Reading the Monstrous Female in Stephen King

Korinna Csetényi

With the possible exception of pornography, there is no other genre so closely bound up with corporeality and the sensations of the body as that of horror literature and films. In fact, according to Gary K. Wolfe, horror is "the only genre named for its effect on the reader."[1] Its readers/viewers are continuously assaulted by images foregrounding the fragile, perishable nature of our bodies: we are forcefully reminded of our biological nature, which we tend to ignore in the present information age with its emphasis on cyber-reality.

Many critics have commented upon our ambiguous attitude to horror, with its curious double bind combining attraction and repulsion at the same time. Particularly strong emotional responses are provoked: terror, horror and revulsion. These narratives have been variously interpreted as relief valves which help us get rid of uncivilized, antisocial feelings, or as works through which we can vicariously experience pleasures denied to us in normal life. In the horror modality we confront taboo subjects and experience a certain kind of catharsis, purging our souls of unhealthy urges. As Stephen King commented in *Danse Macabre,* his nonfiction overview of the horror genre, we sometimes need to raise the trapdoor of the civilized forebrain and feed the alligators swimming down in the subconscious to prevent them from getting out.[2]

The terrifying images within horror narratives engender a sense of dread, but at the same time, they kick-start mechanisms which reassure us of our vitality: adrenalin surges, heart palpitations, screaming and panic reactions. Through our identification with horror movie characters, for example, we can almost experience their sensations as they flee for their lives. In fact, Noël Carroll remarks that film characters serve as role models for the audience, who tend to "copy" their reactions in their "*bodily response to fear*."[3] This experience is like a "rehearsal for death"[4]; we get a taste of how it feels to be in mortal danger, but from a safe distance.

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[1] Gary K. Wolfe and Amelia Beamer, "Peter Straub and Transcendental Horror," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18, no. 2 (2007): 217, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24350987.

[2] Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley Books, 1981), 177.

[3] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 221.

[4] King, *Danse Macabre,* 409.

Contrary to popular belief, King claims that horror stories "do not love death, [...] they love life. They do not celebrate deformity but by dwelling on deformity, they sing of health and energy. They are the [...] leeches of the psyche, drawing not bad blood but anxiety."[5] By crossing taboo lines, we reach a better understanding of their function in the real world and of why they need to be respected: "the horror story [...] is really [...] conservative [...] its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands."[6] In fact, most horror fiction has a conservative streak and ends with a definite narrative closure; after the subversion of the status quo, order is restored, the monster is vanquished and normality prevails. It closes on a note of affirmation, with traditional values reestablished.

Of course, not all horror fiction ends in a reassuring manner. Linda Holland-Toll designates those texts not following the above-mentioned narrative pattern as "disaffirmative horror fiction."[7] In this case, a lingering sense of unease, an ongoing anxiety haunts the reader because there is an open ending and resolution is resisted.[8] Evil is still at large, and the peaceful condition is, at best, precarious, or, at worst, is not restored at all, and chaos and dissolution reign at the end of the story.

The best exemplars of the genre have a diagnostic function because, under the guise of fictional horrors, they metaphorically discuss everyday horrors, often exposing problem areas and contradictions in the social, familial or political fabric of our lives (e.g., the exclusionary tactics involved in community construction or the flaws of traditional institutions, such as the school system or the government).

The horror genre is notorious for its continued dedication to exploring "the various things that can happen to a human body"[9] and its emphasizing of our bodily dimension. We are repeatedly shocked by images of bodies invaded, possessed, torn asunder, stabbed, dismembered, slashed, and mutilated. Consequently, horror films are often accused of desensitizing the viewers to the "realities of suffering."[10] However, the pain and suffering witnessed on the screen might actually draw the audiences closer to the char-

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5 Ibid., 198.

6 Ibid., 395.

7 Linda Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001), 10.

8 Terry Heller, *The Delights of Terror: An Aesthetics of the Tale of Terror* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 195.

9 Aviva Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 16, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2005.58.3.16.

10 Ibid., 16.

acters; paradoxically, not just to the victims, but to the monsters as well. The physical or psychological tortures, abuse and persecution endured by some of them (prior to their killing rampages) might trigger sympathy in readers/viewers alike (suffice it to think of Frankenstein's creature or ambiguous contemporary monsters, such as King's Carrie or Thomas Harris's charismatic cannibal, Dr. Lecter, whose murderous predilection can be traced back to a childhood trauma).

In the following, I examine two texts by Stephen King, *Carrie* and *Misery,* where the body, its functions, sensations and fluids receive major emphasis, and where a female character is assigned the role of the monster. While the first is a typical King formula (colloquial prose, small town setting and the intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday) with an ambiguous monster/heroine who invites both dread and sympathy, the second is devoid of supernaturalism. It is a mainstream novel detailing the captivity of a writer at the hands of a crazed female (basically inverting the situation of John Fowles' *The Collector* [1963]), a claustrophobic drama enfolding in front of our eyes, slowly heading for its gruesome ending.

However, before turning to the novels themselves, I would like to briefly touch upon the frequency with which the monster is depicted as female within the horror genre. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) challenges the dominant view that women are, first and foremost, portrayed as victims in such narratives, and examines the various manifestations of women through their terrifying aspects. Indeed, she also questions the widely accepted Freudian notion that woman engenders fear because she is castrated, claiming instead that woman is primarily feared because of her castrating potential[11] (King's *Misery* corroborates this assertion). Creed's new approach attributes an active role to women, who are clearly seen as agents and not merely as sufferers of actions. In the Freudian scenario, they remain firmly within the passive victim category since they appear to have been subjected to castration: this leads to the male child's fear that he might have to endure the same punishment (with the threat coming from the father). Female genitals thus inspire terror merely by their appearance, suggesting former castration.[12] Creed further states that it is the reproductive potential of the female body which produces anxiety (especially in males), since pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation all point to the indissoluble link existing between women and the animal world, and emphasize womankind's debt to nature.[13] Menstrua-

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[11] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 7.

[12] Ibid., 109.

[13] Ibid., 7.

tion is considered a very potent image of horror because the sight of this blood calls to mind the terrifying image of the vagina dentata. The culturally widespread myths and legends of the toothed vagina reflect male anxieties and fears of being eaten and castrated by female genitals.[14]

The list of female monsters featured in horror narratives that Creed offers include the vampire, the witch (King's Carrie falls within this category), the castrating mother (Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* [1959]), the beautiful but lethal killer (Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* [1992]), woman as possessed body (Regan in *The Exorcist* [1971]), and woman as *femme castratrice* (the literal castrators of rape-revenge films and the symbolic ones of slasher films, the self-reliant Final Girls who finish off the killer).[15] In the construction of female monstrosity, gender is of the utmost importance: being a woman is inseparable from being a monster.

King's first book, *Carrie* (1974), is the story of a socially awkward, sixteen-year-old girl, whose latent telekinetic powers bloom upon her reaching biological maturity. Her life has been plagued by the crazed religious fanaticism of her mother, and the scorn and hatred of peer groups that make a sport of humiliating her. Her desperate attempts to find her place in the social hierarchy (as represented by her high school) are doomed, since society needs outsiders in order to be able to construct its own sense of identity in relation to them. According to Creed, the novel charts a child's struggles to break away from her mother, to become a separate subject.[16] If Carrie remains trapped in a dyadic relationship with her dominating parent, she is threatened with a loss of identity since her subjectivity would be incorporated by the all-devouring mother (another archetype of the monstrous-feminine).

In the opening scene of the novel, Carrie has her first period, while in the girls' shower, at school. Since her mother has kept her in the dark about menstruation (she considers it a sin, a sign of female desire), Carrie is frightened out of her mind, thinking she is bleeding to death. Her classmates react in a nasty way, bombarding her with tampons, showing no sympathy. This communal attack on Carrie seems to be fuelled by resentment, anger, and disgust. Carrie is guilty of bleeding in public: something which should stay hidden inside the body has come to the surface. Mythologist Joseph Campbell points out that menstruation is considered a taboo subject in most societies, and girls having

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[14] Ibid., 106. King confessed in an interview that his greatest sexual fear is that of the vagina dentata (Bob Spitz, "Penthouse Interview: Stephen King," in Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, eds., *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King* [London: New English Library, 1990], 256).

[15] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine,* 1.

[16] Ibid., 78.

their first period in primitive tribes are often physically separated from the rest of the community to emphasize "the privacy of the act."[17] In a sense, the girls who witnessed Carrie's rite of passage are forcibly reminded of their own carnal nature and their body's vulnerabilities. The girls have been conditioned by society, which has taught them to feel "revulsion" and "disgust"[18] at the "sight of their female natures."[19] They are encouraged to keep their bodies under control at all times, and to hide from the world the unattractive aspects of femininity.

In point of fact, their attitude reflects Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, which claims that images of bodily wastes, such as blood, vomit, pus or urine, always fill the subject with disgust and loathing.[20] These are the products of our bodies which "undermine our identity by their presence as both not-us and us."[21] By demonstrating the fragility of the stable ego, they conjure up the threat of the ego's collapse. Menstrual fluid is seen as a form of defilement, making us recoil. Such "signs of bodily excretions" should be "cleaned up and removed from sight"[22] because their abject status disturbs identity and order. The construction of the clean and proper body is of the utmost importance because it is a means of separating out "the fully constituted subject from the partially formed one."[23]

In an article on the importance of pain and masochism in the portrayal of cinematographic monsters, Aviva Briefel points out that, in adapting King's *Carrie* to the silver screen, director Brian De Palma intentionally structured the opening scene to parallel perhaps the most famous horror sequence of all times, the shower scene from *Psycho* (1960).[24] Even the school Carrie attends is called Bates High School (in the film version), undoubtedly as an homage to the genre's masterpiece.

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[17] Quoted by Alex E. Alexander, "Stephen King's *Carrie:* A Universal Fairytale," *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 2 (1979): 284.

[18] King, *Carrie* (Kent: BCA, 1993), 12.

[19] Douglas Keesey, "Patriarchal Meditations of *Carrie:* The Book, the Movie, and the Musical," in Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson, eds., *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 32.

[20] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 102.

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

[22] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine,* 38.

[23] Ibid., 8.

[24] The filmic allusion is remarked upon by several critics (eg. Keesey, "Patriarchal Meditations of *Carrie,*" 39; Mark Browning, *Stephen King on the Big Screen* [Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009], 34; Michael R. Collings, *The Films of Stephen King* [Washington: Starmont House, 1986], 31).

In both *Carrie* and *Psycho,* the shower is initially presented as a safe haven, a "refuge from external anxieties",[25] a private place where solace is available for the persecuted heroines. The body is treated as a fetish; it is shown in fragmentary shots, first focusing on the moment of pleasure and then that of pain. In De Palma's film (1976), the scene is charged with eroticism, and is accompanied by languorous, sensual music: the camera lingers on Carrie caressing her breasts and thighs, and on the expression of innocent joy on her face. Suddenly, the dreamy atmosphere is interrupted in a shocking manner with the appearance of blood. According to Briefel, the spectatorial position is rendered even more uncomfortable by the heavy intertextual link with *Psycho*: when blood starts to flow from between Carrie's legs, it seems to come from wounds inflicted on the body, rather than being the sign of biological maturity.[26]

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

The shower sequence turns to horror for both heroines: Marion in *Psycho* is brutally murdered, while Carrie has to suffer the psychologically devastating, heartless attack of her peers. One might even associate this scene with another landmark text and its grisly ending: the communal stoning of a female cowering in fear in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (King's concern with community construction and scapegoating mechanisms in *Carrie* reinforces this mental leap). Although not making the connection explicit, Douglas Keesey's remark that the girls in the shower "pelt her [Carrie] with tampons like stones"[27] also suggests stoning, and the loss of control that is characteristic of mob mentality.

In the book, Carrie's suffering continues when she is sent home from school: home, instead of being a place of refuge, brings only further pain, since her mother equates sexuality with sin. Margaret demonizes her daughter's body and is convinced Carrie could have willed away the "curse" if she had restrained from sinful acts or thoughts: "O Lord,

[25] Briefel, "Monster Pains," 22.

[26] Ibid., 22.

[27] Keesey, "Patriarchal Meditations of *Carrie*," 39.

[...] help this sinning woman beside me here see the sin of her days and ways. Show her that if she had remained sinless the Curse of Blood never would have come on her. She may have committed the Sin of Lustful Thoughts."[28] Margaret hinders Carrie's growth and maturation in every possible way and forcefully attempts to repress her budding sexuality. Instead of enlightening her daughter about this threshold event, she resorts to physical abuse and locks Carrie up in a closet, "the home of terror",[29] where the girl is ordered to get down on her knees and pray for forgiveness. The dark, crammed space (filled with frightening religious images) is like a symbolic womb and Carrie soon reverts to a childlike state inside it, crying, feeling helpless, subordinated to her mother's rule, not an agent of her own life.

This terrible day, however, also marks the beginning of a slow process of claiming more and more control over her life and distancing herself from her domineering mother. She consciously starts to devote attention to her body, testing its limits, carefully experimenting with her re-discovered telekinetic abilities, even doing weird "exercise sessions."[30] There had already been sporadic occurrences of her telekinetic powers during her childhood, but she fully repressed these memories: "but now there was no denying the memory, no more than there could be a denying of the monthly flow." [31]

Relying upon this "wellspring of power",[32] her attempts to break free from the confines of her home intensify. The turning point arrives when she is invited to the school's Spring Ball, a highly important ritual in the adolescent world. This event triggers a clash of wills between mother and daughter, during which Carrie refuses to back down. Probably for the first time in her life, she says "no" to her mother, meanwhile clearly expressing her will: "I only want to be let to live my own life. I ... I don't like yours."[33] She also warns Margaret that "things are going to change around here",[34] signaling that she will refuse to be trodden down in the future and that the previously unbalanced power relations will be tipped in her favor, from now on.

One of the girls who participated in the shower room cruelty, Chris Hargensen, decides to take revenge because, when she refuses to comply with the school punishments for what they did to Carrie, she is barred from attending the Prom. The ball is a pivotal

28 King, *Carrie,* 54.

29 Ibid., 53.

30 Ibid., 75.

31 Ibid., 87.

32 Ibid., 87

33 Ibid., 92.

34 Ibid.

event in the novel, since it provides the occasion for another classmate, Sue Snell, to make reparation for her participation in Carrie's humiliation by behaving unselfishly. As an act of atonement, Sue decides to "lend" her boyfriend, Tommy, the most popular boy in the school, to Carrie as her date for the night (this has a clear, fairy-tale-like ring to it, and many critics have pointed out the similarities between King's novel and Cinderella).[35] At the Prom, we are witness to Carrie's transformation from ugly duckling to a beautiful swan, and the long-desired acceptance from her peers seems to be realized. One of her classmates, upon meeting this new version of Carrie, admiringly exclaims: "You look so DIFFERENT. [...] You're positively GLOWING."[36] Later, she muses upon what has happened in the following way: "It was as if we were watching a person rejoin the human race."[37] However, only short-lived happiness is Carrie's lot, and her dream soon turns to nightmare.

Thanks to Chris's manipulation of the votes, Carrie is elected Prom Queen. At the very moment of her triumph, during her coronation, Chris dumps two buckets of pig blood on her, eerily replaying the shower scene: Carrie, once more drenched in blood, is horribly exposed in front of spectators who are watching her humiliation. Another parallel between the two blood-soaked scenes is the jarring juxtaposition of a pleasurable moment with one of horror: in the shower, Carrie was enjoying a moment of quiet intimacy and peace, relishing her body under the water, and her coronation ceremony similarly assumed a dream-like quality. In both cases, the sudden appearance of blood signals the destruction of the magic of the moment. Prom Night turns into utter horror when Carrie's repressed rage erupts with frightening force and with her telekinetic powers she sets the school on fire, killing almost everyone.

Destruction and death follow in her path as she wreaks havoc on a large part of the town, on her way home. Margaret, completely deranged by this time, awaits her daughter with a butcher's knife. She seriously wounds Carrie, but she still has time to stop her mother's heart with the power of her mind. The dying Carrie is subsequently found by Sue in a deserted parking lot. A telepathic connection is established between them, and Sue witnesses Carrie's death in a very intimate way. "Sue tried to pull away, to disengage her mind, to allow Carrie at least the privacy of her dying, and was unable to. She felt that she was dying herself and did not want to see this preview of her own eventual end."[38]

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35 Douglas E. Winter in *The Art of Darkness* ([London: New English Library, 1989], 34) and Linda Badley in *Writing Horror and the Body* ([Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996], 67).

36 King, *Carrie,* 134.

37 Ibid., 155.

38 Ibid., 211.

What Sue glimpses seems to suggest there is no Heaven, no light, no redemption for Carrie, only "the black tunnel of eternity."[39] Readers of the novel are disturbed by this dark dénouement since, having had direct access to Carrie's mind, they feel only sorry for her and cannot join in society's condemnation of her (condemnation which, ultimately, goes unchallenged).[40]

During the course of the novel, Carrie is variously referred to as "Typhoid Mary", "witch", "monster" or "devilspawn."[41] Her witch-like status, her ungovernability, her obvious otherness, all present a threat to the purity and stability of the community. According to Dani Cavallaro, societies strive to "classify and explain the abnormal so as to reassert by implication their notions of normality and stability",[42] and in the aftermath of the tragedy, Carrie's case is analyzed ad infinitum by the authorities. What the girls did (forcefully distancing themselves from Carrie and what she represented, in order to construe their identity in relation to the abhorred Other) is repeated, on a major scale, by society, which has subjected her to the same "strategies of exclusion"[43] employed during the Salem witch trials. Edward Ingebretsen claims those trials served as "a socialized rhythm by which a community defined the parameters of the acceptable by repudiating the unacceptable"[44] and describes witchcraft as being "functional rather than personal."[45] He also points out that the names of Martha Corey and Martha Carrier, both executed in Salem, resonate in Carrie's name.[46]

In her book on disaffirmative horror fiction, Linda Holland-Toll argues that a so-called "human monster", like Carrie, is the product of the community, which is responsible for forcing "monsterhood" upon her.[47] This process of demonization has ill-fated consequences. By Prom Night, society's demarcation lines are so entrenched that it is impossible for Carrie to cross them. Her attempts to conform, to be accepted by her peers, to

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[39] Ibid., 212.

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

[41] King, *Carrie,* 96, 88, 133, 88.

[42] Dani Cavallaro, *The Gothic Vision* (London: Continuum, 2002), 173.

[43] Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie,* 80.

[44] Edward J. Ingebretsen, "Cotton Mather and Stephen King: Writing/Righting the Body Politic," in Lant and Thompson, *Imagining the Worst,* 28.

[45] Edward J. Ingebretsen, *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 62.

[46] Ibid., 20.

[47] Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie,* 77.

become an integral part of the social fabric, result in tragedy. However, since her status is imposed upon her from the outside, readers also feel pity along with the horror. When she lashes out to punish the people who have made her life miserable, she succumbs to her assigned role and deliberately chooses to act as a monster.

Of particular interest in Carrie's construction as a monster is how firmly her monstrosity is grounded in her body. Her peers reject her partly because of her physical unattractiveness: being slightly overweight, having ugly skin, not wearing make-up or fashionable clothes, she is far removed from the embodiment of ideal femininity. Nevertheless, her body is also the source of her power and mystery: her telekinetic abilities (which can be seen as an explosion of her repressed rage) are related to bodily functions, since they reach their full potential as she reaches her full feminine potential, i.e., child-bearing age.

The other novel I would like to examine is *Misery,* a highly autobiographical work, reflecting King's views on authorship, creativity, and his connection with the reading public. At the same time, it also brings into focus "the destructive, potentially castrating nature of women",[48] with a monstrous female as its protagonist. It is the story of Paul Sheldon, world-famous author of a series of historical romances featuring the brave and beautiful heroine Misery Chastain. Although he enjoys financial prosperity due to the *Misery* books, Sheldon looks down on these works and hopes to gain the critics' admiration with what he considers his "serious fiction". When he embarks on a journey to celebrate the completion of his first "non-Misery" novel, *Fast Cars,* he is surprised by a snowstorm, and drives his car off the road. He is rescued by Annie Wilkes, a former nurse, who takes the seriously wounded man to her isolated farmhouse and nurses him back to health. The woman, who defines herself as his "number-one fan",[49] subjects Paul to various physical and psychological tortures and turns him into her pet writer, forcing him to write a novel just for her (in the process resurrecting Misery, who died in the last *Misery* book).[50]

> King gives a twist to the common Gothic plot of a villainous figure holding a fragile victim in captivity: in this case, the victim is male, and the victimizer, the updated Gothic villain, is a female serial killer. The weird connection between Annie and Paul can be interpreted in multiple ways: they may be seen as trapped within the context of a *victim-victimizer,* a *reader-writer,* or a *mother-child* relationship. However, a common

[48] Tony Magistrale, *Stephen King: The Second Decade, Danse Macabre to The Dark Half* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 126.

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

[50] Paul's predicament also echoes that of Scheherazade (albeit with a gender reversal) who similarly must tell tales because her life depends on it.

thread running through all these approaches is the attention given to the body and its sensations.

If we concentrate upon the *victim-victimizer* aspect of the novel, it should be pointed out that Paul is subject to constant monitoring. According to Jack Morgan, this is a clear "marker of victimization",[51] since Paul's personal space is frequently invaded, and he is stripped of any sense of privacy (he even has to relieve himself in Annie's presence). Along with the psychological terror, Paul also suffers on a physical level: Annie invades his body with IV tubes, needles, and pre-operation shots, disrupting the integrity of the skin, cutting him open. Skin is "a fragile container",[52] a delicate boundary separating the inside and the outside, and damage to it might shatter the image of the proper, clean self. The familiar body can be easily turned into an uncanny object if it is injured, and Paul gapes in horror at himself the first time he pulls back the blanket to confront the aftermath of the accident: "he stared with horror at what he had become below the knees."[53]

Annie, the victimizer, is an embodiment of the monstrous feminine, a castrating female, who symbolically emasculates the male hero. Utilizing phallic weapons (axe, knife), on two different occasions she carries out amputations to punish Paul, and although he loses "only" a foot and a thumb, dismembered limbs always evoke castration anxieties.[54] To make it even more clear, Annie explicitly threatens him with the dreaded act: "You're lucky I didn't cut off your man-gland. I thought of it, you know."[55] No wonder, then, that Paul lives in constant fear of literal castration: "He was suddenly, utterly sure that she meant to pull the knife from the wall and castrate him with it."[56]

To further underline Paul's position as victim, King repeatedly uses images of oral rape. *Misery* begins with Annie pulling Paul out of the wreckage of his car. At one point, his breathing stops and she has to resuscitate him. "Then there was a mouth clamped over his, [...] and the wind from this woman's mouth blew into his own mouth and down his throat [...] and [...] he smelled her on the outrush of the breath she had forced into him the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman."[57] Though Paul is dis-

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51 Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 84.

52 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 53.

53 King, *Misery,* 42.

54 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* trans. and ed., James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 244.

55 King, *Misery,* 296.

56 Ibid., 239.

57 Ibid., 5.

gusted by her breath, it proves to be the kiss of life: he later recalls "being raped back into life by the woman's stinking breath."[58] In a sense, Paul is forced into the position of a passive, female victim whose body is a playground for the enactment of her rapist's fantasies.

However, later on, this rape imagery returns with a vengeance, to constitute a curious framework to the novel. Paul and Annie's final battle starts with Paul pushing himself up from his wheelchair and tottering "*erect* on his right foot" while Annie is "writhing and moaning"[59] on the floor (she fell when Paul threw his typewriter at her). Natalie Schroeder calls our attention to the juxtaposition of the words "erect" and "moaning", which highlights the sexual undertones of the scene.[60] Then Paul falls on Annie, "lying squarely on top of her like a man who means to commit rape"[61] and he crams his manuscript down her throat, silencing her: "*I'm gonna rape you, all right, Annie. [...] So suck my book. Suck my book. Suck on it until you fucking CHOKE.*"[62] King challenges the "traditional" rape scene in the first chapter, but then he reverts to the conventional paradigm and lets the male hero (victim-turned-victimizer) subordinate the woman and commit his bizarre version of rape on her.

As Douglas Keesey has pointed it out, even though Paul is victimized for most of the time and occupies a feminine position confronting a woman characterized by her bulk, strength, solidity and her androgynous or downright masculine qualities ("She [...] seemed to have no feminine curves at all"[63]), in the end he still emerges triumphant, reasserting traditional male dominance and authority.[64]

To quote Montaigne, "Writing does not *cause* misery, it is born of misery",[65] and this statement proves to be a good starting point if we wish to focus on the *reader-writer* dimension. It illustrates that writing, traditionally considered a purely mental activity, is inseparable from bodily sensations. This is the lesson Paul learns from his horrible experi-

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[58] Ibid., 7. According to Kathleeen Margaret Lant, Annie giving Paul injections and making him swallow pills (often thrusting her fingers inside his mouth) also evoke the image of rape. Kathleen Margaret Lant, "The Rape of Constant Reader: Stephen King's Construction of the Female Reader and Violation of the Female Body in *Misery*," in Lant and Thompson, *Imagining the Worst*, 174.

[59] King, *Misery*, 346, emphasis added.

[60] Natalie Schroeder, "Stephen King's *Misery*: Freudian Sexual Symbolism and the Battle of the Sexes," *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 2 (1996): 145.

[61] King, *Misery*, 346.

[62] Ibid., 347.

[63] Ibid., 8.

[64] Douglas Keesey, "Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera: Masculinity, Masochism, and Stephen King's *Misery*," *American Imago* 59, no. 1 (2002): 55.

[65] King, *Misery*, 109.

ence: how to "create meaning out of personal suffering."[66] Annie, "who stimulates the fear of death",[67] also serves as a catalyst, enabling him to regain his will to live, even revitalizing his creative energies. As the embodiment of the voracious reading public, demanding the return of her favorite heroine, Annie turns out to be his Terrible Muse,[68] inspiring him to write his best novel so far.[69] Paul himself reflects upon the irony "the woman had coerced him into writing what was easily the best of the 'Misery' novels"[70]: "the story was turning out to be a good deal more gruesome [...] But it was also more richly plotted than any *Misery* novel since the first, and the characters were more lively."[71]

Annie, overstepping her role as a fan and a reader, even becomes a "Merciless Editor", who makes her dislikes known by chopping off various parts of Paul, in effect exercising "editorial authority over his body."[72] King seems to suggest with these brutal images that editors, who "mutilate" texts, cause almost physical pain to their authors, who consider the writings as parts of themselves.

So Annie's role, in a certain sense, is to shock Paul into realizing that to perform as a writer, to be able to give his best, he also needs to descend to the level of physicality and turn even pain and suffering to his advantage. As his agent remarks after the gruesome ordeal: "*writers remember* everything*, Paul. Especially the hurts. Strip a writer to the buff, point to the scars, and he'll tell you the story of each small one. From the big ones you get novels*."[73] This is exactly what happened to Paul: the trauma prompted him to write a better work, wherein he was able to channel the anguish he had suffered in a positive way.

A new Paul emerges after the ordeal, more mature, both as a writer and a human being: in fact, his reassertion of masculinity is counteracted by the strengthening of the feminine part of his personality. In the very last sentence, he is described as weeping, while commencing a new, post-trauma novel. During his captivity, he often broke down and cried, and he seems to have carried over this sensibility (a quality primarily associated

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[66] Magistrale, *Stephen King,* 131.

[67] Badley, *Writing Horror and the Body,* 60.

[68] Tabitha King claims Annie is "a metaphor for the creative drive itself" (Michael R. Collings, "A Chronological Look at the Books," in George Beahm, ed., *The Stephen King Companion* [Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995], 269).

[69] Lant reminds us that in the opening "rape" scene Annie literally inspired Paul, filling his lungs with air during the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation she performed (Lant, "The Rape of Constant Reader," 171).

[70] King, *Misery,* 221.

[71] Ibid., 182.

[72] Ibid., 116, 312.

[73] Ibid., 258.

with females), into his new life. Owing to this re-connection with the feminine dimension, he is even capable of feeling sympathy for his tormentor: having spent months under her roof, he finds himself "feeling a little sorry for Annie Wilkes", and he is even capable of seeing "the woman she might have been if her upbringing had been right or the drugs squirted out by all the funny little glands inside her had been less wrong."[74]

It is highly interesting to observe how Paul and Annie continue to exchange roles and overlap each other as the novel progresses (as was also the case with the *victim-victimizer* scenario). Though at first it seems that the division of the roles of *reader-writer* is very clean-cut, we soon learn that Annie herself is also an author: she keeps a scrapbook entitled "Memory Lane" filled with newspaper articles about her killing sprees. While working as a nurse at various hospitals, she had murdered several patients whose lives she judged pointless (because of their terminal illnesses, or birth defects). In a certain sense, her book is her art, the work of her life: in her psychosis, she probably thought she was liberating people from their suffering, acting like an Angel of Mercy. Much to his horror, Paul discovers that the last article in the scrapbook reports him missing. In a very real sense, he has become a part of Annie's book. He has every reason to fear for his life even if he complies with Annie's command to complete the new Misery novel, since all the people mentioned in the scrapbook ended up dead.

There exists a strange dynamic between Paul and Annie, pulling them ever closer, so close indeed that he thinks that "part of his imagination had [...] actually *become* Annie."[75] He is able to think like her and, in a sense, his survival depends upon his ability to predict her responses to certain actions (he correctly guesses, for example, that if he threatens her with withholding the last chapters of his new book, she will be so upset that she will act less cautiously, giving him a chance to attempt escape).

They are more similar than meets the eye, since both of them have developed addictions: Annie is hooked on Paul's novels in the same way as he is hooked on Novril, the powerful painkiller she administers. In an apt metaphor, King likens the craving for fiction to drug dependency and calls this "her fix", the *"gotta",*[76] as in 'I *gotta* find out what happens next': the feeling one gets when it is impossible to put down a book, when one feels compelled to go on, to read the next page or the next chapter. "*I had a certain passive hold over her. The power of* the gotta. *I turned out to be a pretty passable Scheherazade*

[74] Ibid., 329, 334. Once again, King's opinion mirrors the protagonist's feelings: "In the end, I felt that Annie was almost as much to be pitied as to be feared" (Stephen King, *On Writing* [New York: Scribner, 2000], 168).

[75] King, *Misery,* 206.

[76] Ibid., 266.

after all."[77] Paul is convinced that it is the "*gotta* which had kept them both alive – and it had, for without it she surely would have murdered both him and herself long since."[78] However, he also falls under the spell of the "gotta", and is almost as curious as Annie to see the ending of the new novel: "Still, he had decided to live. Some part of him [...] had decided he could not die until he saw how it all came out."[79]

As a conclusion to this *reader-writer* dimension, it is important to note that entire chapters of the new Misery novel are reproduced in the book. These are also signaled visually since a different font is used. Later, when Paul starts using a pencil instead of the typewriter, we are confronted with handwritten pages. According to Lauri Berkenkamp, with the two texts placed side by side, King succeeded in blurring the "boundaries between reality and fiction, life and art."[80] We are involuntarily drawn into Paul Sheldon's fictional world and are explicitly reminded of our role as reader by being placed in Annie's position: we are reading the same book, *Misery's Return,* as she. Thus, King establishes a link between his real readers and his fictional number-one-fan, adding a metafictional dimension to his text.

A further dichotomy the novel explores is the one existing between *mind* and *body*. Linda Badley considers the book an "allegory of writing out of bodily misery",[81] since it is mainly concerned with Paul's daily suffering, his agony and his slow emergence out of the haze of pain, re-acquiring his sense of self and the strength to survive. While Paul considers himself a being ruled by the mind, he is reminded throughout the narrative of being a creature of the body as well. Physical demands and needs (hunger, thirst, the craving for painkillers) are superimposed over everything else. In fact, as Clare Hanson points out in her article, "Stephen King: Power of Horror", Paul tried to banish misery from his life in the dual sense of killing off a tiresome heroine with the same name (whom he had come to see as symbolic of the prostitution of his art), but also in the concrete physical sense of banishing meaningless pain.[82] His definition of "misery" embraces both concepts: "As a common noun it meant pain, usually lengthy and often pointless; as a proper

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[77] Ibid., 271.

[78] Ibid., 267.

[79] Ibid., 262.

[80] Lauri Berkenkamp, "Reading, Writing and Interpreting: Stephen King's *Misery,*" in Tony Magistrale, ed., *The Dark Descent* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 210.

[81] Badley, *Writing Horror and the Body,* 60.

[82] Clare Hanson, "Stephen King: Powers of Horror," in Brian Docherty, ed., *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), 151.

one it meant a character and a plot, the latter most assuredly lengthy and pointless."[83] Annie, however, demands that Misery return, so Paul is forced to bring the character back to life. At the same time, Annie keeps in mind the primary meaning of "misery" and makes sure Paul's life abounds in prolonged pain.

Thus, in this dichotomy of *mind/body,* Paul is revealed to be a creature not exclusively of the mind (an important lesson for his development both as a writer and a man). When Annie hides him in the basement during a routine police check of the premises, he realizes that "in the dark he thought with his skin."[84] This sentence sums up neatly how the two dimensions, our thinking processes and our physicality, are inextricable. Ultimately, this will prove to be essential to Paul's ability to survive, to find a way out of captivity.

A further proof of this *mind/body* interconnectedness is how Paul uses the typewriter to help him recover both mentally and physically (it was given to him by Annie, to write the new novel). Escaping into a fictional world, disappearing through a "hole"[85] in the paper to leave behind Annie's warped world, is Paul's method of achieving mental freedom. It represents his creative force and the power of his words. However, he also uses the typewriter to gain back his physical strength: doing lifting exercises with the heavy machine, he reinforces his muscles in order to be able to fight his tormentor when the occasion arises.

As opposed to Paul, Annie's ties to the body are constant throughout the narrative. She is often described in terms of her physicality: she is "a big woman",[86] strong, solid, unattractive, and smelly. Suffering from manic depression, she is a victim of her illness, subordinated to terrible mood swings and erratic behavior patterns. This disease of the mind subjugates her body, controls her personality, and renders her life miserable.

Her former profession also accentuates her link with the physical dimension of existence: as a nurse, she had to attend to the physical needs of the patients under her care, so she is well aware of the implications of the vulnerability in which Paul finds himself. By withholding his medication, food, or water, she demonstrates her power over him. She literally holds the power of life or death in her hands, becoming in a way similar to Paul (another role reversal), who wields the same power over his fictional characters' lives via his role as a creator: *"a writer is God to the people in a story."*[87]

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83 King, *Misery,* 260.

84 Ibid., 307.

85 Ibid., 163.

86 Ibid., 8.

87 Ibid., 39.

Finally, I would like to examine how Annie and Paul's relationship parallels the *mother-child* bond. In a sense, the novel details Paul's development from a state of childlike dependency to autonomy and independence. A symbolic return to the womb, a place of safety and oneness with the mother, where all his needs are taken care of, might seem attractive at first. Paul is infantilized and regresses to "the stage of infant orality as he greedily sucks"[88] the painkillers from Annie's fingers: "She brought him two every six hours, first announcing her presence only as a pair of fingers poking into his mouth (and soon enough he learned to suck eagerly at those poking fingers in spite of the bitter taste)."[89] In parallel with his becoming totally dependent on her for medication, food and water, Annie adopts a parental role, as a caring, nurturing mother (spoon-feeding, bathing and changing Paul), calling him "a very stubborn little boy."[90] However, this all-encompassing mother figure also threatens his individuality and stunts his growth (as was the case with Carrie). It is no wonder that Paul compares himself to unfinished entities like a "tadpole" or a "blubbering ball of protoplasm",[91] which echo a "preoedipal, sexually undifferentiated stage."[92]

Paul needs to break away from this devouring mother, repeating the process of separation after having been reborn during the near-death experience of the car crash. To quote Clare Hanson, "Annie, like the mother, *must* exist in order for the self and the text to begin to be born, in the primary movement of abjection."[93] There are some evocative images in the novel which clearly suggest this birth process, beginning with his 'rebirth' in the opening pages, when Annie literally pulls him out of his car. Once, when Annie goes to town, Paul tries to leave his room, but his wheelchair gets stuck in the doorway. "In the end he was able to squeeze through – barely"[94] and the baby's passage through the birth canal is evoked in our minds. When he hears Annie returning, he breaks down and starts to cry in desperation and horror. The memory conjured up in his mind stems from his childhood, when having stolen a cigarette from his mother, he was surprised by her sudden return, "knowing he was caught, knowing he would be spanked."[95] This incident was a similar gesture of rebellion, a step on the road to independence.

88 Schroeder, "Stephen King's *Misery*," 139.

89 King, *Misery*, 9.

90 Ibid., 49. Paul repeatedly uses the word "maternal" to describe Annie's look or grin (ibid., 15, 21).

91 Ibid., 198, 353.

92 Keesey, "Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera," 66.

93 Hanson, "Stephen King: Powers of Horror," 150.

94 King, *Misery*, 90.

95 Ibid., 100.

In a perceptive comment tying together almost all these interpretative possibilities, Linda Badley notes that the book draws a trajectory from total disempowerment and victimization to a sense of empowerment and manly individuation, entailing a recovery of the feminine, essential to a writer's life.[96] She further adds that "*Misery* is also [...] about writing and the body: the experience of the body, "feminizing" embodiment, and the body as text."[97]

According to Jack Morgan, a primary aim of literary horror is to put its readers in touch with a "sense of their own physicalness."[98] In the case of the King novels that have been analyzed, this "lesson" extends also to the protagonists: both Carrie and Paul become more attuned to their body's sensations, developing a more intimate bond with their "fleshly reality."[99] Carrie's body is the source of her supernatural power, yet it also causes her anguish: her victimized position (in relation to her peers) is partly due to her physical unattractiveness and clumsiness. Paul, on the other hand, needs to reintegrate the bodily dimension into his life and his writing. While his broken body puts him in an extremely vulnerable position, the overriding physical imperative to evade pain also prompts him to new heights of creativity, both in his new novel and in his hatching an escape plan.

The bodily focus of horror reminds us, again and again, that we are creatures of flesh and blood, and that pain is an intrinsic part of human existence. The genre dramatizes our "mortal vulnerability, centralizing it for our feeling and contemplation." While watching a horror movie, or reading a horror story, we "confront in ritualized form our physical precariousness."[100]

To defend the curious taste and seemingly unhealthy attraction of horror aficionados to representations of our fragility, I would like to conclude with a quote from horror grand master Clive Barker, who suggests "valuing our appetite for the forbidden rather than suppressing it", and states that "our taste for the strange, or the morbid, or the paradoxical, is contrary to what we're brought up to believe, a sign of our good health."[101]

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96 Badley, *Writing Horror and the Body,* 61.

97 Ibid., 59.

98 Morgan, *The Biology of Horror,* 74.

99 Ibid., 91.

100 Ibid., 69, 73.

101 Clive Barker, "Surviving the Ride," in Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, eds., *Kingdom of Fear: The World of Stephen King* (Kent: New English Library, 1988), 57.