

The Weaponized Mundane: Nostalgia and Catharsis in the Work of Stephen King

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Abstract:

Stephen King's career spans decades and includes works of fiction in the horror, crime, and fantasy genres. Although King is typically recognized and marketed as a horror author, horror is an outlier in publishing because it is based more on intended reader affect than on the content of the story itself. As a result, certain elements and rhetorical moves in a work of horror fiction take on functional purposes distinct from their counterparts in other genres. Indeed, notions of "horror" and "genre" remain poorly defined, and these ambiguities serve as the basis for my argument about King's explorations of evil. By viewing it through the lenses of scholarship into creativity, nostalgia, and creative writing practice, we begin to see a pattern of evil manifesting as renewed and updated creative utility across King's body of work.

Keywords:

Stephen King, horror, nostalgia, catharsis, genre

The text:

Stephen King's literary career began in the late 1960s with the publication of a number of short horror stories, several decades before Internet memes—and the Internet itself, as we know it today—came into existence. If King were a more recent arrival on the literary scene, one of his more quotable lines would most likely be available as an animated gif: "I recognize terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud" (1981, p. 10). I bring this up not to conjure images of cute kittens on Twitter or Jack Nicholson's deranged face as he chops his way through a door in Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of *The Shining*, but to point to a certain ambiguity around what kind of writer King is. This question has dogged him since the beginning of his career, when his editor cautioned him about choosing *'Salem's Lot* (titled *Second Coming* in its early draft form) over *Blaze* and becoming perceived as a horror author as a result (1982). The ontological question at the heart of this volume is to do with the ways evil manifests in King's work, and the answer matters because it speaks to a much older but still contentious cultural dialogue around the work creatives do. The phenomenon of creativity itself has been studied for decades, but what is creative work *for*? As a scholar of

creative writing as it is taught in the academy, I am drawn first to the Foucauldian idea of “author function,” which tends to be interpreted as a comment on the way writers are often pigeonholed by genre. However, this elides the deeper message in Foucault’s views on authors, which is that they—we—are subaltern to the cultural discourse in which our work is but one component (Wilkins & Bennett, 2020, p. 28-29). While as a scholar I take Foucault’s point, as a practitioner I have always struggled with what seems to be an assertion that the wind matters more than the trees. By the end of this chapter, I will make my meandering way back to the question of discourse and King’s treatment of evil, but first I want to look at his literary work through the lenses of research into horror, creativity, and nostalgia.

This is probably the point where I should mention my personal connection to this topic. I grew up in the 1970s and ‘80s and was a bookish kid, the type reliably chosen last for sports and games during recess. Books were both world and refuge. Staff in bookstores knew me by name. My hometown library in Greenville, North Carolina was housed in a former mansion on the edge of downtown. The children’s section was in the basement; the grownups’ (I hesitate to use the word “adult” here) section was upstairs. One day, descending the stairs, I realized I had read pretty much everything of interest in the kids’ section. I paused, reflected, turned around. Entering the grownups’ library, I felt a little overwhelmed by choice. My parents had shelves of books by John D. McDonald, Robert Ludlum, and James Michener, so there wouldn’t have been much point in borrowing titles we already had at home. Who else should I read, then? Approximately once a year, the local bookstores would put up cardboard display stands with the name KING emblazoned across them in huge red or white letters. I made my way through the stacks to the K section and found copies of *Firestarter* and *The Shining* on the shelf. I knew my parents had a copy of the latter, but *Firestarter* appealed. I read it in one sitting. I was eleven. In the decades since, I have read—and in some cases reread—King’s body of work extensively. Reading *The Shining* as a preteen and revisiting it in my forties as a doctoral researcher investigating commonalities between classical Chinese and Western ghost stories taught me volumes about the form. As a lifelong fan of the horror genre, and more recently a scholar, I am grateful for this chance to take a critical look at this aspect of King’s work.

Notionally, King is a horror author, but that definition is reductive. Outwardly this is a marketing issue: genre in publishing is itself a bizarre and illogical construct. Some genres are based on the content of the stories: science fiction, Westerns, romance, crime, mystery, erotica. Others are based on the identity of the author: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and so on. Literary fiction exists as a peculiar literary white space (pun intended) defined more by absence than presence. Horror is the other literary outlier, based on affective response over and above the content itself (Carroll, 1987). This is all well and good in the sense that it makes no sense, but what of horror itself? In the decades and centuries since the heyday of the Victorian

ghost story—arguably the predecessor of today’s horror genre—various writers have explored the distinctions and gradations of horror. MR James has argued that the ghost story¹ is ‘subject to the same broad rules as the whole mass of them’ (1924, n.p.), a point the scholar Julia Briggs expands upon in her book *Night Visitors*:

[James] is right in the obvious sense that many important features—atmosphere, economy, well-managed climax, final twist—are common to both [ghost stories and stories in other genres]. At the same time the ghost story itself can be regarded as a special paradigm, involving suspense and the unknown, within the story classification. (1977, p. 13-14)

HP Lovecraft is similarly cagey on the nature of horror in fiction, preferring the term *dread* in his treatise “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927, pp. 23–59). We can trace this generic fascination with the literary dark back as far as the late eighteenth century, to John and Anna Laetitia Aikin’s “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror,” in which the authors argued that we are naturally fascinated by what we find terrifying, even thrilled by it (1773, pp. 127 – 37). From this debate, I have arrived at my own working definitions of terror and horror: I tend to regard terror as an immediate feeling of threat; whereas horror as a version of the fear response that involves a degree of moral offense and a struggle to comprehend some irruption into, or disruption of, our understanding of reality. In other words, terror is the shooter’s volley of bullets or the spray of shrapnel from the bomb; horror arises from our contemplation that such a thing could happen at all, and how close we might have come to being grievously injured or killed. Thus, horror is not a singular emotional domain, and even its foremost literary purveyors over the centuries are not in close agreement on what it comprises.

Having now argued that neither the horror genre nor horror itself is a tangible, well-defined construct, I would like to touch on a similar lexical ambiguity around the term evil. As other contributors have pointed out, numerous definitions have been put forward, explored, and subjected to scholarly scrutiny. It may involve the imposition of a deluded, egotistical will; it may take the form of institutional malfeasance or incompetence; it may manifest as the agenda of a deity or supernatural being intent on harm or extermination. As King puts it in a 2014 interview with *Rolling Stone*,

I believe in evil, but all my life I’ve gone back and forth about whether or not there’s an outside evil, whether or not there’s a force in the world that really

¹ Scholars of the ghost story have long contended that it is a separate genre from horror, and MR James was one of the loudest quiet voices in that argument. That being said, the term ‘ghost story’ was often used then in a way that contemporary readers would construe as horror.

wants to destroy us, from the inside out, individually and collectively. Or whether it all comes from inside and that it's all part of genetics and environment. When you find somebody like, let's say, Ted Bundy, who tortured and killed all those women and sometimes went back and had sex with the dead bodies, I don't think when you look at his upbringing you can say, "Oh, that's because Mommy put a clothespin on his dick when he was four." That behavior was hard-wired. Evil is inside us. The older I get, the less I think there's some sort of outside devilish influence; it comes from people. And unless we're able to address that issue, sooner or later, we'll fucking kill ourselves.

To put it succinctly, scholars in other branches of the humanities—philosophers, psychologists—may struggle to articulate these nuances and distinctions, but from the standpoint of creative writing, this complexity and elusiveness is a boon. The novelist has the luxury of working on a much larger canvas.

In "The Associative Basis of the Creative Process," Sarnoff Mednick (1962) scours the written reflections of authors, scientists, and other creatives—from Albert Einstein to Andre Breton to Samuel Taylor Coleridge—to construct a sort of Grand Unifying Theory of human creativity. Mednick argues that "the creative thinking process [involves] the forming of associate elements into new combinations which either meet specified requirements or are in some way useful. The more mutually remote the elements of the new combination, the more creative the process or solution" (1962, p. 221). He further suggests that "[c]reative thinking as defined here is distinguished from original thinking by the imposition of requirements on originality" (p.221). This is remarkably consistent with King's comments on the origins of his own work over the years. Case in point: in a 2011 interview in *The Atlantic*, King recounts the process of writing the short story also published in the same issue. He and his son Owen (also a novelist) had made a bet on the outcome of a basketball game, and the loser of the bet would have to write a short story based on a title supplied by the winner. King *pere* lost and therefore had to come up with a story that fit the random title "Herman Wouk Is Still Alive." Part of King's ensuing perplexity arose from this "ass-backwards" inversion of his typical approach to writing and choosing titles: stories normally present themselves to him first, and he chooses titles once he has written enough to see where the story is going. His first idea was "to write a story about a guy in a mental asylum who believed that he was keeping certain writers alive by brainpower." Shortly after that, he made the connection with JD Salinger, who famously went into seclusion and refused to publish another book. And shortly after *that*, a woman died in a motorcycle accident near King's home. Out of these disparate but connectable elements, the story began to take shape.

Throughout the interview, King refers back to the same process of forming or finding connections between objects, ideas, and events that happened to cross his field of vision: a flyer with pictures of missing children printed on the back, a car accident on Mother's Day in which a number of people were killed, the poetry of Philip Larkin and James Dickey. From networks of interconnections such as these, short stories and even novels begin to emerge, but it is not a process King or any writer necessarily exerts agency over: the resulting work is "less of a *made* thing and more of a *found* thing" (2000, p. 30). According to Sarnoff, the creative process is organic, often subconscious; however, in the case of a writer needing to cobble disparate items together, problems may arise. We see this writ large in *Misery*, whose narrator Paul Sheldon, forced under torture to write a novel for his captor Annie Wilkes, reflects on the miseries of trying to make an idea come to fruition before the necessary connections are in place. Via Sheldon, King invokes the myth of the muse, as well as the inspirational properties of a long walk, in a passage that suggests that author and character are, momentarily, the same person (1988). Is Annie Wilkes evil? Absolutely. But my question here is less about what that means than it is about the narrative purpose she serves.

A similar process of associational bricolage took place in the creation of *The Body*, the 1982 novella that was originally published in *Different Seasons* and later adapted as the film *Stand by Me* (1986). King has stated in interviews that when he was a small child, he witnessed a friend being struck and killed by a train. Not long after that, he saw the body of a drowned boater. The corpse had not yet been covered after being brought to shore (Hendrix, 2013). *The Body* differs from much of King's other early work in its departure from horror. An autobiographical Bradbury-esque coming-of-age quest set in 1959, in which four boys go in search of a corpse one of them has heard about, this novella lacks a direct focus on more conventional tropes of horror. Although there are horrific elements, I would argue that nostalgia is the overarching emotional tenor of the story.

Nostalgia, described by Svetlana Boym as "a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (2007, n.p.), makes sense as being as effective as horror when deployed in fiction when one takes into account that it was historically seen as a form of disease (Boym, 2007; Sedikides et al, 2008; et al). According to these theorists, nostalgia is also forward-looking, encompassing a certain reverie toward imaginary better futures. Crucially, nostalgia has evolved in the public consciousness across cultures as being a curable affliction, and not a state in which one should reasonably expect to want to linger for fear of coming to some more permanent form of harm. Over time, the notion of nostalgia as a form of mental disease has diminished, to the benefit of marketers and politicians and to the detriment of everybody else. It is the sugar that hides the taste of the poison. I contend that by inflicting and alleviating this deceptively, insidiously pleasant state of suffering upon the reader, King instills

(or aims to) a sense of catharsis when the story is complete. This is the same emotional response horror ultimately intends to bring about.

For much of his career, King has argued that catharsis underpins the genre of horror, possibly serving as a counterpoint to everyday fears and anxieties. In *Danse Macabre*, he calls horror authors “agents of the norm” (1981, p. 58), providing catharsis by inserting some terrifying irruption into the daily lives of their characters but then restoring the survivors to some version of the lives they had previously been living. He makes a similar point in “Why We Crave Horror Movies,” an essay published in *Playboy* the same year, suggesting that horror is “innately conservative, even reactionary” (1981, n.p.) and that by appealing to the worst and darkest of our desires, it functions to keep “the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath” (1981, n.p.) instead of letting them loose into the world. And as recently as 2020, he made the same point in an interview with Stephen Colbert when discussing the pandemic, the Trump presidency, and his then-new book *If It Bleeds*:

When you go to a horror story... you read it and the situations are even more horrible than being under house arrest with no toilet paper. And when you finish... you've had a place to put your fears for a little while. You've been able to say, these problems are worse than my problems... at least, that's the theory.

If we look at nostalgia as a vector to instill a sense of catharsis, then the relevance and utility of “everyday evil” become more apparent. It isn’t that King leans on overt nostalgia as an alternative to more conventional horror trappings for emotional effect, because what he is doing is more subtle. The tension and catharsis in his work arise as the quotidian details of life become threatened and thereby become the sources of the threat, as it were. King’s imaginary is solidly rooted in the fabric of the American everyday, and a key component of the American mythos is the notion of our way of life being in constant peril. To be American is to be—or to be exhorted to be—on constant guard against potential impending loss². Nostalgia contains a similar and overlapping element of threat: not just for a past that has been lost, but for the possibility that it cannot be retrieved.

Nostalgia is a common thread throughout *The Stand* (1978 and 1990) and the Dark Tower novels: the former takes the reader on a journey through the barren landscape of a post-plague world in which most of humanity has perished; the latter arc of stories offers glimpses of a multiverse in which the world through which the characters travel has fallen but the diegetic “real” one can still sometimes be seen. These stories are shot through with a gnawing, inchoate

² This idea has been explored by numerous writers in the second half of the twentieth century, notably Richard Hofstadter, Neil Postman, and Susan Faludi.

sadness as we see detritus left behind from crumbled civilizations. In much the same way, a sense of loss hangs over 1979's *The Dead Zone*: protagonist Johnny Smith awakens from a five-year coma with powers of precognition and clairvoyance, and comes to realize that not only is his previous life irretrievably over, but the future is also foreclosed. In each case, the reader likely experiences some version of the fear response not because of an imminent attack by vampires or aliens but because of the same sense of impending, monstrous loss I have just discussed. We see similar currents running through other works as well: In *It* (1986), the overt menace may be Pennywise the Clown, but the lost, traumatic childhoods of the seven kids in King's all-American everytown Derry lend the story its depth. And in *11/22/63* (2011), nostalgia for an imperiled future America manifests through an excursion back in time via a portal in the back of a restaurant. Anyone venturing through the portal is always returned to a fixed time and place in 1958. Protagonist Jake Epping becomes convinced he can prevent John F. Kennedy's assassination by stopping Lee Harvey Oswald. Epping succeeds, but returns to find the world an apocalyptic nuclear wasteland. Too many such interventions would, according to a character whose function is to monitor them, cause the very fabric of reality to unravel.

This threat to the everyday and the resulting imperative to restore it or return to it takes on forms other than nostalgia while still employing the same dynamics. Many of King's "everyday evils" stem from tangentially realistic situations in which elements of the supernatural matter less than the sense of risk inspired by this nostalgia-like fear of loss. Corruption is one such example. In *The Institute* (2019) and *Firestarter*, shadowy, nefarious government agencies have weaponized members of the public by inducing or enhancing psionic abilities. The fear and horror come about not from the risk of incineration by a chance meeting with a grumpy pyrokinetic teenager but because these people have been callously ripped away from their homes, their families, and their day-to-day lives. Worse, the treatment they are subjected to is dehumanizing, stripping them of agency, bodily autonomy, and in the case of *The Institute*, clothing, sanity, and ultimately, identity. Tellingly, the captive children in both novels are given toys and clothes and rooms/cells meant to resemble the homes they have been taken from. The cruelty is the point. These are not the only examples of corrupt, impersonal institutions in King's work: there is the callous government agency using eminent domain for a freeway expansion project in *Roadwork* (1981); the gruesome, dystopian, fatal—and, importantly, state-sanctioned—competitions in *The Running Man* (1982) and *The Long Walk* (1979); and the penal systems, which are by nature depersonalizing, in *The Green Mile* (1996) and *Sleeping Beauties* (2017). *Under the Dome* (2009) puts a different spin on the notion of the weaponized everyday when malignantly indifferent aliens place an impenetrable barrier above and around the town of Chester's Mill. Inside the dome, the environment quickly begins to deteriorate and civilization frays, a dynamic we also see in the supermarket where much of *The Mist* (1980) is set.

Just as being subjected to or victims of malign indifference can drive the characters in a story to restore life to some recognizable version of what it used to be, isolation is a similarly effective “everyday evil” which must be overcome in a number of King’s works. The premise of *Cujo* (1981) is deceptively simple: a woman and her son are trapped in a car with a rabid dog outside and no means of calling for help. In a way, *Cell* (2006) inverts this approach: mobile phones transmit a mysterious signal that turns the people who hear it into mindless, violent zombies (the *28 Days Later* variety, not the kind from *The Walking Dead*). A small group of survivors dwindles; the book ends with protagonist Clayton Riddell making his solitary way home to find his son. The isolation in *Misery* and *Gerald’s Game* (1992) is literal and overt: both involve people being held captive in remote locations. Trisha McFarland, the titular girl in *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999) is lost and alone in the remote woods of New England, is not a captive but still has to survive the elements and an attack by a bear. The novella *The Langoliers* (1990) deploys isolation and restoration of the everyday in a more literal sense, sending a commercial airliner through a time rift into a parallel dimension where the past is a physical construct that is consumed by the story’s strange Pac Man-like namesake entities. The escape back into the everyday is temporal in this case, a rejoining of the quotidian timeline the characters had previously inhabited.

Associational chains of mundane details of the type Mednick referred to can be, and in King’s work typically are, weaponized for narrative purposes. Therein lies his gift. I regard King’s explorations of “everyday evil” as a career-long musing on the nature of how evil plays out in society because I think that’s what authors do: muse on things instead of striving to put forward precise, scholarly definitions. By mining the details of daily life and assembling them in recognizable but unexpected ways, intentionally or not, King threatens us by reminding us how tenuous our grip on the familiar can sometimes be. This transient, nostalgia-like form of suffering is at least as much a feature of King’s work as more conventional tropes of horror and the supernatural, yet the (intended) effect is the same: it is deeply and uniquely cathartic.

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