

SOCIAL INDIFFERENCE AND ITS ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION IN THE PROSE OF STEPHEN KING

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Abstract

Stephen King is usually read as a writer of the supernatural, yet a large part of the fear his fiction produces comes from ordinary people who see harm and choose not to act. This article examines how social indifference is constructed as an artistic problem in two of King's central novels, *Carrie* (1974) and *It* (1986). The study combines close reading with narratological analysis of focalization and narrative structure, and it interprets the findings through Axel Honneth's account of social invisibility, the bystander model of Latané and Darley, and Bauman and Donskis's concept of moral blindness.

Keywords: Stephen King, social indifference, bystander, social invisibility, American horror fiction, focalization, *Carrie*.

Introduction

Stephen King occupies an unusual position in contemporary American letters. He is among the most widely read novelists of the last half century, and for much of his career his popularity was treated as a reason to doubt his seriousness. Academic criticism has gradually revised that judgement. Douglas Winter's early study presented King as a writer who uses the conventions of horror to examine the anxieties of ordinary American life (Winter, 1984). Tony Magistrale placed King within an American Gothic tradition in which the small town, the family and the institution become the sites of terror (Magistrale, 1988), and later described him as a storyteller whose fiction records the moral condition of the nation (Magistrale, 2010). Heidi Strengell went further and argued that King's work, for all its reliance on Gothic motifs, is shaped by the determinism of literary naturalism, so that character and fate are often products of environment (Strengell, 2005). King himself, in his extended



essay on the genre, described horror fiction as a form that stages threats to social norms and in many cases ends by reaffirming those norms (King, 1981).

This critical history has established that King's fiction is socially engaged. What it has treated less systematically is a specific and recurrent feature of his prose, namely the depiction of social indifference. In novel after novel, the injury that sets the plot in motion is not caused by a monster alone. It is permitted, overlooked or quietly accommodated by neighbours, parents, teachers, officials and townspeople. The supernatural event frequently arrives only after this ordinary failure has already occurred. The most sustained engagement with this problem to date is Penny Crofts's reading of *It*, which examines the townspeople of Derry as bystanders who share responsibility for evil through their failure to intervene and their participation in a culture of silence (Crofts, 2022). Crofts approaches the novel from the standpoint of law and ethics and compares Derry's complicity with the institutional failures revealed by inquiries into child abuse. Her reading is persuasive, but it concentrates on one novel and on the question of culpability. The collection in which it appears shows how diverse current approaches to *It* have become, ranging from memory and nostalgia to colonialism and the American Dream (May, 2022). Across this body of work, however, the question of how King's narrative form produces the experience of indifference, rather than simply representing indifferent characters, remains open.

The present article addresses that question. It treats social indifference not as a theme that can be extracted from the plot but as an artistic construction, built through the choice of narrators and focalizers, the arrangement of time, the use of documents and the relation between the supernatural and the everyday. Two novels form the corpus. *Carrie* (1974), King's first published novel, concerns a bullied adolescent in a small Maine town. *It* (1986), one of his longest and most ambitious works, concerns a group of children and the town that fails them over several generations. The two texts are separated by twelve years and differ greatly in scale, but both place a neglected child at the centre of a communal catastrophe, and both are built from more than one layer of narration. Together they allow a comparison between indifference in a closed institution, the school and the family, and indifference in an entire civic community. The study is guided by three research questions. First, which social actors and mechanisms of indifference does King depict in these novels? Second, which formal devices does he use to make that indifference perceptible to the reader? Third, what is the relation between the supernatural agent and the social neglect that precedes it?

The article argues that King's supernatural figures function primarily as revealers. They give visible and monstrous form to a neglect that the community has already made invisible, and the formal architecture of each novel is designed to show that this neglect is structural rather than accidental.

Carrie opens with an act of collective cruelty. In the girls' shower after a physical education class, Carrie White begins to menstruate for the first time. She does not know what is happening to her, because her mother, a religious fanatic, has never told her. Her classmates respond by mocking her and throwing sanitary products at her while she cowers in the corner (King, 1974, Part One). The scene is often read in psychoanalytic terms, and Kristeva's notion of the abject is plainly relevant: the girls react to Carrie's body as something that must be expelled in order to preserve the boundaries of the group (Kristeva, 1982). What matters for the present argument, however, is what happens after the shower, when the adult world takes over.

The gym teacher, Miss Desjardin, first responds with revulsion and slaps Carrie to stop her hysteria before she understands the situation. She later recognises her own share in the humiliation, and her reaction mixes sympathy with a disgust she cannot entirely suppress (King, 1974, Part One). The school administration handles the event as a disciplinary matter. The assistant principal who deals with Carrie repeatedly gets her name wrong, a small detail that functions as a precise image of institutional non-seeing. Carrie has attended the school for years and has been bullied openly throughout that time, but in the eyes of the institution she remains a file whose name can be misremembered. The school registers her presence and processes her case while failing to recognise her as a person. This is exactly the form of disrespect that Honneth describes as invisibility, in which the other is perceived but looked through (Honneth, 2001).

The same pattern extends to the home. Margaret White's religious fanaticism isolates Carrie from the community and subjects her to confinement and punishment. The neighbourhood knows the White household is strange. Episodes from Carrie's early childhood survive in the novel as local anecdotes told by witnesses years later, yet within the story nothing in the community's response suggests that anyone treated the family's condition as a matter requiring action (King, 1974, Part One). The Whites are tolerated as eccentrics, and tolerance here is another name for neglect.

When the school finally does act against the bullies, its intervention reveals the limits of institutional attention. The punishment imposed on the girls provokes the

resentment that produces the prom-night prank. Chris Hargensen, the ringleader, refuses the penalty and is excluded from the prom, and her father, a lawyer, attempts to pressure the school on her behalf (King, 1974, Part One). The episode shows that the institution's belated concern for Carrie is procedural rather than protective. It punishes an act of cruelty without addressing the social order that made Carrie a permanent target, and it places the victim at even greater risk. Only one of Carrie's classmates, Sue Snell, experiences genuine guilt, and her attempt at reparation, persuading her boyfriend to take Carrie to the prom, is an individual gesture that the surrounding social structure cannot support.

The most distinctive formal feature of *Carrie* is its montage of documents. The narrative alternates between conventional third-person narration and extracts from fictional books, newspaper reports, scientific articles, a memoir by Sue Snell and the transcript of an official investigation known as the White Commission (King, 1974). Critics have usually discussed this device as a way of generating suspense or of lending pseudo-factual credibility to the supernatural. Its effect on the representation of indifference has received less attention.

Every document in the novel is written after the catastrophe. The scientists, journalists and commissioners who examine Carrie's life do so only because she has destroyed much of her town. In the documentary sections Carrie becomes an object of intense attention for the first time. Her childhood, her family, her school record and her body are investigated in detail. This attention is the inverse of the neglect she experienced while alive. The novel therefore enacts what may be called retrospective attention, a pattern in which a community attends to suffering only when suffering has become disaster. The official inquiry exists because the town failed to inquire earlier.

The documentary montage also exposes the self-protective character of institutional memory. The commission's aim is to explain what happened and to reassure the public that it will not happen again. Its language is technical and exculpatory. The novel undermines this reassurance in its closing pages with a private letter describing a small child elsewhere who shows signs of the same power (King, 1974, Part Three). The final document thus contradicts the official conclusion and suggests that the conditions which produced Carrie persist. In formal terms, the novel sets the institutional archive against a private voice and allows the private voice to have the last word. In social terms, it indicates that the lesson of the catastrophe has not been learned.

The same technique can be observed in *Carrie*, though in a more compressed form. The narrated sections of that novel move between the focalization of Carrie and that of the girls and adults around her. The reader is repeatedly shown the same event from the position of the victim and from the position of those who ignore or torment her. This alternation produces a double awareness. The reader understands the victim's experience and simultaneously understands how that experience remains invisible to others.

The analysis of both novels yields four recurrent mechanisms through which King constructs social indifference. The first is institutional non-seeing, in which schools, families and officials register the existence of a victim without recognising her as a subject, as in the school's handling of Carrie. The second is retrospective attention, in which the community's concern arrives only after catastrophe and takes the form of investigation rather than care, as in the documentary layer of *Carrie*. The third is civic forgetting, in which a town absorbs its own violence into routine and excludes it from official memory, as in the interludes of *It*. The fourth is the split between child and adult perception, in which those with the least power see the most and those with the most power see the least, as in the focalization of both novels. These mechanisms are not isolated themes. Each is tied to a formal device, respectively the minor detail of misrecognition, the documentary montage, the cyclical chronology with its historical interludes, and the distribution of focalization.

Conclusion

This article has argued that social indifference in Stephen King's *Carrie* and *It* is not a secondary theme but a central artistic construction, and that King's supernatural agents function primarily as figures that make visible a neglect already normalised by the community. The analysis identified four mechanisms of indifference and linked each to a formal device. Institutional non-seeing is conveyed through small details of misrecognition. Retrospective attention is conveyed through the documentary montage of *Carrie*, in which the victim becomes an object of study only after catastrophe. Civic forgetting is conveyed through the cyclical chronology and historical interludes of *It*, which function as a counter-archive to the town's official memory. The split between those who see and those who do not is conveyed through the distribution of focalization between children and adults.

The principal contribution of the study is to move critical attention from the monster to the social conditions that allow it to operate, and from the content of King's social critique to its form. The findings suggest that King's horror is, at its core, a horror of recognition withheld. The reader is frightened by the creature, but the more lasting disturbance comes from the recognition that the community saw the victim and chose not to look. Future research could test the typology proposed here on other King novels in which a town is the collective protagonist, and could apply it comparatively to literatures in which the relation between the individual and the community is organised differently.

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