

THE QUESTION OF VALUE:
READING STEPHEN KING IN A LITERARY CONTEXT

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

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On November 19, 2003, the National Book Foundation awarded best-selling author Stephen King the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. A number of scholarly elitists, including renowned critic Harold Bloom, vehemently condemned the National Book Foundation's decision to offer such a prestigious award to a popular fiction writer like King. I contest, however, that popular writing is not always unintelligent or inartistic and that King's writing is an example of popular fiction that also has literary value. My goal in this thesis is to examine some of the universal elements in King's works and perform an in-depth literary analysis of one of King's novels, The Shining, in order to demonstrate a sampling of qualities that make King's work worthy of literary recognition and examination.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The critics . . . --infuriatingly enough--see the novel as divisible only into two categories: 'literature,' which may either succeed or fail upon its merits, and 'popular fiction,' which always fails, no matter how good it may be. (King, Danse Macabre 367)

If one were to rattle off the names of famous twentieth-century authors, a name that would undoubtedly come up would be that of Stephen King. Author of more than forty best-selling novels and over a hundred short stories and in genres ranging from horror to fantasy to nonfiction, King has proven himself one of the century's most prolific and most popular writers. Despite his commercial success, King has been consistently lauded by critics who dismissed his works – especially his early horror novels – as worthless trash, entertainment-based fodder for the masses.

It seems a long shot that Stephen King, a one-time high school teacher who had to work in a laundry during summers to support his family, would have gone on to become one of the best-selling authors in

history.¹ When his first novel Carrie was published in 1974, King was hopeful that it would bring his family around \$6,000, double what he would make from his teaching salary in three years (King, On Writing 87). Apparently the book struck a chord with readers and sales skyrocketed almost immediately, catapulting King to a celebrity status that sales of his subsequent novels have only substantiated. Since then, he has written over forty novels and several short stories spanning various genres such as horror, science fiction, fantasy, mystery, non-fiction, and autobiography. He was also one of the first authors to venture into online publishing, a market most authors at that time either feared or chose to ignore completely. His popularity, versatility, and innovation were all factors that no doubt made him a very appealing candidate to receive a National Book Award.

The National Book Awards, the most prestigious literary awards in America, have been presented to noteworthy authors since 1950. Sponsored by a consortium of book publishing groups, the purpose of these awards is to “enhance the public’s awareness of exceptional books written by fellow Americans, and to increase the popularity of reading in general” (“The National Book Awards”). National Book Awards are given in areas such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and more recently young

¹ By the early 1990s, over one hundred million of King’s works had been sold (“Author Data Sheet”).

people's literature; but the most coveted award is by far the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters, the recipient of which is "a person who has enriched our literary heritage over a life of service, or a corpus of work" (Baldwin). Since its creation in 1998, this award has been presented to several renowned authors such as Eudora Welty, Toni Morrison, John Updike, and Arthur Miller.

On November 19, 2003, the National Book Foundation held its fifty-fourth Annual National Book Awards in Manhattan, New York. This black tie affair, though a tradition in the literary world for over half a century, usually occurs just under the mass media radar and outside of the perception of the average American. On this particular occasion, however, things were a little different. The name on the lips of all who attended the ceremony would have been recognizable to millions of readers who stood outside the literary circle: Stephen King. That evening, the best-selling author would receive the established organization's most coveted award: the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Master of Ceremonies Walter Mosley warmly introduced King, calling him a "wonderful character in our literary landscape" and recognizing his ability "to celebrate and empower the everyday man and

woman” (Mosley). He called presenting the award to King “an honor and a pleasure” and continued by saying that “[t]here is no writer in America more worthy of recognition for his contributions to literature, to literacy and for his generosity to writers” (Mosley).

After receiving the medal from Deborah Wiley, Chairman of the Board of the National Book Foundation, King was quick to respond to the many vocal critics who were displeased with the idea of such a prestigious award being given to such a popular writer. “There are some people who have spoken out passionately about giving me this medal,” King said; “There are some people who think it’s an extraordinarily bad idea” (King, “Acceptance Speech”).

King’s remark was hardly an understatement. A number of scholarly elitists vehemently condemned the National Book Foundation’s decision to offer such a prestigious award to a popular fiction writer like King. Harold Bloom, Yale professor and renowned literary critic, was the most verbal of these opposers. Bloom even wrote an editorial for The Los Angeles Times calling the decision “another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life” and claiming that King was “an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis” (“Dumbing Down”).

Perhaps before putting his mighty pen to paper on this subject, Bloom should have taken into consideration the fact that King shares this award not only with the aforementioned American literary giants, but also with individuals such as science fiction writer Ray Bradbury and Oprah Winfrey, whose book-of-the-month club contributed to the NBF's main objective: "to raise the cultural appreciation of great writing in America" ("History of the National Book Foundation"). This medal does not solidify King's place as a great American writer, but rather acknowledges his accomplishments in the publishing industry and the interest he has given our society in reading, a fact which no one can honestly deny.

There is no aspect of King's work that should render it unworthy of critical examination and literary recognition, especially given the fact that the term "literature" is very difficult to define objectively. In Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton discounts the more common definition of literature as "imaginative" writing, the Russian formalists' definition of literature as writing characterized by exalted language and estrangement, and the definition of literature as non-pragmatic discourse (1-8). He claims that "[i]t would not be easy to isolate, from all that has been variously called 'literature', some constant set of inherent features . . . There is no 'essence' of literature whatsoever" (Eagleton 9).

Another common contention among King's cavaliers is the financial security his occupation has brought him. Some scholars seem to believe that a great literary writer must be the proverbial starving artist; that is to say that, in order to be a producer of literary work, or any kind of real art, one must not be commercially successful. However, Charles Dickens sold his stories to newspapers and enjoyed quite a popular following in his heyday. Likewise, Shakespeare wrote to please the public and fill his theater; his livelihood depended entirely on the success of his plays and the public's reaction to them. Unless Shakespeare and Dickens, among scores of other authors, are to be permanently stricken from high school and college syllabi on the grounds that they were "sell-outs," it seems unfair to dismiss King on the basis of his success.

King's work may be consistently overlooked due to the genre he is most frequently associated with: horror. This connection reveals itself even outside the literary community: more dramatic and poignant films like Hearts in Atlantis are marketed as coming from "the creator of The Green Mile" rather than Stephen King, the ominous "Master of Horror." Horror or gothic novels have always been met with cool reception from literary critics, and even works of this genre that are now considered "classics," such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and various works by Edgar Allan Poe, have had to fight for their current places among other

canonized texts. Although respected writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and William Faulkner have dabbled with gothic literature in the past, the genre is still generally regarded as sub-literary. There have been, however, a number of significant studies – Donald A. Ringe’s American Gothic, Elizabeth MacAndrew’s The Gothic Tradition in Literature, Edith Birkhead’s The Tale of Terror, and Marshall Brown’s The Gothic Text, among others – that examine the genre’s characteristics and its influence on mainstream writers. These studies all conclude that horror is not only valuable as a literary genre but is necessitated by psychological need. According to Elizabeth MacAndrew, the gothic novel is

a fulfillment of literature’s inexorable function to show life’s complexities. Gothic fiction symbolizes the unresolvable, shifting, but perpetual paradox of human nature. Until the human condition changes, we will need such fantasies to embody the dilemma of our existence, to face us with it, so that we, too, may face the dark. (MacAndrew 250)

Moreover, King’s more recent works, such as The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon and The Green Mile, have shown the author delving into other genres, further invalidating the argument that King cannot be a literary writer because he writes horror fiction.

Those who dismiss King as a hack, a plebian, or simply a bad writer have met their own resistance from other critics who have deemed his writing worthy of numerous awards, including the World Fantasy Award, several Bram Stoker awards, and even an O. Henry Award for his short story "The Man in the Black Suit." His work has also been published in The New Yorker, a reputable publication, on more than one occasion. Receiving the coveted Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters from the National Book Foundation, however, seems to have been the final straw for many who study "serious" literature, Bloom included. This critical exclusivity is the springboard of my research and the foundation of my contention that the literary world should be more open-minded and inclusive toward popular fiction, particularly works by an established author like King.

King's naysayers are also meeting strong opposition from throngs of King supporters, many of whom have been advocating the literary recognition of King's work for years. In their introduction to 1987's The Gothic World of Stephen King, Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne suggest that "[t]here can be no doubt that King is a remarkable phenomenon of our time. It is time that he be as appreciated by scholars as by the general reading public" (18). King scholar Tony Magistrale says, "For King, horror art is essentially a moral medium: it teaches us

behavior to avoid, illustrates survival mechanisms worthy of emulation, and extols the virtues inherent in experiencing personal tragedy without being overwhelmed by it” (Magistrale and Morrison 3). Vocal though his critics may be, King’s advocates might someday be able to drown out those cries of disapproval with demands of acknowledgment.

Literature Review

The scholarly interest in Stephen King is evident in the number of respectable works published about his stories. One useful general reference book is Douglas E. Winter’s Stephen King: The Art of Darkness. In addition to analytical reviews of some of King’s earlier works, the book contains a brief biography, a chronology of King’s life and publications, appendices with synopses of King’s short fiction and film adaptations of his works, and an extensive (though unfortunately now outdated) bibliography. In a similar vein, George Beahm’s The Stephen King Companion is an informative compilation that could be useful to both scholars and fans. It contains articles, interviews, profiles, synopses, and photographs relevant to King’s life and works. In addition to appendices containing listings of publications (more recent than that found in Winter’s book, but still sadly outdated) and films based on his writings, editor George Beahm also includes a list of other secondary sources on King’s work.

Several works include criticism of varying depth on a number of King's novels. In The St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture, biographer Michael R. Collings provides an entry for Stephen King complete with succinct criticism of a number of his novels. Collings notes King's ability to meld horror with realism, his mastery of various genres, and his willingness to blend and experiment with conventional narrative motifs while meriting the way "he has continuously redefined the commercial possibilities of horror fiction." Sharon Russell's Revisiting Stephen King: A Critical Companion offers more extensive critical study on eight of King's more recent creations: Desperation, The Regulators, The Green Mile, Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass, Bag of Bones, Hearts in Atlantis, The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon, and Dreamcatcher. The author's systematic analysis of each work's plot and character development along with possible themes and "alternative readings" make this volume essential to anyone considering a scholarly study of King's work. Her notes on the serial novel form in the chapter on The Green Mile in particular show appreciation for King's willingness to experiment with formats different from the standard novel as well as tapping into a longstanding literary tradition.

One of the most recent published guides to King's work is The Essential Stephen King: A Ranking of the Greatest Novels, Short Stories,

Movies, and Other Creations of the World's Most Popular Writer by

Stephen J. Spignesi. Dubbed “the world’s leading authority on Stephen King” by Entertainment Weekly, Spignesi offers quick insights into what he considers King’s 101 best works, including novels, novellas, short stories, nonfiction essays, screenplays, poems, and even a eulogy. Each chapter contains useful information on a given work, such as date of original publication and subsequent publications, summary and history, and notable instances of writing excellence within the work. Although this particular guide would be more suitable for recreational readers, it deserves merit for being so inclusive of a wide variety of King’s writings outside his novels.

Most scholarly books on King are collections of essays and articles by various authors. The volume on King from Harold Bloom’s book series Bloom’s Biocritiques includes a biography and essays exploring themes and stylistic choices in King’s works, his relationship with critics, the growing amount of scholarly criticism about him, his place in the Romantic tradition, and even how his work reflects the changing morality of America. That these essays came from eminent King scholars (Tony Magistrale, Michael R. Collings, and Jonathan P. Davis, in particular) and were published by an established literary critic such as Bloom make it a prime illustration of King’s value to the literary community. In my

opinion, this particular collection also speaks volumes about Harold Bloom, who is apparently willing to endorse an author that he despises for the sake of making money and putting his name on the cover of another book.

Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne co-edited another collection of essays on King entitled The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares, which contains a wide variety of articles covering topics from King's creation of allegory and use of the grotesque as metaphor to his creation of a new gothic hermeneutic. A particularly noteworthy essay by Samuel Schuman enumerates King's strengths and weaknesses as a writer, using examples from Pet Sematary to illustrate these characteristics. Schuman declares that, despite King's frequently "uneven" writing and occasional "absence of taste," his works impart brilliant plots, engaging characters, and reassuring thematic messages through "a surprisingly effective prose style" (Schuman 108-09). While all of the pieces in this collection have their merits, Schuman's efficiently encapsulates the essence of King's writing without neglecting his imperfections.

Tony Magistrale's The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape is comparable to Hoppenstand and Browne's compilation and also contains several insightful essays, though most of

the essays in this collection explore the various themes in King's oeuvre. Mary Ann Dickerson expands on Tony Magistrale's observation of common themes used by King and William Faulkner; Arthur W. Biddle examines the characteristics of the mythic journey in "The Body;" and Gene Doty explores the themes of guilt and coincidence in "The Monkey." On the whole, these essays appear more literary in nature than those presented by Hoppenstand and Browne, and their concentration on thematic elements makes them more cohesive as a unit.

The most specialized and in-depth critical examination I have come across in my research on King is Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism by Heidi Strengell. Her assertion is that King has "an uncommonly wide interest in other literary genres" for a horror writer and that the influences of these other genres produce fiction that transcends horror. She studies King's use of gothic archetypes, myths, and fairytales along with the influence of Postmodernism and literary naturalism in his works, offering an amazingly (and sometimes overwhelmingly) substantial number of references and examples. Writing a book-length study instead of a shorter article allows Strengell to examine several themes and patterns in King's work cohesively rather than breaking them down by novel or story; she shows one solid picture instead of several puzzle pieces.

This selection of King scholarship illustrates that King's readers are not all intellectually mediocre and that his writing inspires more than gross-outs and nightmares. The sole fact that these essays, collections and books were even written, let alone published, shows that a scholarly interest in King already exists among educated, well-read individuals. These studies unquestionably indicate that there is more to King's writing than the literati would care to admit.

Focus of this Thesis

This study aims to demonstrate that King's writing is worthy of critical attention and examination; but in order to prove that, some type of criteria must be determined. For the purposes demonstrated here, my criteria consist of two items: the use of universal elements and the ability to stand up to literary criticism.

According to Terry Eagleton, literary status is determined less by some mysterious set of qualities and more by "a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing" (9), and it seems clear that the hundreds of thousands of people who read King's works must find something relatable about them. Many of King's supporters hail this connectivity between the author and the world he lives in as the primary reason his works should be studied. Michael R. Collings, author of many critical evaluations of King's writings, claims, "I firmly believe that King

speaks for our times; he touches on elements of American culture that are keystones to understanding ourselves” (Many Facets 139). His writing resonates with readers because, although his plots may be fantastical, his characters are realistic and their fears and hopes mirror those of all people. King dissects the Everyman so often found in literature in a new, relatable way that brings him home to the common people he is supposed to exemplify.

Chapter Two offers expanded insight into the aforementioned criteria and examine some of the universal elements of King’s works. I discuss King’s use of archetypes and allusions to myths and fairy tales, as well as demonstrate how these elements give his contemporary fiction universal appeal. Chapter Three includes a literary examination of The Shining in order to provide an example of a King novel that can withstand critical scrutiny. I show that this book is a powerful literary text that illustrates King’s unique narrative style and contains rich and complex characters, evocative literary allusions, and resonant literary themes and motifs. Chapter Four concludes my thesis by examining Harold Bloom’s opinions of King’s work and reaffirming the intent and cogency of my inquiry.

I believe that works of popular fiction, including King’s, have a place in scholarly study because ignoring their influence on modern

culture and their place within it is detrimental to literary academia and to the society whose interests are being neglected. By refusing to examine King's work more closely, literary critics thumb their noses at their own society; these "cultured" individuals are denying their own culture by not acknowledging the literary presence of authors such as King solely on the basis of their popularity. Perhaps they feel that anything simple enough to be consumed by the masses must surely fail to meet their intellectual standards; perhaps they are merely too fixated on the literary canon to acknowledge the possibility of any other literature for fear of widening the gap between the elite world of academia and the "real world" of readers of popular fiction. Either way, such negligence promotes cultural ignorance and deprives scholars of the opportunity to examine thoroughly the works of one of the world's most revered storytellers.

CHAPTER II

UNIVERSALITY

Myths must be kept alive. The people who can keep it [sic] alive are artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world . . . It is the function of the artist to [interpret unseen things for us]. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. (Campbell and Moyers 85 and 99)

Certain elements are said to make a work of art timeless. When a story makes connections with archetypes or alludes to work containing them, the bond formed between the reader and the story intensify. Carl Jung, the psychologist who first brought the idea of a collective unconscious to popular and literary recognition, believes that archetypes “are deep and abiding patterns in the human psyche that remain powerful and present over time” (Pearson xxv). Jung himself wrote that the use of archetypal images in art “is always characterized by a peculiar emotional intensity” and that the overwhelming power of archetypes makes us aware that “we are no longer individuals, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds within us” (Jung, “Relation” 514). This explains why these elements are found in so many revered literary

works – they add exponentially to the power of a story by connecting it to a larger whole.

While Stephen King's corpus is frequently criticized because he mentions cultural figures and brand names in his prose, I believe that while those things may reflect the time at which his work was produced, they will ultimately be overshadowed by larger, more primary themes and elements in his writing.

Stephen King considers himself to be, above all else, a storyteller. In fact, the conversational prose that so many of King's critics look down upon and view as "vulgar" actually "allows him to use archetypes as they were once introduced in oral traditions" and indicates King's affinity for the storyteller tradition and his desire to continue and enrich it (Strengell, Dissecting 167). As a storyteller, King's primary task is to provide his audience with entertainment, but his responsibilities extend far beyond merely offering amusement. In many civilizations, the storyteller was not only an entertainer, but also a teacher and a revered figure; King teaches his readers about themselves and their place in the world around them. Using the tools shared by most storytellers – archetypal characters and allusions to other stories – King simultaneously connects his readers with a culture-based collective unconscious, intrigues them with gothic and supernatural motifs, and

leads them to identify with his protagonists in order to make his readers emotionally vulnerable and force them to face their inner selves. King's use of archetypes and his allusions to myths and fairy tales help to connect him and his readers, however "unliterary" they may be, to a rich cultural and literary tradition. By acknowledging tales from the past and their influence on his writing, King pays homage to the storytellers who came before him while combining their ideas with his own and introducing them to his audience in new, modern ways.

Many modern literary critics look down upon the idea of universality; they see the term itself as unclear and indefinite, and some even believe it to be a form of patriarchal repression (Zitner 649-51). However, my intent here is not to examine King's works under the umbrella of universality but rather to point out elements of his works that are found and appreciated in many other types of literature. My hope is that, in doing so, those who feel that the allusions to popular culture in King's works depreciate their timelessness will see the enduring themes that lie beyond the modern-day references, and the depth and essence of his work might be more fully understood and appreciated.

Archetypes

One argument for the universality of King's work is the fact that he works with archetypes, particularly in his earlier works. An archetype is a recurring image, character, narrative design, or theme that regularly appears in dreams, art, myth, and literature. The archetype came to literary criticism from cultural anthropology and psychology and "has shaping, communicating force and so is important in considerations of the social aspects and uses of nature" (Lee 508). While archetypal criticism may appear reductionist in and of itself, its concepts and methods have been shown to enrich and complement other kinds of critical inquiry.

In The Power of Myth, folklorist Joseph Campbell defines archetypes as "the common ideas of myths" and explains that "[a]ll over the world and at different times of human history, these archetypes, or elementary ideas, have appeared in different costumes. The differences in the costumes are the results of environment and historical conditions" (Campbell and Moyers 51-52). King scholar Tony Magistrale claims that one of King's strengths is his "ability to create characters at once unique and universal, and who therefore interest and engage us" (Magistrale, "Taking Stephen King Seriously" 109).

The most familiar archetype that appears throughout all literatures of all cultures is the mythic hero, an eminent character who represents the most valued traits of a given society. In his seminal work The Hero with a Thousand Faces, which King has admitted to be “particularly taken” with (Magistrale, Decade 3), Joseph Campbell analyzed the journey of the hero. Using the word “monomyth” (30) to describe its frequency and collective appeal, Campbell sums up the hero’s journey quite aptly:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

The King character most commonly associated with this archetype is Roland the Gunslinger of the Dark Tower series because his quest so closely mirrors the criteria laid out by Campbell: the call to adventure, supernatural aid, the crossing of the first threshold, the road of trials, woman as the temptress, atonement with the father. Because of the series’ close ties with genres that typically draw from archetypal scenarios such as the Western and fantasy, the connection between Roland and the mythical hero is strongly and consistently reinforced. The

principal disparity between Roland Deschain and the mythical hero is that, unlike the hero who is reintegrated into society, Roland must continually repeat the stages of his quest and incessantly seek redemption for his sins.

Several characters in King's apocalyptic novel The Stand are also heroes in much the same sense that Roland is. After a man-made virus wipes out over 99 percent of the human population, the few survivors are drawn either to Randall Flagg in Las Vegas, Nevada, or to Mother Abigail in Boulder, Colorado. The protagonists receive their call to adventure in the form of dreams about their supernatural aid, Mother Abigail, and endure a road of trials to reach the place where they will attempt to re-establish a democratic society.

Whereas King's heroes are certainly memorable, his antiheroes are equally intriguing. Because heroes represent the values of the society which creates them, the face of the hero has changed over time: the earliest of heroes, such as Moses, were religious or god-directed; later, heroes were secular or military, like Beowulf (Burrows, Lapides, and Shawcross 225). With the advent of realism, the hero became a representation of society's more common members; Northrop Frye defines such heroes as "ironic" (34), but most modern critics call them antiheroes. What is so revolutionary about these figures is that, instead

of characters that the reader must admire and thus feel inferior to, the reader is given the opportunity to relate to the hero on a very real and human level. As is the case with most memorable modern literature, King's canon is populated with characters who are ordinary people faced with extraordinary circumstances. Strengell claims that "King's Everyman struggles against indifferent forces and triumphs over evil by discovering his inner strength" (Dissecting 16). These trials and victories are illustrated when writer Paul Sheldon finds himself at the mercy of Annie Wilkes in Misery; when twelve-year-old Gordon Lachance embarks on a quest with his friends to find a dead body, fights off a group of thugs, and finds his calling as a writer and storyteller in "The Body"; when poet and recovering alcoholic Jim Gardener sees that the mysterious spaceship buried in the nearby woods is to blame for the strange behaviors of other townspeople in The Tommyknockers; and when local sheriff Alan Pangborn realizes that Leland Gaunt and his new shop are responsible for the disintegration of the local community in Needful Things.

Several of these antiheroes – especially those who are prepubescent or teenaged – are hybridized with the outcast archetype. This combination is logical in that children and young adults are decidedly xenophobic and ostracize one another for a wide variety of

social “crimes,” and these behaviors frequently cause strong feelings of isolation. Prime examples of this antihero-outcast crossbreed are the eleven-year-old protagonists of It, especially Bill Denbrough. The name of the self-proclaimed “Loser’s Club” says it all really; among their ranks are the janitor’s daughter (Beverly Marsh), a fat kid (Ben Hanscom), an asthmatic with an overbearing hypochondriac mother (Eddie Kaspbrak), a four-eyed geek who fancies himself a comedian (Ritchie Tozier), a Jewish boy scout (Stan Uris), a stuttering story teller (Bill Denbrough), and one of the few African American kids (if not the only one) in Derry, Maine (Mike Hanlon). Brought together by their respective anomalies, these pariahs try to destroy an evil entity (the “It” of the title) that preys on the children of Derry every twenty-seven years and is responsible for the violent death of Bill’s younger brother, George. They manage to send the protean monster into hiding in 1958 during a confrontation in the town storm drain and vow to return to fight It should It return. All but Mike Hanlon leave Derry and become very successful, but must return for a final showdown in 1985 before vanquishing It completely.

Many of King’s heroines also fall under the antihero category; while they are not all admirable women, they are usually very strong of character, for good or for ill. A prime example of such a figure is Donna Trenton, the heroine of Cujo. Though she has an adulterous affair and

seems somewhat self-absorbed, she does everything in her power to protect her young son from starvation, dehydration, and a rabid dog when the two are trapped inside a car in the countryside for several days. The title character of Dolores Claiborne shows antiheroic qualities. A strong and at times willful woman, she takes a job as a local rich woman's maid in an effort to save money to send her daughter Selena to college. When she finds out that her drunkard husband has squandered her savings and sexually abused Selena, she devises a plan to eliminate him. While Dolores is faced with battles common to many women, such as spousal abuse and the grimness of rural life, she finds strength to fight against the destructive forces in her life for the sake of a better future for her daughter, an ideal most mothers can identify with and understand.

Another archetype found in King's oeuvre is the Wise Fool, usually in the form of the simple-minded. The Wise Fool has no knowledge of the negative aspects of life, and her/his innate goodness brings great moral insight (Burrows, Lapides, and Shawcross 310). King's Wise Fools, unlike those found in most other literature, often possess supernatural powers that serve as a physical manifestation of their innate goodness. John Coffey ("like the drink, only not spelled the same way" [56]) in The Green Mile is a good example of such a character. Although he is not an

intellectual man, he has a great spiritual depth that many around him respond to with admiration. While attempting to use his healing powers on two girls he finds dead, he is apprehended by the authorities and presumed to be their murderer, and he ultimately perishes as a result of his gift. Like Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's The Idiot, Coffey cannot remain in a society that is not spiritually ready for the likes of him.

Of course, because of King's presumed status as a horror writer, he is probably best known for his antagonists, whether they are human or paranormal. An adversary regularly used in both King's works and other allegorical literature is the devil figure, one whose malevolence leaves him with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. One villainous figure that turns up frequently in King's works is Randal Flagg, who appears in various guises and using an assortment of pseudonyms in The Stand, the Dark Tower series, Eyes of the Dragon, and Hearts in Atlantis. Flagg resembles other antagonists in King's oeuvre in that he is a complex allegorical villain who can be seen as the embodiment of two different archetypes. At times he represents a genuinely evil figure (and in fact resembles the antichrist in The Stand), while at others he acts as a trickster figure, committing evil from sheer unrelatedness (Jung, Archetypes 264) and, in doing so, acting as a "transformer whose actions . . . provide humans with a kind of order" (Strengell, Dissecting 141). The

trickster often instigates chaos and thus can frequently be seen as an evil figure.

Another character that walks the line between the trickster and the devil figure is Leland Gaunt, the antagonist of Needful Things who is the proprietor of a shop called Needful Things in Castle Rock, Maine. Though the audience and the novel's protagonist, sheriff Alan Pangborn, eventually learn that Gaunt is the Devil himself, he also presents strong trickster traits in that, like the Yoruba trickster deity Edshu, spreading strife seems to be his greatest joy (Campbell 45): he uses the greed and selfishness of the townspeople to turn them against one another.

In "The Man in the Black Suit" nine-year-old Gary encounters a similar character one morning while embarking on a fishing trip. After dozing off while watching the clouds drift by overhead, Gary awakens to see the man, whom he instantly recognizes as the Devil: his fingers end in menacing claws, his eyes are "the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove," and he reeks of sulfur (King, "Man" 46). He tells Gary that his mother lies dead on the kitchen floor, killed by a bee sting just as Gary's older brother Dan had been killed a year before, and says he intends to eat Gary. Although the Man in the Black Suit wishes only to harm Gary, he actually saves him in the sense that after their encounter Gary convinces his mother to return to the church she had neglected

since the death of her oldest son. In keeping with the trickster archetype, the Man in the Black Suit seeks to disrupt order but in doing so actually inspires a return to normalcy and spiritual awareness.

While the aforementioned archetypes can be found in all types of literature, the gothic or horror genre has developed its own subset of archetypal figures. King himself addresses three of these archetypes in Danse Macabre, referring to them as “an almost perfect Tarot hand representing our lushest concepts of evil . . . : the Vampire, the Werewolf, and the Thing Without a Name” (Danse Macabre 50). He identifies each of these archetypes with a specific novel that either created the archetype or solidified its position in mass culture. King also acknowledges the most common gothic archetype, the ghost, calling it “the Mississippi of supernatural fiction” (Danse Macabre 50). In the beginning of his writing career, King set out to pay direct homage to the first three of these figures, assigning a novel to each image: the vampire in ‘Salem’s Lot, the werewolf in Cycle of the Werewolf, and “the Thing Without a Name” in Pet Sematary. Not only do these archetypes appear throughout King’s canon, but their symbolic meanings often accompany them, addressing universal issues in the process.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula is considered the epitome of the Victorian vampire novel, a culmination of the works of J. Sheridan LeFanu and

John Polidori. The vampires in Dracula represent sexual perversion and offer their victims the opportunity to enjoy sexual deviation because the influence of the vampires takes away their control and thus their responsibility (Strengell, Dissecting 35). King's vampires in 'Salem's Lot' also represent perverse sexuality, but unlike Stoker's vampires they do not limit themselves to adult victims of the opposite sex. King uses his vampires to explore deviances that cause particular unease in modern American society, such as homosexuality, incest, and pedophilia, as well as more commonplace behaviors such as violence in destructive heterosexual relationships (Strengell, Dissecting 33-34).

Werewolves, too, retain their metaphorical significance in King's universe. King considers Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde the quintessential werewolf story and calls its main character "the *real* Werewolf" (Danse Macabre 69). Michael R. Collings claims that the werewolf story works on two levels: on the level of plot, it transforms an otherwise sensible man into a dangerous monster; on the level of theme and symbol, it divorces him from reality, isolating the person from society and from personal standards of morality (Facets 78). King's direct homage to this mythological creature, Cycle of the Werewolf, is a straightforward telling of the duplicitous nature of human beings. When Reverend Lester Lowe becomes a werewolf, his illness leads him to

commit terrible acts of violence, as would be expected in any werewolf story. However, when Lowe becomes aware that he is in fact the werewolf who has been plaguing Tarker's Mills, he refuses to take responsibility for his actions or fight against his werewolf instincts (Strengell, "Monster"). Like Jekyll and Hyde, Lowe responds hypocritically to his problem and makes excuses for his behavior.

The title character of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, who plays god by creating a man using alchemy and scientific knowledge, serves as a warning against the hubris of humanity and of science. At a time when scientific and industrial development threatened innumerable social and moral standards, Victor Frankenstein's monster embodied the tensions and fears of a world ruled by science instead of by God. King's retelling of the story in the form of Pet Sematary also warns against placing power over death and life into human hands; but his monsters are created (or, rather, reanimated) by means of ancient mysticism rather than science. Dead creatures buried in the old Indian burial ground beyond the pet cemetery do come back to life, but "changed" (King, Pet Sematary 226). Taking the advice of his neighbor Jud Crandall, Louis Creed buries the family cat Church in this sacred space only to have the cat return a hostile and wretched creature. Like Victor Frankenstein, Louis Creed does not learn from his first mistake and buries his son Gage there as

well after the child is hit by a truck. The result proves disastrous, and Jud Crandall's eerie words linger in the readers' ears long after the book is closed: "sometimes dead is better" (144). Ultimately, Creed's selfishness and refusal to face the death of his son instigates the unraveling of his entire family.

Although these particular works blatantly address these archetypes, more subtle versions of them can be seen throughout his canon as well. Annie Wilkes of Misery can easily be seen as a psychic vampire of sorts, preying upon captive author Paul Sheldon to fulfill her psychological needs. Thad Beaumont and his alter-ego George Stark of The Dark Half together represent a werewolf/doppelganger figure comparable to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, transforming from loving father and best-selling writer to vicious killer. Nameless evil appears in several King stories, such as the mystical seeds that Rose Daniels brings back from her paranormal journey into the painting in Rose Madder and the ink-like blob that devours four college students in "The Raft." King manages to take these characters and all that they imply and place them in a milieu that modern audiences can understand and appreciate on numerous levels.

Allusions

Allusions, like archetypes, draw upon cultural experiences shared by author and audience and connect them not only to each other, but also to the tradition being referenced. Although King is famous (or perhaps infamous) for littering his works with pop culture references and allusions to his own stories and characters, he also peppers his tales with numerous allusions to myths, fairy tales, and literary works. These allusions serve a variety of purposes: they connect characters to myths or fairy tales in order to imply certain tendencies or personality traits; they parallel characters' external circumstances with those of characters from other works; and they provide the reader with insight regarding the mindset of the character.

In addition to the myths revolving around the aforementioned gothic archetypes (the vampire, the werewolf/shape shifter, the Thing Without a Name, and the ghost), King also frequently alludes to ancient myths, particularly Greek and Christian. In Firestarter, Charlie McGee is chased by The Shop, a secret governmental agency that desires to harness the girl's pyrokinetic abilities and use them for destructive purposes. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro claims that Charlie's story can in some ways be compared to the persecution of the infant Heracles in Greek myth: just as Heracles is singled out by his mother Hera and survives

several assassination attempts, so Charlie is singled out by the government for her inborn abilities and escapes several perilous situations because of that recognition (68). Yarbrow also asserts that John Rainbird, the man sent by the government to apprehend Charlie, is her mythical antithesis who has perverted his gift and therefore has the mark of the beast on his scarred face (69). Douglas E. Winter suggests that Rainbird's having only one eye evokes the myth of Polyphemus (80), and his somewhat pedophilic fascination with Charlie suggests the Cyclops's infatuation with the sea nymph Galatea.

King's novel Rose Madder presents very obvious mythical allusions that effectively add a fantastical element to an otherwise realistic story. While on the run from her abusive husband Norman, a police detective turned homicidal lunatic, Rose Daniels buys a cheap painting in a pawn shop and hangs it in her new apartment. The painting depicts a woman in a rose madder dress standing on a hill with her back turned to the viewer. Rose soon begins to notice, however, that the painting is not an ordinary decorative object: it changes daily, and the woman with her back turned in the painting moves closer to its edge. At one point, Rose enters the painting and meets the woman it portrays, who is disfigured and ridden by madness. Rose perceives her insanity as a type of rabies, a disease "whose name is rage in several European languages" and

identifies it with an all-consuming anger that could destroy a near goddess (Wood 57). The situation that Rose finds in the painting is a combination of the Minotaur myth and the story of Demeter searching for Persephone after she has been abducted and taken to the underworld (Wood 57). As the novel reaches its climax and Norman tracks down his runaway wife, Rose walks into the painting and lures Norman into its ethereal dimension as well. Once there, Norman transforms into a bull called Erinyes, which means “fury” and is one of Demeter’s epithets (Causo). Using this mythological imagery, King presents Norman as the “less-than-human male” and the woman in the painting as “a feminine principle” (Wood 57). He effectively brings out the monster (figuratively and literally) in the abusive husband and the woman who has let the abuse of another infect her with an erosive fury, a situation which Rose later confronts herself.

King frequently references the Christian myth of the Wandering Jew, a character who has committed a crime against God and is doomed to a perpetual life on earth. As the story goes, a Jewish man named Cartaphilus harried Jesus and struck him on the back as he was being taken to be crucified. Jesus said that Cartaphilus would await his return, and, according to legend, he has. He was supposedly baptized by Ananais, who also baptized the apostle Paul, and has since been called

Joseph (Russell and Briggs 137). Echoes of this tale can be found in Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Shelley's Queen Mab, Blake's Jerusalem, O. Henry's "Door of Unrest," and Goethe's Faust (Punter 114-16). According to Heidi Strengell, King's corpus is rife with characters fitting this category, including Kurt Barlow in 'Salem's Lot; Leland Gaunt in Needful Things; Andre Linoge in Storm of the Century; and Roland the Gunslinger in the Dark Tower series. However, just as Randall Flagg is King's supervillain, he is also King's clearest personification of the Wandering Jew. Many of Flagg's epithets, such as the Man with No face and the Ageless Stranger, indicate a connection with this mythical figure. "The Walkin' Dude," another of Flagg's monikers, even sounds similar to the title of his legendary counterpart. He is also related to several characters found in the Bible and Christian demonology texts through these different guises, including Judah (Ahaz), Beelzebub, Legion, Judas (presumably Iscariot), Aztaroth (Grand Duke of Hell), as well as with Anubis, the Egyptian god of the underworld, and Set, the Egyptian god of the desert and of evil. One particularly intriguing Flagg sobriquet is Nyarlathotep, a messenger deity in H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos that roams the earth in the form of a human and has more blatant contempt for mankind than any other Lovecraftian deity. His name means,

appropriately, “the crawling chaos,” and his alias “The Black Man” is relatively synonymous with Flagg’s handle “The Dark Man” (Lovecraft).

Like myths, fairy tales are timeless stories that people from different walks of life can relate to and appreciate. While some would dismiss fairy tales as mere juvenile literature, great writers have repeatedly drawn inspiration from them, and “[g]reat literature of all ages has borrowed from fairy tale motifs and often exhibited an imaginativeness not unlike that of the fairy tale” (Lüthi 21). Many of King’s works also feature fairy tale motifs or parallel particular fairy tales outright. These particular allusions serve to catapult his readers back to the world of childhood where “our own shadow may once again become that of a mean dog, a gaping mouth, or a beckoning dark figure” (King, Danse Macabre 101). King has an admitted fondness for these kinds of stories and claims that they “form a conduit leading to what adults call horror stories” (Strengell, Dissecting 111). Although this connection may appear far-fetched, it makes sense: both share a gothic atmosphere and themes that rely on common human phobias; both can be seen as allegorical genres that tell universal truths; both emulate a sort of initiation in which readers face their fears and develop skills that allow them to cope with the evil they encounter in their daily lives (Strengell, Dissecting 108-12). King’s horror fiction often mirrors the themes, plots,

and characters commonly found in fairy tales and many of his novels essentially revise these stories to make them more appropriate for his setting (modern America) and his audience (adults).

Carrie is an excellent example of how King uses an updated fairy tale motif with supernatural flourishes. In this revision of “Cinderella,” Carrie White, a social outcast with a maniacal mother, develops telekinetic powers and ultimately exacts revenge against those who had mistreated her all along. Maintaining the universal themes of familial discord, peer pressure, and social inequality, King modernizes the story and enhances its gothic atmosphere. The wicked stepmother is replaced by Carrie’s religious-fanatic mother, who sees her daughter as a constant reminder of the sins she has committed; the evil stepsisters are supplanted by Carrie’s more sexually mature classmates, who malevolently plot to humiliate Carrie by dumping pig’s blood on her in front of the whole school at prom; and Prince Charming is swapped for her reluctant date Tommy Ross who, like most of the students and teachers at the prom, does not live to tell the tale of Carrie’s vengeance. Though many may be reluctant to see the resemblance of these two tales due to Carrie’s macabre overtones, remembering that in the original Brothers Grimm version of “Cinderella” the wicked stepsisters cut off their own toes and heels in an attempt to make the slipper fit (Grimm

Brothers, "Cinderella" 91) may help bridge that hypothetical gap between gothic story and fairy tale.

Similarly, the story of John Smith in The Dead Zone parallels that of a less familiar Grimm Brothers' character, Faithful John. The Grimm character, called Johannes in some translations, is the most cherished servant of a king who, on his deathbed, asks John to promise to protect the king's son so that he may go in peace. John, of course, swears that he will not forsake the king's son and will serve him faithfully, even if it costs him his life (Grimm Brothers, "Faithful Johannes" 22). The king asks Faithful John to keep his son from looking in a room at the end of the hallway wherein hangs a portrait of the Princess of the Golden Roof, warning that if his son sees the portrait he will fall in love with the princess and undergo great risks to win her; John agrees. Unfortunately, the new king is very stubborn and ultimately commands John to unlock the room for him. Just as his father said, the king instantly fell in love with the princess in the portrait and insisted upon leaving to woo her immediately. They set sail for the princess's kingdom and trick her into returning with them. En route, the king declares his love for her and asks for her hand in marriage; she accepts. As they were sailing home, however, Faithful John saw three ravens on the bow of the ship and overheard them foretelling of three calamities the king and his bride-to-

he would encounter, along with a solution to each. They also say that if anyone should tell the king of these misfortunes or their resolutions, that person would turn to stone. Faithful John struggled with his decision for some time: if he did not tell his master what the ravens had said, the king would be doomed; but if he told the king, he would pay with his life.

Faithful John manages to save the king and his fiancée from the first two calamities, though his actions confuse his master. However, as he was working to save the princess from a curse on her wedding day, the king mistakenly thought Faithful John was trying to harm her and sentenced him to death. Before he is due to be executed, John finally tells the king about the omens of the ravens and explains that he was trying to save the princess. The king cries out to his guards to release his servant, but he has already turned into a statue. The king and his wife, greatly grieved, place the statue in their bedchamber. They go on to have twin sons. One day while his wife is at church, the king laments the loss of his most faithful servant. Then, he hears the statue speak: John says that he could be brought back to life if the king were to cut off the heads of his sons and rub their blood on the statue. Though he was horrified at the thought of harming his children, the king remembers the great fidelity of Faithful John and does as he is told. When John is returned to his normal state, he tells the king that his loyalty will not go unrewarded.

He then puts the children's heads back in place, rubs their wounds with their blood, and within seconds they are whole again. The king explains the events to his wife when she returns, and "they all lived happily together until the end of their days" (28).

Similarly, The Dead Zone's John Smith gains special insight and must struggle with a moral dilemma that leaves him with a choice of either allowing many to die or sacrificing himself on their behalf. After a tragic car accident leaves him in a coma for five years, Smith awakens to find that his life has drastically changed: aside from the fact that his fiancée has married someone else, he discovers that he has developed the ability to see events in a person's past, present, and future simply by touching that person or an object she/he has come into contact with. While this wild talent proves helpful in apprehending a local serial killer dubbed the Castle Rock Strangler (Frank Dodd, who appears in other King stories as well), it soon becomes a burden to Smith, who avoids using it as much as possible. However, when he touches maverick political candidate Greg Stillson, Smith has an apocalyptic vision so terrifying that, after struggling with his conscience, he decides to thwart Stillson's rise to power by any means necessary.

Aside from relatively analogous plots, fairy tales are frequently alluded to throughout King's canon: "Snow White and the Seven

Dwarves” and “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” relate to the Loser’s Club and their battle to fight an evil entity in It, and “Beauty and the Beast” can be perceived in the relationship between Charlie and Rainbird in Firestarter (Strengell, Dissecting 113). These references are particularly striking when used in combination with young characters, as they allow the reader to come closer to understanding each child’s innocent perspective of the events going on around them.

In The Shining, King refers to a number of fairy tales instead of directly following the pattern of one specific story. References to “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” “Bluebeard,” and Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland all serve to place the reader on the psychological level of Danny Torrence, a boy whose father Jack has taken a job as the winter caretaker of the Overlook, a resort hotel in the Colorado mountains (Strengell, Dissecting 168). Upon arriving at the Overlook, Danny and his mother Wendy are taken aback by its largeness. Wendy makes a mental note to leave a trail of breadcrumbs every time she goes to the kitchen (King, The Shining 105), alluding to “Hansel and Gretel.”

Left alone in the enormous building for the off-season, Jack Torrence hopes that he has found an opportunity to write a novel while earning a living for his family. However, when cabin fever sets in, Jack is haunted by his past, by his current frustrations, and by the ghosts that

occupy the Overlook; this horrific combination awakens all the insecurities that had led Jack to drinking and leads him down a spiraling path to madness. Stranded in a secluded area, Danny and his mother Wendy soon find themselves at the mercy of Jack's alcoholism and insanity. The novel's title refers to Danny's precognitive abilities, and the child occasionally explains his visions and intuitions in terms of fairy tales. After Jack forbids his wife and son to enter Room 217 for reasons unknown to them, Danny relates his father to Bluebeard, who forbade his wife to enter one particular room in their castle:

Actually the story was about *Bluebeard's* wife, a pretty lady that had corn-colored hair like Mommy. After *Bluebeard* married her, they lived in a big and ominous castle that was not unlike the Overlook. And every day *Bluebeard* went off to work and every day he would tell his pretty little wife not to look in a certain room, although the key to that room was hanging right on the hook, just like the pass-key was hanging on the office wall downstairs. *Bluebeard's* wife had gotten more and more curious about the locked room. She tried to peep through the keyhole the way Danny had tried to look through Room 217's peephole with similar unsatisfying results. (King, The Shining 254.)

In this instance, the story of Bluebeard pulls the reader into Danny's psychological frame of mind and also hints at Danny's precognition of what lies behind the door of the forbidden room: while Bluebeard's wife finds the severed heads of Bluebeard's seven previous wives, Danny finds Mrs. Massey, a woman who committed suicide in Room 217. Strangely enough, the entity that leads him to Room 217 is a white rabbit similar to the character that led Alice down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's children's story, and Danny's reminiscence of the mad Red Queen's violent croquet parties later comes to life when Jack attacks his family with a mallet. These allusions "provide an archetypal infrastructure of meaning" and act as "a form of divination that guides both its readers and the Torrance family in their mutual experience of primal fear" (Curran 33).

Conclusion

King's stories indicate his commitment to the definitive theme in literature: good versus evil. In these stories, good and ordinary people battle evil and powerful forces to preserve themselves, their families, or the whole of humankind. Common men and women like Alan Pangborn, Rose Madder, and Stu Redman share the status of great mythic heroes like Beowulf, Odysseus, and Gilgamesh. When his protagonists are successful in their endeavors, King offers what Campbell calls "the divine

comedy of the soul” and helps his readers “[transcend] the universal tragedy of man” (28); when King’s protagonists fail, his readers must face “death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of [their hearts] with the passing of the forms that [they] have loved” but are also reminded of “the universal life that throbs and celebrates its victory in the very kiss of our own annihilation” (Campbell 26-29). King’s stories indicate his belief that, while good and evil are both necessary in the world, evil exists primarily to reinforce good. Like his trickster antagonists, King shows his readers the dark side of life so that they may appreciate the good more fully.

According to Max Lüthi, “[t]he characters of the fairy tale are not personally delineated; the fairy tale is not concerned with individual destinies” (24). While King’s characters have clearly defined personalities, they are not so distinct as to make them unrelatable to his readers. Some critics may accuse King of writing one-dimensional characters, but the people who populate his works represent Everyman in their relative anonymity and relative indistinctiveness. If King’s duty as a storyteller is not only to entertain his audience but also to help them get in touch with their emotions, then part of King’s massive appeal certainly lies in his ability to connect his readers to the characters he creates and the worlds they inhabit. His readers feel Donna Trenton’s anguish when her only

son dies; Dolores Claiborne's vindication when she rids herself of her abusive husband; Danny Torrance's fear when his father goes mad; and Bill Denbrough's relief when the monster that killed his little brother is destroyed. As a storyteller, King clearly fulfills his duty.

CHAPTER III

LITERARY CRITICISM

It is the intention so primarily, with me, always, of the artist, the painter, that is what I most, myself, feel in it--and the lesson, the idea-ever-conveyed is only the one that deeply lurks in any vision prompted by life. And as regards a presentation of things so fantastic as in that wanton little tale, I blush to see real substance read into them--I mean for the generosity of the reader. But, of course, where there is life, there's truth. (James, Letters 298-99)

Henry James's opinion of his novel The Turn of the Screw, as he admits here in a letter to Dr. Louis Waldstein, is a far cry from that of literary critics who now herald this work as a classic. The Turn of the Screw is one of the rare examples of a gothic story that has been embraced by the literati and studied as a serious piece of literature. What if, however, this "wanton little tale" had not been written by a literary figure such as James? Because the gothic genre in general is regarded as sub-literary, it is doubtful that this novel would have received such academic accolades had its author not been accepted into the scholarly world on the basis of his other works. This is not to say

that gothic stories have no merit, but if James had ever been pigeonholed as a gothic writer, chances are he would not have become such an acclaimed literary author.²

Stephen King does not consider himself a great writer; he in fact has referred to himself as the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries (Collings, "Afterword" 190). Unfortunately, most of his critics thus far agree with him. Because King is dismissed as a genre writer (and an immensely popular one at that), his work has not been given much critical attention. However, I contest that at least some of his works would flourish under critical scrutiny if they were viewed with less discrimination and more open-mindedness. In order to demonstrate this, Chapter III provides a literary analysis of one of King's best-known stories: The Shining.

The Shining was chosen as the focus of this analysis for several reasons. In an e-mail conversation, writer Stephen J. Spignesi claimed that The Shining is one of King's most literary works and that it is taught at both the high school and college levels (Spignesi 5 Jan. 2006). The Shining also typifies the common connection between King's novels and the films based upon them. While not necessarily an example of a bad

²Note that several other well-received authors also employ gothic motifs in their works, among them Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, Mary Shelley, William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad, Sherwood Anderson, and Kate Chopin.

movie based on a King work that ruined said work's reputation, the most popular film version of The Shining, directed by the legendary Stanley Kubrick, fails to convey many elements that made the novel so profound. King himself explains in an introduction to The Shining that he and Kubrick had very different ideas about what the story meant:

My single conversation with the late Stanley Kubrick, about six months before he commenced filming his version of The Shining, suggested that it was this quality about the story that appealed to him: What, exactly is impelling Jack Torrance toward murder in the winter-isolated rooms and hallways of the Overlook Hotel? Is it undead people, or undead memories? Mr. Kubrick and I came to different conclusions (I *always* thought there were malevolent ghosts in the Overlook, driving Jack to the precipice) . . . (xvi³)

Iconographic images such as that of Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrance chopping his way through a bathroom door with a hatchet, grinning maniacally and saying, "Heeeeere's Johnny!" have become so ingrained in the minds of anyone who has seen this film (and even several who have not) that they have nearly overshadowed the contents of the novel. While many people are familiar with The Shining as a story about a haunted

³ All references to The Shining will be to this edition and hereafter cited in the text by page number.

hotel or a man who goes crazy, much more lurks beneath the gory, shock-factor exterior; The Shining is far too complex a novel to be dismissed as pulp.

Plot, Structure, and Narrative Technique

The plot of The Shining revolves around the Torrance family: Jack Torrance, a writer and recovering alcoholic who recently lost a teaching job because of physical violence acted out on a student; his wife Wendy, who views herself as the heart of the family unit and strives to keep her family together and happy; and their five year old son Danny, who has telepathic, psychokinetic, and clairvoyant powers. Jack takes a job as caretaker during the winter off-season at the Overlook hotel in Colorado, thinking it would offer not only employment but a chance to work on his new play. When the family goes on a tour of the massive resort hotel, they meet Dick Hallorann, the cook, who shares Danny's psychic gift. He calls it "the shine" and tells Danny that he will probably see "bad things" in the hotel but that they are "like pictures in a book" (128) and cannot hurt him. Soon after the Torrances are left alone at the Overlook, the hotel's latent psychic energy comes to life, leading Jack back to his old drunken and abusive behavior while terrorizing Danny. When a fierce blizzard leaves the family stranded in the hotel, Jack goes insane and tries to murder Wendy and Danny because the Overlook's haunts

convince him that his wife and son have turned against him and have been the cause of his failure all along. Danny uses his shine to telepathically call Dick Hallorann, who comes to rescue Danny and Wendy just before the boiler in the basement of the hotel explodes.

The Shining's structure emulates that of a five-part Shakespearean tragedy, and the progression of the plot clearly parallels that of several of Shakespeare's tragedies such as Othello and Hamlet (Magistrale, "Shakespeare"). Part one, aptly entitled "Prefatory Matters," informs the audience of the characters, themes, and areas of conflict in the story: as we learn of Iago's hatred of Othello and Hamlet's vow to avenge the death of his father, so we learn about Jack's history of alcoholism and violence along with a bit about the Overlook's violent past. Parts two and three, "Closing Day" and "The Wasp's Nest" respectively, contain the rising action in which the protagonist begins to lose control over himself and "the microcosm in which he once flourished" and his tragic imperfections "are exploited by the unsympathetic agents of fate, unscrupulous individuals, or a combination of both" (Magistrale, "Shakespeare" 157-58). King throws the reader headlong into the gravity of the Torrances' situation: Danny's "episodes" continue to worsen; Jack begins to lose his grip on reality; Wendy's fear of her husband's fierce temper deepens; and they are all ultimately trapped by an impenetrable snowfall in a hotel

that shows clear signs of volatility. Parts four and five, "Snowbound" and "Matters of Life and Death," present the climactic sequences in which tension between the characters explodes into madness and violence. The haunts of the hotel drive Jack past the brink of sanity and try to stake their claim on Danny; the whole scene literally erupts in a sweltering inferno, claiming Jack's life while his wife and son escape with the help of Dick Hallorann. There is also, however, an optimistic ending as Wendy and Danny plan to rebuild their lives, without Jack and far away from the scorched remains of the Overlook. This epilogue echoes what A. C. Bradley points out in Shakespearean Tragedy: "What remains is a family, a city, a country, exhausted, pale and feeble, but alive through the principle of good which animates it; and within it, individuals who ... still have won our respect and confidence" (38). As in most King stories, the individual survives, leaving readers optimistic about human possibility.

The Shining is generally indicative of King's writing style, particularly in relation to his other early novels. The authorial narration is heterodiegetic yet highly overt, giving the reader a sense of intimacy and distance at the same time; King often jumps from the perspective of the third-person narrator to one or more characters in the breadth of one sentence. The narrator's omniscience allows insight into each character's psyche and personality while maintaining the objectivity necessary to

appreciate the complexities of the story. King's frequent use of free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, and psychonarration further demonstrates the intricacies of the characters' minds and shows the disturbing effect that the Overlook can have on their thoughts.

King's writing style is also noteworthy because his rhetoric varies between extremes: moments of rather poetic prose are intermingled with staunch dialogue, occasionally vulgar language, and as frequently seen in The Shining, childlike diction. For example, the paragraph following the reader's initial introduction to Danny Torrance begins thus:

Now it was five o'clock, and although he didn't have a watch and couldn't tell time too well yet anyway, he was aware of passing time by the lengthening of the shadows, and by the golden cast that now tinged the afternoon light. (King, The Shining 37)

Danny's diction shows in the childish run-on structure of the first subordinate clause, while the rest of the sentence shows more mature rhetoric with its parallel subordinate elements and polysyllabic wording (Casebeer 49). This interweaving of adult thought and youthful perspective provides The Shining and many other King works with distinctive and engaging narration.

King's narrative style ensures that each character has a distinct voice and that the reader understands how each is affected by certain experiences, but considering each character's perspective also makes the facts of the story questionable. This technique is significant because it renders a single-minded reading of the novel erroneous and adds to the ambiguity of the tale. On a larger scale, this ambiguity intentionally raises questions about free will. The reader is left with no clear answer as to how much the Overlook had to do with Jack's descent into madness or whether Jack even had any choice in his actions.

Characters and Setting

As a writer who believes that characters are the most important ingredient of a story, King ranks The Shining among the most treasured tales he has ever written because of the realistic emphasis placed on its characters (Reesman 124). Though the supernatural circumstances of the novel may be implausible, the personalities entrenched in them are quite genuine. The Torrances are a young family with a temperamental automobile, money problems, a lot of stress, and less-than-perfect familial relationships; in short, they are a considerably average lower-middle class American family.

The paranormal forces of the hotel affect Jack Torrance the most out of the three main characters because of his inherent psychological

weakness. The son of an abusive alcoholic, Jack seems simultaneously determined to escape the harm inflicted upon him in childhood and doomed to repeat those transgressions in his relationship with Danny. By the time he applies for the job at the Overlook, Jack's violent temper has already gotten him fired from a teaching position at Stovington Preparatory Academy, "one of the finest prep schools in New England" (53), for assaulting a student. He has also broken his son's arm, a fact that offers more insight in light of "Before the Play," a prologue King wrote for The Shining that was removed from the published manuscript and later printed in Whispers magazine (Weller 78). An excerpt of this piece describes a young Jack's drunken father throwing him out of a tree house and breaking his arm (Weller 67-68). With this parallel, King was clearly trying to set up a perceptible cycle of abuse, a theme still illustrated in The Shining despite the omitted opening.

Jack's inability to control his temper is only the beginning of his personality flaws: his greed and selfishness cause his family to be exposed to the dangers of the Overlook. After Danny is half-strangled by the woman in Room 217 and Wendy pleads with him to take them to nearby Sidewinder in the snowmobile, Jack refuses to leave the hotel, claiming that this job is his last chance to make something of himself. He

risks the safety of his wife and young son to avoid failing as a breadwinner and losing his pride.

As an aspiring writer, Jack at first hopes that working at the Overlook will afford him some peace and quiet in which the new play he has been working on will flourish into literary excellence. Once he becomes engrossed in the history of the hotel, however, his perceived role changes from that of creator to a mere cipher, a “caretaker rather than a meaning-maker” (Dickerson 34). By abandoning his play, Jack also abandons his primary instrument for coping with his inner demons, adding to the power the hotel has over him (Dickerson 42). Though he dreams of the acclaim that writing a book about the Overlook will earn him, he also imagines that writing the book will please the hotel and that, as its caretaker, it is his job to serve the Overlook. He believes that the hotel has somehow chosen him for this job, that he is destined to play Boswell to the Overlook, “rambling Samuel Johnson that it was” (425). Ultimately, Jack becomes jealous of his son’s importance to the force that haunts the hotel. Danny’s psychic ability is the key that brings the Overlook to life; it wants to own and absorb Danny’s power, and Jack is willing to sacrifice his son to please the hotel.

Jack’s fatal flaw, however, is clearly his inability to accept responsibility for his actions. He cannot admit to his failings as a writer,

a father, or a husband. Patricia Ferreira points out that The Shining links King to several of Hawthorne's works which explored the "two options we have when confronting humanity's evil: either recognize this force and learn to live with it, or fail to acknowledge its taint in the human personality and find that we are doomed to self-destruction" (26). Perhaps Jack's incapacity to perceive his own malevolence weakens his ability to perceive malevolence in other entities – particularly in the Overlook and in the shades it uses to entice him. He is not entirely without redemption, though. Before the last trace of Jack's spirit is devoured by the demon that possesses him, a composite of the ghouls that inhabit the hotel, he tells Danny, "Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you" (652). When Danny hesitates, Jack pleads, "Oh Danny, for God's sake," and then begins to smash himself in the face with the roque [sic] mallet in an attempt to prevent his body from harming his son once he has lost control of it (652). This final conscious act gives Jack's character roundness and shows his enduring humanity (Cohen 56); without it, the reader might too easily fall into believing that Jack was truly evil. To help maintain a sense of ambiguity and depth, King skillfully crafted this scene to enforce the idea that Jack Torrance is not a villain, but merely a weak and flawed human being – a tragic hero.

While the reader may initially believe that Wendy Torrance would crumble under dire circumstances as her husband does, she ultimately proves to be a morally, physically, and emotionally strong character. Like Jack, Wendy had an unpleasant childhood: though her mother never physically harmed her, she abused her psychologically. Years of being blamed for her parents' divorce and constant criticism from her mother left Wendy vulnerable and codependent. When she was in college her mother forced her out of her home, and Jack Torrance became a lover as well as a replacement for the controlling entity that Wendy had come to need in her life. While Jack filled the shoes of his dominating, abusive father, Wendy continued to fill the role of the victim. After Danny is born, the Torrance family becomes a recreation of Jack's family with a violent alcoholic father, a weak and passive mother, and a victimized son.

Unlike Jack, however, Wendy refuses to let the wounds inflicted upon her in the past cloud her judgment to the extent that they prevent her from protecting her son. Standing in opposition to her husband's selfishness and weakness, Wendy Torrance refuses to succumb to the evil of the Overlook and bases her decisions on what she believes to be morally right. Though she is reluctant to leave Jack, her maternal instincts ultimately override her responsibilities as a wife and she decides to protect Danny at any cost. Wendy surprises the reader by

enduring broken ribs and shattered vertebrae, then pushing on to ensure that her son escapes the hotel safely. Dick Hallorann articulates the changes in her character when he describes her physical appearance in the novel's epilogue:

Hallorann was struck again by the change in her [. . .] [he] saw a grave sort of beauty there that had been missing on the day he had first met her, some nine months ago. Then she had still been mostly girl. Now she was a woman, 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. (676)

Wendy's experiences at the Overlook do not weaken her psychologically; rather they give her strength and force her to mature for the sake of defending her offspring.

Although Jack has many of the traits of a tragic hero and Wendy shows the most personal growth, most readers would agree that Danny Torrance is the undisputed hero of The Shining. In accordance with Joseph Campbell's scholarship on the mythic hero, Danny is born with supernatural abilities and enters an ordeal that tests those abilities. His supernatural ability manifests itself in the form of Tony, whom Jack and Wendy at first assume to be an imaginary friend. King insinuates that

Tony represents a part of Danny's mind by giving him a name based on Danny's middle name, Anthony, and by giving him a physical description congruous with an older version of Danny (639-40). Though Danny is not in a position to refuse his call to adventure, as it were, part of him (Tony) is reluctant to go on his journey. While Tony can be seen as Danny's supernatural aid, Dick Hallorann fits this position more effectively because he constitutes an external force; he is the "old man" who provides Danny with "amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell, Hero 69). Danny survives his trial at the Overlook and is initiated into adult responsibility, as signified in the epilogue when Danny single-handedly reels in a large fish. Hallorann advises Danny to mourn the death of his father in private when necessary and to "keep [his] love alive and see that [he gets] on, no matter what" (682). Jack's absence places Danny in the role of the patriarch at the tender age of five, and Hallorann instructs him in the ways of manhood.

As is characteristic in most of King's works, the child character acts as the moral center of the story, and like most of King's children Danny represents good, purity, and innate wisdom. In this author's universe, childhood is a realm of imagination whose inhabitants have the power to see things as they truly are. When the topiary threatens to attack Jack, he refuses to believe his own senses and convinces himself

that he was hallucinating as a result of exhaustion and stress; when the topiary attacks Danny, he has no doubt that this new manifestation of the Overlook's hostility is entirely real. The child protagonist in King's oeuvre plays Country Mouse to the City Mouse of the associated adult. Davis claims that, while "[a]dults are unable to see their shortcomings because they are too enveloped in a subjectively egocentric universe based on the rules of rationality," children are "not yet able to reject the thought of entering the world of the irrational," a factor that makes them intensely vulnerable to destructive forces of all kinds.

Danny is an extremely sensitive and bright little boy whose psychic abilities offer him glimpses into the future and into other people's thoughts. His "shine" tends to thrust him into an adult world that he is too young to understand, a fact that often worries Wendy, who feels that "to children adult motives and actions must seem as bulking and ominous as dangerous animals seen in the shadows of a dark forest" (18-19). Though his parents are aware of Danny's gift, they grossly underestimate it. They agonize over what they should share with Danny and what they should keep to themselves, but the boy already knows far more than they think. In fact, the reader learns most of the details of the relationship between Jack and Wendy through Danny's narration, not from the characters themselves.

Danny's shine also acts as a distinguishing characteristic to separate him from his father. Since Jack Torrance has essentially re-created the family he grew up in and positioned himself as the tyrannous patriarch, Danny should ostensibly follow in his father's footsteps, first as the young boy who loves and fears his father, then as the adolescent who grows to hate his father, and then as the man who repeats his father's mistakes. Although Danny already occupies the first of these phases, he will certainly never make it to the second or third. The distinctive perception that the shine causes in him will prevent him from ever truly hating his father and save him from his father's inclination toward self-loathing, self-pity, paranoia and denial. Danny's radical talent provides more than insight about the future: it is a tool to help him break the cycle of abuse by forcing him always to acknowledge the truth.

As with most gothic tales involving a haunted vessel, the setting of The Shining – the Overlook Hotel – is almost as much a character in the story as any of its inhabitants. The Overlook reflects the turmoil within the Torrance family collectively and as individuals. King addresses the haunted house tradition in Danse Macabre and mentions that he dealt with that archetype in The Shining. He refers to the haunted vessel as “the Bad Place” and discusses an article that he once read claiming that

haunted places “might actually be psychic batteries, absorbing the emotions that had been spent there” (265). Apparently The Shining was inspired by this notion, which King extended with the logic that “the fact that many haunted houses are shunned and get the reputation of being Bad Places might be due to the fact that the strongest emotions are the primitive ones – rage and hate and fear” (265). These emotions run rampant within the halls of the Overlook, and the additional energy provided by Danny’s psychic ability seems to bring the battery to a full charge.

Discriminating readers could detect a certain amount of symbolism in the locale of the Overlook. The Overlook is also situated deep in the wilderness, nestled in a wooded area in the Colorado Mountains. This aspect of the setting isolates the Torrances from civilization after a massive snowstorm, but it also functions on a symbolic level. Like Hawthorne and Poe, King uses the woods and the mountains to symbolize the more natural, wild, unrestrained aspects of the human mind (Dickerson 50). As in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” the journey into the woods – and to the Overlook – represents withdrawal into the self, making the spirits that haunt the hotel the psychological demons that torment the Torrance family.

Allusions

The Shining abounds with allusions to other literary works, ranging widely from children's readers to esteemed plays, novels, and short stories. Unlike most authors, King makes his allusions very direct and unambiguous, frequently divulging author's names and titles of specific works. Content to save his readers from playing guessing games, he avoids more subtle or obscure means of connecting himself and his audience to the literary universe. He also refrains from limiting his allusions to canonical texts by incorporating modern authors and children's books. Not only are these less scholarly references accessible to King readers who are unfamiliar with literary works, but they also serve as a characterization tool and give readers insight into the minds and personalities of King's characters.

Through Danny's struggle to master reading King mentions Where the Wild Things Are and the Dick and Jane series, and through Danny's fertile imagination and attachment to other children's literature the reader finds allusions to Through the Looking Glass and "Bluebeard" attached to the boy's fascination with Room 217. Danny himself compares his desire to see inside Room 217 to the longing Bluebeard's wife felt to know what was in the one room she was forbidden to enter; Danny even looks through the peephole of Room 217 as Bluebeard's wife

looked through the peephole of the prohibited room, “with similar unsatisfying results” (King, The Shining 254). A white rabbit that reminds Danny of the character in Through the Looking Glass ushers him into Room 217 (324-25), and the unusual croquet game played in Lewis Carroll’s story is later brought to mind when Jack chases Wendy through the hotel with a roque mallet in Chapter 52. When Danny encounters a ghost wearing a dog mask, the man taunts him with quotes from “The Three Little Pigs” and Where the Wild Things Are (506-07). These references allow readers to share Danny’s perception, thus making them just as vulnerable as Danny. Though the notion of alluding to children’s books in relation to a child character may seem an obvious gesture, King has chosen these particular stories because they reflect Danny’s perspective of his experiences in the topsy-turvy world of the Overlook.

Most of The Shining’s literary references are appropriately linked with Jack Torrance, the writer. A few weeks into their stay at the Overlook, Wendy half-jokingly greets her husband as “Jack Torrance, the Eugene O’Neill of his generation, the American Shakespeare” (173). The reference to O’Neill instantly evokes notions of family strife and chemical dependency to anyone familiar with his work, particularly Long Day’s Journey into Night, and the bleak nature of O’Neill’s work does not bode

well for the outcome of the Torrance family (Dickerson 43). Certainly Wendy, who had probably only heard of O'Neill through her husband's commendations, would be unaware of the irony in her comparison. King also suggests strained relationships through the mention of Frank Norris' "great novel" McTeague (579). Used to describe the way Jack viewed his parents' confining marriage, the indication also applies to the "gradual disintegration of [Jack and Wendy's] love and respect for each other" (Kent 141).

The aforementioned reference to Shakespeare could be taken a number of ways, but in the context of the mention of O'Neill it could easily suggest turmoil in the area of parent-child relationships: after all, Hamlet's destruction is caused by the need of his father's ghost for vengeance, whereas Jack's demise is certainly facilitated by predispositions to violence and alcoholism inherited from his father, as well as by the fears and insecurities inherent in his personality due to his father's abuse. Shakespeare resurfaces later in the novel when Wendy finds herself thinking that "he looked to her like an absurd twentieth-century Hamlet, an indecisive figure so mesmerized by onrushing tragedy that he was helpless to divert its course or alter it in any way" (450) – an astute observation of their dire situation as well as Jack's attitude toward it. King also includes a brief allusion to T.S. Eliot's

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" while Jack is scouring through the hotel scrapbook. The line "In the room the women come and go" (239) could refer to prostitutes, just one of the Overlook's cast of depraved characters, but its presence promotes comparison between the speaker of Eliot's poem and Jack himself: both are educated men burdened with debilitating insecurities who are suspicious that others harp on their inadequacies behind their backs.

Before the novel begins, King includes a lengthy passage from Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" followed by a quotation from Goya ("The sleep of reason breeds monsters," an inscription from one of his etchings) and a folk saying ("It'll shine when it shines"). While the relevance of the latter two is somewhat clear in retrospect, the former has a much deeper significance. Both Jack Torrance and Poe's Prince Prospero commit the Hawthornean sin of isolating themselves from society; they enter their havens to shut themselves in and keep out troubles they believe to be caused by the outside world. Despite their attempts to segregate themselves, the evil and tragedy they aim to escape are shut in with them: they ultimately lock themselves into their own coffins (Weller 70). Prospero is undone by his self-indulgence and arrogance in believing that his wealth will help him evade death, and Jack is defeated by his selfishness and self-pity. Perhaps part of his downfall comes in realizing

that the flaws he had blamed others for throughout his life were actually his own personality defects, though, like Shakespeare's King Lear, he holds fast to the defense that "[h]e had not done things; things had been done to him" until the novel's closing sequence (159).

The Shining is littered with references to "The Masque of the Red Death." The haunts of the Overlook are depicted as attendees of a masquerade ball. As living beings these people were probably drawn to the resort hotel for the same reasons Prospero's "light-hearted friends" (Poe 307) were delighted to join him in the abbey: these structures offered refuge from problems and threats to their happiness and well-being. However, as the party-goers came to find out, gaiety comes at a price and no sanctuary is impenetrable.

The mystical ebony clock that stands in the black and scarlet chamber in "The Masque of the Red Death" finds a contemporary counterpart in The Shining: exposed wheels and cogs under a glass dome that plays Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz" on the hour. The clock resides on a high mantle in the east-wing ballroom, ostensibly the room where the phantasmal masquerade ball is held. Flanked by a pair of large ivory elephants (which may symbolize the frivolity and excess of the hotel and its ghostly inhabitants), the clock remains untouched and motionless throughout approximately two-thirds of the novel. After Danny winds the

stilled clock and it strikes midnight, two mechanical dancers appear under the glass dome and proceed to insinuate lewd acts in front of the boy. The phrase “and the Red Death held sway over all” flashes through his mind for no apparent reason (458). If “the Red Death” can be interpreted as time and the inevitabilities associated with it (including death), perhaps the clock represents the inevitabilities of life and death and the sexuality of the two figures represents Danny's eventual loss of innocence as he approaches adolescence. Later on, Jack sees the same clock strike midnight, but this time the two mechanical figures are a father carrying a steel mallet and a son wearing a dunce cap. As Derwent shouts in the background for the party-goers to “Unmask! Unmask!” Jack watches in confusion and terror as the father beats the son's head in with his tiny weapon. The same phrase, “and the Red Death held sway over all,” comes to Jack, indicating the inevitable outcome of Jack's psychological disintegration.

An allusion associated specifically with the story's setting, the Overlook Hotel, is a nod to Shirley Jackson, author of The Haunting of Hill House. As Jack stewes over Wendy's desperation to leave the hotel, he decides that the hotel does not want them to leave, that in fact it is using the Torrance family as a sense of amusement and

if it played its cards right they could end up flitting through the Overlook's halls like insubstantial shades in a Shirley Jackson novel, whatever walked in Hill House walked alone, but you wouldn't be alone in the Overlook, oh no, there would be plenty of company here. (424)

The reference to Jackson's now-classic haunted house is especially fitting because Hill House and the Overlook create a similar mania in certain inhabitants. The protagonist of The Haunting of Hill House, Eleanor, becomes so fixated on the house and frustrated when she is asked to leave it that she crashes her car into a tree in the front yard (Jackson 245-46). The success of her suicide attempt remains unsubstantiated, but her intention to continue as a resident of Hill House one way or another is dreadfully clear.

Themes and Motifs

The acts of reading and writing are vital to the story being told and to the characters experiencing it in The Shining and recurrent allusions to authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Shirley Jackson, Eugene O'Neill and William Shakespeare act as constant reminders to the reader of Jack's inability to write (Dickerson 40). Soon after arriving at the Overlook, Jack abandons his play in favor of researching the hotel's sordid past. He becomes completely engrossed in the scrapbooks he finds in the cellar as

well as the people whose stories are contained in the newspaper clippings. When his thoughts do return to writing, they revolve around his desire to write a book about the hotel – an occupation that reduces him from the role of creator to the subordinate position of cipher (Dickerson 34). In King’s world, when the artist ceases to create, he effectively fails to address his inner demons, and they destroy him from the inside out.

Danny’s determination to learn how to read illustrates a common struggle for all children, but in Danny’s case the struggle goes far beyond Dick and Jane. He must learn how to “read” the side of his father that the Overlook unleashes and to discern whether he is dealing with his father or a monstrous force “hiding behind Daddy’s face . . . imitating Daddy’s voice, [and] wearing Daddy’s clothes” (639). Interpreting the signs that he acquires from Tony and from his “shine” becomes crucial to Danny’s survival and that of his mother. Deciphering “redrum” forces Danny to realize that the hotel does not intend for him to leave the Overlook alive, and unraveling the riddle about remembering what his father had forgotten (to tend to the boiler before the pressure inside of it climbs too high) leads to those three characters’ escaping the Overlook before it explodes.

A more subtle motif found in The Shining concerns, of all things, digestion: images of abundance, starvation, and cannibalism abound throughout the text. On their way to the Overlook, Wendy cannot help but think of the Donner party snowbound in the nearby Sierra Nevada Mountains (89). This thought disturbs her again while Hallorann gives her a tour of the Overlook's copiously stocked kitchen, establishing a distinct contrast between the comestible bounty inside the Overlook and Wendy's fear of starvation. Cannibalism is alluded to again when Hallorann leaves them at the hotel: when he looks back at the porch the Torrance family had been standing on when he got in his car, they had gone back inside, and "[i]t was as if the Overlook had swallowed them" (131). King later mentions the Torrances' progression in the hotel's digestive tract, comparing them to "microbes trapped in the intestines of a monster" (317). Perhaps Wendy's visions of cannibalism are intuitive warnings of the engulfing effects the Overlook will have on Jack and the destruction it will bring to their family.

King's version of the haunted house story differs from most in that the haunting metaphorically reflects not the inner workings of a disturbed psyche, but rather the turbulent troubles of family relationships and of society as a whole. In works by authors like Poe, Hawthorne, and Shirley Jackson, the haunted house acts as a metaphor

for the unstable mind of an individual character in the story; in The Shining, the haunted house metamorphoses into a haunted hotel, which “can embody the history not only of a family but of a larger social whole” (Hatlen 99). This seemingly minor variation indicates King’s interest in social constructs and opens the door to discussing The Shining as a commentary on American culture.

Tony Magistrale suggests that The Shining parodies the American Dream and that the Overlook “symbolizes a corporate organization that asks Jack to sacrifice everything, including his family and soul, for the advancement of his career” (Magistrale, Second Decade 18). Jack, in turn, appears “as a negative portrait of the American success story” who strives for fame and fortune at any cost (Magistrale, Second Decade 18). The western setting of The Shining supports this notion: in keeping with American tradition, Jack Torrance packs up his family and heads west from Vermont to Colorado in search of happiness and prosperity (Reesman 122), only to allow his ambition to overshadow his responsibilities as father and husband.

Patricia Ferreira describes a variation of Magistrale’s suggestion in “Jack’s Nightmare at the Overlook: The American Dream Inverted.” She feels that the hotel represents the corruption of and in American culture. Ferreira points out that King consistently juxtaposes American

presidents and politicians with criminals, insinuating that America's leaders are "nothing more than Mafia giants wearing masks" (26). The historical setting of the story complements this theory nicely: King began developing the story in late 1974, and the novel itself was published in 1977 (Beahm, A to Z 190).⁴ In the wake of Watergate and the discovery of Nixon's treachery, Jack Torrance's discovery of the scandalous core beneath the Overlook's opulent exterior mirrors the country's detection of its government's imperfections. The ghosts of the Overlook are stuck in the past, and Jack's thoughts keep turning to the masquerade ball hosted by Horace Derwent on August 29, 1945, whose guests would be basking in the glory of America's World War II victory and promises of a bright future for their country. The spirits of the hotel "delude Jack into believing that he, like the post World War II America, is on the road to a new life" (Ferreira 29). However, he is actually regressing into old bad habits like drinking and violent behavior.

Much has already been said about the cycle of abuse in The Shining in relation to its characters, but as such a dominant theme in the novel it deserves further discussion in its own right. King sees the nuclear family as the most basic and valuable of social structures and feels that straying from this intimate community makes characters more

⁴ In the winter of 1974, King and his family made a trip to the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, just as it was closing for the season. The idea for The Shining came to King as he was wandering the empty halls of the building (Beahm 190).

susceptible to evil. Given Jack's volatile relationship with Wendy and the abuse he suffered as a child at the hands of his father, his severance from the family unit seems inevitable; abuse and its effects serve as a catalyst for the separation of the individual from the family, making it an extremely destructive force. Child and spousal abuse are prevalent themes in King's canon, and he also frequently explores the long term effects of childhood guilt and anxiety. The Shining offers examples of both themes: in Jack and Wendy we see how child abuse affects its sufferers as adults, and in Danny we sense the tension that results from abusive family relationships.

The cyclical nature of abuse manifests itself in various ways throughout the novel. Jack and Wendy both came from abusive families and united to form a new one with their son. The relationship between Jack and Danny is particularly significant because it so closely resembles the relationship Jack shared with his father. This idea is symbolized nicely by the wasps' nest that Jack finds while replacing loose shingles on the roof of the Overlook. Jack uses a bug bomb to kill the insects and decides to give Danny the nest as a gift. When he was a boy, Jack's father had similarly destroyed a wasps' nest and given him the empty shell, so he figures there would be no harm in giving this one to Danny. However, the regenerative powers of the hotel cause the dead

wasps to come back to life, and they attack Danny viciously. While the characteristics Jack has inherited from his father remain unacknowledged, the wasp stings Danny receives because of his father's present show Danny's becoming acutely aware of the flaws he could inherit from his father, a realization no doubt facilitated by the clear perception gained from his psychic powers. Instead of questioning his decision to give the nest to Danny, Jack denies responsibility and blames the makers of the bug bomb for producing a faulty product – another example of his refusal to recognize his faults. To an extent, the Overlook itself represents and perpetuates the cycle of abuse by demanding the murder of its caretakers' families, first Delbert Grady's, then Jack Torrance's.

One of the most masterful devices employed by King in The Shining is ambiguity, particularly as it concerns Jack and the question of free will. Is Jack Torrance a victim of fate, a victim of his past, or simply a weak and selfish character who fails to recognize his flaws until it is too late? While determinism may be a factor in Jack's demise, it is certainly not the sole cause of it. Jack's belief in determinism stems from his lack of personal responsibility: it is simply easier for him to blame his circumstances on fate rather than admit that they are the direct results of his actions.

The most striking evidence of fate's involvement in bringing the Torrance family to the Overlook lies in the incident that causes Jack to stop drinking in the first place. He and his friend Al Shockley had been out drinking one night, and as they were driving home they hit a bicycle at a high speed. Understandably worried that the rider had been injured, the pair search the nearby area but find no one. The idea that there could have been someone on that bike, perhaps even a child, who would have surely died upon the impact of Shockley's Jaguar startled some sense into both Jack and his companion; they decide to sober up for good. Jack considers this incident a divine intervention: "Jack thought later that some queer providence, bent on giving them both a last chance, had kept the cops away, had kept any of the passersby from calling them" – had placed a vacant bicycle in the middle of the road (58). Though Jack interprets the event optimistically, it seems very possible, if not likely, that "the providence that put this bicycle in the middle of Jack's life is the same energy that conveniently placed the scrapbook of the Overlook's sordid history in a place next to the boiler where Jack was certain to find it" (Magistrale, "Shakespeare" 161). After all, he and Al bonded as recovering alcoholics after the incident, and this closeness surely played a part in Al's getting Jack the caretaker position at the Overlook. Had he remained an alcoholic, he never would have been hired

for fear that he would end up like Delbert Grady. Taking away Jack's alcohol only made his insecurities more palpable without any substances to submerge them; sobriety made Jack even more vulnerable to the wiles of the hotel, and the temptation to leap off the wagon eventually proves too great for him to resist.

However, like Shakespeare's tragic heroes, fate only causes the circumstances that trouble Jack; it is ultimately his own decisions and actions that lead to his downfall (Magistrale, "Shakespeare" 162). As the three witches can only torment Shakespeare's Macbeth but cannot force him to commit crimes, so the Overlook merely shapes the circumstances of Jack's life but cannot force him to act violently against his family. In choosing to believe the witches' prophecy and in giving in to the coercions of the hotel, these men allow themselves to become victims of circumstance while abrogating responsibility for their own actions.

Of course, the ultimate theme of any horror story is that of good versus evil. On a surface level, the Overlook and the forces it contains obviously represent evil, as does Jack once the hotel devours him and he is driven to endanger and eventually to attempt to kill his family. Danny and Wendy are both basically good characters. Danny's innocence and his shine allow him to see things as they really are and prevent his judgment from being clouded by an adult sense of reality: he trusts his

intuition, and his intuition seldom misleads him. Wendy is good because, unlike Jack who refuses to recognize the presence of evil and thus succumbs to it, she understands that things are askew at the Overlook and makes a conscious decision not to fall victim to its games to improve the chance that she and Danny will survive. Although delaying her separation from Jack was most likely a mistake that endangered Danny, Wendy's decisions are always based on an inherent belief in right and wrong, and in this light she is the moral center of the story.

However, the ultimate evil in The Shining resides inside Jack Torrance, in his personality flaws and in his inability to acknowledge them. Jack's selfishness and ambition lead him to endanger his family and attempt to kill them for the sake of maintaining his ties to the Overlook. Ultimately, he is not condemned as an alcoholic or as an abusive father and husband, but as a weak man who absolutely refuses to reform until it is too late. Before he loses all control and succumbs completely to the power of the Overlook, Jack says to Danny, "Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you" (652). Shortly thereafter, the hotel takes over Jack's body, and all perish in the massive explosion. Redemption comes for Jack Torrance, but at a terribly high price.

Conclusion

All tales of horror can be divided into two groups: those in which the horror results from an act of free and conscious will – a conscious decision to do evil – and those in which the horror is predestinate, coming from outside like a stroke of lightening. (King, Danse Macabre 62)

But which of these categories does The Shining fit into? The complexities and ambiguities of the story allow for so many interpretations that at times it seems impossible to decide on only one. By presenting characters that are so real and so human, King draws us into their dilemma and makes their story matter to us. His narrative techniques lend a captivating combination of eloquence and honesty that draws his readers further into the novel, even when they wish they could turn their eyes away from it. The numerous allusions found throughout the book enrich its context while further developing the relationship between the characters and readers. King struggles with themes that have captivated countless venerated authors from all time periods, places them in a modern context, and makes them tremendously accessible to a modern audience. When viewed as more than pulp fiction, The Shining is enriching, thought-provoking, and brilliant; it is proof that King's aptitude in his craft far exceeds most readers' expectations.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Critics and scholars have always been suspicious of popular success. Often their suspicions are justified. In other cases, these suspicions are used as an excuse not to think. No one can be as intellectually slothful as a really smart person; give smart people half a chance and they will ship their oars and drift... dozing to Byzantium, you might say. (King, On Writing 143)

My interest in studying the work of Stephen King as literature began after reading Harold Bloom's article "Dumbing down American Readers," in which he chided the National Book Foundation for awarding King its prestigious Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters. I was struck not only by his vehemence and obvious exasperation, but also by the lack of specific reasons as to why he thought King such a horrible writer. Aside from calling King "a writer of penny dreadfuls" and claiming that he is "an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis," Bloom offers no further explanation of his intense aversion to King's writing. This led me to research further Bloom's past criticism

of King in order better my understanding of his argument. My wish was soon granted in the form of Bloom's BioCritiques: Stephen King.

In the introduction to this collection of critical essays on Stephen King, Harold Bloom enumerates five flaws that he finds in King's writing. The first is implied and actually has little if anything to do with King's writing itself: Bloom says that King "impresses [him] as being no more or less aesthetically and cognitively valuable than Tom Clancy, Danielle Steele, John Grisham, and our other popular novelists with enormous audiences" (Bloom, "Introduction" 1). In this way of thinking, Bloom joins the ranks of so many critics who feel that if a work is literary, then it cannot be popular, and vice versa. Here, King has a strike against him before his critic reads even a sentence of his writing. Anyone who has avoided living under a rock for the past three decades knows that King is a popular writer, and this knowledge gives many critics the only excuse they need to dismiss his work as regressive and unsophisticated. However, as I have demonstrated here, King's work is far from unrefined, and his canon contains examples of complex stories conveyed in articulate and inventive prose.

Bloom's second critique parallels his first in that it too requires no actual evaluation of King's work. Showing clear disdain for horror fiction, the genre King is most commonly associated with, Bloom says that "King,

whatever his qualities, emerges from an American tradition one could regard as sub-literary: Poe and H.P. Lovecraft” (Bloom, “Introduction” 1). He then interrupts his condemnation of King long enough to criticize both Poe and Lovecraft, along with Anne Rice, Dean Koontz, and Peter Straub (Bloom, “Introduction” 2). This slight digression proves that Bloom has no interest or reverence for gothic literature, which illustrates the bias of this particular argument. King does not limit himself strictly to horror fiction, and even the works that are commonly considered horror fiction often function more allegorically than literally. The Shining is a prime example of how King has created his own kind of realism by using gothic conventions metaphorically.

Bloom presents his next three contentions as “King’s obvious inadequacies: cliché-writing, flat characters who are names upon the page, and in general a remarkable absence of invention for someone edging over into the occult, the preternatural, the imaginary” (Bloom, “Introduction” 1-2). Even though Bloom’s problems with King’s writing insinuate that Bloom has actually read King, he fails to substantiate his claims with examples from King’s work. If Bloom finds King’s writing cliché, then he may very likely be referring to certain conventions of gothic stories that he, as a distinguished literary scholar who believes horror fiction to be “sub-literary,” would naturally despise. As for his

comments about King's characters and lack of imagination, the information that I have presented in this work offers sufficient evidence to the contrary.

Ironically, Harold Bloom's approach to literature focuses on how it functions for and fulfills its readers, and yet he actively stands against assessing literature by cultural relevancy, a primary function that modern literature serves for many of its readers. When I began this study, I had hoped to work at discovering exactly how the great scholars defined literature in order to understand why King's work is not considered literary. What I found as I began my research was that literature is usually defined in such broad strokes and abstract ideas that one could either apply the term "literature" to everything from Shakespeare to auto repair manuals, or apply it to almost nothing at all. Bloom himself claims that "[t]o read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you. You are more than an ideology, whatever your convictions, and Shakespeare speaks to as much of you as you can bring to him" (Bloom, How to Read and Why 28). Why should the same not be said of any writer, including Stephen King?

What I have shown here is that, regardless of how one defines literature, Stephen King's works are significantly profound and complex.

His popular success should not discourage scholars from taking him seriously. As I have demonstrated with The Shining, what may appear to be a horror story about a haunted house or a raging case of cabin fever is more accurately described as a tale of real horror: the torments of the human mind and the evil and destruction that its weaknesses can cause. It is important to remember that, as a storyteller, King's purpose is not only to entertain his audience, but also to reflect and preserve the traditions and beliefs of his culture. His work speaks to the fears and concerns of modern American society while addressing enduring traditional values and acknowledging his narrative heritage. He is truly a writer for our time and possibly for all times. Though I admit that King's writing can be erratic (after all, no writer hits the mark every time), I also believe that anyone willing to evaluate King's work with impartiality will be richly rewarded.

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