

## Utterances Connected with Social Criticism in Stephen King's *PET SEMATARY*

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### **Abstract**

Stephen King's *PET SEMATARY* (Hence, abbreviated as PS) (1983) has seldom been studied from the perspective of utterances connected with social criticism. Usually, this work is thematically treated as a narrative text in the Horror Fiction genre. The present research analyzes some utterances and their meanings (clear or hidden) in connection with the social criticism in this novel, to determine how the Horror, or Gothic, element is used to express the manner of speaking as a critical interlocutor of Postmodern American culture, and the role, judgment and attitudes in specific narrative situations. The study highlights the nature of social criticism between interactants in the text, in relation to the relevant contexts. The approach enables us to examine what is communicated (i.e. discourse) and how it is communicated insofar as the narrative text is socially oriented with a critical intention that activate areas of articulation which may seem unrelated to any familiar socio-political background.

Stephen King is perhaps one of the best known practitioners of Post Modernism in contents, themes, and techniques including the display of thought process and his use of untraditional language in Horror Fiction. He had a purpose in his genre. The aim of the paper is to reveal the unspoken message of the writer in using such utterances in this novel. It is not to achieve temporary gory effects that King composed such a novel, but for a more lasting social impact, as will be revealed in the analysis.

This research selects a number of utterances from Stephen King's PS to prove that despite the semblance of supernatural horror, the real source of fear in post modern times comes from the socially condemnable and blameworthy points criticized in the course of the narrative.

### **Introduction**

Stephen King (born 1946) is an avid reader of the cultural and social milieu of his country and his times. His proper university education drove him

to self-criticism and the criticism of any probable, seemingly intellectual background. The volumes in his library vary from Greek Classics, Latin, and French to English masterpieces. This is all revealed in his *DANSE MACABRE* (1981.Reprinted with addenda 2009). He is alive to the contemporaneous political, theological, and philosophical writings .He has strong leaning and interest in the exotic, and the curious. He is interested in the remote in time and place. His works can be additionally meaningful to the well-informed, rational audience. Literary art according to Terry Eagleton's *MARXISM& LITERARY CRITICISM* (1976.Reprinted2002), regardless of the genre, has to "make significant connections or offer adequate discourses."(P.54)

Thus, Stephen King is concerned with facts that make significant connections, such as social criticism. So, his discourse relies on real, available evidence and documents when feasible. He used autobiographical details in writing PS as he said in the introduction of the book itself. His aim was, obviously, honesty. Art may tell the truth *obliquely to encourage the critical thought process*. King seems to require his audience to think continuously of his narrative, even after the reading is done.

The problem of this particular novel is that it can hardly be seen as a critical narrative in the first reading. The reason may have to do with the so-called label of "Popular Fiction". This is what Wilfred L.Guerin says in *A HANDBOOK OF CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE* (Reprinted2005): "There was a time before the 1960s when popular culture was not studied by academics-"(p.302). Now it is a different matter because such products are paid high attention for their "implicit social meanings" (Guerin,p.302).

It would thus be more tempting to write about the horror, the depression, and the supernatural element in this novel than to tackle its complex narrative design that focuses on layers of social criticism. King's unconventional matter and style combine to use scary clusters of words that socially and psychologically chill the unconscious. His genre has been the subject of discussions, presenting absorbing problems: this novel shows pictures of socially defective characters with twisted versions of human nature. This kind of writing experiments with the exposition of the spiritual

shallowness of the social misfits. It is both spiritually and socially connected because these misfits have spiritual misconceptions, malpractices, antithetical rites and rituals that are perverted and, consequently, socially detrimental.

### **The Social Misfits of *PET SEMATARY***

The socially critical parts of the novel's characters touch upon the individuals as well as the phenomena. Dr. Louis Creed, Mrs. Rachel Creed, Mr. Jud Crandall and Mrs. Norma Crandall are presented with defects that label them as misfits. Dr. Creed's name itself is ironic, because he has no real Creed. He is as hollow as T.S. Elliot's "Hollow Men".

There is a bewildering mixture of good and evil, despair and hope in the character of Dr. Louis Creed. His philosophy of life is based on the "American Dream", which is essentially what we call today 'pragmatic'. Thus, he always acts as if his view were the only sound one. So, if the medical profession cannot save his perished pet animal from a road accident, why not bury it in the resurrectionary burial ground? If the medical profession fails to bring back to life his deceased child from a car accident, why not use black magic? If the Modern and Postmodern technology falls short of reviving the murdered wife, why not trust the other gods, of other nations, to do the trick? If the medical professor in charge of the Ludlow infirmary acts like that with his own family, how can he be trusted with other patients? Dr. Creed's failure to address a medical problem or an ontological question of being vs. non-being mirrors his identity as social misfit in the role of a physician in charge of a medical unit and a university clinic. Most probably, he could have been more comfortable as a shaman or a tribal wizard doctor of the pre-Columbian era. It will not save him; to say after all his fatal mistakes are committed, to contemplate in this manner: "How strange it all seemed...and how he wished they had never heard of the University of Maine, or Ludlow, or Jud and Norma Crandall, or any of it."PS .Chapter 57, page 508. Too late to regret. Too useless

Another piece of social criticism is directed against Creed as well as his elderly neighbor Jud Crandall. It concerns their marital failure. Each of these characters has a wife. Dr. Louis Creed is, at least in appearance, happily married with two children. He lives happily with his wife Rachel, the daughter of the wealthy Irwin Goldman. She was good enough to pick the fatherless

nonentity Louis Creed, fall in love with him, live together with him, spend her father's money on his medical education, then go against her father and family to get married to him. In a very real sense, Creed alienated Rachel Goldman from her parents. Nevertheless, she already had problems with her own family. It is ironic that she found solace and security under the unprotected and penniless Louis Creed, the undergraduate medical student.

Rachel Creed, nee Goldman, is another social misfit, with problems involving her sinister, insane, bed-confined sister Zelda Goldman. She may well have caused Zelda to pass away through unintentional carelessness in administering the medicine when she was supposed to look after her as a nurse. Thus, she seems to have had such a low degree of self-esteem that she yoked herself to the said undergraduate. She, too, cannot be called a woman with a healthy childhood background. Raised with parental lack of attention; she repeats the story with her own children. Being the indirect reason for her sister's death, she becomes the indirect reason, again, of why her son Gage wanders away to fly a kite and get hit by a speeding truck. But, she is mostly undone by her husband. He kills her twice. First, when he marries her although he knows she is a woman socially above him. Secondly, when he ruins her family ties. His final act of having her buried in the Micmac burial ground is a symbolic repetition and a semiotic representation of what he was doing to her for years: ruin. In his hands, she is dead and gone. The new, Modern, American wife is not in good hands, even if she thinks that she has a loving husband. Her husband is the one that will bury her whether dead or alive. In this, Stephen King is using the Bakhtinian defamiliarization of the familiar.

As to Jud Crandall as a social misfit, he gets started as a father-figure to Dr. Louis Creed, but he ends up teaching him that kind of forbidden knowledge, the mysteries of the occult. Moreover, Jud is unfaithful to his wife. Towards the end of the novel, the reanimated Gage Creed, who is not really Gage but the demonized, resurrected version of his former self, reveals the secrets of the happy marital bond of Jud and Norma Crandall. The demon inside Gage communicates to Jud the voice of Norma coming from Hell: "Listen, Jud," it whispered...Norma's voice issued forth.

“I laughed at you! We all laughed at you! How we laaaaaaaaughed at you!

.....

.....

“We did it in our bed, and I did it, I did it with George, I did it with all of them.I knew about your wh-s but you never knew you married a w..ore and how we laughed....”P.519.

In the earlier course of the novel, Jud hardly gave Norma his wife the chance to talk when she was still alive. Likewise, Creed seldom gave his son Gage, or anyone else, the chance to express himself. Now, when Gage returns in this demonized mentality, he gives neither Jud nor Creed the chance to talk. Gage takes his offensive turn now to do some sharp and abusive talking, giving no way to others, as in this quotation, which is a good example of the unsuccessful conversations. The following words from David Crystal’s *HOW LANGUAGE WORKS* apply well to the above-quoted utterances:

For a conversation to be successful, in most social context, the participants need to feel they are contributing something to it and are getting something out of it. For this to happen, certain conditions must apply. Everyone must have an opportunity to speak: no one should be monopolizing or constantly interrupting. The participants need to make their roles clear, especially if there are several possibilities (e.g. speaking as another/linguist/Catholic,etc)

(p.267)

This proves that King, in his social criticism in the novel, reveals the moral and ethical failure of the marital relationships of these times because they are characterized with mutual infidelity. The most injurious criticism in any cultural background is adultery. King seems to suggest that the west ought to be horrified by the high range of adulterous relations, not the imaginary ghosts.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

In her essay entitled *Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture*, Susan Bordo makes a critique of culture and postmodern attitudes. Quite a few of these remarks throw light on the hidden implications of the text of PS:

.....fed by currents of consumer capitalism, modern ideologies of the self, and their crystallization in the dominance and American mass culture, western science and technology have now arrived ..... at a new postmodern imagination of human freedom from bodily determination ..... In place of God ..... we now have ourselves ..... This ..... intoxication with freedom, change, and self-determination, is enacted in a wide range of contexts, including .... the material and social realities that it denies or renders invisible.

(pp. 1099-1100)

According to Saussurean and functionalist approaches, the primary function of language is "social interactive communication." (Keith Allan P.334). This implies that, discourse is concerned with linguistic structures that can express social criticism in a sentence or utterance with definable communicative function. This further implies the speaker and listener in the text world, on the one hand, and the writer and the reader in the real world, on the other. The fundamental point is that, in both instances, we can only decode the meaning intended by the communicant from invariable indications in variable sentences. As such, the purpose of King in this novel, with its socially critical utterances, can be dealt with in accordance with a communicative, rather than silent, framework. Thus, King reveals the moral weakness of his characters in the morbid social milieu.

*PET SEMATARY* absorbs into its socio-critical substance the speakers' observant glance, the chronotopic scenery, memory and concealed unconsciousness exposed in the current of self-revealing speech. The love of

pet animals to the point of morbidity, the love of macabre landscape, the love of secret, dark life, the fear of madness and death, are inseparable in the narrative. The power of such issues sinks the lover to the lowest level in the Chain-of-Being. The society that permits this morbidity cannot be man's dream, but his nightmare and ordeal. PS uses language with a dialogue rich in hidden meanings and socially critical ideas: it is not a text of a ghost story. It is the kind of language to convey socially critical but hidden meaning. Thus, the right track is set and encoded in the race of the two misguided men, Creed and Jud Crandall to reach the burial ground. Ironically, the burial ground belongs to the Micmac Native American Tribes. Thus, The Civilized White man failed to educate the "Primitive Amerindian". Rather, the white man turns impulsive and primitive himself.

### **Hidden Meanings as Implicit Social Criticism**

There are some phenomena which are obviously part of what is meant by the speakers but not part of what they actually say. The distinction is not so clear always:

"Beyond the house was a large field for the children to play in, and beyond the field were woods that went on damn near forever.

The remains of the Micmac Indian Tribe had laid claim to nearly eight thousand acres in Ludlow....".That 's it"Louis said. Apprehensive-no, he felt scared. In fact, he felt terrified." Chapter1, p.5.

So, when King uses the words "Apprehensive, Scared, terrified," he hardly alludes to a gothic event. He, rather, dishonors the cowardly Dr Creed. The presence of supernatural fear is not part of what is being meant as the ultimate intention of the writer. But, there is the real fear of becoming a bad neighbor and an unwelcome intruder on an area that legally belongs to the Indian tribe but is now the de facto property of the non-Indians, who use it to dump chemical waste and all kinds of filthy garbage.

Dr. Creed shouts at the demonized Gage these words: "*Gage, want to go to Florida with me?*"Chapter61, P.544. In this typical and representative utterance, *the novel shows us how some American fathers are untrue, unserious and deceptive towards their children. He wants to kill him, not to take him on a ride. He is afraid of his own son, whom he himself turned into a*

*monster:*

*“From somewhere in the shadows above there came a giggling—a cold and sunless laughter that made the skin on Louis’s back prickle.(P.544).* Again, King is showing us in a few words how the father figure is a failure because it is a meaningless myth, decontextualized and unrewarding in the Postmodern world.

Louis is described as if in a race: usually the winner of the race is the loser. Through the character Steve, the author communicates the idea of a winner/loser without using the lexical item relevant in this case, i.e victory-related diction:

*“He’ll fall, Steve thought incoherently. He’s been damned lucky,incredibly lucky,but pretty soon He’s going to fall...P.555.*

Luck, fortune, and misfortune take turns in Creed’s life. Thus, the quotation above ought to be seen in relation to these:

1. King at the beginning of the text is telling us that Creed is a poor doctor, a shaken man by saying: “He would drive south, all the way to Orlando, Florida, where he would get a job at Disney World”.P.4.
2. In the following lines King is showing through his unusual use of words that Louis is a very unrepentant person. Although a culprit of burying the cat in the demonic grounds, this does not cause him remorse:”Oh boy, you would have made a great murderer—cool as a cucumber, Dr. Creed, when did you last see the deceased?”P.188. In fact, he will end up as a sort of murderer, of his own family, though acting in good faith, trusting the gods of darkness, the spirit of chemical pollution and industrial waste dumped into the Native Indian tribe acreage.
3. Creed loves his cat as his son. King shows the strong relation between men and their pets among the Americans by saying:”Louis smiled at the cat and said ‘Go on, eat up, Church. Hey ho, let’s go, right?’”He stroked the cat, felt its back arch...”P.541
4. He cannot get rid of Jud’s house, give it away, or replace it. King is indicating this when “He burns it totally”.
5. He’s the foul gardener who plants evil weeds. This is indicated by the way he gives up his medical uniform, putting on a gardener’s hat and pair of gloves towards the end. The story of his social failure is told by this gothic genre. King is giving us an idea of the weak relationship



between the medical doctor and reason:”I waited too long with Gage. But it will be different with Rachel, Steve .I know it will’. He staggered a little, and Steve saw that Louis had gone insane—he saw this quite clearly. Louis [the medical Physician]was insane and abysmally weary.” Chapter 62, P.556.

### **Conclusion**

After viewing selected utterances in the text from a socially critical point-of-view, the following results can be obtained:

1. What is said by the characters or King himself is dictated by socially critical rather than linguistic utterances. Thus, King can say indirectly that the postmodern physician is a careless father, an infidel husband, a dreamer in false Disneyland, and ungifted in doing his job.
2. What is meant, by the characters or King himself, is reflected by what is done as a misdeed by the character, rather than what is said. What is said has little truth in it, which is highly misleading. Thus, the notion of conversational betrayal is strong in the utterances selected. This is seen in father Vs. son, husband Vs. wife, man Vs. pet role in a love/hate relationship.
3. What is meant is what counts, but it is unsettled by linguistic meanings. This is because the final meaning relies on the total effect of the words and the misdeeds. Thus, the judgment of Gage against his father and Norma against Jud her husband is severe condemnation.
4. Stephen King has a social purpose in using his gothic, horror genre. Thus, the message he sends is that real postmodern misfits as Creed and Jud are more harmful than imagining ghosts. Thus, their attitude is that of kills the son and the husband buries the wife.
5. The social horror is the real horror. It is implicit throughout the novel. Adultery, fraternal carelessness, parental negligence, are more frightening than fictions phantoms. The ethical, moral, and cultural implications of this social criticism is covert textually, but expressed contextually.
6. It is this kind of approach which makes Stephen King one of the founders of Post Modernist socially critical authors in American fiction, in the researches’ opinion.
7. King proves that the postmodern society is horribly void of noble values. The husband ruins and buries his wife, his son, his faith, and

his career. The consequences of this pragmatic, utilitarian, opportunistic behavior, is catastrophic. The collapse of the family in the postmodern times is actually the real horror facing the nation. In this, King is implicitly condemning such infections, morbid malpractices.

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## التعبيرات ذات العلاقات بالنقد الاجتماعي في رواية ستيفن كنج الموسومة بـ (مقبرة الحيوانات الاليفة)

### المستخلص

ينتخب هذا مجموعة من التعبيرات ذات البعد النقدي الاجتماعي في رواية الرعب الموسومة مقبرة الحيوانات الاليفة 1983 للروائي ستيفن كنج . تعد هذه الرواية واحدة من أكثر مؤلفات كاتبها كآبة و قتامة و حزنا . إلا أن النماذج المنتقاة لتحليلها في هذه المحاولة تبرهن أن هذا النص حافل بأقوال و مقولات تدخل في باب النقد الاجتماعي ضد مجتمع ما بعد الحداثة ، لا سيما من حيث الخواء الكارثي على المستوى العائلي و المهني و المجتمعي و الروحي . إن كنج يدين ، في نهاية المطاف ، كافة الممارسات النفعية و البراغماتية التي تميز أسلوب العيش ما بعد الحداثوي .

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