



World Conference on Social Sciences, Law and Public Policy

Hosted Online from Toronto, Canada

Date: 26th September, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

STEPHEN KING AS AN EDUCATOR: FEAR, MORAL ATTENTION AND THE INFORMAL PEDAGOGY OF HORROR FICTION

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Abstract

This paper proposes that Stephen King's fiction can be considered an educational process, not didactic or incidental but that it can be considered pedagogy without falling into metaphor. The statement is not biographical. It is about the manner in which King's stories focus the reader's attention. The study suggests that fear in King's fiction is a way of exposure, based on narrative ethics, reader-response theory and recent work on horror as a simulation of threat, which places characters in situations where the normal social protections are not in place, thus making visible moral commitments that comfortable circumstances allow people to leave untested. Four interrelated operations that are traced through close readings of *Carrie*, *The Body*, *It* and *The Shining* and *The Green Mile* are the documentary apportionment of responsibility, the portrayal of learning outside of institutions, the systematic failures of adult custodians and the positioning of readers in relation to socially invisible suffering. The paper does not aim to uphold the well-known claim that literature makes readers more empathetic, which is not well supported by the empirical evidence. What King's fiction offers is more modest and more interesting: repeated opportunities to attend to moral matters under stress. It is on that basis that Stephen King as an educator is considered to be an analysis and not a slogan.



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Keywords: Stephen King; pedagogy of fear; narrative ethics; horror fiction; moral attention; reader response; institutional failure; childhood

Introduction

Prior to *Carrie*'s publication in 1973, King worked as an English teacher at Hampden Academy in Maine and teachers, former teachers and failed teachers are a recurring theme in his fiction, one that has been pointed out but little explored. Jack Torrance is fired from a prep school; Ben Hanscom's schooling takes place almost entirely outside of the classroom; Paul Edgecombe tells *The Green Mile* as an old man giving a private seminar on his own culpability. This biographical coincidence could be easily exploited and used to make an argument but it's wrong. The interest of the pattern is not there. King's fiction is more than usually obsessed with the issue of where and how people actually learn what they know about cruelty, obligation and their own capacities—and it is always sceptical of the answer: in school.

It is this scepticism that is the starting point for this paper. I would like to suggest that King's horror fiction is an informal pedagogical space and that fear is the particular pedagogical tool that is used. The proposition needs to be taken care of. There is a long history of hyperbole when it comes to the moral effects of literature and horror fiction is either dismissed as sensation or defended as a kind of disguised allegory - neither of which is what it's like to read King. My argument is more limited. King's stories constantly set up scenarios where the normal moral gears of family, system, neighborhood, job, etc. fail. In such a situation, characters have to do what they have to do without having to explain it. The reader is a witness and the act of watching is not a passive one: King's narrative device often sets the reader a specific interpretive task.



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What is learnt is not a lesson. It's more of a habit of attention.

Defining the Terms: Pedagogy Without a Classroom

Here I am using the term pedagogy in the sense of Rosenblatt (1978) who has suggested that a literary work is a transaction between text and reader, not an object with a content to be delivered. It is on this view that teaching is not the transmission of a message but rather the structuring of an occasion. Whether or not a text is intended to instruct, it does pedagogical work if it tells a reader what to notice, what to notice first and what to notice last and what it will cost him. The gaps a text leaves unfilled are supplied by the reader, as Iser (1978) provides the complementary mechanism: interpretive commitments are experienced by the reader as her own in the process of filling the gaps.

The specifically moral dimension is added to that of narrative ethics. Reading is a kind of company keeping, Booth (1988) suggested and that our assessments of narratives are not made by applying rules but by comparing responses, what he termed coduction. Newton (1995) went further, claiming that the act of narration is an ethical relationship between narrator, listener and the subject, even before the content of the narration. The strongest version of the claim is that of Nussbaum (1995) who sees the literary imagination as a public capacity, which trains a form of attention that is essential to just judgement.

It is here that I must leave the received account. In the popular version of Nussbaum's argument and in her own, literary attention is supposed to be a reliable indicator of moral concern. At least not reliably, as Keen (2007) showed: narrative empathy can be easily triggered, often misplaced and is poorly related to altruistic behavior. The experimental literature has also been shaky. Although Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction for a short period of time led to an improvement in theory-of-mind performance, Panero et al. (2016) did not replicate this finding.



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This is where the more conservative view of fiction as a moral laboratory, in which different perspectives can be explored without repercussions (Hakemulder 2000), holds up better, as it does not promise improvement.

There's horror to make a claim here too. Carroll (1990) explored the paradox of the pleasure of fictional fear, while Clasen (2017) rethought the genre as a functional one, in which the horror film presents a threat without any real danger and the viewer can practise how to respond to a threat without any real consequences. Clasen's is a book about fear. My extension is that King's fiction is the same simulation on moral danger, instead of physical danger. His stories don't often ask the question of will you survive? It is what would you have done and what did others do instead?

Duress as a Method: What Fear Exposes

Carrie (1974) starts with a girl getting her first period in the school shower and her classmates throwing sanitary products at her and chanting. The scene has been interpreted as the novel's source of violence. It has another pedagogical role and it is contingent upon King's next step. The gym teacher, Miss Desjardin, shows up but she doesn't come to save the day. She is revolted, she loses her control and she hits Carrie. Then King tells about her own reaction and how she was horrified at herself.

It's a very accurate build. A reader who has been set up to denounce the girls is handed, within a few pages, an adult whose sin is not evil but polluted — she is swept along by the same tide of repulsion that the students feel and only realises this after the event. The story doesn't offer the false security of an easy separation of bad kids and good adults. What this fear reveals is not that there is cruelty, the reader assumes that but that there is a distribution of it, how far it goes into people who think they are not in it.



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The formal apparatus of the novel finishes it off. Carrie is a collage of the testimony of commissioners and a survivor's memoir, both composed after the destruction of Chamberlain and pseudo-scholarly extracts. The reader is thus thrust into the role of an investigator who is sifting through an archive to decide on who is responsible — and who has a real epistemic burden, as the documents disagree. King is a non-adjudicator. Sue Snell's guilt, Desjardin's tarnished authority, Margaret White's theology and the town's convenience are all in evidentiary limbo. Delegation of apportioning blame. That delegation is the teaching.

The Curriculum Outside the School

King's kids learn a lot and nearly all of it outside of classrooms. In *The Body* (1982), Chris Chambers informs Gordie that he stole the money for the milk and then, mercilessly, handed it over to a teacher who kept it, purchased a new skirt and handed the rap over to Chris. What Chris knows and what his teachers would not give him credit for is that his last name has already limited the options of what he can do with his life. He is aware that he will be followed up in shop courses. He knows that the town has already made up its mind which of the two stories is true when Chambers and a teacher tell different stories.

It's not a bad-teacher-blaming episode. It is a story of how a child learns to have a correct sociological picture of his own situation, by injury, when there is no institution that will tell him the truth about his situation. The story places the reader in Gordie's shoes and this knowledge is imparted second-hand and alters Gordie and the reader, as well. Here, the learning is horizontal, from child to child and is a survival information.



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It (1986) is a generalisation of the pattern as a theory of a town. Derry not only fails its children, it forgets – and the forgetting is systematic. Mike Hanlon's interludes are counter-historiography, re-constructing the Bradley Gang massacre, the burning of the Black Spot by a local white supremacist organisation and the murder of Adrian Mellon – atrocities the town has metabolised into silence. King's small towns are, as Strengell (2005) sees them, environments that shape inhabitants: the Gothic community is the central American subject, as Magistrale (1988) had previously noted. I would like to make the argument that the adults of Derry are not unaware of what goes on there, as both readings make this point. They have made a system of ignorance.

The Losers' Club can thus be best thought of as a counter-institution. What its members offer each other: belief, testimony, confirmation that what is seen is seen, is what the town's adults, schools and police deny. King's fiction suggests that education is primarily the passing on of unconfirmed narratives and that this passing on is more likely to be lateral and extra-institutional than institutional.

The failure of custodians to act in accordance with their duties.

Jack Torrance checks in to the Overlook already having been fired from Stovington Preparatory School for assaulting a student. He has broken his son's arm. These facts are not background to a supernatural plot in the novel, rather they are the conditions that the hotel takes advantage of. The Shining (1977) is often described as a story about a haunted building but its structure is that of a slow institutional recruitment: the Overlook identifies in Jack a man whose resentments, professional humiliation and dependence make him usable and it offers him what every failing institution offers — the promise of belonging in exchange for the sacrifice of the vulnerable.



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The Overlook's collection of past horrors serves as an example of Sears' (2011) notion of inherited structures that outlast their creators and King's Gothic is part of a tradition that is obsessed with inherited structures that outlast their creators. The pedagogic point is that five-year-old Danny has to make a correct model of his father's danger and all the scripts of the available adults are that fathers are safe. He is offered no institutional vocabulary for what he perceives. Dick Hallorann is the only character who provides any helpful advice in the novel and he does so informally, in a hotel kitchen, as he teaches Danny his ability's name and that others have it as well.

The Green Mile (1996) takes the issue to an adult professional environment where it is not a fault of the individual. Percy Wetmore is being kept on the block due to a family tie to the state's governor. It is not that the institution is evil but that it is made to take such things in stride, such as his deliberate sabotage of Eduard Delacroix's execution (not wetting the sponge, so that the man burns). Paul Edgecombe tells the entire story decades later from a retirement home and his telling is steeped in the hindsight that he could have done something but didn't and that he had good reasons for doing so at the time. Here, as in Newton's (1995) assertion that narration is an ethical act, the form of the novel is literally a man's effort to pay off a debt by narration.

This pattern is the same in all three texts. King's institutions don't fail due to incompetence. They don't work because they're based on interests other than the interests of those they serve and because the people within them can find it easier to comply than to obstruct. For the reader, the instructive element is the ordinariness of the mechanism.



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Close to Suffering that is Socially Invisible

It's too easy and, based on the evidence above, not well supported to say that King teaches empathy. It's a more particular thing at the narrative level.

King routinely gives characters who are denied interiority by their social status, interiority. In *Carrie*, the free indirect narration of Carrie's consciousness is presented first and undercuts every external description of her given later by the documentary sections; the reader has already been in the mind of Carrie, which the White Commission can only describe from the outside. Lant and Thompson (1998) compile readings that will not let any simple sympathy for King's treatment of women get in the way and it is well that they do: proximity to Carrie does not save her and the novel's proximity is not innocent.

The Green Mile is dealing with the same issue with an inversion. John Coffey never has an interior that is focalised. He is viewed solely through Paul, who has a limited and late understanding. It is the withholding that is the point. A novel which would let the reader into the untroubled inner life of Coffey would enable the reader to feel that the moral work of understanding had been done. King's opacity maintains the unreadness of Coffey's suffering in his world.

This is why I don't go along with the empathy formulation. What these stories do is teach focus on the dissonance between an individual and the story a community tells about him. If that attention Carries over to the outside of the reading situation is an open empirical question and Keen's (2007) scepticism is well taken. What can be said is that the texts make the gap apparent, over and over and make it the reader's not perceiving the gap part of the plot.

Having power and how to use it

Carrie White's telekinesis is not at the heart of her novel. There are many mundane denials that come before the destruction of Chamberlain: denials to explain, to intervene, to believe, to include.



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The moral question is not posed by the supernatural capacity but rather, by its presence, the asymmetry which had kept the moral question invisible is removed. As King says here and elsewhere, power does not make character, it shows it; and the interesting question is what a person has learned to want.

The same holds true, albeit with a different result, with Danny Torrance, who has a supernatural perception from childhood but whose moral identity is decided upon at a later age. That course of action is not followed here and is left to be dealt with separately.

First, the pedagogy described is unreliable by design. A text that provides opportunities for moral focus cannot ensure that the opportunities are seized. King's fiction is read as sensation and readers are free to do so. It is exactly because of failed experiments that the laboratory metaphor is apt, as Hakemulder (2000) has pointed out.

Secondly, there is a danger that people can get used to horror. As suggested by Clasen (2017) threat simulation is about practice and practice can lead to tolerance as well as discernment. In *Danse Macabre* (1981), King was frank about the reactionary as well as critical uses of horror and his description of its conservatism (restoring the order it has disrupted) is applicable to his own work. Thirdly, institutional context is important. The essays in *Power, Wilhelm and Chandler* (1997) show that King's presence in American classrooms has been resented for a long time and the pedagogical argument presented here is complicated by the fact that the fiction's educational work has been accomplished often in opposition to formal education. Burger's (2016) anthology is a more recent and self-assured effort to include King in the university curriculum. In both instances, the evidence is for the same underlying argument: King's fiction has served as an unofficial curriculum for a very large audience, albeit one that has not been institutionalized.



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Conclusion

If carefully expressed, the notion of Stephen King as an educator holds up. His fiction is not didactic and the reader seeking moral formulas will be disappointed or disappointed by something crudely moral. What the narratives supply is a repeated structure: ordinary protections are withdrawn, characters are required to act on commitments they have never examined and the reader is assigned interpretive work that the text declines to complete. This structure is made possible by fear: fear takes away the freedom of moral positions to remain unstated.

The strongest claim that I would make is that, for several generations of readers, King's fiction has been a space where some kinds of knowledge have been available that could not be had elsewhere: that adults fail, that institutions protect themselves, that cruelty is ordinary, that it is collective, that the person a community has decided not to see may have an interior life. It is not known and perhaps not possible to determine, whether readers were improved by this. It is much more difficult to say that they were not taught something.

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