BLOOM'S MODERN CRITICAL VIEWS

UPDATED EDITION

STEPHEN KING

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM

Bloom's Modern Critical Views

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Updated Edition

Edited and with an introduction by
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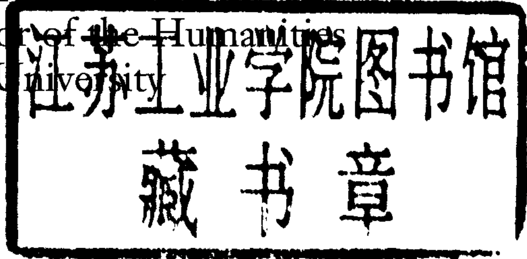
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Editor's Note

My introduction, implicitly echoing Oscar Wilde's remark that all bad poetry is sincere, grants the benign social decency of King's fictions.

Ben P. Indick relates King to such precursors as Poe, Stoker, and Lovecraft, while Don Herron insists that King is "literature," a judgment I might deplore, but why blow sand against the wind?

Horror fiction, King's included, is judged by Clare Hanson to have a masculine psychic function, after which Tony Magistrale invokes King's Gothic heritage.

Douglas Keesey attributes a subtle remedy for homophobia in King, while Michael N. Stanton finds a critique of American politics in *The Dead Zone*.

Early King is regarded by Linda Badley as a shamanistic healer, after which Sharon A. Russell interprets *Needful Things* as a fusion of natural and supernatural horror.

Kathleen Margaret Lant discovers in King's *Misery* a supposed rape of the female reader, while Jesse W. Nash argues that popular American culture and King both decline to confront the necessity of dying.

The sexual panic represented in *Christine* is seen as a national malaise by Edward Madden, after which Sherry R. Truffin attempts to define King's contribution to the American genre of Schoolhouse Gothic.

My Afterthought credits King as the appropriate figure for our Age of Information.

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HAROLD BLOOM

Introduction

In a brilliant study, *Nightmare on Main Street* (1997), the critic Mark Edmundson attributes the immense popularity of Stephen King to our universal Gothic obsessions as we approach the millennium. Edmundson is very shrewd in surmising a quasi-religious source for the latest wave of American Gothic:

> Yet if I were pressed to submit one reason for the contemporary proliferation of Gothic, that reason would in a certain sense be religious. Though most of us Americans claim to believe in God, few of us seem able to believe in God's presence. That is, we do not perceive some powerful force for good shaping the events of day-to-day life in accord with a perceptibly benevolent master plan. Most of us don't have a story that we can believe about the way God's designs are unfolding among us. Whatever God is up to, he is not busying himself unduly with worldly events.
>
> Many of us have, I think, turned from hope in benevolent religion to fascination with the Gothic. There is something to gain in accepting the harsh belief that the world is infested with evil, that all power is corrupt, all humanity debased, and that

> there is nothing we can do about it. With the turn to contemporary Gothic—no-fault, dead-end, politically impotent though it may be—we recover a horizon of ultimate meaning. We recover something of what is lost with the withdrawal of God from the day-to-day world. With the Gothic, we can tell ourselves that we live in the worst and most barbaric of times, that all is broken never to be mended, that things are bad and fated to be, that significant hope is a sorry joke, the prerogative of suckers. The Gothic, dark as it is, offers epistemological certainty; it allows us to believe that we've found the truth.

On this persuasive account, our lust for Gothic is a parody of Gnosticism, which is a major strand in the American Religion. Stephen King is not at all Gnostic, whether in religious persuasion or in temperament. Edmundson notes a Wordsworthian strain in King: he exalts children, and severely distrusts adults. I suspect that Mark Twain and not Wordsworth is the source: many of King's heroes are very diffuse versions of Huckleberry Finn. Though King manifestly derives from many major storytellers in the American tradition, he has much the same relation to them that television and film scripts frequently possess: a waning out of imaginative energies. I find King very hard to read, even when I can discern redeeming social values in his narratives. There are depths beneath depths, and clearly King is preferable to the sadistic Anne Rice, whose fictions are profoundly unhealthy, and whose style is even more tedious than King's. Nothing intrinsic in King's work is nearly so important as the overwhelming fact of his popularity. Like television, motion pictures, and computers, King has replaced reading. Hundreds of thousands of America schoolchildren, who will read nothing else that isn't assigned, devour King regularly. They turn to King as their parents resort to Danielle Steel and Tom Clancy. I see no point in deploring this, and yet we ought not to deceive ourselves: the triumph of the genial King is a large emblem of the failures of American education.

I will confine this brief introduction to just two of King's works, *Carrie* and *The Shining*, equally famous, and clearly representative of his achievement, whatever that is. With great effort, I have just reread both, after an interval of some years. The narrative line of each book has a certain coherence and drive; the prose is undistinguished, and there is nothing much that could be termed characterization or inwardness, or even vivid caricature. And yet there is an imagistic strength in both tales, by which I do not mean individual images, but rather the heaping-up of events to constitute giant or central images. King's most authentic continuity with Gothic masters like

Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, and Poe in his stories, is his ability to concentrate upon what the reader is compelled to see. *Carrie* and *The Shining* have nothing to match Mary Shelley's grand vision of the daemon's (or monster's) self-immolation as an arctic funereal pyre, or Poe's nightmare evocations of the shades of deceased beauties. And yet Carrie at the prom, first humiliated as a scapegoat, and then horribly triumphant as a fiery avenger, is a marvelous culmination of popular melodrama. She will not survive as a figure of American literature, but she seems to have entered our folklore, as the apotheosis of the wallflower, and a caution to many. Similarly, the image of a mother and her boy pursued by a crazed husband-father, himself victimized by demons, outlasts the tired tracts of *The Shining*'s prose. A prolix storyteller, generally trapped by his own facility, King nevertheless has a kind of archetypal power of the image.

As I understand what I have learned to call the American Religion, no American truly feels free unless she is alone, and no intensely spiritual American believes that she is part of the creation. Though he has a secular sensibility, King implicitly endowed the boys of his earlier novels with the conviction that the best part of their selves was older and wiser than the corrupt adult world, whether manifested by individuals or by institutions. A perpetual contrast between youthful value and mature depravity enabled King to fashion a sequence of persuasive images of sympathetic horror. In his recent work, this most popular of writers has retreated from boyish protagonists, perhaps out of an uneasiness at repeating himself. Yet the later books rarely sustain the enormous images summoned up by *Carrie* and *The Shining*. I cannot locate any aesthetic dignity in King's writing: his public could not sustain it, nor could he. There is a palpable sincerity to everything that he has done: that testifies to his decency, and to his social benignity. Art unfortunately is rarely the fruit of earnestness, and King will be remembered as a sociological phenomenon, an image of the death of the Literate Reader.

BEN P. INDICK

King and the Literary Tradition of Horror and the Supernatural

I.

As one of the most successful writers in the history of the horror tale, Stephen King has constructed his work on a sure knowledge of the fiction of his predecessors. References to authors and titles abound in the pages of his novels. Even more important, he has absorbed and utilized those qualities which characterize the different types of stories in the horror genre. In his own distinctive style are mirrored the major traditions he has inherited.

The ghost in fiction is at least as old as the Graeco-Roman era, but Pliny the Younger's chained ghost is merely a plaintive creature seeking proper interment. Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" tells of a traveler who dreams of seeing his companion's wounded and bleeding body, but the purpose is to help him discover that murdered friend. With the Witches of *Macbeth* and the ghosts within *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare added a sense of fright to Elizabethan theatre, in which the ghosts' purpose was largely the furthering of the mechanics of the play.

It was the dawning era of Romanticism which gave birth to the supernatural story as we know it: an anti-rationalism accepting essentially unknowable and hidden aspects of nature. A very real world was busy exploring, geographically and industrially; in response, poets and story-tellers looked for mystery, and found it in strange islands and weird creatures

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of imagination. For Horace Walpole, a devotee of Medievalism, what better period could there be than that era called the Gothic?

Others obviously agreed. The novel Walpole wrote in 1764, *The Castle of Otranto*, precisely caught the mood. He populated his decaying castle with an array of noble lords, helpless females, scheming villains and a battery of supernatural forces, all of whom were manipulated through real as well as fantastic dangers directly menacing the heroes. The story itself was frequently absurd and the plot melodramatic. The narrative style was ponderous and the dialogue, which would influence a century of stage melodramas to come, was formal and stilted. (A friar speaks: "The will of heaven be done! I am but its worthless instrument. It makes use of my tongue to tell thee, prince, of thy unwarrantable designs. The injuries of the virtuous Hippolita have mounted to the throne of pity.") The style did not bother the reading public. The book became a best-seller. Its weaknesses are excusable, for it was, after all, the *first* Gothic novel. Issued under a nom-de-plume, the novel's enormous success quickly persuaded the author to have his true name appended.

Walpole's ingenuity resulted in an endless flow of similarly inspired Gothic novels, which offered better characterizations as well as more sensational fears. Moral tone was usually present, to justify the excesses. Thus, Clara Reeve concludes in *The Old English Baron* (1777): "All these ... furnish a striking lesson to posterity, of the overruling hand of Providence and the certainty of RETRIBUTION." Sometimes, as in the very popular *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe, weak explanations for the supernatural events were offered; fortunately for her readers, these rationalizations came too late to dilute the action.

Sensationalism reached early heights in Matthew Gregory "Monk" Lewis' work, particularly his lurid *Ambrosio, or the Monk* (1795). To the mysterious knights and swooning maidens of his predecessors, he added explicitly personal terms of fear with strong sexual overtones and violence. Lust, matricide, incest and murder are ladled up with many fantastic elements, upon none of which he wastes a word of rationalization.

The style and manner of the Gothic would begin to appear in fiction distinguished by grace and honesty in writing. Charles Dickens used ghosts effectively if sentimentally in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and quite unsentimentally in such stories as "The Trial for Murder" (1865). Charlotte Brontë employed the essence of the Gothic form powerfully in her non-fantastic novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) with the castle, the mysterious owner and his dark secret, and a suffering but courageous heroine. Her sister Emily eschewed the trappings but retained the potency of ghostly images with her ill-starred lovers of *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

While the broad outlines of the original Gothic style withered, the supernatural elements, particularly the ghost story, prospered. The 19th and 20th centuries have been rich with lastingly effective examples of the genre. The external ghost as limned by Montague Rhodes James (1862–1936) in "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," wherein a figure composed of the crumpled linens of a bed suddenly rises, remains potent. Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951) made equally feasible the presence of a Satanic mystery and willing human followers in "Ancient Sorceries." The tradition of the ghostly tale is well exemplified in the stories of such writers as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Mary E. Wilkens Freeman, J. S. Le Fanu, E. F. Benson and H. R. Wakefield. Their prose is characterized by subtlety and avoidance of the sensational.

The castle of the Gothic novel, with its ghostly accoutrements, would survive in humbler form as The Haunted House, beloved alike to fictioneers and spiritualists. Perhaps the most distinguished modern example is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a subtle work with ghosts so tenuous that the reader must decide whether or not they truly exist. A half century and many haunted houses later, the form still retained its potency in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) by Shirley Jackson. Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) utilizes a huge apartment house, gothic in its architectural details, as a fine counterpoint to his lively New York scene. Peter Straub fills a mansion with a ghost's vindictive terror in *Ghost Story* (1979). Stephen King himself displays a splendidly classic haunted house in *'Salem's Lot* (1975) and the haunted house to end all haunted houses, the craggy Overlook Hotel of *The Shining* (1977).

But the Gothic held little validity for serious writers of the 19th century. In the hands of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) for the first time the point of view was significantly altered. The weird tale would not merely provide fear for the characters of the story, but would provide *the reader* the greater fear of self-identification. "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Fall of the House of Usher" have no Satan, no externally influential force, no abstract presence of Evil to direct the characters. The vengeance that is so much a part of Poe's fiction always stems directly from the actions of his actors, and they must later bear full responsibility for their acts. Their own decisions will finally destroy them.

In this sense, Poe's writing is of true psychological content; the grotesque behavior actually represents the normal distorted by emotion to the extreme. Even his allegorical tales follow a line of inevitability and deterministic logic. His weird stories are as rational as his detective stories, and his use of the fantastic must be understood as the ultimate extension of this logic. As a poet, his language was both natural and important to him; his

favored themes of murder, retribution and dissolution are couched in a florid and gorgeous tapestry of words so evocative of mood and place that in themselves they heighten the tension. The characters are intense, humorless, compulsive and expressive.

This vein of psychological insight which Poe added to the supernatural tale was exploited by others. Fitz-James O'Brien (1828–1862) wrote what was basically science fiction to create terror in "What Was It?": an invisible, inimical creature is discovered in a hotel room and is finally beaten to death. Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893) offered a more subtle approach in "The Horla." His narrator is threatened also by something unseen; it may be of extraterrestrial origin, or it may indicate his own growing madness. Ambrose Bierce (1842–?) had insight as sharp as Poe, tempered by cynicism. The psychological power of his stories derives from the eternal hope of his characters, who eventually discover it to be a futile snare. Fate, to Bierce, is not only blind but cruel.

The inner psychiatric maze Poe opened lies at the heart of the Victorian world of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891) and Stevenson's schizophrenic *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1888), each a study of internal evil. May Sinclair, Walter de la Mare, Oliver Onions and numerous others continued the tradition. With one notable exception, the *Vampire Tale*, the course of the weird tale would not change again until the advent of H. P. Lovecraft.

In 1816 at Lake Leman, Switzerland, three travelers had a ghost-story writing contest. They were Lord Byron, John William Polidori, his traveling companion, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, wife of the poet. Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein* would become immortal; Byron's "Fragment" would be completed by Polidori as "The Vampyre, A Tale," the first popularization of the vampire theme. Byron later disowned any part of it, professing to dislike "Vampires," but no doubt the attribution to him helped the work, as it achieved great popularity in print as well as in a stage adaptation.

The first modern treatment of the vampire theme, in plot, writing and characterization, is "Carmilla" (1872), a novella by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Its turns, plot surprises, and sexual undertones hint at the potentials of the vampire novel. Yet none of his successors surpassed the sensitivity of Le Fanu, as expressed in his concluding lines: "To this hour, the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alterations—sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door."

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel written entirely in the form of letters and journals, scarcely had a "light step." The trappings of the Gothic

novel are notable here: the sepulchral castle, the brave heroes, the weak, helpless women, and a frightful, nearly insuperable villain. Yet the book soars beyond the limitations of the Gothic and its own self-imposed style of narrative. The action is continuous, and the book is packed with excitement and sexual allure (satisfying a Victorian preoccupation, yet remaining within the bounds of propriety). Stoker combined genuine pathos with a satisfactory psychological development in the characters. Innocent at the outset, they suffer deepening fear and a sense of guilt because of their increasing, if involuntary, complicity and debasement. The combination of these elements renders *Dracula* truly the first "Neo-Gothic" novel, indebted to the romantic past, yet contemporary in its characterizations and mores. It is interesting that Count Dracula himself has very few actual lines to speak in the book (he can only be quoted by others) yet emerges unforgettably.

In the Twentieth century H. P. Lovecraft reached into space and time to give horror new dimensions. If Poe was the Newton of the weird tale, Lovecraft was its Einstein, bringing it into the Atomic Age. Horror in his writings arises from the helplessness of his protagonists before the awesome forces they have called up or else inadvertently encountered. These mysterious entities antedate Man, are extraterrestrial in origin, and survive, hidden and dormant, yet possessing limitless power. The pantheon of "gods" associated with Lovecraft represent more, however, than a "mythos" of squirming, tentacled creatures: they are inimical forces which taint man and his earth. This taint is an irreparable demeaning of the self and the ego, and the initial horror is in the realization of it. This leads to the final horror, which is death or capitulation, *the surrender of one's humanity.*

II.

That King was aware of his genre and its beginnings is clear from the numerous references to writers and titles in so much of his writing. In *Carrie*, an interviewer on the west coast is described as having "an odd, pinched look that is more like Lovecraft than Kerouac out of Southern Cal." The first paragraph of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is utilized to hint at the horror of the Marsten House in *'Salem's Lot*. A passage from Poe illuminates the living-dead nature of the final state of the doomed Lot, while Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" is inspiration for and encapsulation of *The Shining*, and is subliminally referred to in its climactic pages.

H. G. Wells, Washington Irving, Algernon Blackwood, J.R.R. Tolkien, Bram Stoker and others roam his pages. Even King himself is present, when, in *The Dead Zone*, a hysterical woman accuses his hero of having started a fire "by his mind, just like in that book *Carrie*!"

The Dead Zone is, significantly, a tribute to one of King's most important inspirations, Ray Bradbury. Bradbury's early weird fiction had initiated the use of a natural vernacular and ordinary individuals in their own homes and small towns. The knowledge that horror could be local and the victim a common man produced a more personal fear in the reader. King's novel not only owes much of its carnival ambience to Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, but it acknowledges the debt in mentioning the title and author, and, in another reference, yet another Bradbury title, *Dark Carnival.* (It even features a character who sells lightning rods, an occupation much discussed in Bradbury's first chapter!)

The heroes of *The Shining* and Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" bear valid comparison. Each carries within him the seeds of his fate. For Lovecraft, it is the taint of the decadent subhuman followers of the fish-god Dagon; in King, it is Torrance's connection with the evil essence of the hotel: "It laid its Jack Torrance hands on the valve ... 'I WIN!' it cried." The "it" is Torrance, lost forever to the hotel.

King's references to other writers in the field are not strictly in emulation. He has succeeded because he has forged his own style. Nevertheless, there are influences upon his thinking and his writing, and these may be examined, as follows:

1. The Poesque

King is not about to become a poet, however much he enjoys quoting poets and lyricists. The feverish prose of Poe is antithetic to King's terse and rapid narration, although he is capable of expressive imagery: "The womb of his young wife had borne a single dark and malignant child" (a metaphor for cancer in *The Stand*); "The skeletal fingers danced and clicked on the dark air like marionettes" (the convulsive, final gesture of the vampire in *'Salem's Lot*); "Overhead, the moon rode the sky, a cold sailor of the night" (a moment of foreboding mood from *The Dead Zone*). Such passages are uncommon. Action, not metaphor, moves King's stories. Even in *The Shining*, which is so directly affected by atmosphere adapted from Poe, the writing is devoid of any self-conscious attempt at beautiful prose.

Poe's influence lies in the psychological honesty of his writing, which discarded worthless labels of Virtue and Villainy, and in the subsequent burden of introspection which Poe gave his heroes. King, always a story-teller first, is not above having villains to spice the action; however, with the exception of a fantasy villain such as Barlow, the vampire of *'Salem's Lot*, there is a measure of explanation for such destructive individuals as Greg Stillson and Frank Dodd of *The Dead Zone*, in early maternal acts of harshness and

even cruelty. (In a sense King offers us the opportunity of seeing Dodd, the compulsive rapist, from another view, in his short story "Strawberry Spring." Here the narrator is a compulsive murderer much like Dodd, but is sensitive and aware of his acts—too late. It is pure Poe.) King's more normal characters such as Larry Underwood (*The Stand*) and Charlie McGee (*Firestarter*) tend to deliberate their future courses of action carefully, rueing past actions which resulted in grievance to others. The heroine of *Carrie*, no more mature than most of her fellow teenagers, nevertheless tries to understand herself and particularly her mother. Her destructive acts come only because she has no way to respond emotionally and intellectually.

The psychic powers of Carrie, Johnny Smith (*The Dead Zone*), Danny Torrance (*The Shining*) and Charlie McGee are thus in no way employed for *deus ex machina* pyrotechnics. To some degree they are a curse to the characters, who must try to control the powers, and to understand that they can never be a magic carpet of escape. It is the Fantastic made Real, instead of being accepted as simply fantastic. This is the triumph of Poe.

2. The Vampire Tale

Stoker's *Dracula* opens in the romantic, Gothic-inspired setting of the hills of Transylvania. King's *'Salem's Lot*, his major contribution to the vampire genre, is set, characteristically for the author, in a typically small New England town. Its inhabitants are stereotypical; major characters receive individual chapters, titled for themselves, the others are covered broadly by chapters titled "The Lot." In a sense this repeats the individual epistolary and journal-entry division of *Dracula*.

Stoker wastes little time establishing his fantasy; Jonathan Harker quickly realizes he is a prisoner of the Count and then almost at once encounters three female vampires. When Dracula deprives them of feasting on the hapless Harker, he gives them instead a bag "which moved as though there were some living thing within it." They vanish with the bag, and "Then," writes Harker, "the horror overcame me, and I sank down unconscious."

King likewise moves quickly into the horror of his story, although not revealing at once the presence of vampirism. Hints of terrifying acts mount in the brief sub-chapters, usually commencing prosaically and concluding ominously. Only pages after a child has vanished, a "dark figure" appears at the cemetery, bearing the body of a child. An obscene prayer to a "Lord of Flies" is offered, along with the body. The subsequent lone line, "It became unspeakable," is the commencement of a crescendo of horror, which quickly becomes very explicit.

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