

Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King’s Fiction
Review by Michael Collins

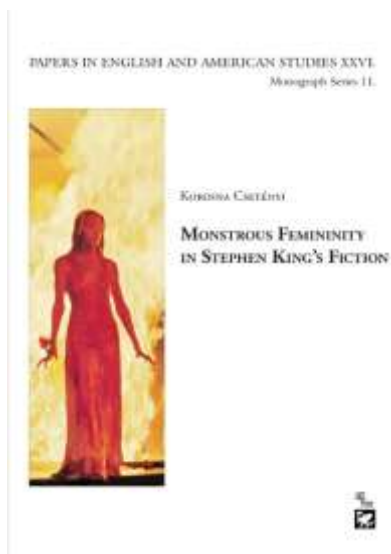
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Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King’s Fiction

by Korinna Csetényi

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Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King's Fiction by Korinna Csetényi is a rich resource and read if one is looking to understand King's work and the complexities of the horror genre. The introduction and theoretical background of the book (pp. 1-84) provide the reader with a history of the evolution of gothic horror and with the ways the idea of the monster and monstrous beings have been analyzed in academic texts insofar. The author emphasizes that gothic and horror literature is usually considered a lowbrow genre, which for some time, was not taken seriously in academic contexts. However, she discusses the genre's importance in the birth of the novel and gives an account of its rich history in different literary eras. Csetényi shows many perspectives of the idea of monster and reveals how the academic theories and debates over it have changed. After the academic discussion of the figure of monster, the author of the book introduces Stephen King (pp. 85-108) as author, including his stories and his thematic elements to set the stage for Csetényi's two case studies of two of King's famous female monsters: the eponymous Carrie and Annie Wilkes from *Misery*. Through these case studies Csetényi shows King's monstrous females from a gender-oriented, feminine viewpoint. This last part of the book includes extensive scholarly interpretations on the monstrous feminine and supplies it with a brief cultural history about monsters and their representations, starting with studies on how the monster used to represent the fear of abnormality within the community and continuing with contemporary ideas of monsters that can become celebrated as symbols of freedom.

The second section of Csetényi's book (pp. 85-108) focuses on the themes and ideas of Stephen King's work describing the ways in which these influence contemporary horror genre. This part of the book is particularly important because King has over seventy books and many connect in his own metaverse with subjects that build on his ideas of monsters and his thoughts on community and society (which may make it difficult to understand some of his novels) and emphasizes that for King the horror genre is conservative in that the monster need to be destroyed in the end to restore societal norms. However, Csetényi points out that King as a writer, turns this conservatism on its head by showing that it is the community norms that turn others into monsters and not the other way round. She also goes into an in-depth discussion on King's colloquial writing style, especially his use of intertextual references and recurring themes that manage to connect his own books, especially in the case of the above-mentioned two case studies. The author's goal is to show how King uses and at times subverts his own ideas of conservative horror by giving a sympathetic portrayal in his monstrous women. Csetényi points out the horror genre overall has been demonized in the past for having a corrupting influence on society and was thus many times misunderstood by outsiders. (For example, Mary Harron, who identifies as a feminist, had a similar problem with her 2000 adaptation of *American Psycho*, even though the film cut most of the goriest parts of the novel out and kept graphic images only when artistically absolutely necessary.) One of the most intriguing parts of the book is when the author mentions incidents from her own life where she has been questioned about her love of the genre based on her gender. This is important because the case studies in Csetényi's book also show that King with his use of the horror genre creates a diverse way of looking at the female monster not demonizing them, so they become likeable by women readers and audiences.

In Carrie's case (pp.109-140), Csetényi sees the protagonist as a monster that was created more by the monstrous community that bullies her and discusses how King allows the reader to

identify with Carrie and understand why she lashes out violently against her peers and authority figures such as her religious mother, who tries to hide all forms of sexuality and body changes from her daughter, and the teachers and especially the principle, who allows the bullying in the school to occur. Csetényi observes that the character Sue Snell becomes important because she does try to break the community's disgust of Carrie by not only asking her boyfriend to take Carrie to the Prom, but by also allowing Carrie to share her mind. This gives Carrie a positive connection with someone as she dies and allows Carrie to show her own thoughts and share with Sue the emotions Carrie kept hidden from the world around her. Csetényi shows, that King is turning this conservative community on its head at this stage, because for him the community can become the creator of its own monster, with the outcast needing justice and love.

The section on *Misery* (pp. 141-174) is about the shifting power dynamics in Annie and Paul's relationship, including their shared addictions. Csetényi reveals that the horror is partially based on the shift in traditional gender ideas since Paul is infantilized and represented as weak compared to Annie, who is a physically domineering mother figure. Annie's monstrosity is shown to be from her obsession with the character of Misery in Paul's books series. King implies later on that Annie could be more of a psychopath since Paul later finds a book of newspaper clippings she keeps about murders at a hospital with Annie suspected as the perpetrator. Nevertheless, Annie's dominance over Paul and eventually his writing becomes the crux of the King's novel since Paul must learn Annie's behavior patterns as he writes the new *Misery* book for his survival. In this very case, Csetényi observes that Annie is an abstract monster, a kind of monstrous editor writers fear and reveals through her how writing can be used as therapy in that Paul physically uses his typewriter to kill her and, as such, to free himself from his number one fan.

The conclusion part of the book provides one more case study for the female monstrous. The author discusses King's novella "The Body" from the collection *Different Seasons*. She does this because this chose non-horror story contains the same themes as those found in *Carrie* and *Misery*. Like Carrie, the narrator and his friends are outcasts within the community and their families. Moreover, through the boys' journey to find a body, the novel shows how the gender dynamics of the boys shift between masculine and feminine, showing that monstrosity has no real gender but rather an eerie power. This final analysis allows the reader to see how King repurposes his ideas on the individual monster embedding it in a non-horror work to give it extra emphasis. "The Body" is, in this sense, is a very pragmatic text in King's representation of monstrosity and the monster.

To conclude, *Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King's Fiction* is a well written examination into two of Stephen King's most famous female characters and a bonus novella. The depth and the intriguing approach in different interpretations that Korinna Csetényi found shows the complexity within King's characters and plots and makes this book an enjoyable reading for literature lovers and especially for the genre fans. This is important because horror and dark stories have always been a part of the human storytelling history. Csetényi's book is yet another study which shows that this genre has still a lot to offer when it comes to different academic and scholarly research. The depth of insight and research that she put in her case studies gives a rare glimpse of where King fits into horror history and how the idea of the monster may change due to his literary influence.