

## **“Dark Turns and Exhalations”: Stephen King’s Side-Steps into Childhood**

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### **Introduction: Steve Reads Stevens, or “A Child That Sings Itself to Sleep”**

The sixth and final stanza of Wallace Stevens’ elegiacal poem, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” offers a cryptic and image-rich meditation on the complex connections between childhood, monstrosity and death:

This is the mythology of modern death  
And these, in their mufflements, monsters of elegy,  
Of their own marvel made, of pity made,

Compounded and compounded, life by life,  
These are death’s own supremest images,  
The pure perfections of parental space,

The children of a desire that is the will,  
Even of death, the beings of the mind  
In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare...

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,  
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,  
The people, those by which it lives and dies.<sup>1</sup>

The poem develops a procession of troubling images as a production of mind, culminating in its portrayal of mind itself as “a child that sings itself to sleep.” Among the products of this child-mind, this mind-as-child, this mind-as-generativity, are the monstrous beings on whom the child’s life depends, that is, “death’s own supremest images,” which are the “pure perfections of parental space.” These monsters are adults, or the child’s ideas of them (which is, ultimately, the same thing), and they are elegiacal because their existence is predicated on their loss of childhood, on their separation from the imaginative unity of the child, the mind-child, that made them. Adults are monsters evicted from and yet a part of the plurality of the poem (or so the child-mind imagines), separated onto a separate realm and yet intricately interwoven with children as caretakers on whom the child depends for survival and who in turn depend on the child since without the child, the child-mind, there would be no poem, no life of the mind.

Toshiaki Komura reads this poem as an elegy presenting an allegory of death, arguing that it uses allegory as “a cognitive mechanism of naming the unnamed, which is symptomatic of the hypertrophied subjectivity of melancholia. The allegorical nature of the poem signifies the poem’s attempt to conceptualize death, the epitome of the unimaginable.”<sup>2</sup> Komura interprets Stevens’ poem as an unusual elegy insofar as it undermines “the consolatory function of elegy as one of finding, in the face of a disruption and loss of one life, a sense of presence or continuity in other lives or

substitutive forms of lives including that of the poet-speaker the consolatory function integral to traditional elegies.”<sup>3</sup> The poem achieves this disruption by ironic deflation of its chief allegorical figures and by gesturing insistently toward its own fictionality, its own production of word-images, a gesturing definitive of Stevens’ poetic practice of working toward a “supreme fiction:”

Instead of basking in the fictive comfort of the “pure perfections of parental space” (VI. 6), the child “sings itself to sleep”; there is no parent, the mythical “mother of us all” or anyone who would lullaby the child into sleep. This ambiguous image is a simulacrum of solitude. The child is left alone, with the knowledge that the consolatory narrative is a fiction but that it is the only thing he’s left with.<sup>4</sup>

The poem’s evocative, indefinite images offer an aperture into our discussion of Stephen King’s almost obsessive and highly insightful preoccupation with childhood and those who occupy this contested state. While it is unclear whether King was influenced by this poem in particular, he has professed a long-standing admiration for Stevens’ poetry. In a 2006 interview, King states, “I always liked Wallace Stevens, although I didn’t have a fucking clue what that man was talking about.”<sup>5</sup> That King’s admiration admits a lack of rational comprehension would surely have pleased Stevens, with his insistence that a poem must “resist the intelligence / Almost successfully.”<sup>6</sup> Surely, this insistence itself, the sine non qua of Stevens’ poetic pursuit of “supreme fictions,” is a powerful part of his poetry’s appeal for King who, we hope to show, works within a similar imaginary framework, although through very different literary forms.

While King never mentions “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” its imagery nevertheless resonates powerfully with the way his own copious writings and intellect negotiate and express the complexities of childhood. King does, however, quote from and refer to other poems by Stevens, particularly those that seem to express a child’s-eye-view of death; a view that is reflected in King’s writing as well as in Stevens’ poem above.

King’s writings have shaped how millions of readers over multiple generations understand and experience what it is to be a child. King’s ruminations about children and childhood are nostalgic reflections by an adult who is deeply concerned with preserving his own childness, as well as that of his readers, while recognizing that this childness is something that always eludes strict definition. It is a coming to terms with one’s own past lived childhood experience, a grasping of experience through the intellect, memories, testimonies, which, at the same time, fails to be grasped as those ruminations fade out onto the ungraspable, unfathomable aspects of experience.<sup>7</sup>

*Childness* herein deviates from the adjectives *childish* and *child-like*, which are common place holders in our vocabulary about children and childhood, where *childish* has become a derogatory and dismissive term towards anything that has to do with children, and where *child-like* denotes a romanticized and regress into childhood, into a previously occupied space marked by naivete, immaturity, and unknowing. *Childness*, however, preserves that which has to do with children, that which can and which cannot be represented, tapping into the affects and percepts that we have associated with children—curiosity, excitement, and openness—while making them available to any age. *Childness* never leaves us; we just risk closing ourselves off from it.<sup>8</sup>

The liminality of childness as that which holds space for both representation and non-representation touches the liminality of the mind, the child-mind or mind-as-child, as in Stevens' elegiacal poem. The mind is not the brain, but it is inter-relational, interbeing, interpersonal. Daniel J. Siegel defines it as an "energy and information flow," an "embodied and relational emergent process of self-organization that regulates that flow."<sup>9</sup> Mind is the regulation of an energy flow, linked to an intuitive rather than an intellectual way of knowing, which children are privy to. As King frequently reminds readers, the greater horror comes not from the wonder of a supernatural threat, but from the severing of this flow, its packaging into preformed molds and itineraries that cut us off from the primacy of childness. In short, it is the privileging of the intellect, associated with the adult, over the intuition, which cuts us off, a severance assisted by the adjectives *child-ish* and *child-like*, that dismiss and endanger an intuitive engagement with the world. *Childness*, in its liminality, opens out to this mind-flow, to the production of word-images such as in Stevens' poems, which "almost successfully" escape the intelligence by creating both unity and plurality. *Childness* allows for an open-ended production and productivity of mind as it communicates with the world.

The singing child in Stevens' poem and the characters in King's horror fictions (both adult and child) whose *childness* enables them to survive, and even vanquish, supernatural horrors, are figurations of this. Komura writes of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus": "the ambiguous image of the lone child singing himself to sleep in the closing stanza becomes not only desolate but also heroic. The 'pure perfections of parental space' may be an unpersuasive fiction, but the song the child sings to himself, the song he creates, becomes a fiction that is real (VI. 6)."<sup>10</sup> As we will show through a discussion of a number of King's fictions, his goal of producing fictions that "become real" by inspiring childness in readers is similar, as is evident from the dedication with which *It* (1986) opens. King dedicates this novel to his children, "who taught me how to be free," with the message: "Kids, fiction is the truth inside the lie, and the truth of this fiction is simple enough: the magic exists."<sup>11</sup>

Further, the singing child in Stevens' poem has a sibling in, and may even have partially inspired, Deleuze and Guattari's child, who "gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, centre at the heart of chaos."<sup>12</sup> The child here engages in self-organization through song, moving from chaos to organization, where the child

opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, once created by the circle itself. As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters. This time, it is in order to join with the forces of the future, cosmic forces.... One ventures from home on the thread of a tune. Along sonorous, gestural, motor lines that mark the customary path of a child and graft themselves onto or begin to bud "lines of drift" with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities.<sup>13</sup>

The child is able to cope with fear and anxiety through song, and is autonomous in its creation of stability within instability, as the child encounters the chaos of experience. This passage bestows an ability to cope, a self-mastery, on the child, for which the words *childish* and *child-like* do not account, but which *childness* permits.

We see King's writing about children and childhood as being primarily preoccupied with preserving *childness* and producing an awaking of its characters and readers from the stories that we adults tell about children, that children tell about adults. King's fictions of supernatural horror especially offer various ways of making childness available to adults and children, while refusing to define it fully, preserving both its elusiveness and decentering force.

King's use of Stevens' poetic imagery in exploring the intersections between childhood and monstrosity, between childness and that which kills it, is most evident in his popular novel of small-town vampiric terror, '*Salem's Lot* (1975), in many ways King's prototypical coming-of-age novel. King repeatedly re-works many of the connections the novel makes between supernatural monstrosity and childness in his subsequent writings. '*Salem's Lot* is also a self-conscious exploration of its own literary parentage via stylistic homage and explicit allusion. The novel tellingly situates itself in terms of precursors including Stoker's *Dracula*, Golden Age horror comics, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Matheson's *I am Legend*. While each of these is in some ways crucial to *Salem's Lot*'s strikingly vivid realizations of childness via monstrosity, its most telling and resonant allusion is to Stevens' 1922 poem "The Emperor of Ice Cream," referred to on separate occasions by both of the novel's primary adult protagonists, Ben Mears and Matt Burke, both of whom are possessed of a childness that enables them to confront the supernatural horror threatening the town.

The poem provides the title for, and is included as an epigraph to, the novel's lengthy second section, in which Kurt Barlow's vampirism begins to spread through the town in earnest.<sup>14</sup> The startling concatenation of sweetness and cold inhering in the ice cream of Stevens' poem becomes King's chief means of expressing the mingled attraction and repulsion of vampirism. The sweetness and pleasure of ice cream signifies childhood sensuality, wonder, and pleasure. Inseparable from it, however, is the cold; the icy, implacable certainty of death as the end of all pleasures. The novel's English teacher, Matt Burke, states as much as he stands over the body of recently-vampirized Mike Ryerson:

It made him think of that Wallace Stevens poem about the dead woman. "Let it be the finale of seem," he misquoted. "The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream."

Matt looked at him sharply, and for a moment his control seemed to waver. "What's that?" Parkins asked.

"A poem," Matt said. "It's from a poem about death."

"Sounds more like the Good Humour man to me," Parkins said, and tapped his ash into the vase again.<sup>15</sup>

Matt's quotation will be recollected, and corrected, by Ben later in the novel. He recalls the poem when things are darkest, as he returns to the Marsten house to face Barlow, who has destroyed all his beloved allies, with the exception of Mark: "Let be be finale of

seem. The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream. Who had said that? Matt. Matt was dead. Susan was dead. Miranda was dead. Wallace Stevens was dead, too.”<sup>16</sup>

Stevens’ cryptic, evocative poem can be understood as a child’s-eye view of death and pleasure: the sweetness of life, of fleshly pleasure, with the coldness of death, the void of eternity. The promise of vampirism is an eternity of childhood, an eternity of ice cream, of endless pleasure in the absence of responsibility, with no need to grow up. The novel makes clear, however, that its reality is undying, but also unliving and unloving, an existence of predatory puppetry. Barlow, perceived by most of his victims as a paternal figure, is a grotesque embodiment of “the pure perfections of parental space,” even deadlier than the dullness of the town’s adults.

Vampirism, in short, is a false promise to preserve childness (one later focalized by the classic teen vampire film, *Lost Boys*, a film greatly indebted to King’s novel, and one which makes the equation between vampirism and J.M. Barrie’s Neverland explicit). In reality, the novel leaves no doubt, vampirism, with its stasis, opposition to growth and change, submission to an absolute authoritarian-parental mastery, and destruction of wonder through relentless hunger, is an even more thorough annihilation of childness than the deadened adulthood that most of the novel’s minor adult characters experience. It is their lack of childness that ultimately leads these characters from the figurative undeath of an adulthood without childness, to the literal undeath of Barlow’s vampirism. We will consider *Salem’s Lot* at length below. First, however, we turn to King’s highly influential, deliberately idiosyncratic autobiographical survey of horror in popular culture, *Danse Macabre*, which presents a theory of horror’s popularity and power in terms of a conception of childness, the quality of the child-mind that King invites and cultivates in his readers.

## **Part One: “Kids are bent”: King’s Dance with Our Inner Child**

In his introduction to the 2010 reprint of *Danse Macabre*, King writes that the central thesis of the 1981 original “still holds true,” this thesis being that a “good horror story is one that functions on a symbolic level, using fictional (and sometimes supernatural) events to help us understand our own deepest real fears.”<sup>17</sup> The rhetorical persona of *Danse Macabre* is similar to the narrative voice of most of King’s novels. His markedly American Pragmatist philosophizing about horror is deliberately folksy, digressive, and marked by self-deprecating humor and conversational intimacy. It is also avuncular; regardless of the age of the book’s actual readers, King presents himself as addressing their “inner children,” presenting himself as an in-the-know-adult who is still a child-at-heart. The King who narrates *Danse Macabre* comes off as a weird uncle, one who encourages a youthful love of horror movies and pulp fiction against the narrowly moralizing prejudices of parents, Gradgrinding teachers, “chickenshit” academics and parochial religious leaders. It is an authorial impression his 2010 remarks reinforce, as King reminds readers that “cinematic horror is a potent art form, and there’s a lot more going on under the surface than immediately meets the eye. Therein lies its many dark pleasures. And the next time your parents or your significant other ask you why you want to go and see that crap, tell them this: Stephen King sent me.”<sup>18</sup>

King's authorial persona here combines Mark Twain with Ray Bradbury's Mr. Dark and Spider-Man's Uncle Ben. With Twainesque avuncularity, he pulls the curtain back on the pretensions of academics, literary critics, and Satanic-panicked parents alike. Like Mr. Dark, he offers "dark pleasures" to readers that can only be attained by touching, nostalgically, the terrifying and wonderful magic of their own childhoods. Like Uncle Ben, he suggests that, with these dark powers and pleasures comes great responsibility. This authorial is an extension of the narrative voice in many of King's novels, especially from 1975 through to the mid 1980s. It is an authorial persona founded on King's conception of the necessary relationship between the power of childhood and the pleasures of horror.

*Danse Macabre* links King's theories about horror's appeal directly to his meditations on the relationship between childhood and adult consciousness, and he illustrates both with vivid personal recollections. Most important is the experience King recounts in a movie theatre in 1957. In the midst of a screening of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, then-ten-year old King learned that the Russians had successfully launched a satellite, Sputnik, into space. King's relation of this anecdote reveals a great deal both about his theory of horror's appeal, and what we might call his theory of childness. The book begins with the admission, "For me, the terror—the real terror, as opposed to whatever demons and bogeys which might have been living in my own mind—began on an afternoon in October of 1957. I had just turned ten. And, as was only fitting, I was in a movie theater."<sup>19</sup>

In its uncanny synthesis of fantastic menace (the film's enigmatic alien) and apparent real-world threat (the evident Russian superiority in the Space Race), the anecdote presents what King sees as the "two levels" on which all great horror operates: "novels, movies, TV and radio programs—even the comic books—dealing with horror always do their work on two levels," the "gross-out"<sup>20</sup> and "the dance," a moving, rhythmic search" for where readers live at their "most primitive level,"<sup>21</sup> their "phobic pressure points" that allow the creator to unite the conscious and subconscious mind with one potent idea," a concept not far removed from Eliot's conception of the objective correlative.<sup>22</sup> As the rest of *Danse Macabre* makes clear, this "most primitive level" of being is King's conception of what we call *childness*, of the primary, intuitive awareness that children have and that adults (and children who have been forced to "grow up" too quickly) tend to lose, but that the "dance" offered by good horror helps them to regain. *Danse Macabre* is explicit about this: "God knows why so many adults have confused enlightenment with emotional and imaginative bank robbery, but they have; they cannot seem to rest content until the wonder has flickered and died out of their children's eyes."<sup>23</sup> Good horror, King insists, is a way of preserving, or of regaining, this lost paradise of childness. It knocks "the adult props out from under us," tumbles "us back down the slide into childhood."<sup>24</sup> He puts it like this toward the end of the book: "The job of the fantasy writer, or the horror writer, is to bust the walk of that tunnel vision wide for a little while; to provide a single powerful spectacle for the third eye. The job of the fantasy-horror writer is to make you, for a little while, a child again"<sup>25</sup> and the fantasist "begins to play [with an idea] as a child would, speculating about children from other dimensions."<sup>26</sup>

King presents that day in 1957 as a kind of coming-of-age ritual that reverberates through the numerous adolescent characters in his fictions: "We were fertile ground for

the seeds of terror, we war babies; we had been raised in a strange circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism, and national hubris.”<sup>27</sup> This, King claims, “was the end of the sweet dream, and the beginning of the nightmare. The children grasped the implications of what the Russians had done as well and as quickly as anyone else.”<sup>28</sup> Importantly, King does not portray this experience as marking a linear transition from childhood into adulthood; instead, he presents it as “a dark turn,” a kind of side-step at once (to echo Stockton’s terms<sup>29</sup>) broadly strange and slightly queer. King is keenly aware of how much the difference between the two states depends upon an awareness of these “two levels” of significance, an awareness of the conscious and unconscious mind more likely to be lost on, or forgotten by, adults. Children, King suggests, have an intuitive understanding that “[w]e make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.”<sup>30</sup> He suggests that we start “by assuming that the tale of horror, no matter how primitive, is allegorical by its very nature; that it is symbolic. Assume that it is talking to us, like a patient on a psychoanalyst’s couch, about one thing while it means another.”<sup>31</sup> King suggests that the most powerful fictions of horror are resonant because they use the fantastic as an open window onto the “real” horrors that helped give rise to them. It is the stories that we make up to help us cope and make sense, at least intellectually, of our experience that reassure but also terrify us, as they come dangerously close to glossing over that which they figure.

The bend, the side-step, that King alludes to in his experience at the cinema is one that conflates non-fiction and fiction, producing a “reality” in which the conscious mind is highly alert, highly aware of the coming together of those two strands. It is a side-step into awareness, into consciousness, into being awake.

‘Salem’s Lot refers to a similar side-step. “There are no words for childhood’s dark turns and exhalations. A wise child recognizes it and submits to the necessary consequences. A child who counts the costs is a child no longer.”<sup>32</sup> Such side-steps are a form of growth different from a linear, teleological “growing up.” They are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari’s singing child who creates a territory within chaos, just like Steven’s singing child. It is this overlay of child narratives, this glossing over of the child’s experience, which makes for the alienation that King refers to, where the pressure point becomes the torn feeling of not being able to mediate, of having lost a child identity that one is still, awkwardly, performing.

This troubling experience remains troubling as the bent child-now-future-adult searches for what has been lost, a child-piece, a blissful childhood (never the way it is imagined to have been). This is *childness*, which has never really been lost, but has been buried under the socio-psychological demands of adulting, or being adulted. It is still accessible and makes for what King calls a “phobic pressure point” in horror fiction. Virginia L. Blum mockingly calls the Inner Child “the best child... not only because it is safely stored *inside* the ego but because it will never contest the past the adult revises arbitrarily. Its beatific and imperturbable silence is precisely why it is accorded a ‘voice.’”<sup>33</sup> The figure of the Inner Child, appealed to throughout *Danse Macabre*, aligns with this discourse. The Inner Child is silent and subordinate to the narratives that adults tell themselves about their past childhood, singing their song, while also creating a distance due to it being a wounded child, a wounded place, that nobody dares to touch (who wants touch pain?). The Inner Child solidifies the adult’s entanglement in childhood, but also creates a gap as a site that is painful and undesirable (how glad we

are to be adults now). This denial of *childness* builds pressure in need of an opening and a release so that *childness* may be lived. It is this link between *childness* and/as the Inner Child that we see at work in King's horror fiction, with its cultivation of an active *childness* in readers.

## **Part Two: Returning to ‘Salem’s Lot: Vampirism, Childness and Pederasty**

The “Uncle Steve” rhetorical role *Danse Macabre* employs for this invocation of childness is, effectively, a fusion of the subversive, avuncular writer and the invasive, avuncular vampire who struggle in a tug-of-war for the life of ‘*Salem’s Lot*’s adolescent protagonist, Mark Petrie. The first is King’s authorial double, Ben Mears (who becomes, for Mark, a kind of homosocial mentor, Batman to his Robin, if you will) and the second is the novel’s evil supernatural antagonist, Kurt Barlow. It is a parallelism that King repeats with minor variations in a number of his later fictions, including *It*, in which Bill Denbrough is opposed to that protean figuration of the horror writer’s imagination itself, the cosmic monster that wears the mask of Pennywise. Yet, both novels make clear, it is only through the writer’s figurative Inner Child that the real monsters can be overcome.

King’s emphasis on the apotropaic and childness-preservative power of horror is figured in ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ by Mark’s impressive collection of monster models from classic Universal horror films. These figures mark the boundaries of his childhood, and it is through them that he glimpses the reality of adults, and the reality of monsters, that lurk beyond: “Mark Petrie was working on a model of Frankenstein’s monster in his room and listening to his parents down in the living room.”<sup>34</sup> With Chekhovian inevitability, Mark’s models save his life during his first face-to-face encounter with the “real life” monsters; specifically, his now-undead friend Danny:

The plastic ghoul was walking through a plastic graveyard and one of the monuments was in the shape of a cross.

With no pause for thought or consideration (both would have come to an adult—his father, for instance—and both would have undone him), Mark swept up the cross...<sup>35</sup>

Model monsters, a toy cross, childish things. Yet Mark only survives the encounter because he refuses to follow St. Paul’s dubious advice and put them away. These figures also figure something further; King’s conception of the value and appeal of fiction, and especially of supernatural horror fiction, as an apotropeia against the loss of childness. It is through his love of fictional monsters that Mark is equipped to survive the “real” ones. This is a metonym for the importance of supernatural horror in King’s writings, for those imaginary monsters conjured from a desire to make the magic real, to keep the magic alive—to, in other words, exercise the author’s own childness in a way that he hopes will invoke a similar response in readers, be they children or adults.

That it is Mark's childness, that very quality that King believes "good horror" helps keep alive, that saves his life is reinforced by the final paragraph in the chapter:

The night before, Matt Burke had faced such a dark thing and been stricken by a heart seizure brought on by fright; tonight Mark Petrie had faced one, and ten minutes later lay in the lap of sleep, the plastic cross still grasped loosely in his right hand like a child's rattle. Such is the difference between men and boys.<sup>36</sup>

The narrator's remark closely parallels *Danse Macabre*'s insistence "that children are better able to deal with fantasy and terror *on its own terms* than their elders are."<sup>37</sup>

*'Salem's Lot* is not just King's first novelistic map of childhood, it is also his first fully developed meditation on literary influence and authorial apprenticeship. *'Salem's Lot* is, for King, what "The Prelude" was for Wordsworth; it offers readers considerable insight into the interdependence of these ideas through an extensive use of literary parentage as an aperture into the psychological and cultural construction of childhood.

Its adaptation of Stoker, as King admits, makes its portrayal of the shift from childhood to adulthood more resonant, amplifying Sedgwick's conception of growing up as "adaptation." Given that the child is already complete, as Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, the enterprise of growing up to adulthood becomes one of adaptation. Sedgwick writes, "Adaptation emphasizes how an original is being altered, modified, fitted for a different use, maybe even decentered, drawn out of an earlier orbit by the gravitational pull of an alien body."<sup>38</sup> The pull of adulthood, that alien body, from a child's perspective, then is one of ageing, of death (*Erziehung*, in German, contains the word *to pull*). The novel's vampirism is such an alien pull. Kurt Barlow's name itself suggests a shortening, a lowering, of life. But it is also a promise of immortality, of perpetual childhood, as Danny Glick demonstrates and as Mark Petrie is deeply aware.

Stoker's novel works for King because of how directly and powerfully it appeals to the "primitive level" that he sees as the root of horror's appeal: "Stoker creates his fearsome, immortal monster much the way a child can create the shadow of a giant rabbit on the wall simply by wiggling his fingers in front of a light."<sup>39</sup> King's reading of Stoker is also informed by both popular psychoanalysis and the Victorian repression hypothesis.

Parroting Freud, he claims that,

the sexual basis of Dracula is an infantile oralism coupled with a strong interest in necrophilia (and pedophilia, some would say, considering Lucy in her role as the "bloofer lady.") It is also sex without responsibility, and in the unique and amusing term coined by Erica Jong, the sex in Dracula can be seen as the ultimate zipless fuck. This infantile, repressive attitude toward sex may be one reason why the vampire myth, which in Stoker's hands seems to say "I will rape you with my mouth and you will love it; instead of contributing potent fluid to your body, I will remove it," has always been so popular with adolescents.<sup>40</sup>

King is hardly alone in his diagnosis of the transgressive sexuality implicit in Stoker's novel. Yet, according to Elizabeth Miller,

If we take Bram Stoker at his word, we must assume he did not deliberately intend his novel to be concerned with sex. We need only recall his comment to William Gladstone in 1897 that “There is nothing base in this book” (Letter 48) and his later declaration that “the only emotions that in the long run harm are those arising from sex impulses” (“Censorship” 436).<sup>41</sup>

In Miller’s words, “every imaginable sexual practice, fantasy and fear has been thrust upon the pages of the novel: rape (including gang rape), aggressive female sexuality, fellatio, homoeroticism, incest, bestiality, necrophilia, paedophilia, and sexually transmitted disease.”<sup>42</sup> It is a tendency that King propagates in *Danse Macabre*. It is ironic, then, that he goes on to claim that, with ‘*Salem’s Lot*, he jettisoned “the sexual angle, feeling that in a society where homosexuality, group sex, oral sex, and even, God save us, water sports have become matters of public discussion,”<sup>43</sup> “the sexual engine that powered much of Stoker’s book might have run out of gas.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite King’s claim to have abjected the (no-longer-sufficiently-transgressive) sexuality of Stoker’s novel, ‘*Salem’s Lot* uses vampirism to flirt with many different forms of non-normative sexuality, including homosexuality, BDSM, and, most importantly, pederasty. Throughout the novel, the sexuality of the vampire shares with the sexuality of the child a quality at once phantasmal and forbidden, unmistakably present yet endlessly deniable. Eve Sedgwick states that, “Aside from the special status granted by psychoanalysis, especially under the influence of Lacan, to the identities ‘male’ and female,’ all other complex intersections of behaviour, subjectivity, self-perceived identity and other-ascribed identity are treated as both completely transparent and historyless by psychoanalytic discourse,” which tends to “presume and reinscribe the lie of universal heterosexuality.”<sup>45</sup>

Sedgwick illustrates this point with a critique of Kaja Silverman’s synonymizing uses of the terms “sodomy” and “pederasty,” explaining that the latter “is not the name of a genital act at all but of a historically specific, relational orientation of desire by an adult toward a youth.”<sup>46</sup> ‘*Salem’s Lot* programmatically makes a similar distinction by emphasizing the opposition between Mark’s relationship with Ben Mears and Straker’s with Barlow. Through these contrasts, ‘*Salem’s Lot* reveals “the lie of universal heterosexuality,” while at the same time reinforcing it in ways its partial openness to the “queerness” of the child can’t entirely avoid.

The relationship between Mark and Ben is focalized by the novel’s ambiguous opening sentence, which establishes its preoccupation with the relationships among childhood, parenthood, literary paternity and the pleasures of horror: “Almost everyone thought the man and the boy were father and son.”<sup>47</sup> This assumption suggestively establishes that they are not father and son, without establishing what the nature of their relationship is; it suggests the possibility of a pederastic relationship. Even if the rest of the novel leaves little doubt that this relationship is not sexual, it at the same time emphasizes that both are perceived as “queer” by many in the town.

Mark is surely a “queer child,” or at least “broadly strange” in Stockton’s term.<sup>48</sup> “At age twelve, Mark Petrie was a little smaller than the average and slightly delicate-looking. Yet he moved with a grace and liteness that is not the common lot of boys his age, who seem mostly made up of knees and elbows and scabs. His complexion was fair, almost milky, and his features, which would be considered aquiline later in life, now

seemed a trifle feminine.”<sup>49</sup> As Steven Bruhm points out, “Mark Petrie is a four-eyes queer boy” accused of a proclivity to “suck the old hairy root”. Ben Mears is, according to Ann Norton, no fitting suitor for her daughter Susan because he is “a sissy boy” whose novel *Air-Dance* contains a “homosexual rape scene in the prison section.”<sup>50</sup> Both characters are coded “queer” due precisely to their sensitivity, their insight, their openness—their childness.

Bruhm also notes the novel’s alignment of queerness with the verbal: “Like the homosexual in these novels, the protagonist demonstrates a desire for verbal acuity that is coded queer.”<sup>51</sup> The town’s perception of Ben as “queer,” despite the novel’s insistent emphasis on his heterosexuality, derives from this alignment. Bruhm goes on to claim that “Barlow’s homosexuality may signal rural Maine’s fear of pederastic invasion by gay men whose visibility has increased since Stonewall.”<sup>52</sup> The pederastic connotations of Barlow’s relationship with Straker are campily amplified during Mark’s capture. Straker restrains him to await his master’s ministrations after sunset:

“You’re trembling, young master,” Straker said mockingly. “Your body is all in hard little knots. Your flesh is white—but it will be whiter! Yet you need not be so afraid. My Master has the capacity for kindness. He is much loved, right here in your own town. There is only a little sting, like the doctor’s needle, and then sweetness. And later on, you will be let free. You will go see your mother and father, yes? You will see them after they sleep.”<sup>53</sup>

This passage is King’s most direct engagement with Harker’s seduction by Dracula’s Brides in Stoker’s novel. ‘Salem’s Lot’s portrayal of the vampire as an avuncular, European aristocrat, one half of an ambiguous same-sex partnership, is in part King’s response not just to the sexuality in *Dracula*, but to the Stoker’s sexuality. British, histrionic, connotatively pederastic, subordinated to a vampire whom he helped bring to small-town America, Straker is, in some ways, a caricature of Stoker. At the risk of pushing the envelope, if we consider the young Stoker’s desire for a quasi-pederastic relationship with the much older Walt Whitman, a desire strongly suggested by the letter he drafted in 1872, kept on his desk for four years, and finally mailed to Whitman on Valentine’s Day in 1876, this association becomes even more resonant. Stoker’s letter ends: “How sweet a thing it is for a strong healthy man with a woman’s eye and a child’s wishes to feel that he can speak to a man who can be if he wishes father, and brother and wife to his soul. I don’t think you will laugh, Walt Whitman, nor despise me, but at all events I thank you for all the love and sympathy you have given me in common with my kind.”<sup>54</sup>

That those affections, the love and sympathy, that Stoker has for Whitman are not by necessity sexual, but are often read that way stems from the social restrictions and taboos placed on sex, in particular on homosexuality, to which the vampire offers an intriguing and fascinating release. In King’s words, “In matters of sex, a highly moralistic society can find psychological escape valve in the concept of outside evil; this thing is bigger than both of us, baby.”<sup>55</sup> This is how pedophilia is displaced, and replaced, by vampirism in ‘Salem’s Lot, as it will be in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*, which also appeared a few years before popular representations of vampirism were

rampantly infected with connotations derived from the “AIDS panic.” Richard Primuth comments on this vampiric displacement:

Bram Stoker was a closeted homosexual and a friend of Oscar Wilde, a not-so-closeted gay man. Stoker idolized Walt Whitman and met him while touring the U.S., and he had a “passionate” relationship with actor Henry Irving. He began writing Dracula one month after Wilde was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to hard labor. In a nod to Wilde, he used the “idiom of Oscar Wilde’s letters to Lord Alfred Douglas” in Dracula. His friend of over twenty years was going to prison, and he began writing a novel about sexual repression and fear.<sup>56</sup>

However, there is much more than a reflection of historically normative homophobia at work in Straker and Barlow’s characterization. The novel’s “queer fear” also reflects King’s critical engagement with the moral panic that shaped the history of American comics. As *Danse Macabre* explains: “When I conceived of the vampire novel that became ‘Salem’s Lot, I decided I wanted to try to do the book partially as a form of literary homage,” so “the novel bears an intentional similarity” to both Stoker’s *Dracula* and, “because the vampire story was so much a staple of the E.C. comics I grew up with.”<sup>57</sup> King’s homage to 50s comics with ‘Salem’s Lot is made more resonant by the fact that Stoker’s vampire was also one of Bob Kane’s inspirations for Batman’s character. Along with the E.C. horror comics that King grew up reading, Batman was infamously targeted by Fredric Wertham in his attacks on the comics industry. Why? Because Wertham was convinced the character provided a model of pederasty, and was, in effect, being used to “groom” young boys for exploitation by older homosexual men.

As Frye points out, Wertham defined pederasty as “the erotic relationship between a mature man and a young boy.” He claimed that “The Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zeus type of love relationship. In the Batman type of comic such a relationship is depicted to children before they can even read.”<sup>58</sup> For Wertham, Batman is a metonym for the comics publishers themselves, whom he imagines as invasive, un-American influences, seducing, preying upon and perverting children; young male readers, in particular. Mitch Frye explains that,

Wertham’s critique of fascist, sexist, racist and sadistic elements in comics was damning, especially to post-World War II parents keen on stamping out anti-American sentiment. He argued that comics foster “distrust for democratic law.” Moreover, Wertham singled out the Dracula-inspired Batman title as a “homosexual and anti-feminine” work; he described the cohabitation of Batman and Robin as a “wish dream of two homosexuals living together.”<sup>59</sup>

Wertham’s rhetoric, which King is certain to have encountered during his own childhood in the 50s, aligns queers and comics creators as corrupting, seditious, invasive forces, just like Dracula in Stoker’s novel. As Young notes, “The war against comics also endorsed regulations about sexuality. Aside from simply wanting to protect children from sexually explicit images, they also wished to eliminate themes they viewed as “sexually abnormal.”<sup>60</sup> This meant, in particular, an obsession with rooting out and

eliminating homosexual subtexts, one that King's novel, which gazes nostalgically back at the horror comics from the period, responds to.

Wertham's rhetoric mirrors Dracula's status as invasion narrative, and insinuates itself into King's revision of Stoker, especially via his queerly un-American vampiric same-sex couple, Straker and Barlow. On the other hand, King's rejection of Wertham's McCarthyist homophobic rhetoric is reflected in the deliberately contrasted, highly intimate male homosocial relationship *between* Ben and Mark. As already discussed, the novel begins by ambiguously framing their relationship, and it ends by more forcefully defining it in terms that make the parallel between them and Batman/Robin evident. After having fled to Mexico, Ben and Mark return to the United States determined to exterminate the remaining vampires. They light a fire they know will spread throughout the town and environs, driving the vampires from their homes:

“Tonight they won’t be running sheep or visiting farms,” Ben said softly.  
“Tonight they’ll be on the run. And tomorrow—”  
“You and me,” Mark said, and closed his fist. His face was no longer pale; bright colour glowed there. His eyes flashed.  
They went back to the road and drove away.<sup>61</sup>

The novel ends with the older man and his younger companion, markedly a man, now, rather than a child, “on the road” again, a phrase with Whitmanic implications. Yet it is hardly Whitman, nor his self-proclaimed heirs from the era of King’s youth, Kerouac and Ginsberg, who provide the model of homosocial intimacy that Ben and Mark embody: it is rather those superhero comics King read when he was himself a kid. Ben and Mark are inseparable partners, battling against threats to society; they are a reflection of Batman and Robin. In effect, Ben and Mark’s relationship by the novel’s conclusion reinforces a reading of the Batman-Robin relationship as non-sexual and a viable form of intergenerational homosocial intimacy. However, the novel at the same time propagates aspects of Wertham’s homophobic discourse with its contrapuntal reflection of the Batman-Robin relationship in that between Barlow and Straker. The latter relationship, also characterized by intergenerational homosocial intimacy, is based on predation, exploitation and, of course, the exchange of bodily fluids; it is rife with homosexual and sado-masochistic implications, just as Wertham was convinced superhero, crime and horror comics were. Barlow and his human “bottom” are a menace to all, but especially to male children, as the novel makes clear. Ralphie is slaughtered by Straker in a “black magic” ritual appeasement, florid with Satanic panic, pedophilic overtones. Danny is sucked off by Barlow, “depraved and corrupted,” converted to vampirism. Mark is beaten, bound, fondled and objectified by Straker, and narrowly escapes death and desecrating undeath under the lips of the bat-man, Barlow.

Ultimately, there are only two things that keep Mark from sharing Danny and Ralphie’s fates. First, his enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, horror comics and monster movies, and second, his friendship with, and mentorship by, Ben. King’s novel thus turns the rhetoric of pederasty in the moral panic spurred by *Seduction of the Innocent* against itself. Mark only survives because of his childness, and Barlow’s quasi-pederastic invasion of the town is only stopped because of the intimate, but non-sexual, relationship between Mark and Ben and Matt, two adult men in whom childness is very

much alive. The parallels between Ben's desire to preserve and protect not only Mark's body, but his childness, his sense of magic and wonder, and King's statement of the power and appeal of "good horror" in *Danse Macabre* is unmistakable.

It is childness that asks for preservation and that allows for bonding, a shared access to the qualities surrounding children and the Inner Child, which accounts for the allure of youth to the adult who is no longer granted access to it. Childness does not belong to anyone (such as in *my* childhood), but permeates amongst relations, in particular male-male ones, in King's horror fictions. On the one hand, this serves as a powerful reminder of how forms of masculinity propagated by a patriarchal system are the primary means of destroying childness, as a queerness that rejects teleology and refuses to "put away childish things." On the other, it is an example of how King's nostalgic representations privilege and prioritize a particular kind of "sensitive," but markedly heterosexual, masculinity. As Regina Hansen explains, "Much as there is to admire in King's allegiance to socially marginalized people, especially children," "most of King's social outsiders are white, straight, able-bodied males," "who stand in for the young King as smart, sensitive writers."<sup>62</sup>

King's definition of the child sounds indeed a great deal like Stockton's: "Kids are bent. They think around corners. But starting at roughly age eight, when childhood's second great era begins, the kinks begin to straighten out, one by one. The boundaries of thought and vision begin to close down to a tunnel as we gear up to get along."<sup>63</sup> The age when neuronal pathways begin to solidify strengthens the mind as well, preparing the stage for tunnel vision, that gateway into darkness, that troubles King's preoccupation with children and childhood.

Behind all of this, of course, is King's conception of that magic we call childness, which is itself a poetic, and practical, conception of the mind as characterized by wonder, play, plasticity, and openness to change. It is a quality absent from most of the adult characters in *'Salem's Lot*, those who are subsumed by the narrator under the label "the town," like a vampiric mob. It is a quality that King hopes his "dance" with "phobic pressure points" will make available to readers. In short, King understands part of the pleasure of writing, and reading, horror to be a kind of mindfulness meditation, a dance with consciousness that is at once an invocation of childness.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York Library of America, 1997), 372-373.

<sup>2</sup> Komura, Toshiaki. "MODERN ELEGY AND THE FICTION AND CREATION OF LOSS: WALLACE STEVENS'S 'THE OWL IN THE SARCOPHAGUS.'" *ELH*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2010, pp. 45–70, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen King, interviewed by Jill Owens, Powells.com. <https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/the-once-and-future-stephen-king>

<sup>6</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Man Carrying Thing," *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 306.

<sup>7</sup> Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland, "Introduction: Holy Terrors and Other Musings on Monstrous-Childness," in *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinema's Holy Terrors*, eds. Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 13-18.

<sup>8</sup> Markus P.J. Bohlmann, "Deleuze, Children and Worlding," in *Deleuze and Children*, eds. Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Anna Hickey-Moody (Edinburgh: EUP, 2019), 183-86.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human* (New York, Norton, 2017), 53.

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- <sup>10</sup> Komura, 60.
- <sup>11</sup> Stephen King, *It* (New York: Signet, 1986), 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 311.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 311-12. Bohlmann, 186-87.
- <sup>14</sup> Stephen King, ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 168.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 181.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 406.
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Gallery, 2010), xiii.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., xxxi.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 90.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 434.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 435.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>29</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009).
- <sup>30</sup> King, 13.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32.
- <sup>32</sup> King, ‘*Salem’s Lot*’, 293.
- <sup>33</sup> Virginia L. Blum, *Hide and Seek: The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 261-62.
- <sup>34</sup> King, ‘*Salem’s Lot*’, 135.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 241.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 243.
- <sup>37</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 107.
- <sup>38</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press), 156.
- <sup>39</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 66.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Miller, “Coitus Interruptus: Sex, Bram Stoker and Dracula,” *Romanticism on the Net*, Issue 44, November 2006. Np. <https://doi.org/10.7202/014002ar>
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 69.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 69.
- <sup>45</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 80.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 80.
- <sup>47</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, xi.
- <sup>48</sup> Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009).
- <sup>49</sup> King *Danse Macabre*, 136.
- <sup>50</sup> Steven Bruhm, “On Stephen King’s Phallus or the Postmodern Gothic,” Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (University of Iowa Press, 2009), 75-96.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 88.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> King, *Salem’s Lot*, 287.
- <sup>54</sup> Bram Stoker and Walt Whitman, “Something in the Blood Part 3,” *The Paris Review*, October 2016. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/10/31/something-blood-part-3/>
- <sup>55</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 67.
- <sup>56</sup> Richard Primuth, “Vampires Are Us,” *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, February 2014. <https://glreview.org/article/vampires-are-us/>

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- <sup>57</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 26.
- <sup>58</sup> Quoted in Mitch Frye, "Dracula, Vampires and Superheroes in Comics," *Dracula in Visual Media*, 24.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>60</sup> Young, "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility," 171.
- <sup>61</sup> King, 'Salem's Lot, 427.
- <sup>62</sup> Regina Hansen, "Stephen King's IT and Dreamcatcher on Screen: Hegemonic White Masculinity and Nostalgia for Underdog Boyhood." *Science Fiction Film and Television*. 10:2 (2017): 161-176, 162.
- <sup>63</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 434.

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