons, dating, clothes, makeup, and hair, women are located at the center of *Carrie*. The camera’s gaze may often embody Mulvey’s gender prejudices in the objectification of these women, but the females in this film also occupy positions of power that would appear to extend and qualify Mulvey’s thoughts on the misogyny of the cinemagraphic gaze. For as much as this movie focuses on the objectification of women, it also insists that women wield the real power.” In *Hollywood’s Stephen King* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 31. Also see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975).

⁵⁵⁶ Kelly remarks that in the film the school’s colors are yellow and black, and “their mascot is the Stinger”, further solidifying the relevance of Wiseman’s Bee-Hive thesis to King’s story (op.cit., 15).

⁵⁵⁷ Wiseman quoted by Kelly, op.cit., 12.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ King, *Carrie*, 48.

constricting manacles of conformity. In a sense, her decision to help Carrie can be interpreted as an “act of social rebellion”,⁵⁶⁰ because she consciously upsets the normal order by surrendering her date and her likely title of Prom Queen to the most downtrodden girl in the school – thereby declaring herself independent from peer pressure and showing “her ability to do without social affirmation.”⁵⁶¹ What she did not take into account was what the adult world would make of her magnanimous gesture after the tragedy, how adults would twist and distort it to fit their ends (clearing themselves of the blame and finding a convenient scapegoat).

At the bottom of Wiseman’s hierarchy stands the “Target”, the “victim, set up by the other girls to be humiliated, made fun of, excluded ... [her] style of dress, behavior, and such are outside the norms acceptable to the clique.”⁵⁶² While there is no need to elaborate upon the applicability of this description to Carrie, it may be worthwhile to point out that, during the course of the novel, she repeatedly becomes a *literal* target: first in the shower scene, when objects (tampons, sanitary napkins) are being thrown at her amid the girls’ frenzied chanting, then during the coronation scene with the blood being dumped upon her, and finally, when attempts are made against her life (her mother stabs her in the back and Chris’s boyfriend tries to run her over).

This seemingly unchallengeable hierarchy, with the roles carefully allocated (recalling the Indian caste system previously mentioned by King), is shaken and subverted when the “Queen Bee” is denied entry to the Prom, the “Torn Bystander” renounces participation in the same ritual (and with this decision she is ‘torn’ no more: she explicitly sides with the “Target”), and the “Target”, incredibly, rises up the ladder and threatens to usurp the role of the queen. This she will not allow, hence the revenge scheme and the resulting tragedy.

⁵⁶⁰ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, 97.

⁵⁶¹ Keeseey, *Carrie.*, 33.

⁵⁶² Wiseman quoted by Kelly, *op.cit.*, 13.

3.1.5 Failed Feminine Attempts at Empowerment by Authorship

To connect Carrie's figure more markedly to the writer protagonists who will appear in the following chapters, I would like to expand an idea proposed by John Sears in his book *Stephen King's Gothic* (2011). He calls Carrie the "undeveloped, nascent prototype of King's writer-solitaires", with the Prom tragedy being her "work".⁵⁶³ In a sense, she (or rather, her body) is writing and directing the tragic destiny of the participants of the Prom. She decides to become an author of misery: "It was time to teach them a lesson."⁵⁶⁴ Just like in the case of any author's masterpiece, there are numerous attempts at interpretation: all the documents in the book (the newspaper clippings, the excerpts from scientific journals, the court hearings, the sensational accounts in the tabloid press, and even the school graffiti) are geared towards solving her case, revealing the mystery of her deed and arriving at some kind of an understanding. These interpretative efforts, reflecting "the human desire to explain phenomena, to digest and to rationalize reality",⁵⁶⁵ combined with the account of her deed, constitute the book: they are "textualised into the novel itself."⁵⁶⁶ Her ability to communicate via telepathy could also be linked to writing, since both are free from the constraints of space and King himself has described writing as a form of telepathy and telepathy as a form of art.⁵⁶⁷

Interestingly enough, other female characters could also be looked upon as authors. Chris, "the brains of the affair",⁵⁶⁸ concocts a revenge scheme and has her will done by rigging the election and manipulating people. However, once she sets the plan in motion, it eventually spirals out of her control and she is director of it no longer. Carrie takes over this role, and when Chris and her boyfriend Billy try to run her over, she sends the car crashing into a wall, instantly killing both youngsters.

Sue also makes a plan, but, in contrast with that of Chris, it is a benign one, meant to forward the happiness of Carrie, not to destroy it: her deep sense of remorse triggers her to come up with the idea of lending Tommy for Prom Night. However, similarly to Chris, once she takes action, she seems to lose control over the events, which evolve without her direct participation (she stays home during the Ball).

⁵⁶³ Sears, op.cit., 40.

⁵⁶⁴ King, *Carrie*, 170.

⁵⁶⁵ Leigh A. Ehlers, "Carrie: Book and Film," *Literature Film Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1981):33.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid. In emphasizing the written aspect of the story, it is worthwhile pointing out that the closing document of the book is another piece of written text: the aforementioned letter, detailing the budding telekinetic abilities of a little girl.

⁵⁶⁷ King, *On Writing*, 103.

⁵⁶⁸ King, *Carrie*, 102.

Sue's other attempt at authorship connects her to the art of writing more directly: following the tragedy, she tries to shed light upon what has happened by writing an autobiography, entitled *My Name is Susan Snell*, in which she aims at clarifying the exact circumstances which led to the disaster. The opening pages of her work give the impression that she is the only one who has the correct perspective on the fateful night's events: "There's one thing no one has understood about what happened in Chamberlain on Prom Night."⁵⁶⁹ She is partly motivated by a desire to clear her name (The White Commission has accused her of having been a conspirator), but she is also honestly making an effort to dispel the horrible image attached to poor Carrie's name ("This is the girl they keep calling a monster. I want you to keep that firmly in mind. The girl who could be satisfied with a hamburger and a dime root beer after her only school dance").⁵⁷⁰ However, I think one major reason for her writerly ambition is to make sense of this trauma, to digest it, to grasp it so that she can move on with her life: "This little book is done now. I hope it sells well so I can go someplace where nobody knows me. I want to think things over, decide what I'm going to do between now and the time when my light is carried down that long tunnel into blackness ..."⁵⁷¹ By putting her story down in writing, she hopes to gain some sort of control over events which were out of everyone's control in the end, and finally arrive at an understanding of something incomprehensible.⁵⁷²

While the centrality of authorship and engendering texts have already been detailed, another key concept in *Carrie* is the act of reading. The novel can also be considered as revolving around misreading and misinterpretation.

Margaret White, a devout Catholic, positions herself as a passive reader, characterized by a strict adherence to Scripture. For her, the written word of the Bible is the cornerstone of her life, but she is guilty of misinterpreting the passages since she blindly equates sexuality, or even biological maturation, with sin, as something to be punished. Her entire life is guided by the dictates of religion and she reads, or rather, misreads God's intention into every nuance of mundane life. For example, when Carrie

⁵⁶⁹ King, *Carrie*, 76.

⁵⁷⁰ King, *Carrie*, 133.

⁵⁷¹ King, *Carrie*, 221. Carrying on after a major tragedy and picking up the broken pieces of one's life is a message King delivers repeatedly. In one of the most touching scenes of *The Shining*, the little Danny is lectured thus by his elderly friend: "The world's a hard place, Danny. It don't care. It don't hate you and me, but it don't love us, either. Terrible things happen in the world, and they're things no one can explain. [...] But see that you get on. That's your job in this hard world, to keep your love alive and see that you get on, no matter what. Pull your act together and just go on" (King, *The Shining*, 446).

⁵⁷² This characteristic of writing is also displayed in King's "The Body", more overtly focusing on a budding writer's life.

refuses to eat her pie, saying that it gives her pimples, Margaret promptly retorts: “Your pimples are the Lord’s way of chastising you.”⁵⁷³

Carrie rebels against her mother’s rule, she does not want to live ‘only’ as a reader, a follower of external dictates, she aspires to become an author, a writer, an agent of her life who can decide with autonomy and independence. Unfortunately, she is also guilty of misreading and misinterpreting people and situations around her. Granted, the years of hazing, abuse and repeated scenes of humiliation have eroded her naïve trust in people (still apparent in the infamous bikini scene, when she was just a little girl). However, she is mistaken in suspecting Sue of foul play and during the aforementioned mind-invasion scene, Carrie has to become a reader to gain access to the truth.

At the Prom, she is inclined to misread the students’ reaction in the worst possible way: when the events are filtered through her consciousness, we only learn that “someone began to laugh”, “[t]hey were laughing at her again”,⁵⁷⁴ with the emphasis falling on “again.” She is reading the episode as the ultimate trick, with everyone conniving against her. This is untrue, because the revenge scheme was the brainchild of only one person, Chris, and apart from her boyfriend, no one knew about it. Most of the Prom participants were honestly appalled by the sight of blood, and the first laugh is described by one survivor as “raw and hysterical and awful.”⁵⁷⁵ Clearly, this is not joyful laughter, not an expression of happiness, not “the way a person laughs when they see something funny and gay”⁵⁷⁶ (and there is no mention of a happy reaction from Chris, either). Importantly, the first laugh is preceded by a scream, which seems to set the tone for the laughter: “It was one of those things where you laugh or go crazy.”⁵⁷⁷ As detailed before, this oscillation between laughing and crying evokes the attraction/repulsion of the siren song of the abject (embodied by Carrie’s blood-covered body).

It has already been mentioned that Sue’s decision to become an author is partly motivated by her desire to clear all the misreading and misinterpretation surrounding Carrie (already present during her life, but even more so following her untimely death, when her ‘monsterization’ clearly serves a social purpose). On the Commission’s and the community’s part, it is almost a case of willful misinterpretation, to neglect evidence which refutes their version of the story (the opinion of scientists, who believe that Carrie’s

⁵⁷³ King, *Carrie*, 89.

⁵⁷⁴ King, *Carrie*, 167, 168.

⁵⁷⁵ King, *Carrie*, 154.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ King, *Carrie*, 155.

telekinesis should not be treated as an isolated case and that there is a strong probability of its recurrence). The irony of Sue's effort is that while she aims to rehabilitate Carrie's reputation and position herself as the correct 'reader' of events, she, too, becomes an object of others' reading, a victim of misreading and misinterpretation,⁵⁷⁸ and is turned into a scapegoat, tainted by her involvement with the 'monster.'

In his analysis of Carrie's death scene, Sears emphasizes the "written-ness of human subjectivity."⁵⁷⁹ King utilizes the metaphor of library, with books containing the essence of a person: memories, feelings, impressions and experiences. A telepath is also called a 'mind-reader', which designation posits the mind as a repository of written material at the disposal of someone endowed with telepathy. Jacques Derrida refers to telepathy as "admitting a foreign body into one's head",⁵⁸⁰ which seems slightly threatening, implying an invasion, a violation of our innermost private sphere. In fact, such an intrusion might reveal surprises even to the 'host', as it is implied by King when describing Carrie "[f]inding more than Sue herself had suspected."⁵⁸¹

Sears views the final encounter between the two girls as an instance of "ethical behaviour, a welcoming-in of the other within the self."⁵⁸² Sue, by inviting Carrie to enter her mind, offering her access to her mental library, establishes a peculiar sort of bond (maybe even transcending the physical 'fusion' of love-making, often considered the quintessence of bonding). This mental fusion, this telepathic encounter, helps Carrie understand how and why her peers saw and treated her the way they did, and dispels for a short time the dreadfulness of being "alone."⁵⁸³ King repeatedly uses the word "alone" in connection with Carrie,⁵⁸⁴ and she herself bemoans her solitariness, in a poetry assignment written for class: "Why do I feel so all alone?"⁵⁸⁵ Sears suggests that aloneness which, in Carrie's case, is "a socially enforced solitude",⁵⁸⁶ breeds monstrosity. This remark, of course, recalls the ur-text of such narratives, *Frankenstein*. Thus, Sears agrees with

⁵⁷⁸ In De Palma's film, Sue's being misread by others is already apparent during an earlier scene, in which Miss Desjardin, the gym teacher, after she learns of Sue's plan of lending Tommy to Carrie for the ball, calls Sue to her office. She is distrustful of Sue's good intentions, and suspects her of having ulterior motives.

⁵⁷⁹ Sears, op.cit., 51.

⁵⁸⁰ Quoted by Sears, ibid.

⁵⁸¹ King, *Carrie*, 210.

⁵⁸² Sears, op.cit., 52.

⁵⁸³ King's stance upon this word rings clear in the following quote: "Alone. Yes, that's the key word, the most awful word in the English tongue. Murder doesn't hold a candle to it and hell is only a poor synonym ..." King, *'Salem's Lot* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 305.

⁵⁸⁴ King, *Carrie*, 39, 40, 56, 69.

⁵⁸⁵ King, *Carrie*, 69. The verse she penned in her seventh grade further reinforces Sears's idea that Carrie is a prototype of King's writer-solitarities.

⁵⁸⁶ Sears, op.cit., 52.

Holland-Toll that Carrie's monstrosity is forced upon her from the outside – and this parallel with Shelley's text can be carried further if we keep in mind that it was the monster's appearance which triggered the flight response in people, with the one notable exception of the blind De Lacey. Carrie is also found repellent by her peers, who are not willing to see the person hiding beneath the unappealing exterior.

3.2 The Castrating Mother as Terrible Muse: Writing as a Way out of Misery

Misery is connected to *Carrie* at various points: the centrality of the body (especially the abject body, its experiences and traumas) is one of them, while another is the construction of monstrosity, since the source of horror is a monstrous female in both cases. However, while in the chapter dedicated to *Carrie* it was my intention to clear the protagonist of the blame and I argued against her monstrosity, in the case of *Misery* it would be hard to defend the deeds of the clearly psychotic character. In fact, this work brings into focus “the destructive, potentially castrating nature of women.”⁵⁸⁷ A third link between the two novels is writing, since *Misery* is a highly autobiographical work, reflecting King’s views on authorship, creativity and his connection with the reading public (sometimes viewed as monstrous).⁵⁸⁸ *Carrie* is not so overtly concerned with these issues, but in the last chapter of my analysis of that novel, I explored the importance of reading, writing, misreading and misinterpretation, even describing Carrie as a prototype for King’s later “writer-solitaires.”⁵⁸⁹

Misery is the story of Paul Sheldon, world-famous author of a series of historical romances featuring the brave and beautiful heroine Misery Chastain. Although he enjoys financial prosperity due to the *Misery* books, Sheldon looks down on these works and hopes to gain the critics’ admiration with what he considers his ‘serious fiction.’⁵⁹⁰ When he embarks on a journey to celebrate the completion of his ‘non-Misery’ novel, *Fast Cars*, he is surprised by a snowstorm, and drives his car off the road. He is rescued by Annie

⁵⁸⁷ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 126.

⁵⁸⁸ The novel is also concerned with being “a publishing phenomenon” (George Beahm, ed., *The Stephen King Companion* [London: Warner Books, 1989], 23) and a celebrity: King’s feelings of unease because of being in the public eye and the fear of the ultimate price he will have to pay for being such a well-known figure, all rise to the surface here.

⁵⁸⁹ Sears, op.cit., 40.

⁵⁹⁰ This duality, or clash between genre fiction and ‘serious fiction’, also features prominently in *The Dark Half*. The protagonist, Thad Beaumont, writes extremely violent pulp thrillers (bringing financial prosperity) under the pseudonym George Stark, who functions as a dark alter ego for Thad (trouble arises when this pseudonym comes to life, encroaching upon Thad’s life). The division between these two types of fiction is even more striking in this novel than in *Misery*, since the writer assumes a different ‘identity’, a different name when producing the two genres. In the words of Darryl Jones, Thad “literally splits himself in two” (op.cit., 142). Steven Bruhm remarks that the novel exemplifies the “fear of writing as an addiction and as something that will fragment us, alienate us from our families and ourselves”, adding that “[i]f the Enlightenment gothic documents a self-splitting that is the result of the repression of desires, King’s postmodern gothic documents the fear of self-splitting that is the result of documentation, of the act of writing, and of representing the self” (“On Stephen King’s Phallus, or the Postmodern Gothic,” in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, eds, Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998], 78-79).

Wilkes, a former nurse, who takes the seriously wounded man to her isolated farmhouse and nurses him back to health – without telling anyone about her ‘precious find.’ The woman, who defines herself as his “number-one fan”,⁵⁹¹ subjects Paul to various physical and psychological tortures and turns him into her pet writer, forcing him to write a novel just for her (in the process resurrecting Misery, who died in the last *Misery* book – to Paul’s immense relief). Although the book eventually ends with Paul overcoming Annie, what leaves a greater impression on the reader is the twist given to the common Gothic plot of a villainous figure holding a fragile victim in captivity: in this case, the victim is male, and the victimizer, the updated Gothic villain, is a female serial killer.

In Creed’s list of the different types of female monsters, *Misery*’s villain, Annie Wilkes, can be categorized as the castrating woman. This figure undermines Freud’s theory regarding castration, in which he invariably attributes the horrifying aspect of woman to her being a castrated, mutilated creature (and places the father into the position of authority and agency, as the one who threatens the male child with castration). Positioning the woman as castrator instead of being castrated endows her with power and agency. According to Creed, Freud downplays the mother’s active role in ensuring the child’s entry into the symbolic order, and attributes the separation of the mother from the child to the intervention of the father. However, through a “series of physical and psychic” castrations associated with the maternal body, and the “processes of infant socialization”, she plays a crucial role in achieving the separation, the rupture of the dyadic relationship between mother and child.⁵⁹²

So in Creed’s opinion, the woman is attributed an active role, and the male a passive one (this applies well to the story arc of the first part of King’s text). She mentions several cases when the woman’s threatening potential erupts as a result of symbolic castration.⁵⁹³ An often cited example is *Fatal Attraction* (1987), where the female protagonist turns into a psychotic stalker bent upon the possession of her one-time lover because she is emotionally unfulfilled and deprived of husband and children. The female lead of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992) follows the same path, although what she lacks is more overtly connected to the notion of motherhood (after losing both her unborn baby and her husband, she infiltrates the home of the woman whom she unjustly accuses of her tragedy, and attempts to replace her, both as wife and mother). Creed also includes less

⁵⁹¹ Stephen King, *Misery* (Great Britain: New English Library, 1987), 6.

⁵⁹² Creed, op.cit., 166.

⁵⁹³ Creed, op.cit., 122.

conventional female monsters into her discussion, asserting that these psychotic monsters, who are not castrated, but *castrating*, might even escape punishment: she mentions the “castrating female psychotic”⁵⁹⁴ (e.g. in *Basic Instinct*), and the *femme castratrice*, who often appears in rape-revenge films (a subgenre detailing how victims of rape avenge the horrible deed committed upon them).⁵⁹⁵ King provides no definite answer to the reason behind Annie’s madness, but it is strongly suggested that she suffers from mental illness (probably manic-depressive disorder).

3.2.1 The Shifting Power Dynamics in *Misery*

3.2.1.1 Victim-Victimizer

Focusing upon the weird connection between Annie and Paul, I believe that it can be interpreted in multiple ways: they may be seen as trapped within the context of a *victim-victimizer*, a *reader-writer*, or a *mother-child* relationship. However, one common thread running through all these approaches is the attention given to the body and its sensations.

If we concentrate upon the *victim-victimizer* aspect of the novel, we can see that Paul is subject to constant monitoring. According to Jack Morgan, this is a clear “marker of victimization”,⁵⁹⁶ since Paul’s personal space is frequently invaded and he is stripped of any sense of privacy (he even has to relieve himself in Annie’s presence). Along with the psychological terror, Paul also suffers on a physical level: Annie invades his body with IV tubes, needles and pre-operation shots, disrupting the integrity of the skin, cutting him open. Skin is “a fragile container”,⁵⁹⁷ a delicate boundary separating the inside and the outside, and damage to it might shatter the image of the proper, clean self. The familiar body can be easily turned into an uncanny object if it is injured, and the first time Paul pulls back the blanket to confront the aftermath of the accident, he gapes in horror at himself: “he stared with horror at what he had become below the knees.”⁵⁹⁸

Annie, the victimizer, is an embodiment of the monstrous feminine, a castrating female, who symbolically emasculates the male hero. Utilizing phallic weapons (axe and knife), on two different occasions she carries out amputations to punish Paul, and although

⁵⁹⁴ Creed, op.cit., 123.

⁵⁹⁵ The film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) is a great example for this subgenre as it figures a literal castration: the former rape-victim, turned avenger, cuts off the member of her assailant and lets him bleed to death.

⁵⁹⁶ Morgan, op.cit., 84.

⁵⁹⁷ Kristeva, op.cit., 53.

⁵⁹⁸ King, *Misery*, 42.

he loses ‘only’ a foot and a thumb, dismembered limbs always evoke castration anxieties.⁵⁹⁹ To make it even more clear, Annie explicitly threatens him with the dreaded act: “You’re lucky I didn’t cut off your man-gland. I thought of it, you know.”⁶⁰⁰ No wonder, then, that Paul lives in constant fear of literal castration: “He was suddenly, utterly sure that she meant to pull the knife from the wall and castrate him with it.”⁶⁰¹

To further underline Paul’s position as victim, King repeatedly uses images of oral rape. *Misery* begins with Annie pulling Paul out of the wreckage of his car and taking him home. At one point, his breathing stops and she has to resuscitate him. “Then there was a mouth clamped over his, [...] and the wind from this woman’s mouth blew into his own mouth and down his throat [...] and [...] he smelled her on the outrush of the breath she had forced into him the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman.”⁶⁰² Though Paul is disgusted by her breath, it proves to be the kiss of life: he later recalls “being raped back into life by the woman’s stinking breath.”⁶⁰³ In a sense, Paul is forced into the position of a passive, female victim whose body is a playground for the enactment of her rapist’s fantasies. According to Kathleen Margaret Lant, Annie giving Paul injections and making him swallow pills (often thrusting her fingers into his mouth) also evoke the image of rape.⁶⁰⁴

Later on, this rape imagery returns with a vengeance, to constitute a curious framework to the novel. Paul and Annie’s final battle starts with Paul throwing a heavy typewriter at Annie while her attention is engaged elsewhere (Paul tricked her into believing that he set on fire his new *Misery* novel: he shows her the finished manuscript and then drops a match on top of it, and while she is desperately trying to put out the fire, Paul attacks her).⁶⁰⁵ He pushes himself up from his wheelchair and totters “*erect* on his

⁵⁹⁹ It might also be interesting to note that Annie is likened to the sandman: “[...] this was Annie Wilkes pretending to be Misery Chastain pretending to be the sandman.” Paul imagines that what she is throwing is “not the soothing sand of sleep but poisoned sand”, effectively killing people (King, *Misery*, 35, 209). E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” is under scrutiny in Freud’s “The ‘Uncanny’”, where he elaborates upon the castration-complex in detail, explicitly connecting it to the loss of limbs or eyes (Freud, 244). After losing his thumb, Paul experiences writer’s block: he feels as if he had “lost some vital ingredient, and the mix had become a lot less *potent* as a result”, thereby explicitly showing how these amputations function as figurative castrations (King, *Misery*, 278 – emphasis added).

⁶⁰⁰ King, *Misery*, 296.

⁶⁰¹ King, *Misery*, 239.

⁶⁰² King, *Misery*, 5.

⁶⁰³ King, *Misery*, 7.

⁶⁰⁴ Kathleen Margaret Lant, “The Rape of Constant Reader: Stephen King’s Construction of the Female Reader and Violation of the Female Body in *Misery*,” in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, eds, Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 174.

⁶⁰⁵ Later it turns out he kept the real manuscript hidden under his mattress, and that what he burned were just “written rejects and culls” (King, *Misery*, 354).

right foot” while Annie is “writhing and moaning”⁶⁰⁶ on the floor (emphasis added). Natalie Schroeder calls our attention to the juxtaposition of the words “erect” and “moaning”, which highlights the sexual undertones of the scene.⁶⁰⁷ Then Paul falls on Annie, “lying squarely on top of her like a man who means to commit rape”⁶⁰⁸ and he crams his manuscript down her throat, silencing her: “*I’m gonna rape you, all right, Annie. [...] So suck my book. Suck my book. Suck on it until you fucking CHOKE.*”⁶⁰⁹ King challenges the ‘traditional’ rape scene in the first chapter, but then he reverts to the conventional paradigm and lets the male hero (victim-turned-victimizer) subordinate the woman and commit his bizarre version of rape on her.

As Keesey has pointed it out, even though Paul is victimized for most of the time and occupies a feminine position confronting a woman characterized by her bulk, strength and her androgynous or downright masculine qualities (“[s]he was a big woman who [...] seemed to have no feminine curves at all”⁶¹⁰), in the end he still emerges triumphant, reasserting traditional male dominance and authority.⁶¹¹

The suffering Paul undergoes could be viewed as an ultimate test of manhood, which is a frequent characteristic of action films, where the protagonist (the likes of Dirty Harry or Rambo) undergoes various humiliations and miseries before defeating the enemy.⁶¹² The deeper the hero is pushed down, the greater the laud that is accorded to him once he emerges victorious from his desperate situation. So while at first sight a ‘man of words’, a man of the mind, is a long way from the physically strong, ‘tough guys’ of typical action movies, the underlying structure of the novel bears a strong resemblance to their situation. King’s twist consists of placing a woman in the role of the assailant, one who poses a physical threat to the life of the protagonist, making him suffer her power and feel his subordinate position throughout.

Paul imagines his adventures outside the room (where he is imprisoned) to be within the context of a sporting competition. In a sportscaster’s voice, he continuously comments upon his action, probably to deflect at least some of the terror he is experiencing (he is literally risking his life each time he disobeys his tormentor).

⁶⁰⁶ King, *Misery*, 346.

⁶⁰⁷ Natalie Schroeder, “Stephen King’s *Misery*: Freudian Sexual Symbolism and the Battle of the Sexes,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 2 (1996): 145.

⁶⁰⁸ King, *Misery*, 346.

⁶⁰⁹ King, *Misery*, 347.

⁶¹⁰ King, *Misery*, 8.

⁶¹¹ Douglas Keesey, “Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera: Masculinity, Masochism, and Stephen King’s *Misery*,” *American Imago* 59, no. 1 (2002): 55.

⁶¹² Clover, *op.cit.*, 17.

I just *cannot* believe the guts this Sheldon kid is displaying today! [...] I don't believe anyone in Annie Wilkes Stadium – or in the home viewing audience, for that matter – thought he had the *sly-test chance* of getting that wheelchair moving after the blow he took, but I believe ... yes, it is! It's moving! Let's look at the replay!⁶¹³

This trick of the mind also underlines the fact that these adventures are tests of achievement: Paul is testing his abilities, his limits, how far he dares to go in his reconnaissance of the house in Annie's absence. These small acts of rebellion help him to keep faith with himself and not give in totally to desperation. Also, his overactive imagination, being able to conjure up such small tricks to help him endure, is responsible for the major force which guarantees his survival: writing. Writing has a manifold function in the novel: it is an intellectual activity; a means to manipulate Annie (withholding the novel from her or enticing her with it); a way to express his supremacy (even while subordinated to Annie in every other respect).

3.2.1.2 Reader-Writer

To quote Montaigne, “[w]riting does not *cause* misery, it is born of misery”,⁶¹⁴ and this statement proves to be a good starting point if we wish to focus on the *reader-writer* dimension. It illustrates that writing, traditionally considered a purely mental activity, is inseparable from bodily sensations. This is the lesson Paul learns from his horrible experience: how to “create meaning out of personal suffering.”⁶¹⁵ Annie, “who stimulates the fear of death”,⁶¹⁶ also serves as a catalyst, enabling him to regain his will to live, even revitalizing his creative energies. Demanding the return of her favorite heroine, Annie turns out to be his ‘Terrible Muse’. In the words of author Tabitha King, Annie is “a metaphor for the creative drive itself”,⁶¹⁷ and indeed, Annie inspires Paul to write his best

⁶¹³ King, *Misery*, 84.

⁶¹⁴ King, *Misery*, 109.

⁶¹⁵ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 131.

⁶¹⁶ Badley, op.cit., 60.

⁶¹⁷ Collings, “Chronological Look,” 269.

novel so far.⁶¹⁸ Paul himself reflects upon the irony that “the woman had coerced him into writing what was easily the best of the ‘Misery’ novels.”⁶¹⁹ As he remarks earlier:

the story was turning out to be a good deal more gruesome than the other *Misery* books [...] But it was also more richly plotted than any *Misery* novel since the first, and the characters were more lively. The latter three *Misery* novels had been little more than straightforward adventure tales with a fair amount of piquantly described sex thrown in to please the ladies. This book, he began to understand, was a gothic novel, and thus more dependent on plot than on situation.⁶²⁰

Before proceeding with the analysis, I would like to insert some autobiographical background information, because it reveals a lot about the circumstances that went into the writing of *Misery*. Interestingly, the book has been called both a “love letter”⁶²¹ and hate-mail to King’s fans. Paul is clearly a stand-in for King,⁶²² who is typecast as a horror writer, much in the same way as Paul is considered ‘just’ a popular writer of romances. However, both of them wish to be taken seriously and would like recognition from literary critics.⁶²³

King has a penchant for inserting into his novels intertextual references to his own works, inviting the reader to ‘play along.’⁶²⁴ *Carrie* is directly referenced in *The Dead Zone* (“It’s his fault, that guy there! He made it happen! He set it on fire by his mind, just

⁶¹⁸ Lant reminds us that in the opening ‘rape’ scene Annie literally ‘inspired’ Paul, filling his lungs with air during the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation she performed (op.cit., 171).

⁶¹⁹ King, *Misery*, 221.

⁶²⁰ King, *Misery*, 182.

⁶²¹ Beahm, *Stephen King*, 120.

⁶²² The publishing house NAL (New American Library) clearly grasped that King’s novel could be interpreted as a roman à clef, where he portrays himself in Paul Sheldon. Their edition of *Misery* has a double cover: the interior, a fake, has *Misery’s Return* as its title, with Paul Sheldon’s name as its author. It is a typical cover for historical romances: surrounded by tropical palm trees, there is a beautiful, long-haired, scantily-dressed, sensual woman embracing a bare-chested muscular man ... with Stephen King’s face! See appendix.

⁶²³ Of course, we have to keep in mind that this book was penned in 1987, almost 30 years ago, and recognition is not something which King is lacking, but the old axiom about ‘being popular and rich equals bad writing’ still holds true for many critics. In the previously cited interview conducted with Eric Norden, King remarks upon the “propensity of a small but influential element of the literary establishment to ghettoize horror and fantasy and instantly relegate them beyond the pale of so-called serious literature. [...] But the problem goes beyond my particular genre. That little elite, which is clustered in the literary magazines and book-review sections of influential newspapers and magazines on both coasts, assumes that *all* popular literature must also, by definition, be bad literature. Those criticisms are not really against bad writing; they’re against an entire type of writing.” Op.cit., 79.

⁶²⁴ One defining characteristic of postmodern horror is its self-referential nature, especially prominent in films: they constantly refer to previous masterpieces, are full of in-jokes and literary/cinematic nods to other texts. As Matt Hills remarks, connoisseurship is organized around the idea of catching all the references. It is a self-conscious genre, proud of its inheritance. Relying on intertextuality, writers and directors wish to call our attention to the fact that they are working within a tradition (Hills, op.cit., 163).

like in that book *Carrie*⁶²⁵), while in *Misery* Annie mentions the infamous Overlook Hotel, the setting of *The Shining*.⁶²⁶ This way, we also become involved in the reading process in a more active sense, we are given a task: we have to decode the obscure, subtle hints, which might contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel. However, King also anchors his fictional world to reality by mentioning works belonging to 'our' world. Paul wonders whether Annie has a copy of Fowles's *The Collector*, thus establishing a link between readers of King's *Misery* and Annie, the reader of Sheldon's *Misery's Return*, since we might also have the Fowles book on our shelves. Paul also alludes to writers starring in commercials ("celebrities doing ads for credit cards or vodka"⁶²⁷), which is a direct reference to King himself, who was once asked by the American Express card to pose in an advertisement as the nation's number one boogeyman.⁶²⁸ Thus, King further enhances the 'reality' of Paul Sheldon's world, as if he and King were 'colleagues' working in the same field.

If Paul is King, then Annie is the embodiment of his reading public, voracious, ever-hungry, always clamoring for more. Unfortunately, King is an author who has had his share of unpleasant encounters with over-eager fans, and though he tries to keep a low profile, his status as a celebrity impinges upon his life.⁶²⁹ Years ago, a deranged fan broke into his home claiming to have a bomb, while another sued King for plagiarism, claiming that King "broke into her home [...] to steal her work" and "flew over her home in an airplane and eavesdropped with listening devices."⁶³⁰ Another chilling example illustrates what ominous resonance the 'number one fan' epithet holds for King: once he was approached by a man who identified himself as his number one fan.⁶³¹ He asked for an autograph and a photo with King, who complied with the request. This fan turned out to be Mark Chapman, the man who later shot John Lennon. In the words of King's wife: "Chapman, by his own admission, was out to kill someone famous; it did not matter to him whether it was John Lennon, or Paul Simon, or Steve [King] - all to whom he made

⁶²⁵ King, *The Dead Zone*, 344.

⁶²⁶ King, *Misery*, 230.

⁶²⁷ King, *Misery*, 65.

⁶²⁸ "King, flattered to be asked, hammed it up in the best acting role of his life, convincingly playing himself. In the thirty-second ad, King – appropriately attired in an after-dinner jacket, haunts a mansion on a dark and stormy night. He looks at the viewer and, rhetorically, asks: *Do you know me?* It's frightening how many novels of suspense I've written; but still, when I'm not recognized, it just kills me. So instead of saying "I wrote *Carrie*," I carry the American Express card – without it, isn't life a little scary? The American Express card – *don't leave home without it.*" Beahm, *Stephen King*, 78.

⁶²⁹ Beahm called him "a victim of his own celebrity status" (*The Stephen King Companion*, 1989, 24).

⁶³⁰ Beahm, *Stephen King*, 149.

⁶³¹ Beahm, *The Stephen King Story*, 168.

personal approaches. Murder is the ultimate fan possession of the idol.” She adds that in America there is a “media-enforced insistence that a public person is public property.”⁶³² In an interview with Michael Kilgore, King also pondered upon the role of media in creating a skewed perception of celebrities: “The occupational hazard of the successful writer in America is that once you begin to be successful, then you have to avoid being gobbled up. America has developed this sort of cannibalistic cult of celebrity, where first you set the guy up, and then you eat him.”⁶³³

I do not wish to dedicate more space to autobiographical details but, as a last remark, I would like to mention that during the writing of *Misery*, King was undergoing the harrowing period of kicking both a drug and a drinking addiction. By his own admission, “Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie’s pet writer.”⁶³⁴ He conjured up this monstrous figure to vent all his fear, anger and frustration through her. In a telling metaphor, and indicative of a cornerstone belief of his, King states that “the part of me that writes the stories [...] began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters. [...] I wrote *Misery* (the title quite aptly described my state of mind), in which a writer is held prisoner and tortured by a psychotic nurse.”⁶³⁵

To see how greatly the figure of Annie diverges from the traditional readerly position King assigns to his typical “Constant Reader”,⁶³⁶ we should be looking at clues left by the writer in his forewords, introductions and autobiographical writings. He often suffuses the reader-writer relationship or the act of reading itself with a hint of intimacy, even eroticism. In a beautiful phrase, he likens the reading of a novel to having an affair, while short stories are compared to “a quick kiss in the dark from a stranger.”⁶³⁷ So the ostensibly purely mental activity of reading is attributed a bodily dimension: kissing, with all its concomitant sensations, reminds us of our grounding in the physical world. In *Danse Macabre*, King repeatedly evokes the image of the ‘dance’ to describe both what horror fiction is (“the work of horror really is a dance – a moving, rhythmic search. And what it’s looking for is the place where you, the viewer or the reader, live at your most primitive

⁶³² Beahm, *Stephen King*, 149.

⁶³³ Michael Kilgore, “Interview with Stephen King,” in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (London: New English Library, 1990), 153.

⁶³⁴ King, *On Writing*, 98.

⁶³⁵ King, *On Writing*, 96. The healing powers of writing have already been alluded to during the analysis of *Carrie* (where Susan is working her way through her trauma by writing an autobiography) and will also play a part in the final text under scrutiny, in “The Body.”

⁶³⁶ King, *Skeleton Crew*, 21.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

level”)⁶³⁸ and to characterize his relationship with the reader. Starting with the question “May I have the pleasure?”⁶³⁹ he takes the reader on a journey through the history of horror fiction, concluding with the phrase “[w]e have danced the night away, like lovers in some old MGM musical [...] I feel as I suppose all lovers feel when the dance has finally ended, tired ... but still gay.”⁶⁴⁰ He assures the reader that “you are my love”, a person usually positioned as a compliant female, who lets herself be led in the dance (“grab unto my arm now”)⁶⁴¹ and taken wherever the writer fancies taking her.⁶⁴²

Annie Wilkes is quite a long way from this ideal reader. At first, she is respectful and enthusiastic, even a little star-struck, confessing her adoration: “In fact, Paul, I love you.”⁶⁴³ This behavior lasts until she sees Paul diverging from the role of the romance writer in which he has been typecast. Paul believes the *Misery* series has compromised his integrity as a writer: he feels he has prostituted his art by churning out those ‘bodice-rippers’. So he has decided to finish the series and in the last installment *Misery* dies during childbirth: she “had died five pages from the end of *Misery’s Child*. Not a dry eye in the house when *that* had happened, including Paul’s own – only the dew falling from *his* ocularies had been the result of hysterical laughter” and he screamed “*Free at last!*”⁶⁴⁴ When Annie rescues Paul from his car crash, this latest novel has just hit the book stands so she does not yet know that this is the last one featuring her favorite character (her polar opposite in being the embodiment of traditional femininity).

She asks (in a highly deferential tone) for Paul’s permission to read the manuscript of *Fast Cars*, which she has salvaged from the wreck of his car (“the only existing copy in the whole world”⁶⁴⁵). Upon reading it, she dislikes it immensely: she has no patience with flashbacks, she is revolted by the coarse language (“And the profanity! Every other word is that effword!”⁶⁴⁶), and she cannot identify with the young male protagonist (an “ego-ideal”⁶⁴⁷ for Paul much in the same way as *Misery* is for Annie). Paul, enraged at Annie’s presumption in criticizing the novel which he perceives to be his best so far, yells at her:

⁶³⁸ King, *Danse Macabre*, 4.

⁶³⁹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 15.

⁶⁴⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 404.

⁶⁴¹ King, *Skeleton Crew*, 23.

⁶⁴² The connection of horror to both intimacy and the territory of love is also signaled by the telling phrase in which he states that horror is “a combat waged in the secret recesses of the heart.” King, *Danse Macabre*, 12.

⁶⁴³ King, *Misery*, 21.

⁶⁴⁴ King, *Misery*, 16.

⁶⁴⁵ King, *Misery*, 31.

⁶⁴⁶ King, *Misery*, 23.

⁶⁴⁷ Keeseey, “*Misery*”, 57.

“you wouldn’t know good if it walked up and bit your nose off!”⁶⁴⁸ However, deep in his heart he knows that Annie is no different from the rest of his readers, who clamor only for Misery:

and while she might be crazy, was she so different in her evaluation of his work from the hundreds of thousands of other people across the country – ninety percent of them women – who could barely wait for each new five-hundred-page episode in the turbulent life of the foundling who had risen to marry a peer of the realm? No, not at all. They wanted Misery, Misery, Misery. Each time he had taken a year or two off to write one of the other novels [...] he had received a flood of protesting letters from these women, many of whom signed themselves ‘your number-one fan’. The tone of these letters varied from bewilderment [...] to reproach, to outright anger, but the message was always the same: *It wasn’t what I expected, it wasn’t what I wanted. Please go back to Misery.* [...] He could write a modern *Under the Volcano*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *The Sound and the Fury*; it wouldn’t matter. They would still want Misery, Misery, Misery.⁶⁴⁹

So when Annie finishes *Misery’s Child*, and learns about the tragic ending, her rage knows no bounds: “*She can’t be dead! [...] Misery Chastain CANNOT BE DEAD!*”⁶⁵⁰ Even though she admits to Paul’s godlike status when it comes to his creative endeavors, saying that “*a writer is a God to the people in a story, he made them up just like God made US up*”, she is also keen to point out that “*God just happens to have a couple of broken legs and God just happens to be in MY house eating MY food*”,⁶⁵¹ thus reinforcing and simultaneously deconstructing Paul’s ‘superior’ status in a single sentence.

Annie denies Paul’s autonomy to decide the lives and deaths of his fictional characters as this upsets her narrow perception of the world, wherein a prominent place is reserved for Misery Chastain. She demands Misery’s return and while Paul at first balks at the idea of such readerly intrusion, she has a way of making her demand hard to ignore. Paul recalls that such active audience participation in the writing process was not an uncommon thing in the past, especially in the case of serial publication. He alludes to

⁶⁴⁸ King, *Misery*, 47. Following the immense popularity of the *Twilight* saga, King went public with his views regarding the (non-existent) literary qualities of its author (confronting her with the respected author of the *Harry Potter* series): “Jo Rowling is a terrific writer and Stephenie Meyer can’t write worth a darn. She’s not very good.” Enraged fans rushed to Meyer’s defense, one of them uncannily echoing the words uttered by Paul: “Steven [sic] King doesn’t know what a real book was if it hit him in the face.” ... just another instance of life imitating art. Alison Flood, “Twilight author Stephenie Meyer ‘can’t write worth a darn’, says Stephen King,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2009, accessed 24 April, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/05/stephenking-fiction>.

⁶⁴⁹ King, *Misery*, 30.

⁶⁵⁰ King, *Misery*, 37.

⁶⁵¹ King, *Misery*, 39.

famous examples, such as when all of Victorian England was in an uproar because Conan Doyle had decided to kill off Sherlock Holmes.⁶⁵² Readers can influence, even force writers, stripping them of their artistic freedom, making them please the audience instead of pleasing themselves.

As it has been remarked by Lant, Annie, in her capacities as both jailor and fan, literally holds Paul's "bread and butter"⁶⁵³ in her hands: during his captivity, he depends upon her for food, but he also depends upon her in a figurative sense, since she represents consumers (the buying power), who might cause the 'death' of an author should they decide to stop buying his books. His livelihood depends upon his fans, so it always carries a certain risk to alienate or enrage them. Paul repeatedly attaches the moniker "Bourka Bee-Goddess"⁶⁵⁴ to Annie, and this clearly shows what serious role reversals are taking place within this fictional space dreamed up by King.

In her rage over Misery's death, Annie decides to punish Paul, leaving him alone for fifty-one hours. She retires to a place she calls her "Laughing Place" ("It has a sign over the door that says that. ANNIE'S LAUGHING PLACE, it says. Sometimes I *do* laugh when I go there. But mostly I just scream"),⁶⁵⁵ and we almost appreciate the fact that, at least, she is capable of detecting the worsening of her psychosis. She explicitly tells Paul: "I think I better go now. I don't think I better be around you for awhile. I don't think it's ... wise."⁶⁵⁶ However, she conveniently forgets about food, drink, and most importantly, medication. So, by the time she returns, Paul feels like "nothing more than a slice of living tissue on a microscope slide or a worm on a hook – something, anyway, twisting endlessly and waiting only to die."⁶⁵⁷

In her absence, Annie has decided upon a course of action, a correction to lead Paul back onto the right path as if he were a wayward child in need of discipline. Judging *Fast Cars* an unworthy product ("It's filthy. That aside, it's also no good"⁶⁵⁸), she demands that Paul burn it: "you have a job to do."⁶⁵⁹ This scene has a strong flavor of a sacrifice carried out to appease the Bee-Goddess. Annie makes a point of having Paul throw a match onto the manuscript, as if of his own free will, "as a symbol of your [i.e. his] understanding."⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵² King, *Misery*, 271.

⁶⁵³ Lant, op.cit., 171.

⁶⁵⁴ King, *Misery*, 230, 233, 238, 364.

⁶⁵⁵ King, *Misery*, 191.

⁶⁵⁶ King, *Misery*, 40.

⁶⁵⁷ King, *Misery*, 44.

⁶⁵⁸ King, *Misery*, 47.

⁶⁵⁹ King, *Misery*, 45.

⁶⁶⁰ King, *Misery*, 50.

According to Keesey, this can be interpreted as an attempt on Annie's part to make Paul "internalize the habit of self-mutilation",⁶⁶¹ later reinforced in a scene where she brings him a birthday cake with his severed thumb placed into the middle. He is still delirious because of the pain and the shock of the mutilation, but he immediately pleads "please don't make me eat my thumb."⁶⁶² However, with all these carefully orchestrated scenes of humiliation and demonstrations of power (forcing him to burn the manuscript of his novel, making him drink rinse-water, mutilating him on two occasions, depriving him of food, water, medication and his freedom), Annie achieves just the opposite, bringing the "gunslinger"⁶⁶³ out in Paul, who vows to take revenge.

Referring back to what has been said about King's stance towards his readers and how power is allocated in that relationship, we see clearly that Annie is overstepping her role as a fan and a reader. She even becomes a "Merciless Editor",⁶⁶⁴ making her dislikes known by chopping off various parts of Paul, in effect exercising "editorial authority over his body."⁶⁶⁵ King seems to suggest with these brutal images that editors, who 'mutilate' texts, cause almost physical pain to their authors, who consider the writings to be parts of themselves.

According to Jerrold Hogle, "[w]riting ... is one of the extensions of the body. It is a kind of birth process in which an emission from the body repositions a portion of the body outside the [...] boundaries of the self ... Writing is reconnected to the life of the body from which textualization works so hard to remove itself."⁶⁶⁶ Writers experience their products as belonging to them, if not as parts of their bodies, then as their 'children' (cf. Mary Shelley's farewell bid to her "hideous progeny" to "go forth and prosper"⁶⁶⁷). Hogle's remark also reminds one of Kristeva because the word "emission" and the idea of being situated outside the body, beyond "the boundaries of the self", call to mind the description of the abject (the difference being that, in this case, it is not a repulsive substance which crosses the boundaries). An abstraction, a mental idea undergoes a process of concretization, it becomes embodied, textualized by being written down. In this

⁶⁶¹ Keesey, "Misery", 65.

⁶⁶² King, *Misery*, 276.

⁶⁶³ King, *Misery*, 123.

⁶⁶⁴ King, *Misery*, 116.

⁶⁶⁵ King, *Misery*, 312.

⁶⁶⁶ Hogle quoted by Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), 126.

⁶⁶⁷ Shelley, op.cit., 10.

sense, we can talk about the text as body, but, as we will shortly see, the opposite case is also true: we can interpret the body as text.⁶⁶⁸

Annie's role, in a certain sense, is to shock Paul into realizing that to perform as a writer, to be able to give his best, he also needs to descend to the level of physicality and turn even pain and suffering to his advantage. As his agent remarks after the gruesome ordeal: "*writers remember everything, Paul. Especially the hurts. Strip a writer to the buff, point to the scars, and he'll tell you the story of each small one. From the big ones you get novels.*"⁶⁶⁹ The importance of scars, bodily injuries, indicative of treasured memories, is emphasized when, following the foot amputation, this is how Paul describes the severed body part:

She picked up his foot. Its toes were still spasming. She carried it across the room. By the time she got to the door they had stopped moving. He could see a scar on the instep and remembered how he had gotten that, how he had stepped on a piece of bottle when he was just a kid. [...] He remembered he had cried and his father had told him it was just a little cut. His father had told him to stop acting like someone had cut his goddam foot off.⁶⁷⁰

The scar's presence is highlighted, thus showing its special importance for him (even though it evokes a negative experience). In a sense, Annie is robbing him of a part of his past, of one of his scars, a further example of her diminishing his writerly role, since writers rely upon their bodies and their wounds (signs of remembered traumas), as a storehouse of memories. It can be argued that Annie has given him a fresh series of scars, which Paul is going to exploit by turning this suffering, his "tortured body language"⁶⁷¹ into the language of a Gothic novel, sublimating his horrifying experiences through his fiction. The trauma prompts him to write a superior *Misery* novel wherein he is able to channel the anguish he is feeling in a positive way.⁶⁷²

Paul's existence depends upon his being a writer and he is totally bound up with this role: "[...] he had spent most of his adult life thinking the word *writer* was the most

⁶⁶⁸ Badley makes the same point when she remarks that King "literalizes the notion of the text as a body and the body as text" (op.cit., 12).

⁶⁶⁹ King, *Misery*, 258.

⁶⁷⁰ King, *Misery*, 244. What an ironic remark to be recalled in the present, in light of what has just happened to that foot.

⁶⁷¹ Badley, op.cit., 66.

⁶⁷² Dori Laub and Daniel Podell claim that "engagement in artistic expression" for traumatized subjects has a "restorative purpose." Quoted in Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, "Introduction. Performing the Void: Liminality and the Ethics of Form in Contemporary Trauma Narratives," in *Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and the Ethics of Form*, eds, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

important definition of himself.”⁶⁷³ When he comes to his senses and sees Annie for the first time, the one thing he remembers is that he is a writer: “He was Paul Sheldon, who wrote novels of two kinds, good ones and best-sellers.”⁶⁷⁴ This is his major definition of himself, not as a husband, a son or a father, but as a writer. He failed twice as a husband, he is probably not a father (his ex-wives are mentioned, but there is no reference to children) and whenever he remembers his parents, the memories tend to be unpleasant (his mother belittling him for crying, his father making “a career out of not noticing Paul any more than he absolutely had to”⁶⁷⁵).

Nevertheless, he is proud of his ability as a story-teller and, in the end, he is going to win this unequal match with Annie owing to this talent. He often alludes to a childhood game called “Can You?”⁶⁷⁶ in which the participants had to continue a certain story in a given time-limit (it also had to be plausible otherwise you were out of the game). He was successful in the game and now he must reawaken this ability under the direst of circumstances, otherwise Annie is going to eliminate him (the adult version of excluding someone of the game).

Can you, Paul?

*Yeah. That's how I survive. That's how come I'm able to maintain homes in both New York and L.A. [...] There's a million things in this world I can't do. Couldn't hit a curve ball, even back in high school. Can't fix a leaky faucet. Can't roller-skate [...] I have tried twice to be married and couldn't do it either time. But if you want me to take you away, to scare you or involve you or make you cry or grin, yeah. I can. I can bring it to you and keep bringing it until you holler uncle. I am able. I CAN.*⁶⁷⁷

Annie may not be a writer, but she is not stupid. When Paul finishes the first version of *Misery's Return*, she gives it back to him with the words: “It’s not right.”⁶⁷⁸ Paul changed certain facts which had been laid down at the end of the previous novel, probably hoping they would be overlooked on Annie’s part but, to his chagrin, he has to admit she is right: “He [...] was amazed to find he was ashamed of himself. She was right. He *had*

⁶⁷³ King, *Misery*, 32. As a parallel to this, Annie’s primary definition of herself is being Paul’s “number-one fan” (6). The importance of this has already been signaled by the fact that the novel’s very first words are the phonetic transcription of this (“umber whunnnn”), which is how Paul registers the sounds through the haze of pain (3).

⁶⁷⁴ King, *Misery*, 7.

⁶⁷⁵ King, *Misery*, 11.

⁶⁷⁶ King, *Misery*, 127.

⁶⁷⁷ King, *Misery*, 129.

⁶⁷⁸ King, *Misery*, 116.

written a cheat.”⁶⁷⁹ So he restarts the job and is fascinated how easily he can slip back into Misery’s world, even though he claims “[e]ver since the third book, he had hated her.”⁶⁸⁰ The new book turns out to be more Gothic (two sisters interred alive because they fell into catatonia after being stung by bees), but as Annie says: “It’s fair. And it’s *good*. Exciting. But it’s gruesome, too! It’s not like *any* of the other *Misery* books.”⁶⁸¹

It is extremely interesting to observe how Paul and Annie continue to exchange roles and overlap with each other as the novel progresses (as was also the case with the *victim-victimizer* scenario). Though at first it seems that the division of the roles of *reader-writer* is very clean-cut, we soon learn that both of them assume both states.⁶⁸²

Annie, the obsessive reader, becomes a writer, an author of Paul’s life: she decides on whether he will live or die. He is totally at her mercy, in the same way as fictional characters depend upon their creators. When she recounts the details of the accident to Paul, she says: “I decided I would *make* you live.”⁶⁸³ In a very real sense of the word, he owes her his life: if she had left him in the snow, he would have frozen to death. There are several examples in the novel where Annie draws up possible scripts or plot-lines for the future (e.g. in the case of a police inquiry “I’ll say I hadn’t seen you”⁶⁸⁴) or gives Paul ideas regarding the new *Misery* novel. For example, hers is the suggestion regarding a crucial plot device (the bee stings) necessary to bring Misery back from the dead. Paul incorporates this into the novel, and so they become partners or co-authors (the finished product can be considered a “collaborative writing exercise”⁶⁸⁵). However, Paul knows that it is Annie who will have the final word on their story: she poses as the author of lives. He asks her: “I’ll write THE END, and you’ll read, and then *you’ll* write THE END, won’t you? The end of us.”⁶⁸⁶

As Lauri Berkenkamp has pointed it out, Paul, the writer, has to become a reader in order to survive.⁶⁸⁷ Given Annie’s psychosis, he must become attuned to her moods. He

⁶⁷⁹ King, *Misery*, 121.

⁶⁸⁰ King, *Misery*, 38.

⁶⁸¹ King, *Misery*, 161.

⁶⁸² The codependent nature of that particular relationship is pointed out by Paul himself, who says to Annie: “A person might as well not write a book at all, if there’s no one around to read it.” King, *Misery*, 190.

⁶⁸³ King, *Misery*, 18.

⁶⁸⁴ King, *Misery*, 301.

⁶⁸⁵ Lauri Berkenkamp, “Reading, Writing and Interpreting: Stephen King’s *Misery*,” in *The Dark Descent*, ed. Tony Magistrale, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 210. Because of Annie’s direct involvement in the production of *Misery’s Return* (rejecting the first version, contributing ideas and suggestions and later physically inserting letters into the finished manuscript), Sears interprets the text as also being about the “gradual empowerment of the reader” (op.cit., 125).

⁶⁸⁶ King, *Misery*, 304.

⁶⁸⁷ Berkenkamp, op.cit., 204.

needs to develop the ability to read her mind, to predict her actions and reactions. Since her mood swings are quite unpredictable, Paul has to watch very attentively for small signs. Changes in her daily routine usually indicate the worsening of her condition.⁶⁸⁸ In an apt metaphor, he comments upon his situation as if reporting a weather forecast: “Here’s a special weather bulletin for residents of Sheldon County – a tornado watch is in effect until 5.00 P. M. tonight. I repeat, a tornado watch.”⁶⁸⁹ It seems that when it comes to the reading of external signs, Annie has superior skills, and woe to Paul if he fails to read her correctly. When he incorrectly judges the amount of ‘whining’ or criticism Annie can take, she retaliates with a sadist’s relish: after all, his thumb amputation is due to nothing more serious than him bitching about the typewriter (the sound of a fallen key rattling inside the machine was driving him crazy). “He had picked the wrong day to start complaining about the Royal and its missing n. [...] *Well, if it bothers you so much, I’ll just have to give you something to take your mind off that old n.*”⁶⁹⁰

Perhaps it is due to Annie’s professional background as a nurse that she is a better reader of the ‘body,’ a very careful reader of external signs. Although Paul tries to cheat her and pretends to be weaker than he is, he cannot fool her: “My eyes were opened. I saw how much of your color had come back [...] I saw you were almost *healthy* again.”⁶⁹¹ She devotes a lot of attention to the small details in her surroundings as well. For example, she keeps a telephone in her living room, because she knows this is a typical item in a normal household. However, this is just for the sake of appearances; it is only a gutted shell, with nothing inside: Paul describes it as “castrated” (further proof of the one overriding terror on his mind).⁶⁹² One of the telling signs of Paul having left his room (while Annie is out of the house running some errands), is that when he accidentally knocks over a porcelain figure, although he manages to catch it, when he replaces it on the table, it faces in the wrong direction. Annie notices it, but she does not confront Paul immediately: she decides to wait, leaving him under the illusion his deed has gone unnoticed. Paul learns the bitter lesson that “[p]unishment might be deferred ... but never escaped”⁶⁹³ in Annie’s world ... and her punishment is out of all proportion to the misdeed. She amputates Paul’s left foot with an axe, in her paranoia even accusing him of having ventured upstairs (a wheelchair-bound man with both legs shattered).

⁶⁸⁸ Berkenkamp, op.cit., 205.

⁶⁸⁹ King, *Misery*, 130.

⁶⁹⁰ King, *Misery*, 275.

⁶⁹¹ King, *Misery*, 235.

⁶⁹² King, *Misery*, 98.

⁶⁹³ King, *Misery*, 275.

Before the horrible amputation, during one of his escapes out of his ‘cell’, Paul discovers a scrapbook entitled “Memory Lane” in the living room (later Annie reveals that she deliberately left it out because she was sure he would read it). So the writer-hero assumes the position of the reader, absorbed in a book “too good to put down. It was like a novel so disgusting you just have to finish it.”⁶⁹⁴ It turns out that Annie is the author: the scrapbook is filled with newspaper clippings about her killing sprees. Although she did not actually write the articles, she is the agent behind them since they all detail her crimes: while working as a nurse at various hospitals, she had murdered several patients whose lives she judged pointless (because of their terminal illnesses, or birth defects). In a way, her book is her art, the work of her life: in her psychosis, she probably thought she was liberating people from their suffering, acting like an Angel of Mercy. Much to his horror, Paul discovers that the last article in the scrapbook reports him missing. In a very real sense, he has become a part of Annie’s book, as if he were a fictional character.⁶⁹⁵ He has every reason to fear for his life (even if he complies with Annie’s command to complete the new *Misery* novel), since all the people mentioned in the scrapbook ended up dead.

He finds himself falling under the spell of Annie’s story, ready to fill in the gaps in her narrative (in the same way as Annie is going to fill in his text of *Misery’s Return* with handwritten “n”-s and “t”-s after the old typewriter loses these keys). He even must admit that Annie is adept at making up convincing stories since even though she was suspected of the killings, she was later acquitted of all charges. This scene wherein Paul, the professional writer, assumes the position of the reader, perusing a book authored by his number one fan, a book where he himself becomes a character, is a quintessential example of how easily these roles can shift.

A strange dynamic exists between Paul and Annie, pulling them ever closer. This is already signaled by the way King presents the events leading up to their encounter. In a game of counterpointing, King places Annie’s narration side by side with that of Paul, who is finally able to recall the happenings of that fateful day. In each paragraph, the two story lines switch places with one other.

⁶⁹⁴ King, *Misery*, 212.

⁶⁹⁵ He felt similarly when Annie recounted the story of how she had found him: “the manner by which he was coming to this knowledge was disquieting – it was as if he was a character in a story or a play” (King, *Misery*, 12).

[...] he remembered [...] opening his travel bag and looking at his plane ticket back to New York; he remembered suddenly, on the spur of the moment, deciding –

‘– that I better get you home right away! It was a struggle getting you to the truck, but I’m a big woman [...]. I got you in and wrapped you up, and even then, with the light fading and all, I thought you looked *familiar*! I thought maybe –’

– he would get the old Camaro out of the parking garage and just drive west instead of getting on the plane.⁶⁹⁶

By interweaving these passages, King suggests that the fates of these two characters are also connected. Paul reveals the depth of this bond when he says that during the weeks spent at Annie’s house, he felt that “part of his imagination had [...] actually *become* Annie.”⁶⁹⁷ Though this might seem to be a simple survival technique, it also arises because Paul is stripped of other companionship. Following his accident, he awakens to a sterile world devoid of external stimuli, so for him Annie constitutes his sole contact with the outside world. Learning more and more about her, getting to know her better, it becomes easier for him to slip into her position. At one point, he himself is surprised when he experiences the depth of his anger at imaginary critics scorning his work. He retaliates with “Annie-like ferocity”⁶⁹⁸ at their hypothetical insults:

The *truth* [...] was that the increasing dismissal of his work in the critical press as that of a ‘popular writer’ [...] had hurt him quite badly. It didn’t jibe with his self-image as a Serious Writer who was only churning out these shitty romances in order to subsidize his [...] REAL WORK! [...] hadn’t his ‘serious fiction’ become steadily more self-conscious, a sort of scream? *Look at me! Look how good this is! Don’t you DARE turn away from me! [...] Don’t you DARE turn away from my REAL WORK! Don’t you DARE, or I’ll –*

What? What would he do? Cut off their feet? Saw off their thumbs?⁶⁹⁹

Annie and Paul are more similar than meets the eye, since both of them have developed addictions: Annie is hooked on Paul’s novels in the same way as he is hooked on Novril, the powerful painkiller she administers. King likens her craving for fiction to

⁶⁹⁶ King, *Misery*, 16.

⁶⁹⁷ King, *Misery*, 206.

⁶⁹⁸ Keeseey, “*Misery*”, 69.

⁶⁹⁹ King, *Misery*, 311. Darryl Jones remarks upon King’s frequent comments about critics as being the writer’s enemies. Jones calls them the representatives of “adult authority in the world of letters”, whom King views as the custodians of “an outmoded vision of elite culture” (op.cit., 138). King is especially enraged by their insinuations that popular fiction is, by definition, unworthy of merit: “The idea that success in itself can hurt a writer is as ridiculous and as elitist as the commonly held belief that a popular book is a bad book – the former belief presumes that writers are even more corruptible than, say, politicians, and the latter belief presumes that the level of taste in the world’s most literate country is illogically low.” Stephen King, “On Becoming A Brand Name,” 42.

drug dependency and calls this “her fix”,⁷⁰⁰ the “gotta”,⁷⁰¹ as in ‘I gotta find out what happens next’: the feeling one gets when it is impossible to put down a book, when one feels compelled to go on, to read the next page. Paul detects this peculiar sort of power in himself: “*I had a certain passive hold over her. The power of the gotta. I turned out to be a pretty passable Scheherazade after all.*”⁷⁰² In fact, his eventual ascendancy over Annie might be due to the fact that this power originates within him, it comes from an internal source (while his addiction is a chemically-induced drug dependence). Annie might feel this ‘fire’ within Paul because when she sees him working, she does not even enter the room: “Yet something in her attitude as she stood in the doorway fascinated him. It was as if she was a little frightened to come any closer – as if she thought something in him might burn her.”⁷⁰³

Paul is convinced that it is the “gotta which had kept them both alive – and it had, for without it she surely would have murdered both him and herself long since.”⁷⁰⁴ However, the “gotta” exerts its power both ways: he also falls under its spell, and is almost as curious as Annie to see the ending of the new novel: “Still, he had decided to live. Some part of him [...] had decided he could not die until he saw how it all came out.”⁷⁰⁵ The burst of creative energy experienced in these dire circumstances fuels him and plays a crucial role in maintaining his sanity.

In light of King’s tendency to suffuse the reader-writer relationship with hints of eroticism, it might be worthwhile to mention that “the gotta” is not free from sexual implications, either. In no uncertain terms, Paul states that it is “nasty as a hand-job in a sleazy bar, fine as a fuck from the world’s most talented call-girl.”⁷⁰⁶ He wonders about the effect of his fiction upon Annie in the following way: “But hadn’t there also been some sort of fuck, even if of the driest variety?”⁷⁰⁷ She comes each evening to take away the typed up pages of that day, ostensibly to fill in the missing letters, but Paul can see right through her: it is her craving, her addiction to his novel, the “gotta”, which makes her ‘beg for more.’

⁷⁰⁰ King, *Misery*, 206.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² King, *Misery*, 271.

⁷⁰³ King, *Misery*, 162. The idea of internal fire is reinforced when Paul is struck by sudden inspiration. He calls to Annie to help him into his wheelchair to start working and she looks at him “respectfully, and with not a little awe. Here was the secular version of the Pentecostal fire, burning before her very eyes” (180).

⁷⁰⁴ King, *Misery*, 267.

⁷⁰⁵ King, *Misery*, 262.

⁷⁰⁶ King, *Misery*, 265.

⁷⁰⁷ King, *Misery*, 266.

As a conclusion to this *reader-writer* dimension, it is important to note that entire chapters of the new Misery novel are reproduced in the book. These are also signaled visually, since a different font is used. Later on, when Paul starts using a pencil instead of the typewriter, we are confronted with handwritten pages. According to Berkenkamp, with the two texts placed side by side, King succeeded in blurring the “boundaries between reality and fiction, life and art.”⁷⁰⁸ We are involuntarily drawn into Paul Sheldon’s fictional world and are explicitly reminded of our role as reader by being placed in Annie’s position: we are reading the same book, *Misery’s Return*, as she. Thus, King establishes a link between his real readers and his fictional number-one-fan, adding a metafictional dimension to his text.⁷⁰⁹

3.2.1.3 Body/Mind

A further dichotomy the novel explores is the one existing between *mind* and *body*. Linda Badley considers the book an “allegory of writing out of bodily misery”,⁷¹⁰ since it is mainly concerned with Paul’s daily suffering, his agony and his slow emergence out of the haze of pain, re-acquiring his sense of self and the strength to survive. While Paul considers himself a being ruled by the mind, he is reminded throughout the narrative of being a creature of the body as well. Physical demands and needs (hunger, thirst, the craving for painkillers) are superimposed over everything else.

After a while he began to feel hunger and thirst – even through the pain. It became something like a horse race. At first King of Pain was far in the lead and I Got the Hungries was some twelve furlongs back. Pretty Thirsty was nearly lost in the dust. Then, around sun-up on the day after she had left, I Got the Hungries actually gave King of Pain a brief run for his money. [...] He’d never had any idea how bad hurting could get.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁸ Lauri, op.cit., 210.

⁷⁰⁹ Concentrating on the metafictional dimension of the work, it is tempting to see it as an example of life imitating art: essentially, we witness Paul’s novels’ titles come true. He suffers a car accident (reckless driving played its part in it, not just the snowstorm) after having finished *Fast Cars*, and then almost the entire novel is dedicated to the exploration of bodily and psychological misery for the author of the *Misery* books.

⁷¹⁰ Badley, op.cit., 60.

⁷¹¹ King, *Misery*, 41.

As Clare Hanson points out in her article, “Stephen King: Power of Horror”,⁷¹² Paul tried to banish misery from his life in the dual sense of killing off a tiresome heroine with the same name (whom he had come to see as symbolic of the prostitution of his art), but also in the concrete physical sense of banishing meaningless pain. His definition of “misery” embraces both concepts: “As a common noun it meant pain, usually lengthy and often pointless; as a proper one it meant a character and a plot, the latter most assuredly lengthy and pointless.”⁷¹³ Annie, however, demands that Misery return, so Paul is forced to bring the character back to life. At the same time, Annie keeps in mind the primary meaning of “misery”, and makes sure Paul’s life abounds in prolonged pain.

Thus, in this dichotomy of *mind/body*, Paul is revealed to be a creature not exclusively of the mind (an important lesson for his development both as a writer and a man). When Annie hides him in the basement during a routine police check of the premises, he realizes that “in the dark he thought with his skin.”⁷¹⁴ This sentence sums up neatly how the two dimensions, our thinking processes and our physicality, are inextricable. Ultimately, this will prove to be essential to Paul’s ability to survive, to find a way out of his captivity.

A further proof of the *mind/body* interconnectedness is how Paul uses the typewriter to help him recover both mentally and physically. It is an old, used Royal, given to him by Annie, to write the new novel: it keeps on losing its keys in the same way as Paul keeps on losing his body parts. He initially views it as an enemy, as “an instrument of torture”,⁷¹⁵ thinking it challenges his creativity. The first ‘meeting’ between Paul and the typewriter is not free of implications of masochism, according to Keeseey.⁷¹⁶ Annie places it between Paul’s legs, who looks at it with “avid repulsed fascination.”⁷¹⁷ Echoes of the abject can also be detected in his reaction, since he seems to waver between attraction and repulsion. The typewriter constitutes a kind of challenge and maybe it is significant that it is placed “between his legs”,⁷¹⁸ as if threatening his manhood, his potency as a writer. It is anthropomorphized (it had a “grinning gapped mouth”,⁷¹⁹ as if mocking him), and is also directly linked to Annie: Paul thinks that it is “as solid as the woman and also damaged.”⁷²⁰

⁷¹² Hanson, op.cit., 151.

⁷¹³ King, *Misery*, 260.

⁷¹⁴ King, *Misery*, 307.

⁷¹⁵ King, *Misery*, 70.

⁷¹⁶ Keeseey, “*Misery*”, 63.

⁷¹⁷ King, *Misery*, 71.

⁷¹⁸ King, *Misery*, 64.

⁷¹⁹ King, *Misery*, 8.

⁷²⁰ King, *Misery*, 66.

Since the typewriter is explicitly compared to a woman, has a gapped mouth, and is placed between Paul's legs, it takes but a small mental leap to associate it with the terrifying vagina dentata, which evokes fears of "castration and dismemberment."⁷²¹

However, the typewriter plays a crucial role in his survival. Escaping into a fictional world, disappearing through a "hole"⁷²² in the paper to leave behind Annie's warped world, is Paul's method of achieving mental freedom. It represents his creative force and the power of his words. He does not let Annie control his imagination: physically, he is under her rule, but otherwise he resists her domination.

Paul also uses the typewriter to gain back his physical strength: doing lifting exercises with the heavy machine, he reinforces his muscles in order to be able to fight his tormentor when the occasion arises. As it has already been mentioned, the typewriter figures in the dénouement as well: it becomes a literal weapon, Paul's means of striking back at his 'editor', who chopped off body parts, not just portions of a book. He hits Annie with it, gaining momentary power over her, and in the ensuing scene parts of the manuscript are forced down her throat. However, she is a strong woman, a formidable enemy: she throws Paul off her and is on the point of attacking him when she trips over the typewriter. Falling, she hits her head on the mantelpiece, so, ironically, "she had been killed by the very typewriter Paul had hated so much."⁷²³ Eventually, Annie dies of a fractured skull, which contains the part of her which was defective: in a sense, the typewriter triumphs over the diseased mind.

As opposed to Paul, Annie's ties to the body are constant throughout the narrative. She is often described in terms of her physicality: she is "a big woman",⁷²⁴ strong, solid, unattractive and smelly. Her former profession also accentuates her link with the physical dimension of existence: as a nurse, she had to attend to the physical needs of the patients under her care, so she is well aware of the implications of the vulnerability in which Paul finds himself. By withholding his medication, food or water, she demonstrates her power over him. As it has already been pointed out, she literally holds the power of life or death in her hands, becoming similar to Paul (another role reversal), who wields the same power over his fictional characters' lives via his role as a creator.⁷²⁵

⁷²¹ Creed, op.cit., 107. Paul's misgivings will later be justified when he suffers such punishments on two occasions (although not via castrating female genitals, but via a castrating mother figure).

⁷²² King, *Misery*, 163.

⁷²³ King, *Misery*, 366.

⁷²⁴ King, *Misery*, 8.

⁷²⁵ In an interview with Matt Schaffer, King remarked that "[b]eing a writer is sort of a godlike function in a way, and that's kind of fun. You get to play God" (*Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*,

Suffering from manic-depression, Annie is a victim of her illness, subordinated to terrible mood swings and erratic behavior patterns. This disease of the mind subjugates her body, controls her personality and renders her life miserable. King uses the image of a chasm when he attempts to convey the sense of madness reigning inside her: Paul compares it to “a deep *crevasse* almost obscured by summer flowers in the midst of a smiling, jocund meadow.”⁷²⁶ He comes to understand what it means when he sees that peculiar look on her face: “Again that black look of *crevasse*; the batty darkness under the meadow. Annie Wilkes was gone.”⁷²⁷ “Paul was frightened by what he saw on her face, because what he saw was nothing; the black nothing of a *crevasse* folded into an alpine meadow, a blackness where no flowers grew and into which the drop might be long.”⁷²⁸ This is a place where you could fall, plunge into the void, a place threatening with the loss of self-identity. According to Keesey, it is a “hole of self-loss”,⁷²⁹ where Paul would lose himself, a pit which has already ‘devoured’ Annie.⁷³⁰

3.2.1.4 Mother-Child

Finally, I would like to examine how Annie and Paul’s relationship parallels the *mother-child* bond. In a sense, the novel details Paul’s development from a state of childlike dependency to autonomy and independence. A symbolic return to the womb, a place of safety and oneness with the mother, where all his needs are taken care of, might seem attractive at first. Paul is infantilized and regresses to “the stage of infant orality as he greedily sucks”⁷³¹ the painkillers from Annie’s fingers: “She brought him two every six hours, first announcing her presence only as a pair of fingers poking into his mouth (and soon enough he learned to suck eagerly at those poking fingers in spite of the bitter

eds, Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller [London: New English Library, 1990], 160). It might be interesting to point out that while writers can ‘get away’ with playing God, others, like scientists or doctors, are usually severely punished for usurping this role (cf. *Pet Sematary*’s doctor protagonist, who interferes with the natural order by bringing back the dead – with awful consequences [in the long tradition of Gothic overreachers bringing punishment down upon their heads with their hubris: Frankenstein, Hawthorne’s Rappaccini or Aylmer]).

⁷²⁶ King, *Misery*, 11.

⁷²⁷ King, *Misery*, 238.

⁷²⁸ King, *Misery*, 13.

⁷²⁹ Keesey, “*Misery*”, 61.

⁷³⁰ To counterbalance this hole filled with darkness, King refers to a bright hole in connection with Paul and writing: when he starts a new novel, he feels like “falling into a hole filled with bright light” (*Misery*, 51). The hole functions as a portal, providing him with an escape route to the world of fantasy (recalling Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole): “he found the hole in the paper and fell thankfully through it” (177).

⁷³¹ Schroeder, op.cit., 139.

taste).”⁷³² In parallel with his becoming totally dependent on her for medication, food and water, Annie adopts a parental role, as a caring, nurturing mother (spoon-feeding, bathing and changing Paul), calling him “a very stubborn little boy.”⁷³³ However, she also acts as a strict mother trying to make a naughty child behave correctly. When she makes Paul burn the manuscript of *Fast Cars*, she herself alludes to the mother-child relationship: “The mother feels badly when her child says she’s mean or if he cries for what’s been taken away, as you are crying now. But she knows she’s right, and so she does her duty. As I am doing mine.”⁷³⁴

However, this all-encompassing mother figure also threatens Paul’s individuality and stunts his growth (as was the case with Carrie’s mother). It is no wonder that Paul compares himself to unfinished entities like a “tadpole”⁷³⁵ or a “blubbering ball of protoplasm”,⁷³⁶ which echo a “preoedipal, sexually undifferentiated stage.”⁷³⁷ Paul needs to break away from this devouring mother, repeating the process of separation after having been reborn during the near-death experience of the car crash. To quote Hanson, “Annie, like the mother, *must* exist in order for the self and the text to begin to be born, in the primary movement of abjection.”⁷³⁸

There are some images in the novel which clearly suggest this birth process, beginning with his ‘rebirth’ in the opening pages, when Annie literally pulls him out of the wreckage of his car. Once, when Annie goes to town, Paul tries to leave his room, but his wheelchair gets stuck in the doorway. “In the end he was able to squeeze through – barely”⁷³⁹ thus the baby’s passage through the birth canal is evoked in our minds. When he hears Annie returning, he breaks down and starts to cry in desperation and horror. The memory conjured up in his mind stems from his childhood, when having stolen a cigarette from his mother, he was surprised by her sudden return, “knowing he was caught, knowing he would be spanked.”⁷⁴⁰ This incident was a similar gesture of rebellion, a step on the road to independence.

The birth imagery also returns in the concluding scene. During their final battle, Annie collapses on Paul, who literally has to dig his way out from under her (“[h]e worked

⁷³² King, *Misery*, 9.

⁷³³ King, *Misery*, 49. Paul repeatedly uses the word “maternal” to describe Annie’s look or grin (15, 21).

⁷³⁴ King, *Misery*, 48.

⁷³⁵ King, *Misery*, 198.

⁷³⁶ King, *Misery*, 353.

⁷³⁷ Keesey, “*Misery*”, 66.

⁷³⁸ Hanson, *op.cit.*, 150.

⁷³⁹ King, *Misery*, 90.

⁷⁴⁰ King, *Misery*, 100.

his way out from under her like a man burrowing his way out of a snowslide”⁷⁴¹), crawling away from her, in order to separate himself from her literally engulfing, suffocating presence (which, figuratively speaking, is an important characteristic of castrating mothers). For a moment Annie briefly regains consciousness and, in a final act, tugs at his shirt, trying to pull him back, not letting him go, refusing him independence, but she is too late. Paul crawls through the door and slams the door shut, symbolically cutting the umbilical cord.

A new Paul emerges after the ordeal, more mature, both as a writer and a human being: interestingly, his reassertion of masculinity is counteracted by the strengthening of the feminine part of his personality.⁷⁴² In the very last sentence, he is described as weeping, while commencing a new, post-trauma novel. During his captivity, he often broke down and cried,⁷⁴³ and he seems to have carried over this sensibility (a condition primarily associated with females), into his new life. Owing to this re-connection with the feminine dimension, he is even capable of feeling sympathy for his tormentor: having spent months under her roof, he finds himself “feeling a little sorry for Annie Wilkes”⁷⁴⁴ and he is even capable of seeing “the woman she might have been if her upbringing had been right or the drugs squirted out by all the funny little glands inside her had been less wrong.”⁷⁴⁵

The recurring references to prostitution and whoredom in connection with Paul and his *Misery* series are also relevant when we consider the hero’s aforementioned feminization and his development during his ordeal. He acquires a deeper understanding of a female dimension of life by being forced to be Annie’s ‘whore.’ He thinks that she stuck him “*back in the crib again*” after his “*liberation from a state of whoredom*” (this is how he views discontinuing the *Misery* books).⁷⁴⁶ He, in a sense, occupies the position of a prostitute, since, as it has been pointed out by Schroeder, in order to survive, he has to put

⁷⁴¹ King, *Misery*, 351.

⁷⁴² Jancovich calls our attention to how the feminization of the male character is seen in a positive light, not as posing a threat to his masculinity (op.cit., 102). Also in other King novels there are men endowed with female characteristics: Johnny’s psychic ability in *The Dead Zone* is often likened to intuition, a phenomenon usually attributed to women. He is a gentle man, full of empathy and his profession as a teacher (then a private tutor) also places him in a caring role. A further example could be Danny Torrance, who works at a nursing home in *Doctor Sleep*.

⁷⁴³ “Then he burst into tears”; “he was crying again and unaware of it”; “he began to cry”; “he started to cry” (King, *Misery*, 93, 102, 104, 356).

⁷⁴⁴ King, *Misery*, 329.

⁷⁴⁵ King, *Misery*, 334. Once again, King’s opinion mirrors the protagonist’s feelings: “In the end, I felt that Annie was almost as much to be pitied as to be feared” (*On Writing*, 168). Paul’s empathy also extends to the animals kept in Annie’s shed. When she neglects them and he hears their cry of pain, his heart goes out for the creatures: “He was a little surprised at the depth of sympathy he felt for the animals and the depth of his anger at Annie for how she had, in her unadmitting and arrogant egotism, left them to suffer in their pens” (King, *Misery*, 221).

⁷⁴⁶ King, *Misery*, 80.

up with Annie's unwanted attention, her "tender, melting look",⁷⁴⁷ her adoration (she repeatedly tells him "I love you"⁷⁴⁸) and physical intimacy.⁷⁴⁹ He has to hide his real feelings carefully and put on a happy face whenever Annie courts him by kissing his hand or his cheek, or remarking "[d]id I ever tell you what lovely blue eyes you have?"⁷⁵⁰

This loving compliment precedes by mere minutes the horrifying foot amputation, which further anchors Paul to the traditionally female position of the victim. Annie is towering over him with an axe, while he is lying in bed in a vulnerable, subordinate position, screaming: "He continued to shriek and plead, but his words had become inarticulate babble."⁷⁵¹ "*Annie I swear to you I'll be good I swear to God I'll be good please give me a chance to be good OH ANNIE PLEASE LET ME BE GOOD –*"⁷⁵²

The actual mutilation and its aftermath place Paul even more firmly on the side of femininity. Annie cuts Paul's body open, revealing the inside, which process we have already placed into the category of the abject, since the body loses its integrity, its wholeness: its neat, unbroken surface is shattered, "[t]he body's inside [...] shows up."⁷⁵³ As Morgan remarks, we "are unnerved when our 'flesh' appears to us as meat", we experience "the anxiety of organism in its raw form."⁷⁵⁴ When Paul is trying to pull himself back from the repeated blows of the axe, he realizes that all he is doing is "widening the axe-slash, making it open like a mouth."⁷⁵⁵ Schroeder claims that the gaping, bloody wound correlates with the vagina and that the bloody mattress ("the sheet was turning red"⁷⁵⁶) recalls the loss of virginity.⁷⁵⁷ Keeseey also connects Paul's being cut open to the ongoing process of feminization (already begun in the novel's first scene with "being raped back into life"⁷⁵⁸), and states that the "shattering of Paul is a necessary step in his evolutionary development toward psychic wholeness."⁷⁵⁹

In a perceptive comment tying together almost all these interpretative possibilities, Badley notes that the book draws a trajectory from total disempowerment and

⁷⁴⁷ King, *Misery*, 332.

⁷⁴⁸ King, *Misery*, 21, 28, 174, 332.

⁷⁴⁹ Schroeder, op.cit., 139.

⁷⁵⁰ King, *Misery*, 225.

⁷⁵¹ King, *Misery*, 241.

⁷⁵² King, *Misery*, 242.

⁷⁵³ Kristeva, op.cit., 53. What is more, in *Misery* a portion of the body is taken away.

⁷⁵⁴ Morgan, op.cit., 91.

⁷⁵⁵ King, *Misery*, 242.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Schroeder, op.cit., 143. She adds that the "dripping axe is most obviously phallic as it repeatedly hits the foot."

⁷⁵⁸ King, *Misery*, 7.

⁷⁵⁹ Keeseey, "*Misery*", 59.

victimization to a sense of empowerment and manly individuation, entailing a recovery of the feminine, essential to a writer's life.⁷⁶⁰ She further adds that "*Misery* is also [...] about writing and the body: the experience of the body, "feminizing" embodiment, and the body as text."⁷⁶¹

According to Morgan, a primary aim of literary horror is to put its readers in touch with a "sense of their own physicalness."⁷⁶² In the case of the King novels that have been analyzed, this 'lesson' extends also to the protagonists: both Carrie and Paul become more attuned to their body's sensations, developing a more intimate bond with their "fleshly reality."⁷⁶³ Carrie's body is the source of her supernatural power, yet it also causes her anguish: her victimized position (in relation to her peers) is partly due to her physical unattractiveness and clumsiness. Paul, on the other hand, needs to reintegrate the bodily dimension into his life and his writing. While his broken body puts him in an extremely vulnerable position, the overriding physical imperative to evade pain also prompts him to new heights of creativity, both in his new novel and in his hatching an escape plan.

3.2.2 Truth is Stranger than Fiction

King has always been very open about the importance of writing in his life. In his autobiographical *On Writing* he claims that *Misery* is about "the redemptive power of writing",⁷⁶⁴ and knowing about the addictions he was struggling with at the time, we can also connect this statement to his previously cited belief about "writing myself sane" (which he attributes to the poet Anne Sexton).⁷⁶⁵ In the foreword of *Skeleton Crew*, King similarly defended his profession as not being about money, saying that "you do it because it saves you from feeling bad" and because "to not do it is suicide."⁷⁶⁶

However, in yet another gruesome twist of fate, he learned that sometimes life imitates art and was placed in a similar situation to that of Paul Sheldon. In 1999, King was hit by a van while taking his afternoon stroll and almost died. During the traumatic recovery period which followed, he relied upon writing as a means to work through pain, suffering and daily agony: "There have been times when for me the act of writing has been

⁷⁶⁰ Badley, op.cit., 61. Elsewhere in her book, she defines the feminine as "the state of being embodied" (63).

⁷⁶¹ Badley, op.cit., 59.

⁷⁶² Morgan, op.cit., 74.

⁷⁶³ Morgan, op.cit., 91.

⁷⁶⁴ King, *On Writing*, 168.

⁷⁶⁵ Norden, op.cit., 68.

⁷⁶⁶ King, *Skeleton Crew*, 21, 20.

a little act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair. [...] Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life. That was something I found out in the summer of 1999, when a man driving a blue van almost killed me.”⁷⁶⁷

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega claim that “art is a privileged vehicle for the expression and transmission of psychic trauma” and it can also provide “mechanisms of resilience aimed at ensuring the survival of the traumatised subject.”⁷⁶⁸ The narrativization of the traumatic experience took both a direct and an indirect form in King’s case: he published an essay entitled “On Impact” in *The New Yorker* (June 19, 2000), the text of which was later reproduced in *On Writing*.⁷⁶⁹ In it he gives a very detailed account of the accident, the extent of his injuries, his thoughts at the time (“I realize that I am actually lying in death’s doorway”⁷⁷⁰) and the painful months of rehabilitation. Setting down to work a mere five weeks after the accident, King rediscovered the healing powers of his chosen craft.

I was never so grateful to be writing as during my time of work [...] on *Dreamcatcher*. I was in a lot of physical discomfort during those six and a half months, and the book took me away. The reader will see that pieces of that physical discomfort followed me into the story, but what I remember most is the sublime release we find in vivid dreams.⁷⁷¹

Though he has always looked upon writing as a means of guaranteeing his sanity, now he has realized that it also helps in working through physical, not just psychic pain. In an interview with Stephen J. Dubner, he claimed that “[w]riting is just this great big conduit, this outflow pipe that keeps pressure nice and even [...] All the insecurities come out, all the fears – and also, it’s a great way to pass the time.” When asked what would have happened if he had not been able to make a career of it, he candidly responded: “Oh, I’d be dead. I would have drunk myself to death or drugged myself to death or committed suicide or some goddamn thing.”⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁷ King, *On Writing*, 249.

⁷⁶⁸ Ganteau and Onega, op.cit., 1.

⁷⁶⁹ By indirect form I mean the novel he wrote during his period of convalescence, *Dreamcatcher* (2001). It even contains a character hit by a car and both the horrible accident (“He’s unconscious in the back of the ambulance but watching himself, having an actual out-of-body experience” [King, *Dreamcatcher*, 255]) and his painful physical therapy are described. See also Sharon A. Russel, *Revisiting Stephen King: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 150.

⁷⁷⁰ King, *On Writing*, 260.

⁷⁷¹ King, *Dreamcatcher*, 571.

⁷⁷² Stephen J. Dubner, “What Is Stephen King Trying To Prove?” in *The New York Times*. August 13, 2000, accessed: 4 June, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/13/magazine/what-is-stephen-king-trying-to-prove.html?pagewanted=1>

Graham Green, King's "favorite writer when he talks about writing",⁷⁷³ stated that "[w]riting is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation."⁷⁷⁴ Committing an experience to paper is a way of understanding and coming to terms with it. The need to find order and coherence in something which defies the human mind can also prompt writing (Ganteau and Onega also comment upon the "unutterability of the traumatic experience"⁷⁷⁵). Contemplating such close calls afterwards helps to integrate the incident into the mind, finding the right place for it, closing the lid on it.

King approaches the subject of his near-death experience⁷⁷⁶ as a professional storyteller, offering a list of his injuries (lower leg broken in nine places, hip derailed, spine chipped in eight places, four ribs broken, lacerated scalp requiring twenty stitches, a collapsed lung), peppered with loving reminiscences (prompted, for example, by the emergency medical technician's cutting his wedding ring off his finger) and even ironic remarks (hearing the absurd remarks from the van driver following the accident, "it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character right out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny"⁷⁷⁷). That the man died a year later, exactly on King's birthday, creates an uncanny aspect to the story.⁷⁷⁸

To conclude on a funny note, I would like to quote from an interview originally conducted approximately a year after his accident, which nicely illustrates how fiction can actually shape real life. The reporter asked him about the nurses who took care of him:

You know, they'd all read *Misery*, and they worked for an outfit called the Bangor Area Visiting Nurses. These are nurses who go into the home and give home care. And I think one of them told me toward the end of the period, where I needed full-time nursing, that they had all read it, and they had all been called into the office by their superior and told in no uncertain terms, 'You don't make any *Misery* jokes.'⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷³ Jo Fletcher, "Stephen King: The Limits of Fear," in *Reign of Fear: The Fiction and Film of Stephen King (1982-1989)*, ed. Don Herron (London: Pan Books, 1981), x.

⁷⁷⁴ Graham Green, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 9.

⁷⁷⁵ Ganteau and Onega, op.cit., 6.

⁷⁷⁶ His head struck the windshield of the van "less than two inches from the steel driver's-side support post" and he barely avoided collision with "the rocks jutting out of the ground beyond the shoulder" of the road: in both cases, in all probability, had the circumstances been less fortunate, he would have been killed on the spot (King, *On Writing*, 259).

⁷⁷⁷ King, *On Writing*, 246.

⁷⁷⁸ Michael Gray Baughan, *Stephen King* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 103.

⁷⁷⁹ "Stephen King: The 'Craft' Of Writing Horror Stories." July 02, 2010, accessed: June 05, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128239303>.

4 Conclusion

The literary canon often marginalizes popular novels like those penned by Stephen King, whose bestseller status is frowned upon by academicians. However, these genres, perhaps due to their ‘ex-centric’ position, are often more successful in highlighting the phobias, latent fears and collective desires of a society than are works belonging to the mainstream.⁷⁸⁰ These books demarcate the borders surrounding a society: they show what can and cannot be done within a certain community. Forbidden territories are explored and often there is a strong didactic element embedded in the text. King claims that “the horror story [...] is really [...] conservative [...] its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands.”⁷⁸¹ Within the safe confines of a literary work, we are given a glimpse of the horrible consequences of trespassing the boundaries which maintain society’s peace and order.

Why do we have this urge to produce and consume horror stories? As Carlos Clarens puts it: “there seems to be inside us a constant, ever-present yearning for the fantastic, for the darkly mysterious, for the choked terror of the dark.”⁷⁸² What is the *raison d’être* of these novels? Why are we attracted to them?

Critical opinions diverge regarding this issue: first, there is the conservative standpoint, which regards these texts as ultimately life-affirming, functioning as safety valves in society, which, in the end, sustain social order. According to Rosemary Jackson, fantasies neutralize “an urge towards transgression.”⁷⁸³ By vicariously experiencing anti-social emotions, we exorcise these feelings and experience a cathartic release from these repressed urges, a kind of psychic relief. This theory builds partly on the repression model of psychoanalysis and claims that it is better to feed the “hungry alligators” lurking in the subconscious once in a while than to risk an upsurge of these repressed desires.⁷⁸⁴ We all have anticivilization emotions (“the potential lyncher is in almost all of us”)⁷⁸⁵ and these stories might help us to cope with these feelings, to maintain mental equilibrium.

Horror texts also reinforce certain taboos and rules which we deem necessary for the sake of society. By toying with the ideas of crossing taboo lines or violating rules, via

⁷⁸⁰ Bényei Tamás, *Rejtélyes Rend* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2000), 42.

⁷⁸¹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 395.

⁷⁸² Carlos Clarens quoted by Punter, op.cit., 204.

⁷⁸³ Rosemary Jackson, op.cit., 72.

⁷⁸⁴ King, *Danse Macabre*, 177.

⁷⁸⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, 176.

our imagination, in fictional worlds, we acquire a better understanding of what those taboos are and what purposes they serve. As Fred Botting points out, the transgression, by upsetting social boundaries, ultimately serves the purpose of reinforcing the value and necessity of such boundaries.⁷⁸⁶ Furthermore, these books also have a counterphobic role: we overcome our fears of frightening objects by confronting them within the safe confines of a literary work.

Some critics, however, tend to emphasize a second viewpoint: they point to the subversive role of such fiction, or its disaffirmative nature. Among them Linda Holland-Toll, who claims that the most effective horror fiction is that which resists closure and resolution, and which leaves a lingering sense of “dis/ease” in the reader, who is later haunted by the text.⁷⁸⁷ Such books probe the hidden reality beneath the happy surface, they search for the “skull beneath the skin” and usually what they find disaffirms our good feelings about ourselves, our community and our society.⁷⁸⁸ They lift the veil, or rather, tear the veil away so that we can examine what is beneath. Often we are confronted with a corrupted version of one of America’s dominant myths (the American Dream), which could be called ‘the American Nightmare’. Horror texts show (and not very delicately) that things are not what they appear to be. They form part of a cultural self-analysis, as it were. They question certain cultural assumptions which we usually take for granted (man’s essential humanity, for example) and often affirm nothing in exchange.

Holland-Toll compares the effect of such texts to a carnival mirror which offers a dark, warped image of ourselves, but which is nevertheless real. The revelation is not a pleasant one and this might be the reason why so many people turn away from horror fiction. However, in Leslie Fiedler’s opinion, this is a distinguishing characteristic not just of horror fiction, but of literature in general: “The writer’s duty is [...] to deny the easy affirmations by which most men live, and to expose the blackness of life most men try deliberately to ignore. [...] it is the function of art not to console or sustain, much less to entertain, but to *disturb* by telling a truth which is always unwelcome.”⁷⁸⁹

In my dissertation I aimed to explore the controversial genre of horror, highlighting its function and its redeeming qualities (for example, “the ability to form a liaison between our fantasy fears and our real fears”,⁷⁹⁰ to reflect the troubling thoughts of a society,

⁷⁸⁶ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 7.

⁷⁸⁷ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 10.

⁷⁸⁸ Holland-Toll, op.cit., 12.

⁷⁸⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Scarborough House, 1960), 432.

⁷⁹⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 129.

regardless of whether they are of a social, economic, cultural, sexual or political nature), explicating our attraction to it and describing an array of theoretical approaches which might aid the reader/viewer when approaching horror fiction.

Tracing back the genre's birth to the Gothic period, I started my investigation with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, examining its far-reaching role in shaping the taste of the period. Following a brief historical overview, signalling the horror genre's major developmental phases both in film and in fiction, I proceeded to highlight a number of critical theories, outlining their different contributions to this controversial field of study. I included the canonical theoreticians' views, however, I placed more emphasis on theories which have not yet reached a wider audience, thereby offering new insights into this controversial genre. The less-well-known theories all have their merits and applicability, but it was not my intention to advocate the supremacy of any single approach. The impressive variety of critical approaches underlines the complexity and heterogeneity of the genre and helps in dispelling the myth condemning horror as a perverted pleasure, devoid of any social merit.

This first, theoretical part is concluded with an introduction into the oeuvre of Stephen King, the undisputed master of horror literature of the present age. He has indeed become a popular phenomenon, "whose identification with horror in the public mind may surpass that of Poe or Lovecraft."⁷⁹¹ I attempted to briefly characterize King and his rich output, analyzing topics such as style, themes, recurring figures in his fiction, the books published under his pseudonym and his theories about horror.

Following this chapter on King, I proceeded to the analysis of two of his novels, *Carrie* and *Misery*, which place a particular emphasis on corporeality, the physical dimension of existence, the various traumas and sufferings the body can go through and how (and whether) these experiences can be communicated and how this process of narrativization contributes to the healing process of the traumatized subject and whether it can fulfill a "restorative purpose."⁷⁹² The other major link between these texts is the figure of the monstrous feminine which, in *Carrie*'s case, evokes our sympathy, while in *Misery* it triggers fear and dread.

During my research, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* proved to be extremely useful, since it provides a catalogue of female monsters, and challenges the dominant view that women usually occupy the position of

⁷⁹¹ Herron, "King," 243.

⁷⁹² Laub and Podell, quoted in Ganteau and Onega, op.cit., 2.

victim in horror narratives. The other theoretician whose views have influenced my conception of the chapter on *Carrie* was Holland-Toll, who is primarily concerned with community construction and the various exclusionary mechanisms and techniques of Othering that a society or community employs in order to maintain its cohesion. I have also dealt with the importance of reading, writing and questions related to authorship in a wider sense in connection with *Carrie*.

In the case of *Misery*, the figure of the castrating mother was scrutinized, and I also drew attention to the curious fact that in spite of its horrifying implications, this figure also functions as some kind of a terrible muse. I was especially intrigued by the shifting nature of the power dynamics delineated within the novel and, thus, I examined the two characters' role reversals through the different lenses of victim-victimizer, reader-writer and mother-child relationship, even connecting their figures to the dichotomy of body and mind. In the chapter devoted to King's canon, I mentioned writers as recurring figures in his fictional landscape, and in fact, *Misery* is highly autobiographical, revealing a great deal about King's view of the reading public and the pressures entailed in being a writer of popular fiction.

I propose to conclude with a close reading of a King novella, "The Body," which serves both as a rounding-off of the dissertation and as a testament to the richness of King's canon and to the diverse critical approaches that can be utilized during its analysis. This novella requires a different approach (instead of feminist psychoanalysis, myth criticism is more relevant, in this case), yet, through the figure of the writer, the importance of writing, the narrativization of trauma, abject substances and questions of mortality, "The Body" is thematically related to the texts that have been analyzed before.

Pigeon-holed as the ultimate Master of Horror, Stephen King is a far more versatile writer than that. His collection of four novellas, *Different Seasons*, published in 1982, attests to this fact: these are not typical King stories, in the sense that they are not horror stories and they do not have recourse to the use of the supernatural, but they do contain elements of worldly horror.⁷⁹³

"The Body" was also translated to the silver screen and the resulting film, *Stand by Me* (1986), won sensational appreciation, both from fans and movie critics. King's name was downplayed and it does not appear until the final credits roll. So most people walked

⁷⁹³ *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), an Oscar-nominated film, was also an adaptation from this collection (from the novella "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption").

away from the movie theatres without knowing this was a piece written by the king of horror. Yet this atypical story also reveals his strengths as a writer: the careful delineation of character, together with small idiosyncrasies and foibles, his ability to capture the dialogue of preteen boys, his depiction of the Maine landscape, his convincing recreation of childhood and, underlying all, his criticism of small town, rural America and the structure of the family, with its uncaring parents.⁷⁹⁴

“The Body” is a bittersweet coming-of-age story, maybe the most autobiographical work ever published by King. Heavily influenced by incidents from his own childhood, it gives a real taste of what it was like to grow up in rural America in the 1960s. What sets this novella apart from other works exploring this fuzzy territory wherein a boy enters manhood, is the central experience which initiates these youngsters into maturity: confrontation with death.

The four boy protagonists, all of them twelve years old, set out to find the corpse of another boy who had been hit by a train. More traditional coming-of-age stories emphasize the sexual aspect of the maturation process: the first kiss, seeing a naked girl for the first time, or plucking up enough courage to buy the first condom. The theme of love is not missing, however; it remains an equally powerful and sustaining force, even if it does not manifest itself in male-female relationships. Instead, we learn about the love existing between friends, and that special bond which connects children of the same sex and age. King attributes a special significance to this period in our lives and suggests that something is irrevocably lost when we cross the threshold to maturity: “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve.”⁷⁹⁵

The subtitle of the novella is *Fall from Innocence*, which clearly has resonances with William Blake, and we immediately associate it with its counterpart: experience. The characters in the book experience something which will usher in their maturity. It is not by chance that King chose late summer and early autumn as the setting for his story, since this is the time of ripening, maturation and harvest. The boys, in a similar fashion, will also reap their harvests, and what they gain during this expedition will change their lives, forever. They are also about to start a new phase in their lives in the academic sense; junior high school is awaiting them and they will have to decide whether they are going to orient themselves for college prep courses or stick to the trade-oriented shop courses.

⁷⁹⁴ Beahm, *Stephen King*, 74.

⁷⁹⁵ Stephen King, “The Body” in *Different Seasons*, 337.

The four friends, who have a regular meeting-place in a treehouse, all have emotional scars. Gordon Lachance, the protagonist, comes from a more socially-elevated family than his friends, but this is still a far cry from the 'ideal'. He had a brother, Dennis, 10 years his senior, a football hero, who was idolized by his parents. Gordie often felt neglected and ignored; his parents only seemed to care about Dennis. Gordie found a very apt metaphor for his condition when he chanced upon a book entitled *The Invisible Man*. He totally identified with the hero of that work: "Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers."⁷⁹⁶ The boy often felt the same when, during dinner, his parents concentrated only on Dennis, overwhelming him with questions about his latest match, or the girl he was dating, but not giving any attention to Gordie. It is small wonder that he experienced a crisis of identity; do you really exist "[i]f no one acknowledges your presence"?⁷⁹⁷

A couple of months before the story begins, Dennis is killed in a jeep accident. His parents are devastated by their loss, and seem to forget about Gordie. They withdraw into themselves, are totally submerged in their grief, and Gordie becomes even more alienated from them. The poor boy does not even blame his mother for her behavior, since her "only kid was dead."⁷⁹⁸

What is even more disturbing for Gordon's psyche is that he thinks that somehow he is responsible for the terrible grief visited upon his family. He is convinced it would have been better for everyone if he had been the one to die, not Dennis. He has a recurring nightmare, in which his brother reprimands him for staying alive: "*It should have been you, Gordon.*"⁷⁹⁹ For Gordie, the main lesson of the adventure is that death is often accidental, and happens for no apparent reason: "Some people drown, that's all. It's not fair, but it happens."⁸⁰⁰ He will eventually overcome his guilty feelings, escape from the shadow of the brother and have his sense of identity reinforced.

Chris Chambers, the rebel leader of the gang, comes from a no-account family. Everyone expects him to live up to their poor reputation, well-established by his delinquent brothers and his abusive, alcoholic father, who regularly beats him up. He desperately tries to avoid being typecast, but the entire community seems to work against this desire: "Chris came from a bad family, all right, and everybody thought he would turn out bad ...

⁷⁹⁶ King, "The Body," 306.

⁷⁹⁷ Arthur W. Biddle, "The Mythic Journey in 'The Body,'" in *The Dark Descent*, ed. Tony Magistrale (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 85.

⁷⁹⁸ King, "The Body," 304.

⁷⁹⁹ King, "The Body," 309.

⁸⁰⁰ King, "The Body," 429.

including Chris.”⁸⁰¹ For example, when the milk-money disappeared from his class, everyone assumed he had stolen it. It is only during this trip to find the dead body that Chris confides to Gordon that he really did steal the money, later repented his deed, and took the money back to the teacher without having spent any of it. Yet the money never surfaced. Who would have believed him if he had told on the teacher, an impeccable figure of authority, who grabbed her chance and spent the money on herself? Gordie is flabbergasted when he hears the story, but he recalls the new skirt the teacher was wearing the week after the theft and this convinces him of Chris’s veracity. Losing your illusions, and being disappointed by persons whom you respected (teachers, parents) come as a hard blow to a child’s developing psyche, yet are an integral part of growing up.

Teddy Duchamp’s father is confined to a mental asylum, but his condition was not detected early enough and, when Teddy was 8, his father decided to teach him a lesson by holding the child’s ears to the hot top of a stove. Teddy’s disfigured ears and hearing impairment are a constant reminder that sometimes the person entrusted with a child’s well-being presents the greatest threat to it.⁸⁰² Teddy is not very bright, just like the last boy in the group, Vern Tessio, who lives in constant fear of his elder brother, at whose hands he often suffers from sound beatings. It is Vern who overhears the conversation between his brother and a friend of his concerning the whereabouts of a dead body.

The radio reports a missing boy from a nearby town, a boy called Ray Brower, aged 12, like the protagonists. He went to pick some blueberries and apparently lost his way in the woods. As it later turns out, he was hit by a train and his body was found, only by chance, by Vern’s brother. While the older boys hesitate about notifying the police, the young ones, once they learn about the location of the body, immediately decide to set out on this big adventure.

Somehow, they all understand the significance of it, “I feel like we *hafta* see him”, “this was a *big* thing”, “we *deserved* to see it”, and they weave a carefully planned web of lies to escape the attention of their parents (which attention was never that intense in the first place).⁸⁰³ They tell them they are camping out in Vern’s back field and set out on their journey of discovery. What they never consciously face is that they are going to meet death ‘face to face’; a confrontation with mortality awaits them, all the more poignant because the victim is a child of the same age.

⁸⁰¹ King, “The Body,” 303.

⁸⁰² A recurring motif in King stories: cf. *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*.

⁸⁰³ King, “The Body,” 350, 398, 391.

King presents a rather dark view of society, full of mean, hypocritical and weak adult figures. Since they do not provide the moral and emotional support which these youngsters need, it is necessary for them to establish non-familial bonds. In fact, their tree-house functions as a “necessary refuge from the irrationalities of Castle Rock parents.”⁸⁰⁴ It is important to see that this journey of discovery takes them away from home. For these boys, home is not the loving, nurturing place of the ideal childhood, but a place where drunken fathers or aggressive brothers threaten their daily existence. Home is also a limitation: certain epithets are attached to them which they would like to shed (Teddy will always be considered ‘the son of a loony’, Chris is ‘expected’ to become a trouble-maker).⁸⁰⁵ Not all of them will be able to break out of these moulds, but this journey marks a watershed.

Critic Arthur W. Biddle sees their adventure as the quintessential example of the mythic journey in which the hero has to undergo different trials in order to return as a new man.⁸⁰⁶ The archetype of the journey underlies many tales and mythological stories, where a hero goes into the outside world, is put to the test, faces certain challenges and then comes back. King admitted that he was influenced by *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, written by mythologist Joseph Campbell.⁸⁰⁷ According to Campbell, the underlying pattern of the mythic quest (and the standard plot of the adventure of the hero) is the following: “separation-initiation-return.”⁸⁰⁸

The separation phase takes place when the four boys leave the security of home and treehouse and cross the town limits to set out for uncharted territories. A dump lies on the edge of the town, and this marks the boundaries of the known world for them. This is the place where Gordie has to face his first test. Trespassing is prohibited, yet the boys enter to get water from the pump. Then Gordie leaves to buy some food. On his return, he decides to cross the dump again, to shorten the road. By the time he has walked half of the distance, he realizes that Milo, the dump-keeper, has arrived, together with his mythical dog. Chopper was “the most feared” dog in Castle Rock, and legends circulated about him.⁸⁰⁹ According to rumors, his owner taught him to attack certain body parts (“Chopper!

⁸⁰⁴ Reino, op.cit., 131.

⁸⁰⁵ Leonard G. Heldreth, “Viewing “The Body”: King’s Portrait of the Artist as Survivor,” in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares*, eds, Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Bowling Greene: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 65.

⁸⁰⁶ Biddle, op.cit., 84.

⁸⁰⁷ Magistrale, *Stephen King*, 3.

⁸⁰⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956), 30.

⁸⁰⁹ King, “The Body,” 333.

Sic! Balls!” is the most dreaded command in the imagination of the boys).⁸¹⁰ When Milo notices Gordie, he and Chopper start to chase him. Gordie’s vivid imagination spurs him to run for dear life, and he manages to climb the fence before the dog could get him. When he looks back at his pursuer, he receives his “first lesson in the vast difference between myth and reality”: Chopper is a common mongrel dog, not the “hellhound” he was made out to be by the kids in town.⁸¹¹ Yet the dog and Milo, functioning as threshold-keepers, the guardians of the border, fulfilled their tasks in this mythic journey.⁸¹² They represented the first obstacle to the hero, who had to cope with the situation on his own. After the successful completion of this first task, the boys proceed.

Next, they have to cross a narrow train-bridge, high above Castle River. Chris’s question (“Any pussies here?”⁸¹³) sets the task in the context of bravery and daring, as if it were a test of masculinity. Halfway across the tracks, Gordie thinks: “If I went back, I’d be a pussy for life.”⁸¹⁴ They have almost reached the other side when he hears a train coming from behind. It is a bit like being pursued again, this time by a mechanical creature instead of a living one.⁸¹⁵ Again, he has to run for dear life; again, he does not look back while being pursued; he does not want to see this life-threatening entity. At the last minute, they jump off the tracks, and this nearly fatal event has a strong impact on Gordie: “I was alive and glad to be”; his will to live is strengthened and he is physically exhilarated by what he has just undergone.⁸¹⁶ As Biddle points out, Gordie discovers “a new sense of wholeness”, thanks to this trauma.⁸¹⁷

After a well-deserved rest, during which Gordie entertained his friends with one of his stories, they decide to camp for the night. The account, embedded in the main story, nicely illustrates Gordie’s role as a “community storyteller.”⁸¹⁸ He performs on demand; his friends ask him for a story, and he obliges. Characters often find their calling and “discover their identities as writers first through telling stories to friends.”⁸¹⁹ King places a lot of emphasis upon the oral nature of the situation; Gordie is interrupted by the other boys who pester him with silly questions and comment upon his narrative choices (“that

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹¹ King, “The Body,” 342.

⁸¹² Biddle, *op.cit.*, 87.

⁸¹³ King, “The Body,” 353.

⁸¹⁴ King, “The Body,” 354.

⁸¹⁵ Biddle, *op.cit.*, 89.

⁸¹⁶ King, “The Body,” 359.

⁸¹⁷ Biddle, *op.cit.*, 89.

⁸¹⁸ Badley, *op.cit.*, 35.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

sounds pretty stupid”⁸²⁰). This gives a real sense of community and audience participation; we are constantly reminded of the presence of the other boys, even though the principal narrator is Gordon.

The next episode, which helps him on the difficult road to maturity, he experiences alone, without his friends. After the night spent in the woods, Gordon is the first to waken up at dawn. He is sitting on the railroad tracks when a roe deer appears and starts to crop nearby. He is completely absorbed by the beauty of the moment (“I was frozen solid”⁸²¹) and King’s description of Gordie’s feelings of awe, wonder and astonishment might be the most delicate passage of the entire book: “What I was seeing was some sort of gift, something given with a carelessness that was appalling.”⁸²²

He keeps this Edenic experience to himself, as if he were afraid his friends would ridicule the delicate, feminine feelings evoked in him. Later, he remarks that “for me it was the best part of that trip, the cleanest part”⁸²³ and the sensations awakened in him were so strongly imprinted on his mind that later, in adult life, he often returns to this memory in times of trouble.⁸²⁴ This encounter with the deer weighs more than the bravery and machismo involved in looking at the corpse, because it exerts an influence upon the soul of the boy, not upon his body.⁸²⁵ The spiritual dimension of the episode is further supported by the fact that the deer might be interpreted as an emblem of the soul, as it appears in Psalm 42: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you.” His soul is awakened, and this condition is “essential for the tests that are yet to come.”⁸²⁶

Later, the other boys wake up, and they continue their travel and come upon a pond. Surface appearances are deceptive; this is another lesson which they have to learn. Under the smooth, cool surface, the pond is full of bloodsuckers. When the boys get out of the water, they discover, to their horror, that they are covered by leeches. Screaming and jumping about, they get rid of the otherwise harmless creatures. When Gordie thinks he has cleared himself of them, he discovers “the granddaddy of them all clinging to my testicles, its body swelled to four times its normal size.”⁸²⁷ Pleadingly, he turns for help to Chris, who only gapes in horror and then throws up, in a fear reaction. Again, Gordie has to face

⁸²⁰ King, “The Body,” 362.

⁸²¹ King, “The Body,” 389.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ King, “The Body,” 390.

⁸²⁴ The reader is reminded of Wordsworth’s similar response to the scenes he witnessed when visiting Tintern Abbey.

⁸²⁵ Reino, op.cit., 130.

⁸²⁶ Biddle, op.cit., 92.

⁸²⁷ King, “The Body,” 393.

the menace on his own: he pulls loose the swollen leech which bursts between his fingers. "My own blood ran across my palm and inner wrist in a warm flood."⁸²⁸ The deed has such strong overtones of self-castration that it is more than an adolescent boy can bear; he faints and falls to the ground, as if dead.⁸²⁹

According to Biddle, the hero must "die in order to be reborn", so this supreme test, where Gordie's sexuality was threatened, and where he had to shed sacrificial blood, was a necessary step in completing the process of his development.⁸³⁰ After the leech episode, we witness "the birth of a higher mode of personality".⁸³¹ All these tests may be seen as various rites of passage, which he needs to undergo in order to leave behind the previous stage of life, to achieve a new identity and become more mature. The fact that they are following train-tracks also reinforces this idea: "There's a high ritual to all fundamental events, the rites of passage, the magic corridor where change happens. [...] the rite of passage *is* a magic corridor [...] Our corridor was those twin rails, and we walked between them [...]."⁸³²

When they finally find the body, what they come face-to-face with is their own mortality, in a sense. Death is no longer an abstract term for them, and Ray's non-existent future life is summarized as a series of "*can't, don't, won't, never, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't*."⁸³³ Gordie needs to look him in the face to prove to himself that it was not he who died. Ray's body helps him digest the experience of dying, something which he was unable to do when his brother died. His maturity is achieved through confrontation with, and understanding of mortality.⁸³⁴

At this point, the older boys arrive, and a clash follows – over the ownership of the body. After some verbal insults, the fight is decided by the firing of a pistol, which Chris had stolen from his father. With the help of this phallic gun, the young ones succeed in making the older boys retreat, thus they prove their masculinity. Though later they decide against carrying the body back with them, they clearly depart the scene as the victors. The hero's initiation phase is completed, and he can return home.

When they get back to town, Teddy and Vern separate from Gordie and Chris, which foreshadows the end of the four friend's union. A few months later, Gordie remarks

⁸²⁸ King, "The Body," 394.

⁸²⁹ Heldreth, op.cit., 70.

⁸³⁰ Biddle, op.cit., 93.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² King, "The Body," 399.

⁸³³ King, "The Body," 405.

⁸³⁴ Raynold Gideon and Bruce Evans, "The End of Innocence: Stand By Me 19 Years Later," *Creative Screenwriting* 12, no. 5 (2005): 69.

that Vern and Teddy “just drifted away.”⁸³⁵ It is implied that they will be true heirs to their parents and brothers. They do not have the moral strength to break away from the codes and values of Castle Rock society.⁸³⁶ So the end of the summer puts an end to their friendship, not just to their innocence.

On the other hand, Chris and Gordie develop a “mutual support system”⁸³⁷ and their friendship becomes stronger. Gordie makes Chris realize that he has “the potential to leave Castle Rock and escape the pattern of failure.”⁸³⁸ He starts to tutor Chris, who will eventually enroll at a university. This one-time loser finds enough strength of will to make his dream come true, and to break out of the confining limits of his home town. On the other hand, Chris recognizes Gordie’s talent and urges him to write, something which proves to be his mode of escape. The boys feel they no longer have anything to do with Castle Rock values, and their bond becomes “an alternative to the sterility of their families and the larger corruption of their community.”⁸³⁹ In a certain sense, they become each other’s parents. As Chris remarks to Gordie: “kids lose *everything* unless somebody looks out for them and if your folks are too fucked up to do it then maybe I ought to.”⁸⁴⁰

Gordie has ambitions to become a writer one day, and “The Body” is also about his development as a writer. He is the narrator of the story which frequently jumps forward and backward in time. In the manner of Dickens’s Pip from *Great Expectations* (1861), there is the older, mature Gordon, recounting his singular summer adventure. The adult perspective sometimes intrudes into the narrative, as when he criticizes his juvenilia (two early fictions of Gordon are embedded in the main story). The fact that the gang’s one-time storyteller ended up becoming a successful writer helps him deal with the strange experiences of his childhood. He feels that writing can offer some kind of control over life’s chaos, and that when the raw experiences of life are shaped by a writer, he creates order over the disorderly elements of life:⁸⁴¹ “[...] there was a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had troubled me for years come out in a new form, *a form over which I had imposed control.*”⁸⁴²

A few years pass, and Gordie receives the news of the death of Chris, who is accidentally killed in a fight. He is so badly shaken that he needs to relive that past

⁸³⁵ King, “The Body,” 428.

⁸³⁶ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, 93.

⁸³⁷ Magistrale, *The Moral Voyages*, 85.

⁸³⁸ Magistrale, *The Moral Voyages*, 84.

⁸³⁹ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, 94.

⁸⁴⁰ King, “The Body,” 378.

⁸⁴¹ Heldreth, op.cit., 72.

⁸⁴² King, “The Body,” 323.

summer. Up until then, Gordie had told no one about the happenings of that weekend, but now he needs to confront his childhood in order to become whole again. Sometimes, the fears of childhood continue to haunt the adult, so he needs to go back and relive those experiences.⁸⁴³ Gordie realizes that “[u]nderstanding the self requires understanding the past.”⁸⁴⁴ However, digging up treasured memories and sharing them are not easy tasks.

*The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them—words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they’re brought out. [...] And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you’ve said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it.*⁸⁴⁵

Gordie finds in himself, and in his experiences, the stuff of storytelling when he returns in memory to that summer of 1960. Through reliving the happenings of that weekend, he retrieves the past, looks in its mirror and writes a story unlike previous ones which reflect the suffering and guilt felt by his younger self.⁸⁴⁶ The final story, “The Body”, is a testament to “the power of honesty, courage, and love.”⁸⁴⁷

I have previously claimed that King is a romantic at heart, and I believe this novella amply testifies to that. Although he is considered an author of ‘scary books’, I hope to have proven in my dissertation that slotting him into such narrow categories does him no justice. He is a versatile, multi-faceted writer, who is deeply concerned with his times and society and who readily tackles problematic topics and societal issues.

I have attempted to offer a satisfying account of the various reasons we feel attracted to horror fiction, which attraction might seem paradoxical, at first: “Ambivalence is at the heart of horror – things that are gruesome can also be strangely compelling. Half of you wants to look, or to know, and the other half doesn’t. One response is about pleasure and the other about pain, and it is the business of horror to put the two in touch with each other.”⁸⁴⁸ Our attitudes are especially ambivalent when we contemplate monsters: distinguishing traits of the genre, monsters (whether supernatural or human)

⁸⁴³ Winter, *The Art of Darkness*, 127.

⁸⁴⁴ Heldreth, op.cit., 71.

⁸⁴⁵ King, “The Body,” 289.

⁸⁴⁶ Heldreth, op.cit., 73.

⁸⁴⁷ Biddle, op.cit., 96.

⁸⁴⁸ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 124.

embody various fears, are constantly recycled, put to new uses, and used by writers to probe beneath the surface, to delve into human behavior, to investigate our hidden fears and reveal our real nature.

“Horror plays on universal fears – sex, death, change – but it also has a charming habit of knowing what scares the wits out of a particular culture at a particular time.”⁸⁴⁹ In that sense, it has a diagnostic function and, as King remarks, these texts “often serve as an extraordinarily accurate barometer of those things which trouble the night-thoughts of a whole society.”⁸⁵⁰ However, “it’s only by addressing these fears that we avoid living in a state of constant trepidation. Horror can speak of such things in a way that a more realistic or naturalistic genre can’t.”⁸⁵¹ I find it fitting to end my work with an analysis of a novella, whose title, “The Body”, encapsulates perhaps the greatest common denominator of horror texts: our physicality, corporeal existence and the body’s vulnerable, perishable nature.

⁸⁴⁹ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 102.

⁸⁵⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 131.

⁸⁵¹ Stephen Jones, op.cit., 7.

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Foo Fighters Ice Bucket Challenge. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE95Xo_uue4

Filmography

Basic Instinct. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. 1992.

Beauty and the Beast. Directed by Jean Cocteau. 1946.

Carrie. Directed by Brian De Palma. 1976.

Corpse Bride. Directed by Tim Burton and Mike Johnson. 2005.

Dawn of the Dead. Directed by George A. Romero. 1978.

Dirty Harry. Directed by Don Siegel. 1971.

Dracula. Directed by Tod Browning. 1931.

Dressed to Kill. Directed by Brian De Palma. 1980.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Directed by Rouben Mamoulian. 1931.

Dr Jekyll & Sister Hyde. Directed by Roy Ward Baker. 1971.

Exorcist, The. Directed by William Friedkin. 1973.

Finding Nemo. Directed by Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich. 2003.

Fly, The. Directed by David Cronenberg. 1986.

Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale. 1931.

Friday the 13th. Directed by Sean S. Cunningham. 1980.

Godzilla. Directed by Ishirô Honda. 1954.

Halloween. Directed by John Carpenter. 1978.

Hellraiser. Directed by Clive Barker. 1987.

Hotel Transylvania. Directed by Genndy Tartakovsky. 2012.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Don Siegel. 1956.

I Spit on Your Grave. Directed by Meir Zarchi. 1978.

Jaws. Directed by Steven Spielberg. 1975.

King Kong. Directed by Merian C. Cooper. 1933.

Lost Boys, The. Directed by Joel Schumacher. 1987.

Maximum Overdrive. Directed by Stephen King. 1986.

Nightmare on Elm Street, A. Directed by Wes Craven. 1984.

Night of the Living Dead. Directed by George A. Romero. 1968.

Nosferatu. Directed by F. W. Murnau. 1922.

Omen. Directed by Richard Donner. 1976.

Phantom of the Opera, The. Directed by Rupert Julian. 1925

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1960.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski. 1968.

Scream. Directed by Wes Craven. 1996.

Shawshank Redemption. Directed by Frank Darabont. 1994.

Shining, The. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 1980.

Silence of the Lambs. Directed by Jonathan Demme. 1991.

Stand by Me. Directed by Rob Reiner. 1986.

Terminator, The. Directed by James Cameron. 1984.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The. Directed by Tobe Hooper. 1974.

Thing, The. Directed by John Carpenter. 1982.

Them! Directed by Gordon Douglas. 1954.

Toy Story. Directed by John Lasseter. 1995.

Appendix

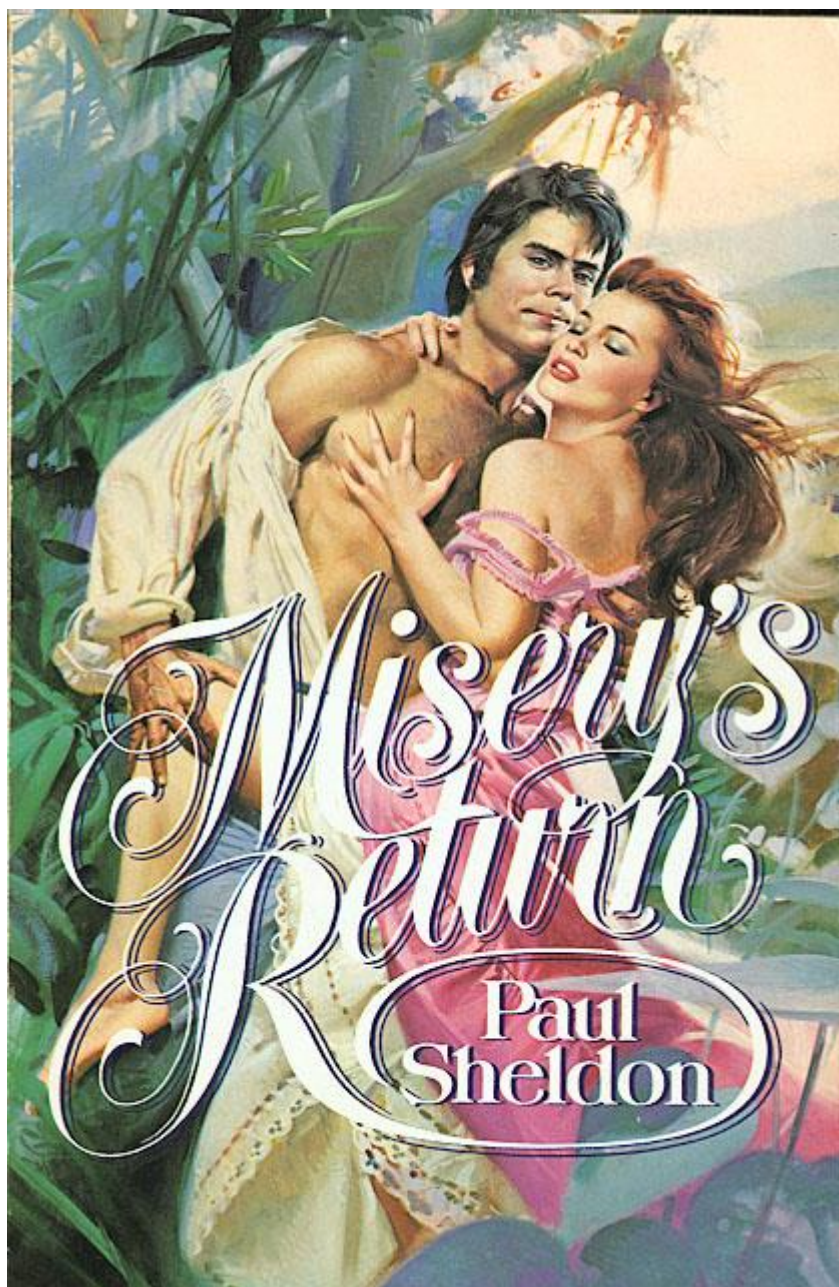


Illustration for footnote 622: the fake cover for Paul Sheldon's *Misery's Return*

http://stephenking.wikia.com/wiki/Misery_Chastain