



Neurophysiology of Horror and Fascination of Danger in Stephen King's Novels: A Neurological Perspective

Dr. RAJI RAMESH (NET,PH.D)

Associate Professor
SK Somaiya College of Arts
Science and Commerce
Mumbai

Abstract

This study is based on the works and life of Stephen King while shedding light on the recent neurocognitive research. His statements will be examined from his writings and interviews, apart from some scientific research findings. He has a deep knowledge on psychological functions and he uses his insights in building characters and situations in his novels. This harmony is known as a potential description to his great success. This study will analyze fascination of danger and horror elements in his writing.

The impact of childhood experience along with its adversity in his work and life is explored in this study. A study of fiction is associated with the role played by important relations in his altruistic bonds and development in the novels like *Shawshank Redemption*, *It* and *The Stand*.

When it comes to his writing, King's imagination and prolific thought process will be determined in the from of his personality traits. This Sensation Seeking storyteller reported pressure and his volume of output will be determined with the state of Flow. His views will be contrasted as per his own statements and findings of previous research on his narrative, suspense building, empathy, and mind psychology. This study will open further research path to appraise and evaluate King's achievements.

Keywords: *Stephen King, Stephen king novels, horror elements, character building, fascination of danger, neurophysiology.*

1. Introduction

There has been a significant advancement in neurological research over the past decades and new details have come out in the mechanisms which control perception. This study is going to apply some of these details for better understanding of works and life of Stephen King, a well-regarded celebrity author. This study will examine his words from his writings and interviews associated with some of the studies. Most of the best-selling and fan-favorite novels by Stephen King have been the inspiration for miniseries instead of feature films. The sheer scope and size of the projects like “*Storm of the Century*”, “*The Shining*” and “*The Stand*” needed screening for at least 3 nights. Each of these dramas have total length of 5 to 6 hours and they are around 3 times longer than just another Hollywood film.

Though King has not allowed the screening of several adaptations in feature films of his own works, he has composed plenty of “teleplays” to make miniseries, along with the aforementioned titles. After their collaboration in “*The Shining*” and “*The Stand*” successfully, Mick Garris is usually the first choice of King when it comes to choose someone to direct a TV mini-series. Garris also directed “*Sleepwalkers* (1992)” and he was the first to team-up with King.

Kids featured in King’s novels are not portrayed to be responsible for errors in judgment and divorces of their parents. Instead, they are forced to deal with those events and the consequences. Like a female lead in a 18th century gothic novel, children featured in his novels are the true victims. Initially, the way they confront with evil is irresistible and their plights show deep heartfelt responses from the viewers. To counterbalance the oppression of their relations with social authority and adults, King shows great energies of his youngsters. They often have supernatural strength or imaginative powers which are so effective that kids should learn to grow with powers who wield them.

His childhood trauma and problems and their effects on his work and life are explored with the study on “anxious attachment (Bowlby, 1977). In addition, role-centric relationships are helpful in his altruistic bonds and his development, which are so common in his stories and novels like “*The Shawshank Redemption*”, “*Rita Hayworth*”, “*It*” and “*The Stand*” that they are often associated with the link between fiction and reality. The vivid imagination and efficiency on his writing will be determined with studies on his “High Sensation Seeking (HSS)” and his personality. He writes the “volume of output” and the pressure which is also evaluated in “state of Flow”. His views will be contrasted with his own statements with the findings on empathy, theory of mind, transportation of narrative, and suspense.

2. Literature Reviews

To approach the element of horror in King's novels, there is a need to go indirectly to the abyss seen via the origins of personality in psychoanalytic theory by Julia, Lacan, Freud and Kristeva. His fiction is taken above all with origins and grounds of being. His works does away with the fascination of the primal/primary movements as well as experiences which force or impel the build-up of the self as a social being. It is worth arguing that his work follows or shows "masculine" trajectory as it is from "mother to text". Hanson (1990) reverses this experiential order to show this and go with epistemological order in psychological theory, which emerged from the focus on text to mother from Freud to Kristeva.

Stephen King is the name to reckon with horror since the 1970s. The similar number of TV shows and films are spawned with a lot of books written by him and they together provide a lot of opportunity to find out how the work of a writer has been adapted for a long time in only one genre and across different media. It is something that can talk about adaptation, TV, and film horror, and about the King. From the premise of authorship ideas to becoming the cinematic, literary, and TV brand, Stephen King discovers the legacy and effects of over 40 years of TV and film adaptations. Initially, Brown (2018) determines the causes for literary success of the King and explains how his style and themes adapted for small and silver screens like "Carrie" by Brian de Palma.

From *Cujo* to *Cell*, he focuses on the horror adaptations in the mainstream multiplex, low-budget horror classics on DVDs like "Children of the Corn" and "The Mangler" franchises, TV works from "Salem's Lot" to "Under the Dome", and non-horror classics like "The Shawshank Redemption" and "Stand By Me". The author defines what his series or films have been with this discussion and how his works have been the inspiration for TV and horror films, and what they discover on changing industrial contexts and preoccupations in the post-1960s horror shows and films.

Scholarly works on the adaptations of Stephen King's works are bygone. It is relevant for TV as his works are the indicators of developments of TV shows since the era of 70s. Kings' adaptations interestingly exist completely in TV network and come up with a useful basis to discuss the TV horror, which ultimately shows a way to consider his work as horror for public. Discussing his works on a small screen is a rich layer indeed. Brown (2014) is discussing about TV adaptations and direct to DVD features as they can be seen most likely on small screens instead of big screens.

Cinematic readings of fiction by Stephen King have been premiered on big screens worldwide along with on VODs on TV screens since the late 70s. King's films have been translated into TV adaptations because longer shows are made for TV, known as miniseries. They have been appeared usually on evenings, i.e., for 2-3

nights. American broadcasts of such films usually have been aired during one among the four “sweep weeks” (i.e., a week in July, November, May, and February where data is collected by “A.C. Nielson” to evaluate and measure number of audiences and popularity of commercial TV channels) and/or a national holiday (Magistrale, 2003a).

In Stephen King’s works, the children appeared in cinema are cursed and blessed at the same time. In short, they are lost most of the time. Usually, they have parents who provide all the material convenience and luxuries to them, but they rarely get love from parents. They may look mentally adjusted on the external world and they often have a troubled past. They live in a dreaded, lonely landscape full of fear of being abandoned. Some of the children in his novels like “Charlie McGee (*Firestarter*)”, “Carrie White (*Carrie*)”, and “Danny Torrance (*The Shining*)” have supernatural strength, while others like “Marty Coslaw (*Silver Bullet*)” and “Gordie Lachance (*Stand by Me*)” have imaginative capabilities to become exceptional, especially in comparison to adults they must either fight with or escape. Virtually every teen in his works is under a barrier. Most of them go through rituals of passage where their innocence must deal with the realities of adulthood. Their journey is always filled with risks and violence. These kids adhere to their idealism and dreamy vigor but they are always endangered by some oppressive behavior or violence from the outside like society, families, abusive and cruel bullies, mentally-ill and immoral people, and several supernatural creatures like ghosts in “*The Shining*” spiders, clown, and internal fears in “*IT*” etc. to haunt their youthful minds with malign energies. Even if they manage to survive physically and morally, they should look for the way to avoid prevailing social values somehow, i.e., usually by contacting adults and outsiders (Magistrale, 2003b).

2.1 Research Gap

It is well regarded that King has a great knowledge on brain functions and psychology of readers, which he makes the best use while writing his novels. The gap between his views on works and findings of studies will be filled in this study to find out the root cause of his great success.

2.2 Research Question

- How Stephen King explores the fascination of danger in children’s mind with his novels?
- What is the thought process of Stephen King when creating anxious statement and sensation-seeking creativity in his works?

2.3 Research Objectives

- To explore the neurological perspective of Stephen King when building fascination of danger, tension, and surprise elements in his works

3. Research Methodology

In order to fulfill the above objectives, this study is based on arguments of Stephen King collected from his interviews and statements. In order to support his theories, this study also collects secondary data from various previous studies done on his novels and his state of mind on his works based on horror and fascination of danger.

4. Analysis of Study

4.1. Fascination of Danger in Children's Mind

Despite being ridden by anxiety, one of the best facts of childhood of Stephen King is that he faced an uncontrollable appeal to the terrifying and the dark. This aspect is explored in his life in two aspects. First, it documents the evidence that he shows the thrill of fear from the drive and early age evolved over time. It is relevant to the frequency of childhood issues that are seen in his novels and life. Different aspects of life can be seen in the second stage to find out whether he had “High Sensation Seeking (HSS)” behavior which could define this contradiction in his autobiography. King is known as a man with own address in “People’s Republic of Paranoia” (Tchen, 2010).

Despite the universal phobias, anxieties, night terrors, and nightmares which haunted him during his childhood, he admits that he already became a fan of horror since his early age. He articulated that he has always been preoccupied with monsters. He constantly read Fate magazine and there are some psychological causes for being attracted to horror stories (Allen, 1979). He faced fascination and fear equally. In “From a Buick 8”, like a dog on the barracks, he would howl in terror and yank ahead as if in the group of some attraction (King, 2018). He faced death brutally, suddenly, and shockingly when he was four years old.

He said, “About an hour after I left, I came back (she said) as white as a ghost. I would not speak for the rest of that day; I would not tell her why I’d not waited to be picked up or phoned that I wanted to come home...It turned out that the kid I had been playing with had been run over by a freight train while playing on or crossing the tracks (years later, my mother told me they had picked up the pieces in a wicker basket). I have no memory of the incident at all” (King, 2010). When the mind faces excessive shocks, it usually turns down that feeling with “Autobiographical Amnesia” (Staniloiu et al., 2018).

However, this experience didn’t dim the penchant for horror in King’s mind. He was impelled to play radio shows that his mother didn’t like for his age. According to King, he first experienced the true horror while listening to Ray Bradbury’s adaptation “Mars is Heaven!” on “Dimension X”. It would have been recorded around 1951 when he was four. He asked his mother to listen but she denied him. She said that it was too upsetting for a young kid like him and her words echoed on his mind over the years in an uncomfortable dream that has no end (King, 2010).

Like a lot of fear-stricken kids from the night onwards, he wouldn't be able to sleep without turning the lights on. He was affected by this fear in hotel rooms even on this day. He always leaves bathroom with the lights on when he was in a hotel, so the devil under his bed won't come up and get him (King et al., 1989). Cantor (2004; 2006) conducted studies on exposure of children to horror content and found long-term and quick adverse psychological impacts. Unaffected by the variety and intensity of symptoms of anxiety when he was five years old, especially during 8 months when he failed to attend first grade because of illness, King consumed comic books with illustrations and gruesome tales vicariously.

He documented that the stuff was built in related to his equipment that he was attracted to. His mother was very much against those horrific 1950's "E.C. Comics" but she allowed him to read them until he was fine (King et al., 1989). He records the effects of Stevenson's Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll, saying that he never forgot it when he was six, his mother used to read Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll and she died with that story. He remembers being wakeful, lying-in bed and reading at night was done (Beahm, 1992). The fascination with the dragging and dark horrors on the night side was extended by visiting the cinema on weekly basis in Pet Cemetery. At the Ritz, he saw "The Haunting" and "I Married a Monster from Outer Space" and he loved everything about horror movies and these were directed with titles by Roger Corman from Edgar Allan Poe (King, 2014).

He became the most adapted author of all time due to the vivid nature of narratives and he may have origins in the visuals of graphic comics he read and films he watched in childhood. According to Chris Chesley, his friend since childhood, he learned writing from what he watched on screen at Ritz (Beahm, 2015). King admits that he still witnesses things in cinema and writes everything down. It feels like a movie and he writes the same way (Beahm, 1992). His reading turns out to be sophisticated as he grows older. He read Dracula by Bram Stoker and his discovery is regarded with H.P. Lovecraft at 14 as a turning point. It was his seriousness which was responded by the dowsing rod (King, 2014).

4.2. Sensation-Seeking Creativity

King has constantly mentioned that his fondness for darkness was quite natural in him. It conforms to his personality trait. He was built with the "unquiet coffin" and a "love of the night" (King, 2014). According to Zuckerman & Litle (1986), it is found that "high-sensation seeking (HSS)" person has a great interest in gloomy themes, while people with "low-sensation seeking" behavior always consider these themes boring and mostly avoid them. HSS people love the ambiguity, complexity, and oddness of surreal art in comparison to low sensation-seeking people who love representational art (Furnham & Avison, 1997).

When it comes to creativity, high-sensation seeking people are more likely to think original and are appealed to bizarre, hypothetical, and pseudoscientific concepts (Gallese& Goldman., 1998). While introducing “nightmares and dreamscapes”, King added that he believes in all the weird items as it was known to believe in it over the years since he was 6 years old. His belief gets stronger in an age when human imagination is developed and they were true to him (King, 1993). They are likely to engage in oneiric thinking and primary process (Schultz & Schultz, 2016).

Sometimes, the shortest distance is not straight between two points for a kid and this is how people dream and think and he associates that kind of state of dream with increased level of state of mind (Smith, 1989). King asks “Waking? Sleeping? Which side of the line are the dreams really on?” while introducing “Dreamscapes and Nightmares” (King, 1993). He added that the stream of thoughts still flows on to drive his creativity the moment he completes a book or stops working on it. He says that he gets all such crazy dreams when he sleeps. All of them are basically not good as any machinery that he has for writing novels doesn’t stop. It must run somewhere if it doesn’t go on the page and he gets such dreams (Green, 2014).

According to the studies, “Sensation Seeking” subscales with the potential of bright imagery across cultures (Rao, 1978; Blankstein, 1976). According to him, his imagination is too large to his head and he used to spend plenty of unhappy hours. He was unable to turn off the visuals with this imagination once he triggers them (Norden, 1983). King also shows a lot of features in this personality. For instance, sensation seeking is the most stimulating indicator of initial drug abuse and use in categories of drugs than any other way of psychopathology or personality (Jaffe & Archer, 1987; Donohew et al., 1999).

Since his teen years, King used to smoke. He used to smoke at least two packs of cigarettes every day even when he was too poor. Another common issue is alcohol for people with high sensation-seeking behavior. According to King, he started drinking when he became adult, i.e., by 18 (Green, 2014). Then, he switched to cocaine, which is very common among such HSS qualities as he told in an interview, “Yeah, coke. I was a heavy user from 1978 until 1986, something like that. ‘Did you write on coke?’ ‘Oh, yeah, I had to. I mean, coke was different from booze. Booze, I could wait, and I didn’t drink or anything. But I used coke all the time” (Green, 2014).

When it comes to “Misery”, he added that it is a book on cocaine and “Annie Wilkes” was cocaine to him. She was his biggest fan (Green, 2014). As his addiction gone constant with impulsivity and worsened, he turned out to be polymorphous in drug abuse. King consumed everything from mouthwash to analgesics. He enjoyed NyQuil, Listerine and so on (Gross, 2000). The taste of thumping and violent music is another symptom of HSS (Nater et al., 2005). King shares in his writings that he used to play music on full volume. According to him, he enjoys loud music and hard rock like Metallica, AC/DC, “Guns N’ Roses” and so on

(King, 2014). HSS is a very genetic quality (Derringer et al., 2010). Along with impulsive desertion of family and constant travels, restless wanderings, multiple addictions, and infidelities of his father are the symptoms of HSS.

5. Results

Human baby is highly vulnerable by nature. Its development, survival and growth rely on the bonds which are nurtured with the caregiver. Extreme experiences in childhood interrelate with genetics to change the brain function and structure, affecting cognitive and emotional growth. There are four key patterns for being attached, i.e., avoidant, secure, disorganized, and anxious (Bretherton, 1992). There are evidences which are second to his experiences in childhood. He discusses about his anxious attachment. He expresses his anxiety in his work and life. Protective factors like unconditional support and mother's love and its responsiveness have protected him from several adverse effects of this kind of attachment.

5.1. Anxious Statement

A major event took place in King's life when he was two years old and his father left his family rudely. His mother was homeless, poor, denounced as single mother, and saddled with debt. It created a deep fear exist in King that she would also abandon him like his father. His insecurity raised up with constant change of residence as his mother travelled across the nation for six years and stayed with both sides of relatives until things turned unbearable. Usually, he and his brother were left alone at young age at home as the mother had to work outside for earning daily bread and butter.

King was triggered with a range of attachment due to this anxiety, called "anxious attachment (Bretherton, 1992). With this kind of attachment, people are known with intense craving for intimacy and closeness which they seek anxiously (Hudson et al, 2020). They need utmost responsiveness and approval from the person they are attached to. They are highly sensitive to even the smallest changes in emotions from others (Fraley, 2016). They are likely to show the signs of emotional distress, avoidance, alcohol issues, and interpersonal problems in adulthood (Allen, 1979).

King was angry, depressed, and alcohol-addicted when he was teen. He was perceived as a loner and outsider who is stick to his books by others and he also looked himself like that. Insecurities and depression are the signs of anxious attachment. The intensity of devotion of his mother saved him from his anxieties due to desertion and fulfilled some of his needs. Despite working several hours being exhausted in tedious jobs, she used to find some time to read stories to her children and nurtured the passion in King to become an author.

He turned his fantasies into fiction with his desire for the dark, which became the ambition for his life that he got from his father. He used to ask himself that he doesn't know how to live the life of someone else (King, 2014). King pursued this goal out of obsession from early childhood and spent almost every moment he had in writing and reading. He identified himself as an author and affirmed by his mother and then subsequently by his wife. They may have bettered the lack of self-esteem due to anxious attachment. His brother David cared for him, published his writings, and played a role of a parent. On the other side, his mother nurtured an inflexible work ethic in him that gave him the structure of grinding rejection, alcoholism, and poverty over the years.

An important day in life of Stephen King was when he came across Tabitha Spruce, who was his mainstay and muse. She seemed to be capable to fulfill his experiential hunger, and his need for security and intimacy. When was struggling to wring during the stormy days of poverty, addiction, parenthood, and inner rage, she supported him. When he built the character named "Wendy" in "*The Shining*", one can get the glimpse of Tabitha. She also played two important roles which changed the course of his life dramatically. First, she was fishing the writings of Carrie off the trashcan. Second, she organized an intervention to keep him from going over the drug abuse. She became his nearest critic who is at the center of his life.

King's work and life echoes the lasting impact of adversity in childhood. The urge to deal with the ghosts of insecurity constantly has been the trait of his adulthood. It is observed in his daily life which was obsessively scheduled, intensity of his bonds built with his choice to live in his childhood place Maine and his children, along with fidelity of marriage. His book "Pet Sematary" is a classic example to understand what he feels for his children, which he thought too disturbing to launch. He shows the team-up of authors who are alcoholic and insecure in *The Shining*; children who fight evil adults with superpowers in *Firestarter* and *The Shining*; strength of group and individual bonds in a day in *The Stand*, *Rita Hayworth*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*; and loners who fight back against the oppressors in *Carrie*. He never felt like a child who is abandoned and never stopped thinking as a child who is constantly haunted by the absence of his father. It will never change and affected the whole life from his marriage and childhood to his books (Ratna, 2020).

6. Conclusion

With this study, it is observed that keen knowledge of King on the nature of consciousness of humans is closely associated with research on brain function as observed in his fiction. Advancements in neuroscience now provide better insights to these hitherto secretive events. His past always haunts his creativity. His fiction consists of a heroic arc which shows his mother Ruth's and his own struggles and affirms the vital goodness and resilience of his protagonists. Tabitha, King, and Ruth have nurtured each other with adversity. Similarly, he develops protagonists who demonstrate the importance of courage, persistence, and selflessness. He invests the readers into the struggles and makes them vulnerable to the same of other characters to trigger specific brain

functions. Hence, his stories lead to chemical reactions and structural changes in readers' brains in a way to make them more socially caring and human.

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