

The main quality of literature in our society is its ability to entertain the masses. Some authors use horror and mystery to keep their reader's attention. Stephen King is the epitome of horror writers. In writing horror mystery novels, Stephen King utilizes small towns, a unique writing style, and people's inherent fears to scare the pants off his readers.

Fear is the basis for nearly all horror fiction, especially in Stephen King's novels. "Everybody goes to horror movies, reads horror novels-it's almost like trying to preview the end" (King 219). In all of King's horror books somebody always dies. Horror fiction "Lets you become a child again" (King 220). King can bring out the fears that are kept deep down in our souls. He knows that we have been set down in a frightening universe, full of real demons like death and disease, and perhaps the most frightening thing is the human mind. Horror is "one of the ways we walk our imagination" (King 218). King takes ordinary emotional situations and translates them into violent tales of vampires and ghosts. "You never have to ask yourself who's afraid of the big bad wolf?--You are" (Yarbro 220). "King has a talent for raising fear from dormancy. He knows how to activate our primal fears" (Nolan 222). Where does he get these fears? His own personal fears in (descending order) are the fear of someone else, others (paranoia), death, insects (especially spiders, flies, & beetles), closed in places, rats, snakes, deformity, squishy things, and his number one fear is fear of the dark. "At night, when I go to bed I am still at pains to be sure that my legs are under the blankets, after the lights go out. I'm not a child anymore...I don't like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from under the bed and grabbed my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the dead" (King, Night Shift xii). "Terror" is the most refined of fearsome emotions because it centers largely on unseen forces. Here are some perfect examples from many of his works. In the book *Thinner*, readers are warned not to underestimate the power of one person and to be wary of everyone. *Dolores Claiborne* takes place during a total eclipse which is supposed to bring out the evil in people. *Gerald's Game* is a book based on women's fears of rape, being alone, helplessness, and danger. The book *Cujo* brings out the fear of what if man's best friend became his worst nightmare? *The Dark Half* is the fear of a person's evil self coming to life and the good self of the person being affected by the evil one's wrong doings, i.e. the evil twin story.

The mystery and inclusiveness of small town America plays a key role in a large number of books written by Stephen King. Castle Rock is the perfect example of a small town used in a few of King's books. It was used in *Cujo*, *The Dead Zone*, and *The Body*. It is a small town in Maine, which happens to be King's home state. Its name came from a lake in Wisconsin. There is actually a town called Castle Rock in Maine now. There are also other examples of the utilization of small towns. In *The Dark Half* King manages to make Pittsburgh look like a small town located in Maine. In *Gerald's Game* a remote lakeside house in Maine is used. *Sleepwalkers* takes place in a small town in Indiana. There are many reasons Mr. King uses small towns in his novels. The whole small town culture makes it easier to intertwine the story among various characters. Small towns also seem to be separate from the world that we are used to today. Also, the fact that everyone knows everyone else helps with the significance of the actions of various characters.

There are many critics who have embraced the public's passion for King books, but there are still a few who do not believe that he is a credible author worthy of the literature books of the future. Positive reviews are abundant. When King is at his best, then the reader is too busy turning pages to be squeamish. "In a time of violence and confusion, it is little wonder then that so many readers have embraced the imaginative talents of Stephen King" (Winter 219). "If someone in the future wants to see what American life was like, what Americans cared about, they'll read Stephen King" (Ross 218). King's work has been described as "the chronicle of contemporary America's dreams, desires, and fears" (Ewing 222).

"Though an inelegant writer, King impresses, finally, by virtue of his enthusiasm and self-confidence, and his faith in his own imaginative powers" (Lit. Criticism 237). It's all too easy to take cheap shots at his material by lifting it out of context. The worst critics seem to be the most formal, concerned with literary technique rather than a good story that can be enjoyed by the masses. Specific complaints on his work are numerous. Some may object that King's writing is too enthusiastic, or at least too energetic (how writing can be too energetic is beyond me). King's artistic sensibilities are that of a fourteen year old boy. Some critics have criticized King for overwriting (too much). Many people believe King is in a field that too easily lends itself to cliché, because of the simplicity of the plots. Don Herron(219) doubts whether "the majority of fans or even his most intelligent critics read him for deep meaning. King has even referred to his own work as "the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald's"(King 222).

King's writing style and utilization of unique characters are what make his books. The form in which his books are written is what grabs the attention of the reader. In *The Dead Zone* and *Cujo* the style is psychological rather than the supernatural mode. King's work is a hybridization of the traditional horror tale, as written by Edgar Allan Poe. A story that offers the chills has become King's trademark. By introducing believable middle and lower class Americans into situations that defy conventional logic King subjects the reader to a harrowing tour of the lives of characters who must attempt to defeat the irrational, in order to restore a modicum of sanity to their world. King tries to terrorize the reader, "If I find I cannot terrify the reader, I will try to horrify, and if I can't horrify, I'll go for the gross-out, I'm not proud" (Gault 243). "Stephen King writes of good vs. evil, putting a usually shaded white up against the blackest blacks" (Gault 238). Stephen King never ends his stories with any cheap or easy hope. King never stops emphasizing his essential liking for people. He lapses into bogeyman mode when inspiration wanes. Characters bring out the realism and excitement in King books. "Of King's imaginary characters, boys, generally twelve years old, are among the most carefully developed and consistently explored. Because pre-teen and pre-puberty youngsters could hardly have done enough to deserve death, terror, or destruction, King rather insistently concentrates upon them, especially in the early novels."(Reino 34) Even King's elderly characters talk as if they had spent their lives at Saturday kiddy matinees. King skillfully evokes the here and now reality of his characters and is astute in dealing with the psychology of his characters. *Gerald's Game* is probably the best example of King's ability to dig into a person's mind. In this case, he uses a typical woman who has to worry about things such as rape, helplessness, and always being in danger. King makes it impossible for his readers not to identify with his characters.

Many people have been both scared and entertained by numerous Stephen King novels. By sheer numbers of books sold, he has proven himself to be one of our greatest authors of all time. Hopefully the future will bring us many more authors with the intelligence and charisma of Mr. Stephen King.

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