

NIGHTMARES OF CHILDHOOD: THE CHILD AND THE MONSTER IN FOUR NOVELS BY STEPHEN KING

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A problematic, greatly underresearched aspect of 20th century fiction is the presence of the child in horror fiction for adults. Popular gothic novelists like Stephen King include plenty of sacrificial children in their novels, as is the case in his own *The Shining*, *Firestarter*, *It*, and *Pet Sematary*. King's use of the sacrificial child might be read as unfair exploitation of the suffering of victimised or monstrous children for commercial ends in entertaining fiction verging on the pornographic. Actually, as this paper argues, his portrait of the child is part of King's constant criticism of the American style of life, which is gradually excluding the imaginary from the relationship between parents and children. His fiction also reflects an evident anxiety about parenthood on the side of baby-boomers, especially white men like King himself. King's fiction is morally ambiguous about the father and child relationship because King may put his finger on the dark areas of the American lifestyle but lacks an answer as to how American society could protect its own children from the horrors adults inflict on them. Basically, his novels address morally autonomous readers capable of understanding the boundaries between exploitation and denunciation in contemporary horror. King's implicit moral message —be good to your children— is addressed to them.

Stephen King's novels *The Shining*, *Firestarter*, *It*, and *Pet Sematary* are remarkable examples of the late 20th century exploitation of the child in horror narratives for adults. King's books, David Skal notes, "brim with fantasies of sacrificial children" (1993: 362). Either as victims under the threat of horrific monsters —as in *The Shining* and *It*— or as innocent monsters created by irresponsible adults —as in *Firestarter*, *Pet Sematary*— sacrificial children occupy a prominent position in King's fiction. The presence of the child in King's novels must be understood in the context of his representation of the collapse of the American family. In King's novels, as Jesse W. Nash writes, this is "judged to be inadequate because it does not prepare its members to deal with the imaginary" (Nash 1997: 154), a failure for which the child pays the highest price.

Obviously, children can neither resist misrepresentation nor articulate an anti-paedophobic discourse. This defencelessness makes the use of children in adult horror fiction specially problematic. Writers like King no doubt use the child to

portray the faults of the adults, but in the process they offer adult readers disturbing images of victimised and victimising children. King maintains in this sense an ambiguous position regarding the relationships between children and adults. Despite his apparently siding with the unprotected children, King's child characters are often exposed to a high degree of abuse that may not be wholly justified by his criticism of the American family. Happy and unhappy endings send King's children in troubled directions that can only result in badly adjusted adulthood, for the children of his fiction *must be* inevitably traumatised by the horrific experiences that King builds around them. King, however, has no answer at all as to how they may overcome these horrors. In *It*, which deals with a group of adults badly traumatised as children by a monstrous presence, only a too convenient amnesia allows them to survive. Their attempt to rebuild the forgotten links between their childhood and adulthood only results in renewed trauma leading to renewed oblivion of the horrific past.

King's sacrificial children are heirs to Henry James's Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Sabine Büssing dates the entrance of children in horror back to the unprotected minor of Gothic fiction, used as the focus of disputes involving "the confrontation of self-entitled creators with their self-conscious creatures" (1987: 138). This is later echoed by the perversion of the father-child bond in the Romantic *Frankenstein*, where the monstrous son awakens to a self-consciousness that finally brings the irresponsible father-creator down with him. Without being openly horror fiction, the work of Charles Dickens also often places the child in quite horrific situations, though, despite exceptions such as *Hard Times*, Dickens lays the stress on orphanhood rather than on parenthood. The dangers the innocent Oliver Twist faces in Fagin's hands and the constant abuse Pip receives from his sister in *Great Expectations* are just some among many instances of the horrors of childhood according to Dickens.

As Bram Dijkstra has argued (1986), Victorian artists and writers gratified the obscure desires of patriarchal Victorian men by representing children as idealised yet secretly eroticised innocents, a fault of which Dickens might also be guilty in, for instance, the infamous scene of the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Men celebrated in their fantasies of childhood innocence and childish womanhood their own power to treat children and women as subordinate, dependent beings. Dickens used children to denounce the abuses committed by adults, but Henry James's children questioned the Victorian myth of the innocent, pliant child. He ambiguously suggested that children might be a corrupt something else but failed to clarify the exact role of the child in the corruption of innocence by adults. The children of 20th century horror follow this line. James's intuition of infantile corruption was somehow backed by Freud's theories on children's sexuality, which definitively denied the Victorian myth of innocent childhood. The discovery of the child's sexual life—a secret kept away from the controlling gaze of authoritarian parents—horrified many adults, especially for what it said about their own digressions from normative sexuality. It is still today a main source of unease in horror fiction.

The current trend defining the relationship between child and monster in adult horror fiction begins in the late 1960s, when baby-boomers became parents. Its main texts are American, as the fears of the baby-boom generation regarding parenthood seem to be much stronger in the arguably more childish American society. King's own first novel *Carrie*, portraying the disastrous relationship between a bigoted, fanatical mother and her tormented, freakish daughter, appeared in 1973. It had been preceded by works as popular as Ira Levin's satanic *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and Tom Tryon's atmospheric *The Other* (1971). The precedent set by John Wyndham's eerie, extraterrestrial children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), a British novel, should not be neglected, either.

As Marina Warner observes, the affinity of children "with monsters has grown with the stresses modern childhood puts on parents" (1998: 14). Just as children were infantilised in the past to signify the patriarch's total control of family life, they are now demonised to express the parents' failure to control them. Part of the anxiety to control the child's body is clearly tinged by more secret, shameful sexual drives on the part of the adults. Discussing 1970s film hits like *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Omen* (1976), S.S. Prawer hinted even at a possible link between the cruelty directed against children in those films and the use of children in pornography (1980: 71). The pornography of contemporary horror fiction focused on the child would thus complement rather than reverse the Victorian exploitation of the eroticism of innocence. It is also the clearest symptom of the adults' abusive behaviour and unfairness towards the child, as the deviant sexuality considered through the figure of the child in horror fiction has nothing to do with the world of childhood: it is part of the adults' secret desire for and hatred of the child.

King's examination of abusive parenthood shifted to the father rather than the mother in *The Shining*, a development followed by most contemporary fiction. In recent decades American fathers have come under the pressures of feminism, political correctness and the massive recovery of supposed memories of sexual abuse during childhood by both adult men and women. David Skal suggests that these "pervasive fantasies of intergenerational abuse" have "more to do with the baby boomers' shifted resentment of their own children—not to mention their own parents" (1993: 362) than with reality; they accuse out of fear of being themselves accused. This may be correct, but it must be agreed that the father is the specific target of attack of this strong wave of resentment, which has placed men in a rather uncomfortable position regarding parenthood.

King focuses mainly on the anxieties of male American baby-boomers who are coping badly with the discredit of fatherhood. Representing themselves as victims of misguided rearing practices and of secret sexual and psychological abuse, men often condone their shortcomings as fathers in all kinds of fiction. In King's novels external agencies—from alcoholism to supernatural possession, passing through experimental drugs and evil patriarchal men—are invoked not so much to excuse the father's behaviour as to explain the dark roots of his victimisation. His men may not be fully responsible for their acts, yet King should not be taken for a simple-minded patriarch justifying men's faults. His work is symptomatic of a complex

social and cultural situation in which men, as David Savran has argued (1998), are split between a masochistic need to assume their guilt and take punishment and a sadistic need to deny guilt and recover their lost privileges. Men like King are looking into the darkest aspects of masculinity and considering how the destruction of the current model of failed fatherhood may bring hope for the child and the future. The problem is that they do so in fiction which, seeking to denounce abuse, must represent it as vividly as possible. This is popular fiction which is, in addition, highly suspect of concerning itself with nothing else but its own commercial impact. Hence the ambiguity of the moral message of regeneration for the American family preached by male writers like King.

The Shining (1977) narrates a family man's failure to control his dark side. Jack Torrance lives engrossed in his frustrations as his alcoholism and violent temper gradually destroy his teaching career and his family. King initially insists on Jack's responsibility for the impending collapse of his family life, but *The Shining* finally becomes an ambivalent vindication of the father as victim. Torrance becomes an alcoholic at high school under the stress of his inability to cope with the effects of the abuse inflicted by his father on his mother, his siblings and himself. His case responds to Alice Miller's diagnosis of the abuser as a person who cannot process his feelings of rage in childhood (1991: 65). Nonetheless, for King, Jack's weaknesses are a shortcut into his soul used by the evil entity that possesses him, rather than the main reason for his fall and death. This entity lives in the Overlook Hotel, where Jack is employed as winter caretaker. Snowbound for months, the Torrances —Jack, Wendy and their five-year-old son Danny— must face Jack's possession as Danny realises that he is the real target of destructive, supernatural evil.

Fredric Jameson argues that what possesses Jack is not evil but "the American past as it has left its sedimented traces in the corridors and dismembered suites" of the Overlook (1990: 90). This possession is a subversion of democratic, liberal values signified by the "nostalgia for hierarchy and domination" (Jameson 1990: 96). The pull of this nostalgia plunges Jack back into the role of the patriarchal father, which Danny resists through the 'shining', his ability to see both into the past and the future. The hotel, a luxury resort where the rich and powerful used to meet, tells the possessed Jack that he also deserves a place in the sun. Impersonating the authoritarian voice of Jack's own father, the Overlook convinces Jack that only killing Wendy and Danny will liberate him. The message, however, might as well come straight from Jack's own subconscious, for he sees his responsibility as husband and father as a burden that will not let him fulfil his literary aspirations. Wendy thinks that writing means for Jack "slowly closing a huge door on a roomful of monsters" (1977: 116), but writing actually alienates father and son. The first episode of abuse happens when Jack breaks Danny's arm after the boy —then three— spoils the manuscript of Jack's first play. King clearly criticises Jack's monstrous selfishness (perhaps his own as a writer) and his assumption that public success as a literary writer should make up for Jack's deficiencies in his private life.

In the final confrontation, Danny forgives Jack's sins and transfers his blame onto the hotel, thus saving Jack's soul from Hell. "You're it, not my daddy", Danny shouts at the monstrous entity controlling his father's body, "and when you get what you want, you won't give my daddy anything because you're selfish. And my daddy knows that" (1977: 398). Danny's courageous resistance against the monster lets Jack, the loving father, resurface for a last good-bye, which presumably signifies Jack's redemption: "suddenly his daddy was there, looking at him in mortal agony, and a sorrow so great that Danny's heart flamed within his chest" (1977: 399). Once Jack is dead and the hotel destroyed, Wendy and Danny flee to sunny Florida with the Overlook's cook Halloran, the African-american man who discovers Danny's shining. King trusts Danny's mental stability to the healing powers of time and to Halloran's gentle pseudo-parenting. The enormity of the experience should inevitably have destroyed this special little boy, but his shining seemingly signifies his ability to survive unscathed to become a well-adjusted man and father. Something an ordinary child might not accomplish, if Danny ever does.

King's main strategy here is the dissociation of the loving father from his main 'complaints': his bad temper (a mixture of the genetic inheritance from his father and the anger bottled up during his childhood), his alcoholism and, finally, his supernatural possession. The father is a child that becomes an abusive, monstrous adult because he did not receive enough love from his father. Danny's ordeal is thus blamed on his grandfather, for whose behaviour there is no excuse, except, perhaps, that it was conditioned by the patriarchal society in which he grew up, a moral abstraction in itself. This reflects the generalised difficulties of American society to cope with the idea of guilt, especially as regards hegemonic groups such as white men.

Steven Bruhm implies that this historical, socio-psychological reading conceals in fact a less time-bound, guilt-ridden Freudian factor: the problematic role of men's homophobia in fatherhood. "By placing Danny and Jack in the arena of historically entrenched male homosocial relations, King documents the anxiety over this forced male proximity, an anxiety that gradually yields psychic dissolution and collapse" (2000: 270). What causes the collapse of the father is the surfacing of his anxiety regarding his subconscious sexual desire for his own male child; since the boy is out of bounds because of particular social constraints placed on the father, hatred of his unattainable body ensues, which leads to the violence against him. Bruhm may be right, but his thesis —that the relationships between men are distorted by their difficulties to acknowledge basic homoerotic impulses— is used to criticise King rather to explain the context from which his fiction arises, Bruhm hints that the 'sickness' of the text arises from Jack's inability to acknowledge his desire for Danny, and implies that the father's awareness of those impulses would lead him to better control them and save Danny from his rage. He also hints that King is not far enough from his own character's rage. Bruhm proposes reaching a stage of liberalism which is radically utopian, in which men are in touch with *all* their feelings. This may certainly protect children from much irrational violence, but it is by no means apparent how adult men would actually behave were they fully aware

of the sexual factors involved in fatherhood. At the current stage in American society, Bruhm's utopian future of well-adjusted adult men seems certainly remote.

It focuses on the idea that only by repressing the memory of the horrors of childhood may the child grow into a healthy adult. This reverses the idea that remembering abuse is the only way to heal one's deepest disturbances. In *It* children understand the monsters that threaten them because of their familiarity with the monsters of their private fears, which they must eventually forgo and forget as adults. Nothing, King hints, can protect children from fear, adults least of all. Being dependent on its parents, the child, King writes, "realises his or her essential lack of control" (1993: 124), which is the main source of their fears. In *It* seven children from small town Derry face the monster 'It' (a Lovecraftian, shape-shifting extraterrestrial) twice: once in childhood, once again as adults. The intervening years are spent in more or less blissful oblivion of the traumatic encounter. Back in Derry, they must learn again to believe not only in the monster but also in their power to defeat it for good.

'It' is a shape-shifter that takes the form the beholder fears most. Ben, Mike, Stan, George, Eddie, Richie and Beverley are drawn together because they have seen 'It', each in a form particularly suited to family circumstances, early childhood traumas or the imaginary horrors enjoyed in fiction. Four of these children are already enduring the attacks of another kind of monster: Ben, Eddie and Mike are being mercilessly persecuted by the school bully, Henry, himself a badly abused child; Eddie is also the victim of an overprotective mother and Beverley of her father's sexual abuse. Their final destruction of 'It' as adults is, then, the culmination of psychological therapy for all. This is similar to the therapy undergone by victims of child abuse: unearthing the memories of the confrontation with the monster in childhood means unearthing the memories of abuse that have conditioned their lives. The fantastic monster gives the children's grown-up selves a new sense of direction in their difficult lives and is also the excuse for a return to a time when intimate, personal problems could be discussed and solved in common. This is why, once they have solved their traumas, they may leave Derry and forget the monster for ever. Presumably, other isolated children will face other horrors in Derry.

The androgynously named Charlie is the female protagonist of King's *Firestarter* (1980). This budding goddess of destruction is an evil innocent, a child that, as Sabine Büssing writes, "abuses its superhuman abilities because it does not yet comprehend the consequences of its acts" (1987: 106). Charlie's pyrokinetic powers—she may light fires simply by thinking—is a mutation, the side effect of an experiment with drugs supposed to develop paranormal abilities. Charlie's parents, college students Andie and Victoria, were once guinea pigs used by a sinister government agency, The Shop, to test a new wonder drug. Charlie cannot blame her parents for her monstrous nature: they are victims of the joint abuse of the Government and technoscience over innocent American baby-boomers. As the head representative of the untrustworthy Government behind The Shop, Captain Hollister assumes the role of patriarchal abuser. In Hollister's vision, Charlie's powers are the ultimate weapon to secure America's world supremacy.

On the run after Victoria's murder, father and daughter establish a very close relationship of mutual trust and protection. This is a father who is literally justified in fearing his own child. Afraid of Charlie's powers, which he thinks will reach a new peak with the onset of menstruation, Andie teaches her self-control. The relationship, however, is broken when Hollister succeeds in imprisoning father and daughter separately. She is then entrusted to the care of a dangerous father figure, Native American John Rainbird. Rainbird, quite a fairy-tale ogre, is the reverse of the normative white American masculinity (and fatherhood) represented by Andie. This villain is used by King as a scapegoat the reader may safely hate, provided the reader accepts the King's politically incorrect use of a Native American as villain. Rainbird is strangely obsessed by Charlie to the point of blackmailing Hollister into giving him free access to the child. Rainbird explains that he wants to know Charlie "intimately". He calls this expected intimacy "something pre-erotic, almost mystic" (1980: 338), though the doubt remains as to his actual intentions. Rainbird, in any case, does intend to kill Charlie, but is temporarily won over by the divine power of destruction he senses in her.

The bond between Rainbird and Charlie, which practically replaces that with her real father, is based on Rainbird's idea that both are freaks: she because of her powers, he because of his badly scarred face. Rainbird, however, miscalculates the power of female rage and is destroyed by Charlie together with The Shop when the dying Andie tells his daughter that Rainbird orchestrated her capture. Charlie's unleashing of her power following Andie's death shows that she has finally matured into a peculiarly strong heroine. Her revenge is presented as a fair act by which the patriarchal Frankensteins who made her receive their due, but she herself remains innocent despite the havoc she causes. Instead of oblivion, Charlie chooses publicity, deciding to let *Rolling Stone* carry her story. Left to the reader's imagination is the matter of whether she will become the mother of a whole new race of mutant, pyrokinetic children.

The breaking of the taboo that also dooms Victor Frankenstein (no man can give life except to monsters made of broken dead bodies) results in the monstrous child Gage of *Pet Sematary*. This novel narrates how a bereaved father, Louis, gives new life to his two-year-old boy, killed in a road accident, by burying him in a magic Indian burial ground. Gage's death is for Louis a sign of his failure as a father to protect his child from harm. But the reborn Gage, a foul-mouthed, murderous parody of a child, is a demon that, as happens in *Frankenstein*, seeks revenge for his new condition by killing what his father loves most—here, his own mother Rachel. For this crime Louis condemns the child to a second, definitive death in a gruesome killing, this time at his own hands. This horrific experience does not prevent Louis, though, from transgressing the taboo once more to reanimate Rachel's dead body.

Louis's insane behaviour springs from an underlying tension in his relationship with his wife and children. He is no patriarch, as his loving care for his family shows. But King's constant references to Louis's patience with the children's whims and Rachel's depressive bouts suggest that the life of this sensible, sensitive man might be easier if only the children and Rachel were less difficult to handle or he

less caring. Louis's deeply felt grief throws him off balance because he is already too stressed by the daily difficulties of family life. The reader feels thus compelled to sympathise with Louis in his bereavement and to forgive him for the horrific manipulation of Gage's and Rachel's bodies. Paradoxically, not the father but his grief springing out of love is the real monster here.

The Shining, *It*, *Firestarter* and *Pet Sematary* present, thus, different aspects of the relationship between children and monstrosity in adult fiction. What emerges from them is a common portrait of childhood as a time of isolation spent facing the horrors created by adults, while fatherhood is portrayed as the task of facing the monsters arising from faulty parenting. Jesse W. Nash has argued that the fundamental inconsistency in King's fiction is that the children who complain that they are misunderstood by adults in his novels are revealed to be ultimately "akin to monsters in their own right, giving awkward credence to what adults have feared all along, that their children are monsters, that they might want to eat their parents, as they do both in *Salem's Lot* and *Pet Sematary*" (1997: 155). According to Nash, in the horror novels of American authors such as King, Dean Koontz, Anne Rice and others the wish to discuss subjects as serious as the American family, child abuse, crime, and gender "are addressed in such mythologically-exaggerated worlds that those worlds become the problem to be overcome, and not the issues that first inspired them" (1997: 158). The presence of the supernatural framework—and possibly the sheer excitement of the suspense-driven plot—precludes finding a solution for the issues raised in the realistic background of the text, hence the failure of the novels as texts addressing particular ethical problems ingrained in the behaviour of Americans.

This is by no means the first time Gothic or horror fiction has been considered a failure. Discussing the original 18th century Gothic, Elizabeth Napier noted that "the genre, indeed, repeatedly fails to engage ... deeper issues, and its failure involves a complex inability to confront both moral and aesthetic responsibilities: its often feverish search after sensation is puzzlingly joined with a deliberate retreat from meaning" (1987: 39). In Nash's view, King and his colleagues are guilty of the same crimes. Whether out of sheer self-consciousness of their limitations as writers, plain simple-mindedness, or commercial interests, horror fiction authors will not go beyond the exposition of a particular real-life issue and its linking to apparently unrelated if not downright amoral fantasies. Novels like King's may be a remarkable index of the anxieties besetting America—especially American men—but cannot articulate a moral message to overcome them. This is why despite their high value as entertainment—a problematic value granted by the arguably pornographic use of violence against the child—they are quite irresponsible, even irrelevant as regards the discussion of children's defencelessness in modern American society.

In King's defence, and in defence of all the other horror (or Gothic) writers working today in America, it must be said that his faulty fantasies lay the finger on sore points of American society that more aesthetically and morally conscious literature tends to neglect. His novels are a symptom of a situation that needs redressing, but King's function as a writer does not include healing American

society's deep wounds. Possibly, no writer at all assumes this Dickensian role today. The function popular American Gothic fulfils today is that of pointing at the dark areas of contemporary American society, among which the troubled relationship between children and adults stands out.

The presence of apparently superfluous supernatural elements is quite possibly a sign of the writer's inability —perhaps rather unwillingness— to address these issues from a clear-cut moral standpoint. It may be also a sign of his readers' own inability or unwillingness to cope with the horrors of plain reality, which they are prepared to approach only through fiction which offers, above all, entertainment. King, however, clearly expresses through the irrationality of the adults' behaviour and the pornography of violence against the child in his commercial novels a quite evident anxiety: because of their awareness of the pitfalls of parenthood, 20th century adults are much more anxious about succeeding as parents, hence, paradoxically, more liable to fail.

King has chosen to point out one of the conscious or subconscious horrors that appal him most and to couch it in horrific scenarios. He may not be capable of offering solutions to the problem of why adults ill-treat children, but, unless they are sadistic monsters, his adult readers are bound to feel pity for the child abused and manipulated by monstrous adults. Hopefully, these readers will be discriminating enough to leave aside the presence of the supernatural and apply King's unpretentious message to their everyday lives (be good to your children: that will make you and them better persons) and to check themselves for any sign of monstrous behaviour towards children. The message may be fuzzy, King's control over the dark drives in his best-selling horror tales may be questionable; but the suffering of his sacrificial children points at adults as the main source of horror in the child's life, within and outside his fiction. And this is, in itself, a significant moral message.

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