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Children in Horror Fiction: A Study of Select Novels by Stephen King

B Lungoii Darlong
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Dhamma Dipa International Buddhist University, Tripura.
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Abstract:

Horror fiction over the decades has been the manifesto of writers to conjure fear, suspense and terror among people using child characters since they easily arouse the feeling of sympathy. Horror stories blend together with children evokes compassion, pity and empathy from readers because children represent innocence, meekness, purity and helplessness that need protection from the dangers lurking around. Stephen King, one of the most celebrated horror writers in the world; he has authored several children-centric horror novels, such as novels like "It" and "The Shining." Considering two of his novels, this paper aims to explore how children navigate and confront the challenges posed by a terrifying state when left to fend for themselves against both supernatural and natural threats as portrayed in his novels.

Keywords: Horror, Children, Fear, Terror, Supernatural.

Introduction

Horror genre can be considered as one of the most unique genres in the field of literature and its capacities to evoke multiple emotions from readers validate it. Horror stories have the power to generate excitement, fear, joy and shock at the same time keeping the readers wanting

for more. Horror stories in the ancient times are much different from what we know today, tales of monsters, legends and tales of vampires were told earlier. In today's time horror represent something more brutal, gore and frightening; it has reinvented itself over the years multiple times. Horror stories today do not focus only on supernatural entities, witchcraft, ghosts or dark power; is intertwined with psychological and supernatural elements. Horror is no longer a mere fantastical tales narrated for sheer entertainment, writers over the years have approached more complex and relatable themes that would resonate with the readers. In the 20th Century horror has entered a new juncture and it was witness through the work of authors like Stephen King, who is considered as one of the most prominent writer in the contemporary times. King has given horror a new recognition completely different from something readers have not yet experienced. Noting the decline of traditional horror stories, King has employed characters that would easily grasp the attention of his readers, that would intrigued his readers and root for them to trump over evil. His excellence comes from his ability to write about ordinary people, the kind of characters one would relate with, and he employed children characters which would effortlessly evoke pity and sympathy from the readers. The child characters in his novels are entrusted with challenges they must overcome; what makes it more interesting is that his characters are powerless, ordinary and mere human beings. King divulge the core of human mind, hidden in the deepest part of their soul, characters in his novels are tested, manipulated and tempted only the strongest survive. Hence, he employed children to lift the heavy task because King believes that children due to their innocent and uncorrupted character trait can overcome the darkness with their light.

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Review of Literature

It is a universal fact that childhood experiences and memories shape our views of the world, it influence our understandings and beliefs as an adult. The non-normative events during childhood can be deeply ingrained in our mind thus impacting our decisions and actions growing up. Parents and adults plays have major role in children's life, it is their responsibilities to teach and lead the children in the right part as well as protect them from the evil and darker side of the world. Children facing hardship and torment from young age can deeply affect their psychological and mental health, especially children who are victim of verbal and physical abuse, who endured domestic violence. While these horror incidents are taking place in our world today, writers or researchers until the late 18th Century have not addressed atrocities against children in the society until recently. Children characters has significantly appeared in horror fiction from the late 20th Century, marking their place in the domain of literature. Stephen King has presented children in different roles, in most vulnerable states yet granting them the power and strength to overcome the challenges.

Alegra, Sara Martín. "Nightmares of Childhood: The Child and the Monster in Four Novels by Stephen King." *Atlantis, vol.23, no.1, June 2001, pp.105-14. JSTOR.web.* This journal explores and highlights the excessive exploitation of children for commercial and entertainment purpose taking King's novels as an example. This paper also points out how prioritizing one's liberal values can be the dealing cause of parental failure which leads to parent-child dichotomy. This article argues that King's portrayal of child in his novels is a constant criticism of the American life style, which is gradually excluding the image of family-centric society.

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Shalon. “Fear and horror in children’s literature – Review of truly terrifying kids & YA book,” (29 February 2020). This paper sought to explains the reasons behind extensive use of the theme of abandonment throughout children’s literature. As discussed in the study the reason being, children are incapable of taking care by themselves and surviving in their own, their small statures makes them prone to predators. They are still incapable of differentiating between good and evil; their innocent and trusting nature can be used against them by adults with evil intentions.

Signe Whitson. “Scratching Beneath the Surface: Recognizing Common Defenses Used by Children in Stress.” *Psychology Today, 19 December 2011.* This paper examines the four common defenses use by children under stressful circumstances. This article includes the discussion on Denial, Rationalization, Conversion and Displacement each serving as a self defense for trouble and traumatic kids. The mentioned defenses are also used by adults but it is primarily found in the case of children, because a young child does not possessed the verbal skill to express and tell someone about his/her pain as compared to an adult. Thus, a child in comparison to an adult goes to a greater extent to mask inner pain with defensive words and behaviors.

Ramella, Brynne. “Why Kids Are The Focus of So Many Horror Movies & TV Shows.” *ScreenRant, 30 June 2020.* Ramella in this paper attempts to elucidate the increasing appearances of children in the horror fiction. As disclosed in the article the reason being, it is because children interacting with evil denote the idea of lost innocence, which is something on can relate to it. Further, this study specify that the innocence of childhood against something diabolic evoke the sympathetic emotions from the audiences which turns out to be a great

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marketing strategy as people have a soft spot for children especially for the one who are battling with monsters and demons.

The Portrayal of Children in King's Novels

The Shining, initially published in the year 1977 is king's third novel which became his first bestseller. The novel comprise of a family of three, father and husband Jack Torrance, his wife Wendy Torrance and their five-year old son Danny Torrance. The family due to an unfortunate circumstance had to live their home and settle in a new place unfamiliar to them, The Overlook hotel where the novel is set in. Now, the hotel is not an ordinary hotel, it is nothing like a place where people would leave their home for a few days of relaxation. Jake has landed the job of a winter caretaker in the Overlook hotel and the family had no choice but accompany him. As the story progress it is reveal that the overlook hotel is seemingly alive and it has the power to manipulate and possess its inhabitants, it is a place of malevolence, haunted by the spirits of previous inhabitants and driven by its own dark past. The hotel has a way to corrupt the mind of the people dwelling there and drive them to insanity, creating a monster out of people. The hotel feeds on people insecurities, weakness and traumas that are buried deep within them. Jake as it is later revealed who was no stranger to violence and brutality falls into the prey of the hotel, thus unleashing destruction and even to the point of almost killing his family. Jake was no innocent bystander, he had a rather bitter relationship with his father, he himself of victim of physical and verbal abuse, enduring a longstanding trauma that lives in his head. Wendy Torrance as well had a cold relationship with her mother, damaging it further by marrying Jake with her mother disapproved. However, Wendy unlike Jake did not succumb to the manipulation of the hotel; she comes out as a strong, resilient and protector to her young child, who she realized has witness and endured violence more than she and her husband had.

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Danny, the young boy who was tangled in all the destruction, too young to grasp and understand the gravitas of the challenges the family was facing for his age was forced to acknowledge and act on it. Danny however was different from others, his parent and other children his age, King hints at Danny's otherness: "he understood a great many things about his parents, and he knew that many times they didn't like his understandings and many other times refused to believe them" (King, 37). Danny had the ability to see past and future, he did not know what to name it and he felt like an outcast, lonely, the power that was bestowed upon him felt like burden until he meets the Overlook's cook, Dick Hallorann, that he puts a name to his somewhat hidden talent and learns that he is not alone in his ability. Dick tells Danny, "What you got, son, I call it shinin on, the Bible calls it having visions, and there's scientists that call it precognition . . . They all mean seeing the future" (King, 121) Dick reveals that "me, I've always called it shining. That's what my grandmother called it," Perhaps for the first time in his life, Danny no longer feels alone, knowing that there are others like him and people he can turn to in moments of solitude or danger. Danny's shining, or his ability to see into the past and the future along with his capability to read minds, is the main determiner of the violence the child experiences within the supernaturally encroaching Overlook. Danny is no stranger to the violence of the past, his and the Overlook's, and cannot ignore the violence awaiting him and his family in the future. He understands the desolation and failure that his family will meet if he chooses to tell Wendy and Jack of his gift and what it has shown him, acknowledging that it will likely be their end. In the tender age of five Danny not only had to endure the violence and disruption over taking his family but he was in a situation where he must take a decision in order to severe their fate and accept it as it. King has presented two trait of characters in one person, a man who has a monster within him and a man who has been created as monster but nonetheless the outcome

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remains the same if one allows the darkness overtake their light in them. The Shining ends with Wendy protecting her son from death in the hands of his father but the horrifying incidents lives forever in Danny.

King's love for writing about ordinary people with extraordinary challenges has reach its height when he gifted the world his novel *It (1986)*, taking his readers for an endearing, emotional ride contrary to what readers experience from horror novels. For this novel, he picked a group of outcast group to embark on a journey that would cost them their lives because they are not going against one opponent but two- the dancing clown Pennywise, otherwise known as It, an entity as old as time and group of irrational teen boys who are bent on tormenting them. We will also witness abuse that comes from adults, like in the previous novel *The Shining,* this novel is merged with horrors from natural and supernatural realm coexisting to unleash terror. The protagonists consist of seven main characters who identify themselves as the "Losers' Club.": Bill Denbrough, Beverly Marsh, Ben Hanscom, Richie Tozier, Stan Uris, Eddie Kasbrak, and Mike Hanlon, from a small town called Derry, Main. The kids have been bullied and ostracized as far as they can remember. King has deliberately made all characters with flawed and scars like he does in all his novels, he does not shy away from showing the imperfections his heroes possessed. King attempts to highlight the prevailing occurrence of child violence in the society at large by adding in stories about children in the town who are terrorized and killed by evil entity; the clown called Pennywise. King was ahead of his time, he shed light on such sensitive topic when the issue of domestic abuse and violence on children were vaguely discussed especially during the period he wrote this novel.

Much like the previous novel we discussed the parents and adults of Derry are as horrifying as Pennywise, what makes it even worse is the fact that unlike in *The Shining* the

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adults in *It* are not possessed by an evil spirit, they are fully aware of their actions. For instance, Bill's parents after the death of Georgie, their younger son, have completely become withdrawn and neglect Bill even though he was struggling and hardly coping up with the death of his brother as well, he could not find any solace in the arms of his parents. Richie afraid to be judged and mistreated by others has to hide his sexuality and feelings for Eddie from everyone; he was also tormented by the constant bullying of Bowers' gang. Stan's anxious behaviour makes him seem like the weakest member of the club and the easiest prey for any bully. Beverly's father physically abuses her while making subtle sexual advances on her when her mother is away from the house. Mr. Bowers who is shown as a racist encourages his son to attack and abuse Mike because of the color of his skin.

King's *It* is more than a horror novel with a larger than life villain one has ever witness, no doubt Pennywise has become a cultural icon and the fright and shock it gave both to the characters in the novel and the readers will always be ingrained in the mind. However, what makes the novel a standout is the children, King did not missed a mark in creating a character so endearing that occupied a place in our hearts, they are flawed yet perfect for each other, weak yet strong enough to defeat an ancient evil entity and their own demons. The Losers' Club holds the candle of true bonds, friendship, love and unity. Maybe their love and care for each other was unshakable because they never experience love beyond their small circle, maybe they were ready to die for one other because all they had was their friendship.

Conclusion

Unlike the traditional horror tales, King brought horror in a new a new direction; he showed that horror is more than evil entity that lurks in the dark corridors, in the basements or in

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an old abundant house, his horror includes monster within oneself, the battle between the good and evil side of human. Horror can be anything that terrifies a person; horror can take any form, anything that inserts fear in the mind. Horror has means the dark nature of human which has the capacity to destroy, traumatize another person. What we acquire from this paper is the author has illustrated the innocent of childhood which has been interrupted by the horror of this world through human and evil entity. The children in King's fictional world can be generalize broadly because there are millions of children out there who are victims of the unjust world. Though King has never stated his precise intention behind featuring misfit, socially awkward children and children with psychopathic, abusive and neglectful parents, dysfunctional families, bullies in his novels, it is clear that there is a hidden message as why such themes are employed in most of their novels. This may be an inspiration from his own childhood and from the experiences or more importantly it may be his way of painting the picture of the society he lives in. To use children as his central characters who are victims of evil adults and supernatural forces is a well execution on his part to allure more readers and spread awareness because everyone has as soft spot for children especially if those children are battling with monsters that have human form and one who are not a part of the living.

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