

THE HORROR OF STEPHEN KING – FACING REAL MONSTERS OR EXAMINING PROFOUND HUMAN CONDITIONS



Literature

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Abstract

Literature has always been a medium through which authors have explored the many profound human conditions and at the same time, they have provided the means of escapism by entertaining readers with exquisite stories. Except for a few writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley, many critics have viewed the horror genre as lacking in literary merit and seriousness. In modern days, if there is a writer of horror who has achieved both popular and literary acceptance, it has to be Stephen King. In this paper, we will explore his unique view on the human psyche through his writing prowess. His name has become synonymous with the horror genre, helped by the many film adaptations of his works and his undisputable storytelling abilities. By analysing three of his most popular, and probably best works, *The Shining*, *The Stand* and *It*, we will provide examples which support the stance that Stephen King as a horror writer, and the horror genre as a whole, can provide a sound basis for an exceptional examination of human psychology and interaction. We will try to show that horror doesn't just fear the monster under the bed or the ghoul in the closet, but also fearing to fail our family, our loved ones and even ourselves, and this is where Stephen King truly excels. I hope that this paper will shed light on the matter and provide the ground for further research on the field.

Introduction

Every generation has its legends, be it movie stars, musicians, footballers, etc. But at times, even writers can achieve that kind of status in relation to the society they live in, or become even more popular and become known in the entire world. If there is a writer who enjoys that kind of status it's certainly Stephen King. King has always been at the forefront of the literary developments throughout the last three decades of the 20th century, and he continues to be so until today (Magistrale, 2010). As an author, he has enjoyed tremendous financial success, especially if we consider that the vast majority of his work has been adapted to the silver screen. But choosing the genre in which he likes to write, has made him suffer from the pen of many mainstream literary critics, particularly at the start of his career. There is moment at the beginning of his success as a writer when after publishing his first novel *Carrie* dealing with a young girl with telekinetic powers who eventually by the end of the book murders all her friends including her mother, he suggested to his publisher his second book called 'Salem's Lot involving vampires who invade a small town in Maine. Considering both novels as horror, the publisher warned King that he might get typed as a horror writer, to which King reportedly replied: "I don't care". Later on with his subsequent novels, such as *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Stand* and so on, he became known as the master of modern horror, and is widely considered as the author who brought back horror literature to the mainstream reading public, by also being considered as the most famous horror writer since Edgar Allan Poe. Although today he is admired by both readers and the majority of critics, King's popularity has caused him many headaches with critics in the past. Many of them didn't take his writing seriously, which, more or less, was fueled by the way

he was commercialized in the media based on the many adaptations of his work, of which a considerable number lack the depth of the work that they're based on. The critical view on his work has changed by the passage of time, acknowledging his unique place in the landscape of American Literature. In this paper, we will try to provide an answer to the question provided in the title by analysing whether Stephen King writes only about ghouls, fangs, vampires and murderous clowns, or there is indeed a more profound meaning in his oeuvre.

The Monsters

In many occasions, people have asked King why he writes what he writes? What particular traumatic moment in his childhood may have sparked his brain to write horror fiction? Although the author has provided various answers regarding the issue, we can begin by stating that he never knew his father who had left his family when King was only a baby boy. He and his older brother were raised by his mother who in return died from cancer before King published his first novel. All these circumstances may have provided the building ground upon which his brain and soul formulated his view on life, still, one other important thing needs to be mentioned in this context, and that is the fact that in a number of occasions King has stated that if there is a human condition that exposes the true psychological nature of a particular person it must be fear. Only when we fear something or someone we show are true feelings towards others. It may be this why King has chosen the horror genre by putting his characters in scary and terrifying situations to show their true face, in which case, fear removes everyone's masks.

On another occasion, when he was asked what were his thoughts about the difference between what critics consider popular and what is generally considered literary fiction? King has replied that although he hates making that kind of a distinction, still he has stated that literary fiction deals with extraordinary people in ordinary situations, whereas popular fiction deals with ordinary people in extraordinary situations. As a result, in the majority of cases, Kings puts his characters in strange situations, thus providing the tools which pave the way for character development.

As noted in the Abstract, we will discuss these aspects by mainly analysing what many consider to be his best novels: *It*, *The Stand* and *The Shining* (Spignesi, Rusell, 2001, 1996).

If we take for example his monumental work *It*, published in 1986, we will see that the main antagonist is a monster that takes many different shapes, but mostly likes to expose itself as a clown. This is a very strange combination at first sight, but if we dwell deeper into the story and start to unravel the mystery behind the monster's characteristics we see the main characters of the book are children and we certainly know that children have a different way of grasping the world around them compared to adults. In other words, they are more prone to the imagination and won't turn away if a dancing clown wants to entertain them. This is the whole point of *Its* transformation. It uses what each of them fears and while at first, *It* fools them as a clown, later on, it starts taking the shape of the children's worst fears. Although each one of them refuses to admit that they fear a certain thing, the monster exposes them and feeds on that fear.

Here is where things become quite interesting; even though we witness that some of the children fear werewolves or mummies, still, some fear their molesting father or their overprotective mother. In this way, King dwells deep inside problematic issues that many families deal within but try to keep them hidden from the rest of the society. We also learn that there are aggressive children who act in that manner as a result of the aggressive attitude that their parents show towards them. In other words, we are dealing with serious human conditions which require special and attention. But we also learn that friendship is what holds us together. Consider the following quotes from It:

Maybe there aren't any such things as good friends or bad friends - maybe there are just friends, people who stand by you when you're hurt and who help you feel not so lonely. Maybe they're always worth being scared for, and hoping for, and living for. Maybe worth dying for too, if that's what has to be. No good friends. No bad friends. Only people you want, need to be with; people who build their houses in your heart."

"The energy you drew on so extravagantly when you were a kid, the energy you thought would never exhaust itself - that slipped away somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four, to be replaced by something much duller, something as bogus as a coke high: purpose, maybe, or goals, or whatever rah-rah Junior Chamber of Commerce word you wanted to use. It was no big deal; it didn't go all at once, with a bang. And maybe, Richie thought, that's the scary part. How you didn't stop being a kid all at once, with a big explosive bang, like one of that clown's trick balloons. The kid in you just leaked out, like the air of a tire."

Of all three King novels that we mentioned, *The Shining* is probably his most famous, in a considerable part thanks to Stanley Kubrick's movie adaptation. The book deals with a writer named Jack Torrance, who is a recovering alcoholic and who applies for a job as a caretaker at Overlook hotel which is closed during the winter (Spignesi, 2001). Torrance needs this job not only because he needs money, but he wants to use isolation to write his book. He gets the job and settles there with his wife and son who has a special ability called *The Shining*. When they are left alone things start to get weird. Jack's alcoholic past starts to haunt him by driving him crazy and becoming aggressive towards his wife and son. He starts seeing illusions of ghosts of people who have worked in the Overlook hotel in the past. He is particularly haunted by the vision of the previous caretaker who had murdered his twin daughters and his wife.

After all these happenings, he is drowned into madness and tries to kill his wife and son who thanks to his ability to Shine understands what his father intends to do.

Although in the surface it seems we are dealing particularly with supernatural events and entities such as ghosts, still if we analyse various passages from the book we understand that the novel provides a profound view on family relationships, especially while exposed to extreme circumstances which make us face our troubled past. Isolation plays a major part in the book because it sets the environment for Jack's confrontation with his inner troubles.

One other thing which is of particular interest regarding this work is the disagreement that King had with Kubrick regarding his film adaptation. One of the main problems that King had with the movie was casting Jack Nicholson as the main character. Considering his physical appearance King stated that Nicholson from the beginning seems cold and the audience immediately smells something wrong in the air, whereas in the book Torrance, although with troublesome past, is basically a good character who slowly transforms into a monster. But probably the main thing that King disliked about the movie was the way it ended compared to the book. The movie ends with snow and ice, while the book with fire. Ending the movie with ice or cold suggests that on way or another, Jack Torrance has a cold personality and he doesn't care about his attitude. In the book, on the other hand, which ends with fire, we see the struggle that Torrance is going through by realizing he has tried to harm his son and wife, meaning that he suffers for acting in such a way and his soul burns inside as the Overlook hotel burns in a more literal way. Consider the following quotes from the book:

“The world's a hard place, Danny. It don't care. It don't hate you and me, but it don't love us, either. Terrible things happen in the world, and they're things no one can explain. Good people die in bad, painful ways and leave the folks that love them all alone. Sometimes it seems like it's only the bad people who stay healthy and prosper. The world don't love you, but your mamma does and so do I.”

“How many times, over how many years, had he—a grown man—asked for the mercy of another chance? He was suddenly so sick of himself, so revolted, that he could have groaned aloud.”

Having all this in mind while reading *The Shining* we have no other way other than to acknowledge the fact that the novel represents a true masterpiece of dealing with human existentialist aspects.

Moving forward, many Stephen King avid readers consider *The Stand* to be his best work, although the author himself doesn't believe it to be so. Whatever the viewpoint may be, there is no doubt that this work has been debated continuously since it's publication in shorter form in 1978 and its republication in longer form in 1990. The book deals with a post-apocalyptic world where a army-generated flu kills 99% of the worlds population, leaving the rest to fight a strange satanic figure, called Randall Flag who gathers those who are left alive and are generally morally degraded in preparing to attack and exterminate the good ones lead by an elderly lady called Mother Abigail who teaches them about God's plan. The book is a masterpiece of good versus evil which provides us with some of the best characters King has ever created.

What is very important to notice in this context is the fact that many of those considered to be good are actually flawed in one way or another, suggesting of what King has stated many times that he considers the majority of people to be good, although they may trespass some moral boundaries given the hard and tempting circumstances. Consider the following passages from *The Stand*:

“Show me a man or a woman alone and I'll show you a saint. Give me two and they'll fall in love. Give me three and they'll invent the charming thing we call 'society'. Give me four and they'll build a pyramid. Give me five and they'll make one an outcast. Give me six and they'll reinvent prejudice. Give me seven and in seven years they'll reinvent warfare. Man may have been made in the image of God, but human society was made in the image of His opposite number, and is always trying to get back home.”

“You just couldn't get hold of the things you had done and turn them right again. Such power might be given to the gods, but it was not given to men and women, and that was probably a good thing. Had it been otherwise, people would probably die of old age still trying to rewrite their teens.”

The Mother Abigail camp wins in the end, but only after a great struggle. It is convenient to elaborate the fact that in the final confrontation, Flag's people use nuclear weapons as their defense and various vehicles to travel long distances, whereas Mother Abigail's side travels on foot, suggesting that the quest or struggle to achieve one's goal and believing that what you stand for is right, is what matters, not the tools we use to achieve something like that.

In the end, the power of God saves them, acknowledging that they have fulfilled their mission.

Conclusion

No matter if we like to be scared or not; no matter if we prefer reading a long book or watching its film adaptation, one thing is for certain, good stories are the ones that remain with us long after we have finished reading or watching them. In my honest opinion, I truly believe that Stephen King is one of the rare modern-day authors who can combine pure entertainment with true literary merits all based upon his extraordinary storytelling skills. I hope to have provided a glimpse to his huge body of work by choosing some of the most important aspects that truly represent his unique description of monsters, but what is most important his honest evaluation of human psychology, and there is no better way to end this paper than with one of his most famous quotes: *“I'm always more interested in the people than I am in the monsters.”*

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