

Exploring Literariness in Stephen King

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Abstract: *This paper deals with recognition of popular literature and the “King of Horror”, Stephen King under the context of a popular fiction writer. There are various disapprovals about considering a work of art (in writing) as a good piece of literature if it is entertaining the masses. A book that is recognized and acknowledged by any reader from the masses also retains literary values. A best selling popular fiction can also inculcate moral values. Genres like horror cannot be prejudiced for its unrealistic nature because the power of fear and imagination of horror literature can never match the earthly possible things as present in an average life of reality. Despite all these remarkable factors, popular writers like Stephen King face avid humiliation from the ‘literary’ critics because he never amused any of them with his intellectual language and subject. On the contrary King is one of the top selling authors of America, widely exalted by mass audiences but never by a literary critic.*

Keywords: *Popular literature, Horror literature, Stephen King, Bestsellers, Criticism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Of course, if original ideas and writing style are a valid measure of success, then William Faulkner and Henry James should be on top of New York Times’ best seller list instead of King. (Hoppenstand and Browne 1987).

Every work of art deserves a ray of recognition. Whether it is a classic poetry or folklore, every work of art has its own set of audiences who appreciate that work and support the corresponding author. There is no set pattern for a work of art to categorize it as essential or non-essential. But why is there always a debate in distinguishing literary and non-literary work. A literary work is always meant to be a ‘culture’ carrier. This culture is not about anthropological study. It’s about the culture instigated with supremacy. A literary work is expected to be composed from literary scholars, intellectual historians are always in good eyes of an elitist critic (Radway 1984). The same work which enriches the culture is not read and sometimes not even known by the ‘ordinary’ people (Radway 1984), eventually makes the literary work not a bestselling, profitable work and always lying in the hands of academicians. The literature of the ‘ordinary’ people cannot amuse a literary critic and vice versa for the same ordinary people to accept a common popular fiction as ‘worthless’.

Thus a popular fiction is always known for giving amusement and pleasure for a reader who is always meant to be in the class of ‘ordinary’ reader. According to any elitist literary circle, ordinary people may blindly praise a work of art which has no value but extremely popular. This ordinary class includes the entire mass who read popular literature are expected to get satiated for mere sake of entertainment and brand name of the author. Ordinary people’s literature is always known for its value less, trash subject which does not inculcate

any serious enlightenment to them. Contrarily the common man finds his or her stance only in popular literature. The language used in the popular literature is the same language used by the common people. It is not the difference, but the partisanship followed by the diminutive set of critics who want their scrupulous favoritism on only the literary subjects.

Whatever the subject matter is taken about, the author ultimately works for it and expects the fruit of labor and that is nothing wrong about it. And that fruit of labor is not mere appreciation. In no way appreciation is going to feed the author's stomach and they strive so hard to get that jump start during the initial stages of career. This is very predominantly found among English writers right from the period of Chaucer till the present; as an author will never publish his/her work for free. Thus it's the right time to take this word into consideration: 'best seller'.

Best sellers are always synonymous towards popular fiction. It is because only popular fiction is widespread in the community. A literary work may not reach every person in the society whereas a popular work may do so. It is not because the general audience hates literary works but they synchronize with their favorite author. The very work which connects with their life and they seek refuge in recognizing themselves in these works. Reading popular literature is never advised by the academicians because they always demand best use of qualified, accepted language with certain standards in the work; still the enlightenment can be understood only by a certain set of audience who are obviously considering themselves as the elites.

Thus literature of masses is represented as something trivial, low and unimportant as observed in "The pistachio-nut ice cream and the brand name of Stephen King are emblematic of America's junk food culture, while Saul Bellow is paired with the more respectable spinach salads (Magistrale 1988). Any work of art recommended by an elitist critic is always meant to carry worthy values and they presume that a bestselling work cannot be a literary work.

One of the era's best selling fiction writers is Stephen King. King is not a writer undiscovered among the audience all around the world. The successful film adaptations of King's *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*, *Misery*, *It*, *The Green Mile*, *Rita Heyworth and Shawshank Redemption*, *The Mist*, *Christine*, etc. have almost occupied a best repute among the history of American horror & psychological thriller film and literature, is good enough to talk how his works are very popular and hugely acclaimed by the audience. This paved the way of wide reach of King's popularity not only with readers but also with film watchers. Despite this huge success King tops in the list of censored writers (Casebeer 1996).

The 'Greatness' of Literary Canon

Various theorists and academicians argue to categorize the writers whether they are worthy enough to be placed into the literary canon. To ensure accuracy, they derive a set of yard scales to measure the quintessence of every work. For sure a literature student would have come across Arnold's 'Touchstone Method' who estimated that Chaucer is not a Classic whereas Shakespeare was indeed a true classic. The critical work of Samuel Johnson "Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets" claimed only 52 poets were dignified enough to take place in his work during the time of the eighteenth century. Here is where the ascendancy fails to concede certain works which are well adept to get placed into the literary canon. Connoting to this perspective Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* encompasses a 'wide' range of 26 writers and he pedantically excluded a great number of important authors (who wrote about various societal stigmas) under the name of School of Resentment. Thus what

defines the literariness of the work? This paper will decipher into the ranging glorification and criticisms on King's works.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Harold Bloom in his seminal work *Bloom's Biocritiques: Stephen King* (2002) initially regards Stephen King as a generous humane and a great social citizen that does not make him a literary writer. He also accepts that he has been openly opposed to this controversy. Just like other writers who were inspired by their favorite forerunner(s), King's precursor would be Jack London then replaced by Lovecraft and Poe in his hallmark on horror fiction. He openly calls King's insufficiencies such as clichéd writing, use of flat characters, absence of invention in occult and imagination. For him King is circulated so widely because he is "addressed" as a crucial horror writer.

Edwin F. Casebeer in his work "Stephen King's Canon: The Art of Balance" (1996) exhibits about how Stephen King is extremely famous in means of bestseller and popularity yet ranks in top in the list of censored authors of America due to carping statements such as "modern meaninglessness, physical corruptibility and death". He remarks his mastery in horror fiction and categorizes them into different varieties such as the vampire novel, the monster novel, wild talent fiction, zombie fiction, diabolic possession fiction, realistic horror fiction for the novels 'Salem's Lot, The dark Half, Carrie, Pet Sematary, Christine and Misery respectively and regards him as a genre novelist. He gives a good elucidation of how evil is handled by King.

Michael R. Collings in his book *Scaring Us to Death: the Impact of Stephen King on Popular Culture* (1997) starts with an impressive poetry which he dedicated to King for his horror works. He gives a detailed description about how King has been as "a bestselling bestseller" and presented a factual way of looking into Stephen King as the "cultural phenomenon" with statistical records who is not in the good looks of any literary critic for being a pop culture writer.

Wendy Commons's *Question of Value: Reading Stephen King in a Literary Context* (2006) is a remarkable defense of Stephen King's success as a popular horror writer. She has elaborately mentioned how King is finest among others in his field, but there is always a 'question of value' in the works written by him. Being very victorious and one of America's bestsellers, King is always a subject of contempt among the literary society. King's popularity and his stories are often facing the subject of derision from many elitist groups especially Harold Bloom, who treats his subject as a trash, highly clichéd stories filled with disagreeable language.

Erica Joan Dymond in her article "Objectivity and the Overlook: Examining the Use of Multiple Narratives in Stephen King's 'THE SHINING'" (2015) talks about his sense of balance in the method of storytelling. King has craftily handled multiple narratives and usage of excessive internal dialogues from limited characters. He had deftly handled the subject of alcoholism and the internal tussle of both Wendy Torrance and her son Danny against her husband Jack Torrance who eventually fell as trap to the manipulation of the haunted hotel 'The Overlook. The tiny family tries to sustain the hard situation of coping with the new job of caretaker of the hotel and sail in a blindfolded 'normalized (lonely) life'. Dymond also appraises the unique creation of an intellect character Danny, the child protagonist of the novel.

Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne in their introduction "The Horror of It All: Stephen King and the Landscape of American Nightmare" in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares* (1987) showcases how Stephen King has been targeted by various

American literary critics as “The Disgusting Colloquialism,” “The Brand-Name Maneuver,” “The Comic Strip Effect,” “The Burlesque Locution,” and “The Fancy Juxtaposition” (2). They also defend King, a withstander beating such harsh approvals for being a critically unpopular author with critically unpopular genre i.e. horror and psychological thriller (2). A brief history entails about how King entered into the field of writing and his ability to reinterpret gothic genre and create his own new world.

Dustin Kahoud in his article “The double-edged pen: Omnipotent fantasies in the creativity and addictions of Stephen King” (2014) represents the life of Stephen King and how his “creative process” has emerged which gave a good foundation to his horror subject. “Omnipotent fantasies” are the product of “psychodynamic thinkers”. In the quest of understanding about King’s omnipotent fantasies, Kahoud delves into the addictive behaviors of King.

Tony Magistrale in his book, *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King’s American Gothic* (1988) is a best upholder of King’s prowess in the field of popular horror literature. He analyses about how King is abased as a “popular” best selling entertainer and his works are compared with the trivial pistachio-nut ice cream which is merely for amusement and pleasure where as a reputed ‘literary’ writer such as Saul Bellow is paired up with the ‘respectable’ healthy spinach salads which is an inevitable healthy food for life. Magistrale gives a detailed account on how King tackled his hard times during the initial stages of his life and his experiences which influenced his works.

Janice A. Radway in her groundbreaking work *Reading the Romance: Woman, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) explores how the recent trend of cultural studies in terms of literariness of a work of art. She was notified about her work in American Civilization Department, University of Pennsylvania in 1984 in the pursuit of American orthodoxy. As a reaction to Formalist criticism, the greatness of American culture is to be found in the classical literary works with historical context. This resulted in collaboration of literary scholars and intellectual historians so that the greatness of past American culture can be the best work of art (2). But unfortunately these literary texts greatly commended by the department were not read by a mass audience. Contrarily, the popular literature which is widely read by “ordinary” people cannot be taken into the consideration by ‘elitist’ critics because it is not retaining any values which showcase the greatness of American culture.

Sharon A. Russell in her book *Revisiting Stephen King: A Critical Companion* (2002) sketches the life of King who underwent various struggles before attaining the peak of adulation. She compares his life to the “American Dream” of being at the position of zero and reaching the enormous heights in many of the aspiring citizens during 1920s to 1930s. She gives a detailed biography of how King overcame his hard times as an addict. The book also includes a detailed analysis of King’s works such as *Desperation, The Regulators, The Green Mile, Dark Tower IV Wizard, Glass, Bag of Bones, Heart in Atlantis, The Girl who loved Tom Gordon and Dreamcatcher*.

Kings’ Art of Darkness

King’s persona can be an essential in understanding the success in his art of darkness. He is cherished as “the king of horror” which is not an easy talent achieved by every writer. Dustin Kahoud (2014) observes that, “psychodynamic thinkers have highlighted omnipotent fantasies as a psychological force driving creative processes as efforts towards personal transformation” (1) which is very true for understanding the potential of Stephen King. It is the magnificent “dazzle effect” stated by Hoppenstand and Browne i.e. pulling the reader to oblivion and making them involved too with the fiction and enchanted with page turning curiosity (2). He is a resilient soul facing too many oscillations in his life right from his

childhood and an unsettled life and a terrible need of good income to run his life with Tabitha King till his publication of *Carrie*. He had proudly stated how Tabitha was solely responsible for the existence of his first blockbuster which he merely tossed them into dustbin during its initial chapters. He said "All I know is that she went into my little writing room, took the pages out of the wastebasket, shook off the cigarette ashes, smoothed them out, read them, and suggested I go on" (King 1947).

King's characters are common ones. They are not only characters that are extremely intellectual or suffering out of identity crisis (as in a literary piece). He includes all; every common human being, every average story. But how does he achieve such extreme adoration? The horror genre employed by King not only amuses the audience but they try to relate themselves in the position of the characters. *Carrie*, being the first published and the top notch novel, talks about a bland teenager who is facing a severe identity crisis among her high school mates. Bullying is not a subject of flippancy which can be ignored by the literary critics as they always demand a sharp subject matter. A central issue faced by many teenagers with a perfect localism of America (1970s) yet with the twist of horrifying conclusion made *Carrie* to achieve sky high success. Revenge tragedy of early English dramatists too dealt with severe bloodshed of the characters that stood against the protagonists. Similar to this, Carrie White also sought her revenge through her telekinetic powers. The adroit choice of supernatural element propelled the story and kindled the curiosity among the audience.

Elements of forethought, insight, intuition are the most integral part of any story. This foreseeing methodology always plays an important role in the majority of epics, ancient literature. King has redefined the foreseeing and telecommunicating aspect with the telepathic ability of Danny Torrance in *The Shining* makes it quite popular among other works of King. Addiction is the cardinal aspect of the novel which goes out of hands explained by little Danny, the misfit hero and the mind reader. The seven years old little boy is able to sense the haunted hotel "The Overlook" and manages to overcome the evil spirit which has already maneuvered his father Jack. Erica Joan Dymond (2002) remarks that

...the reader regards the work as documenting the struggles of a family rather than the inner torment of a single member. King depicts the pain of alcoholism not just through Jack's eyes but also through his loved ones (1).

Danny is being coerced to cope with the teetering life of his parents. He shrieks internally whenever he sees terrifying sights which are visible to him alone. He is smart, concerned about the new caretaker job of his father and remains silent until events take up a greater step of killing the family. Danny is the most sharp, understanding kid ever created by King. The same element of foreseeing ability may be very slightly visible in *Pet Sematary* with the character of Ellie Creed, a little girl and sister of toddler Gage Creed who turns out to be the terrific man eater of the family. *It*, the coming of age novel focuses completely on adolescent children who combat with the deadly entity it (Pennywise) which takes the disguise of the primal fear of each character.

As seen above the majority of King's protagonists are young characters especially toddlers and juvenile characters who are mostly dissevered from society for being misfits or weird often with special powers. They are forced to face their problems which are mostly gargantuan to their maturity. Magistrale (1988) states that

...his use of infantile and adolescent characters who more often than not find themselves in precarious situations. His youthful protagonists are besieged by a variety of demons and ghosts, religious extremists and officials representing an assortment of institutions of bureaucracies. King's children are often endowed with uncommon powers and traits, and these special attributes combined with a native shrewdness and acute perceptivity, help distinguish them from the adult world while aiding in their survival.

Popular fiction writers are never respected by literary critics. This is because a popular writer always caters to the mass. A work which is widely eulogized by 'mediocre' audiences with high success rate in means of selling and popularity, then the work is marginalized by the literary critics. According to Magistrale (1988), Stephen King is overtly censured by critics because

1. Making too much money by producing a yearly book which obviously may not have well organized craft.
2. His paramount importance in creating supernatural, bizarre and occult subjects and not very concerned about the reality and the real human struggles.
3. Being a popular writer he may not be very good at his press and needs an editor due to lack of organization. (11-12).

If writing a book per year is a bone of contention then Shakespeare can also be derided for writing more than 37 plays during his tenure. Shakespeare is the English literary icon till date, as nobody matched his excellence was once a popular playwright! He was also catering to the mass of Elizabethan England. How he took a challenging job of writing plays merely to support his family which was not a direct flow from his intellect. It is very obvious that there were various original sources which he had taken from different European literature and presented it to his audience in a rejuvenated package with their vernacular and fascinated the groundlings and the aristocrats. Apart from providing a huge number of famous plays, he changed his style according to the needs and demands of his contemporary which is very evident in the transition from his Early Comedies and The Last Plays.

Stephen King received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation on 19th November 2003. While welcoming King, Walter Mosley said "a wonderful character in our literary landscape" (Commons 2006), "to celebrate and empower everyday man and woman" (3). This aroused controversy among various literary experts as this prestigious award was coveted only to great writers like Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich etc. A well acclaimed American literary critic Harold Bloom was obviously against this decision taken by the committee as he is merely a popular fiction writer and cannot be the recipient of such prestigious award. He even wrote "another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life... an immensely inadequate writer (King) on a sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis" (4). This hegemonic approach indicates the indifference in treating a work of art as worthless, trash subject if it is welcomed by pop culture. The contrasting idea is so strikingly evident that mass audiences relate and encourage popular fiction so well and they have no possibility of knowing any literary critic unless they are a literature student. Conversely, reading popular fiction helps the students to come out with their perspectives boldly as Kelly Chandler (1999) observed that students

...who are engaged readers of popular fiction outside of school may come to the reading-writing workshop with a set of expectations that is different from their teacher's and from that of other students who do not read regularly for pleasure (1).

This proves that popular fiction can also be used as a scaffolding tool to enrich the students' psyche.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus, whatever work of art is supported by mass culture which is determined as low, unacceptable can never be in the good looks of a literary critic. Popular fiction is always a controversial topic for academicians. And supporting it the critics designate popular fictions as trash. King wished Tony Magistrale for such painstaking analysis of his works and

remarked sarcastically that, “A great read, insightful and intelligent... Tony has helped me improve my reputation from ink-stained wretch popular novelist to ink-stained popular novelist with occasional flashes of muddy insight” (Magistrale 1988).

Success did not knock King’s door very easily. He is a true exemplar of the great ‘American Dream’ i.e. to achieve a successful life right from the point of zero at the start (Russell 1). His subsistence at the point of addiction continued failures in the process of publication before *Carrie* had truly given a triumphant glorious life which he wished for. Apart from being a “generous humane” (Bloom 2002), King is truly a king of horror. The versatility is not to be found in the number of books published per year or number of copies sold per book. Books are sought after only if the readers find it appealing. He never stopped himself in embellishing his novels in his journey of horror fiction. Thus sidelining an author based on these factors is not going to stop the literary analysis of the book. As per the remark of Walter Mosely on Stephen King it is true that, “There is no writer in America more worthy of recognition for his contributions to literature, to literacy and for his to writers” (Commons 2006).

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of Interest.

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