

## Stephen King's *Misery*: Freudian Sexual Symbolism and the Battle of the Sexes

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Paul Sheldon, the kidnapped protagonist of Stephen King's *Misery*, echoes his creator when he discusses his incredible financial success and his own special talents as a writer: "there are lots of guys out there who write a better prose line than I do and who have a better understanding of what people are really like and what humanity is supposed to mean—. But if you want me to take you away, to scare you or involve you or make you cry or grin, yea, I can. I can bring it to you and keep bringing it until you holler uncle. I am able. I CAN" (108).

Don Herron, in fact, attributes King's success as a best-selling novelist to his use of horror, which is "firmly based in the material world" (94): "Horror springs in King's stories from contemporary social reality, and I'd say it is this quality more than any other that has made King a bestseller. King doesn't take vampires seriously, but you would have to be a fool or a saint not to recognize and react to the pervasive horror in everyday life" (92). Such horror is what Freud calls "The Uncanny"—"that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, very familiar," which has been repressed (123-24).

Hoppenstand and Browne call *Misery*, King's eighteenth novel, "a thinly veiled self-examination of his fans, his writing, and his genre work" (13). But *Misery* is also a psychological horror story without the supernatural—a frightening tale of the reality of everyday life, of repressed fears, of pain, frustration, loneliness, insecurity, insanity, dependence, and disintegration. And although there are no explicit sexual scenes in the novel, *Misery* exploits Freudian metaphorical representations of sexuality. In *Danse Macabre*, in fact, King states that "sex continues to be a driving force in the horror genre sometimes presented in disguised Freudian terms....[and] much of the sex...is deeply involved in power tripping; it's sex based on relationships where one partner is largely under control of the other; sex which inevitably leads to some bad end" (96). *Misery* depicts an ultra-violent sexual battle which ends in a stalemate.<sup>1</sup>

King also discusses the strong sexual undertones in vampire fiction. Much of the evil of Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*, he says, "is a perverse sexual evil," while Renfield symbolizes the root source of vampirism—cannibalism (73). King equates the bite of the vampire (male and female) with oral rape. And because readers have fears of pending disaster, of their own mortality, and of their sexual potency (76-77), King, like Paul Sheldon, scares and involves his readers.

At the beginning of *Misery*, Paul Sheldon regains consciousness to learn gradually that he is the victim of a car wreck and that he has been saved and imprisoned by Annie Wilkes, a middle-aged, manic-depressive ex-nurse who is his most avid fan. King's first description of her establishes her as androgynous—a phallic woman: "She was a big woman who, other than the large but unwelcoming swell of her bosom under the gray cardigan sweater she always wore, seemed to have no feminine curves at all—There was no defined roundness of hip or buttock or even calf below the endless succession of wool skirts she wore in the house (she retired to her unseen room to put on jeans before doing her outside chores). Her body was big but not generous. There was a feeling about her of clots and roadblocks rather than welcoming orifices or even open spaces, areas of hiatus" (7).

Locked in a room in Annie's isolated farmhouse overlooking a mountainous terrain, Paul becomes an ironic version of *Misery*, the persecuted heroine of his own Gothic romance series. Annie, a dowdy, unexotic villain who becomes the Bourka Bee-Goddess of Sheldon's newest novel, almost succeeds in consuming him. She drains him of his essential self and scrapes away "the liver and lights of his spirit" (239).

Like a vampire, Annie Wilkes is an oral rapist. Artificial respiration in *Misery* is metaphoric of both rebirth and un-death (through a vampire's bite), and Paul awakens to pain, stink, and infection: "When the lips were pulled back he smelled his warder for the first time, 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, a dreadful mixed stench of vanilla cookies and chocolate ice cream and chicken gravy and peanut-butter fudge" (4). Annie's gluttony is juxtaposed to the figurative violation of his body: before he has a chance to start breathing, she "rape[s] him full of her air again" (5). King extends the vampire metaphor later when Annie squeezes the rat she caught in her trap, crushes its bones, and sucks its blood from her fingers. Left alone with no food, Paul looks at the mangled rat and laughs hysterically: "'Who *said* she didn't leave me anything to eat?' he asked the room, and laughed even harder. In the empty house, Paul Sheldon's Laughing Place

sounded like the padded cell of a madman" (163). Like a vampire's victim, Paul is now undead—a metaphorical vampire himself.

Vampire imagery reappears when Annie kills the state trooper. She stabs him with the cross she had placed on her dead cow's grave; when she pulls the cross free, its sharpened point breaks off, "leaving a jagged splintering stump." As she drives the stump into the trooper's back, buttocks, upper thigh, neck, and crotch, she appears to Paul "like a woman trying to kill a vampire" (241). The cross is also a phallic symbol. The murder is another figurative rape, in which Annie wins a power struggle with a male figure of authority. To Paul, she has "*become* a goddess, a thing that was half woman and half, Lawnboy, a weird female centaur" (240).

The sexual undertones noted above are among many throughout the novel. After Paul regains his will to live, for example, Annie makes him her prostitute by forcing him to write a new *Misery*-novel: "I was driving to the West Coast to celebrate my liberation from the state of whoredom," he thinks "What you did was to pull me out of the wreck when I crashed my car and stick me back in the crib again. Two dollar straight up, four dollar I take you aroun the worl [sic]" (66). The used Royal typewriter with the missing "n" becomes a symbol of his prostitution; and King punctuates this relationship when Annie self-righteously comments that Ms. Dartmonger, the woman who sold her the typewriter, ought to be named Whoremonger because she has been married twice and is now living with a bartender. Annie casually ignores the fact that she is a divorcee, that she and her last victim, Andrew Pomeroy, were lovers, and that she is also living with a man. As Annie's whore, Paul is forced to endure repulsive embraces, words of endearment, and tender melting looks. After he lends her the money to pay her taxes, for example, she treats him with tenderness: "Her own eyes glistened as she leaned forward and gently touched his lips. He smelled something on her breath, something from the dark and sour chambers inside her, something that smelled like dead fish.... His stomach clenched, but he smiled at her. 'I love you, dear,' she said" (148).

The sexual undertones are not limited to rape and prostitution; they also reverberate of incest. Annie becomes not only Paul's wife/lover, but also his mother. When Paul first regains consciousness, he reverts to his childhood. He is Paulie with his mother and father at Revere Beach, watching the pilings appear between the waves. He has regressed to the stage of infant orality as he greedily sucks his medication 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

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enough he learned to suck eagerly at those poking fingers in spite of the bitter taste)" (8).

When she sees his manuscript copy of *Fast Cars*, she looks at him with disapproval, mixed with love; and Paul observes that "It was a maternal look" (17-18). She praises his writing talent as a mother would a child and then feeds him again: "Her fingers were in his mouth suddenly, shockingly intimate, dirtily welcome. He sucked the capsules from between them and swallowed even before he could fumble the spilling glass of water to his mouth" (18).

Eventually, memories of his mother and childhood and thoughts about Annie merge. He remembers a trip to the Boston Zoo and his empathy for the African bird doomed to die in its cage far away from its native land. Because he cried for the bird on the way home, his mother called him a "bawl-baby and a sissy" (27). As he wills Annie to say more about what happened when she was on trial in Denver, Paul juxtaposes his feelings about Annie with his ambivalent feelings about his mother:

"Come on," he muttered, his arm over his eyes—this was the way he thought best, the way he *imagined* best. His mother liked to tell Mr. Mulvaney on the other side of the fence what a marvellous imagination he had, so vivid, and what wonderful little stories he was always writing down (except, of course, she was calling him a sissy and a bawl-baby.)....

Annie Wilkes

("He read at just three! Can you imagine!")

That spirit of...of fan-love...

("He's always writing things down, making things up.")

Now I must rinse.

("Africa. That bird came from.") (28)

Soon after, when Annie makes Paul burn *Fast Cars* (his dirty book with the offensive "effword" in it), she likens herself to a mother dutifully punishing a child she has caught being bad. And, when he refuses to light the match, she calls him "a very stubborn little boy" (41).

Finally, when Paul escapes from his room the first time and thinks he hears Annie's car pulling up, he is filled with the greatest terror he had ever felt and an unmaning guilt. His terror reminds him of the time his mother returned home unexpectedly and caught him smoking when he was twelve: "the only incident in his life that came remotely close to this one in its desperate emotional quality" (83). He becomes that twelve-year-old child again when Annie returns, and he begins to cry: "It was guilt he cried from, and he hated that most of all: in addition to everything else this monstrous woman had done to him, she had made

him feel guilty as well. So he cried from guilt...but also from simple childish weariness" (87).

Paul's foot and thumbectomy, which terrorize him even more, are both figurative castrations. In his essay "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud states that "dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, [and] feet which dance by themselves" are associated with the "castration-complex" (151). He also connects fear of the Sand-man with figurative castration in E. T. A. Hoffman's story "The Sand-Man" (133). Hoffman's protagonist is terrified by his nurse's description of the Sand-Man: "a wicked man who comes when children won't go to bed, and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of their heads all bleeding" (133). Early in *Misery*, Annie becomes the sandman, a phallic mother who threatens to castrate Paul. Paul dreams that Annie comes into his room dressed as the heroine of his novels, a basket over her arm: "She reached in [the basket] and took out a handful of something and flung it into the face of the...sleeping Paul Sheldon. It was sand, he saw—this was Annie Wilkes pretending to be Misery Chastain pretending to be the sandman. *Sandwoman*. Then he saw that ...Paul Sheldon's face had turned a ghastly white as soon as the sand struck it and fear jerked him out of the dream and into the bedroom, where Annie Wilkes was standing over him" (29-30). He recalls this dream later—while reading the obituaries of Annie's murder victims in her scrapbook. He again has a vision of Annie holding a basket over her arm flinging sand into "upturned faces.... This was not the soothing sand of sleep but poisoned sand. It was killing them" (191).

Castration is also *consciously* in both Paul's and Annie's mind. When he finds that Annie's phone does not work, for example, he concludes that she had castrated it (82); drugged from his first pre-op shot, Paul is "utterly sure that she meant to pull the knife from the wall and castrate him with it" (202); and when he contemplates the horror of the loss of his thumb, he thinks of how much worse it could have been: "It could have been [my] penis, for instance. And I only have one of those (226)".<sup>2</sup> Finally, Annie admits that she *had* considered cutting off his "man-gland" (251).

After Paul is mutilated, his writer's block and passivity also suggest that he has become a eunuch: "He seemed to have lost some vital ingredient, and the mix had become a lot less potent as a result" (236). Annie Wilkes is not the most terrifying part of *Misery*, but the poor, poor thing that Paul becomes mentally. When he sees the state trooper in Annie's driveway, for example, Paul is at first unable to respond:

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Nothing which had gone before—except perhaps for the moment when he realized that, although his left leg was moving, his left foot was staying put—was as terrible as the hell of this immobility.... He knew how constantly he had been terrorized, but did he know how much of his own subjective reality, once so strong he had taken it for granted, had been erased?

He knew one thing with some certainty—a lot more was wrong with him than paralysis of the tongue.... The truth of everything was so simple in its horridness; so dreadfully simple. He was dying by inches, but dying that way wasn't as bad as he'd already feared. But he was also *fading*, and that was an awful thing because it was moronic (238-39).

Annie and Paul's relationship parodies a marital one as well as a parental one. Abandoned by her husband, and "retired" from her nursing career, Annie's "relationship" with Paul fills a void in her empty life. As Paul lies helpless in bed when he first regains consciousness and then later as he writes his novel in the wheelchair, Annie often does traditionally female chores in the background. She prepares meals, washes dishes, vacuums, dusts, and washes the floors. By keeping Paul prisoner, she is living out a fantasy through escape in his fiction and through their relationship. Paul even refers to himself as Scheherazade, both the storyteller and the wife of the king in *Arabian Nights*. Early in April, before the rains begin, she behaves like a happy housewife: "Annie...had never been in better spirits than she was during that sunny early-spring week. She cleaned; she cooked ambitious meals..., each afternoon she bundled Paul up in a huge blanket, jammed a green hunting cap on his head, and rolled him out onto the back porch" (155).

The two horrifying dismemberments are ways of crippling Paul to keep him with her, but more importantly to reestablish her power over him. They also can be seen as representations of the primal scene. Awakening to find himself drugged by his first pre-op shot, Paul is disoriented, and Annie plays the coquette: "I *see* you, Paul...those blue eyes. Did I ever tell you what lovely blue eyes you have? But I suppose other women have—women who were much prettier than I am, and much bolder about their affections, as well" (190). After she tells him about her former lover Pomeroy, she confesses that she began loving Paul because he wrote such wonderful stories; but her love for him changed. She began to love the rest of him because he is unlike other writers who drink and whore and shoot dope. Love notwithstanding, Annie wields the axe, an act suggestive of a much more violent rape than the earlier ones:

The axe came whistling down and buried itself in Paul Sheldon's left leg just above the ankle. Pain exploded up his body in a gigantic bolt. Dark-red blood splattered across her face like Indian warpaint. It splattered the wall. He heard the blade squeal against bone as she wrenched it free. He looked unbelievably down at himself. The sheet was turning red. He saw his toes wriggling. Then he saw her raising the dripping axe again. Her hair had fallen free of its pins and hung around her blank face.

He tried to pull back in spite of the pain in his leg and knee and realized that his leg was moving but his foot wasn't. All he was doing was widening the axe-slash, making it open like a mouth. He had time enough to realize his foot was now only held on his leg by the meat of his calf before the blade came down again, directly into the gash, shearing through the rest of his leg and burying itself deep in the mattress (205).

The dripping axe is most obviously phallic as it repeatedly hits the foot; and the cut, which opens like a mouth and bleeds, is suggestive of the vagina. The bloody mattress, of course, suggests loss of virginity. Even Annie's loosened hair makes her somewhat sensual, hinting at erotic pleasure in her sadism.

The thumbectomy also has sexual undertones. First she plugs the knife into the outlet by his wheelchair. Then there is a phallic injection. As the knife saws "rapidly back and forth in the air the Betadine flew in a spray of maroon droplets...and in the end of course there had been much redder droplets spraying into the air as well" (234). This time the blood suggests the release of semen during climax. And "as the humming, vibrating blade sank into the soft web of flesh between the soon-to-be-defunct thumb and his first finger," Annie metaphorically climaxes also. Words of love once again are juxtaposed to the violent act; she assures Paul in her "this-hurts-Mother-more-than-it-hurts-Paulie voice that she loved him" (234).

Paul's writing, which he refers to as autoerotic, also satisfies Annie sexually: "But hadn't there been some sort of fuck," he thinks, "even of the driest variety? Because once he started again.... Well, she wouldn't interrupt him while he was working, but she would take each day's output as soon as he was done, ostensibly to fill in the missing letters, but actually—he knew this by now, just as sexually acute men know which dates will put out at the end of the evening and which will not—to get her fix. To get her *gotta*." (226). For the *gotta*, he says, is "Nasty as a hand-job in a sleazy bar, fine as a fuck from the world's most talented call-girl" (224). Note also that as he approaches the end of *Misery's* Return, he abandons the typewriter and writes with his Berol Black Warrior pencils, which Annie sharpens for him when he writes them

dull. In her essay on Dickens and Freud's "The 'Uncanny'," Dianne Sadoff points out the connection between writing and the phallus: "the word 'pencil,' of course derives from Latin *penicillus*, which derives from the diminutive, *penis*, a tail. This common figure, the pen-as-phallus, represents the enabling power of writing to engender rendered life...art or writing may capture its subject's head [castration], may break the phallus [the dull points—Paul's dismemberment], but it restores the phallus as well; it repeats the enigma of castration and representation" (222-23).<sup>3</sup>

As Paul learns about Annie's mental state and grows to understand her, their relationship changes and evolves, again a parody of a marital one. He observes first her bouts of catatonia, and he imagines that her thoughts become as he had imagined her physical self—"solid, fibrous, unchannelled, with no places of hiatus" (11). Paul becomes "suddenly very scared" when Annie slides into her depressive period in which she both gorges and abuses herself. When he escapes from his room the second time, Paul examines the remains of one of Annie's feasts: "*That was what I saw on her housecoat. The stuff she was eating. And what was on her breath.*" His image of Annie as Piltdown woman recurred. He saw her sitting in here and scooping ice-cream into her mouth, or maybe handfuls of half-congealed chicken gravy with a Pepsi chaser, simply eating and drinking in a deep depressed haze" (164).

After she discusses killing the state trooper, Paul sees craziness in Annie's grin and "something else as well.... He sees conscious evil in it—a demon capering behind her eyes" (246). But Annie is not an actual monster, or a cannibal, or a vampire, or a centaur, or the Bourka Bee-Goddess. The real Annie—the inside Annie...with all her masks put aside is a "crazy lady," curiously pathetic as well as frightening. (159).<sup>4</sup> In her depressive state, in fact, she seems as much a victim as Paul: "The flesh of her face, which had previously seemed so fearsomely solid, now hung like lifeless dough. Her eyes were blanks. She had dressed, but her skirt was on inside out. There were more weals on her flesh, more food splattered on her clothes. When she moved, they exhaled too many different aromas for Paul to count. Nearly one whole arm of her cardigan sweater was soaked with a half-dried substance that smelled like gravy" (159). She may be a symbolic vampire/cannibal who is gorging herself, but she is certainly not *gaining* in power and strength. She goes to her "Laughing Place" to relieve herself of her painful depression; but while she is there, mostly she screams (175).

After Paul reads Annie's memory book of obituaries of her victims, he even empathizes with her. Annie divides all the people in the world into "three groups: brats, poor poor things [who had to be killed to



relieve them from their misery] and Annie" (177). Psychotic Annie Wilkes has murdered more than thirty people, including her own father, but she is also a poor poor thing. Annie is a victim of her manic-depressive cycles, her compulsion to rid the world of brats and to end the misery of poor poor things (rats in traps). She is a lonely loser whose major gratification in life is in reading popular fiction. Paul actually feels sorry for her when the reporters and police harass her. And when Annie is excited about reading the end of *Misery's* Return, and apologizes for the typewriter, he sees in her 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. Or both" (282).

But just as the dull points of his pencils become sharp again, Paul finally overcomes Annie, ironically in an Annie-like fashion. He "rapes" and "sodomizes" her, and then he kills his vampire-captor with a typewriter rather than a stake. After he pretends to burn the novel she made him write (refusing her her sexual gratification at knowing how it ends), he drops the typewriter, the symbol of his forced prostitution, on her back. Then he knocks the board he used for a desk aside, "push[es] himself up and totter[s] *erect* on his right foot," while Annie lies "*writhing*" and "*moaning*" on the floor. (291 emphasis added). Finally, in an attempt to assert his lost manhood, he falls on top of her. Once again, the sexual implications of the power struggle are implicit:

The flames were going out around them but he could still feel savage heat coming off the twisting, heaving mound beneath him, and knew that at least some of her sweater and brassiere must be cooked onto her body. He felt no sympathy at all.

She tried to buck him off. He held on, and now he was lying squarely on top of her like a man who means to commit a rape, his face almost on hers; his right hand groped, knowing exactly what it was looking for. (291)

Like the earlier ones, this rape is also juxtaposed to Annie's gluttony. Paul forces Annie to eat his member and their baby. He stuffs page after page of the manuscript into her "gaping, screaming mouth.... She bucked and writhed under him. The salt-dome of his left knee whammed the floor and there was excruciating pain, but he stayed on top of her. ('I'm gonna rape you, all right, Annie. I'm gonna rape you because all I can do is the worst I can do. So suck my book. Suck my book. Suck on it until you...CHOKE.') He crumpled the wet paper with a convulsive closing jerk of his fist and slammed it into her mouth, driving the half-charred first bunch further down" (292). Annie doesn't give up the sexual-power struggle easily, though. Despite her fractured skull, the

severe burns, and the paper in her throat, she manages to crawl after Paul and to collapse on top of *him*, forcing him to “work his way out from her like a man burrowing his way out of a snowslide” (295). He locks himself into the bathroom and passes out, but when he awakens, his castration-complex returns. He imagines Annie is standing outside the door, axe in her hands, planning to “amputate his head” (296). Fortunately, she dies before she can get back to him with the chainsaw.

Despite this victory, back in New York nine months later, Paul remains a poor poor thing haunted by the undead monster who appears in his apartment in her nurse’s uniform, axe in hand, to decapitate/castrate him in his fantasy. He is lonely, crippled, and still in pain. He substitutes bourbon for what she fed him—the Annie-dope he craves; and unable to write, he is still being terrorized by Annie Wilkes: “In his dreams and waking fantasies, he dug her up again and again. You couldn’t kill the goddess. Temporarily dope her with bourbon, maybe, but that was all” (308). The ending suggests that Paul defeats Annie again when he overcomes his writer’s block, but what will happen when the hole in the paper disappears?

Paul Sheldon’s fate is especially frightening because it reflects fears of both his creator King and of the reading public. When asked in a *Playboy* interview whether he “ever fears that things are going just *too* well...and that suddenly some malign cosmic force is going to snatch it all away,” King responded: “I don’t fear it, I *know* it. There’s no way some disaster or illness or other cataclysmic affliction isn’t already lurking in wait for me down the road. Things never get better, you know; they only get worse. And...we are rewarded only moderately for being good, but our transgressions are penalized with absurd severity” (239). That is precisely what happens to Paul Sheldon. He freed himself from writing *Misery* novels by killing off his heroine, and he spent two years writing *Fast Cars*, a serious novel. But he transgressed by ordering a second bottle of Dom Perignon and setting off on a “Grand Odyssey to Somewhere” (16). And everything was snatched away when he wrecked his car, and he was “saved” by Annie Wilkes.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In *No Man’s Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the treatment of the battle of the sexes in twentieth-century literature. They discuss works by male best-selling authors like Philip Roth and John Irving, but they do not consider Stephen King. They note that in *The World According to Garp*, although John Irving’s “portrayal of feminists as self-mutilating hysterics is

savage, his novel's denouement suggests that, as the battle of the sexes grows increasingly violent, a victory for either side becomes virtually unimaginable" (61).

<sup>2</sup>Since Paul has regressed to a childhood state, his repressed fears of castration and his resentment of his father also surface. When he asks Annie about his wallet, he remembers that his father, who never noticed him "any more than he absolutely had to," (9) gave him a condom to keep in his wallet on his fourteenth birthday—so that whenever he got excited making out in a drive-in, he would use it, because there were "too many bastards in the world already" (10). And after Annie cuts Paul's foot off, he remembers that when he had cut his foot at Revere Beach, his father had told him to stop acting "like someone had cut his goddamn foot off" (207).

<sup>3</sup>For another discussion of the pen as a metaphorical penis, see also Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 3-44.

"Freud states that epilepsy and madness produce an uncanny effect: "The ordinary person sees in them the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his own being" (151). And in his 1983 *Playboy* interview, King states that one of his biggest fears when he was a child was that he was going to go insane (230).

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