

DOUGLAS KEESEY

**“Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera”:  
Masculinity, Masochism, and Stephen King’s  
*Misery***

Writing is like “dreaming awake” (King 1987, 112), thinks Paul Sheldon, echoing Freud in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” In Freud’s definition, a “dream is a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish” (1900, 160). But, we may wonder, if Paul’s—or Stephen King’s—writing represents his wish-fulfillment fantasies, why is it so unpleasant, so unbearable? Why is it horror? *Misery*: “As a common noun it meant pain, usually lengthy and often pointless; as a proper one it meant a character and a plot, the latter most assuredly lengthy and pointless, but one which would nonetheless end very soon” (King 1987, 220). If there is no point to Paul’s misery, why draw it out in the way that Stephen King does here, prolonging to an almost unbearable extent the spectacle of Paul in pain, the parts of his body being hacked off piece by piece even as he nearly loses his mind? What kind of sense does it make to call *Misery* “a novel so disgusting you just have to finish it” (179), a nightmare at which we “did not wish to look and yet could not forbear to” (215)? If it is clear why we are repulsed by horror, what accounts for its attraction?

Freud argued that anxiety dreams or nightmares were still wish-fulfillment fantasies in which the dreamer is compelled to repeat traumatic experiences that occurred earlier in life, but to repeat them with a difference: in the revision that is the dream, the dreamer is no longer a passive victim, but instead eventually gains control over disturbing past events. Repetition compulsion is thus “a matter of attempts made by the ego, in a piecemeal fashion, to master and abreact excessive tensions.

My thanks to Leonard Cassuto for his encouragement to write this piece and for his incisive comments on an earlier draft. I would also like to thank Peter Rudnytsky for his helpful suggestions, one of which led to the Postscript.

Repetitive dreams following mental traumas would especially tend to bear this out" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 80). Elizabeth Wright (1987) provides a useful summary of Freud's difficult theory, adding a comment about the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe that is strikingly relevant to our consideration of Stephen King:

Since the central tenet of Freud's theory of dream-formation was that dreams are wish-fulfillments, the compulsion to repeat raised a problem for him when it came to anxiety dreams . . . where the dreamer returned over and over again to the memory of his traumatic experience. Freud came to think of anxiety dreams in general as attempts to fulfil wishes accompanied by the performance again of the ego's initial repression of the dangerously challenging upsurge from the id, as if to renew and strengthen the resistance to that wish. Poe's fiction, according to [Marie] Bonaparte, embodies the wish to become reunited with his dead mother; since this must needs be a censored wish we should not be surprised that Poe's tales hardly read like wish-fulfillments [but nevertheless are wish-fulfillments in disguise]. (41)

Surely, Paul Sheldon's nightmarish experiences involve his fear of a mother-figure, Annie Wilkes, the crazed female fan who rescues him from a car crash and then holds him hostage, progressively infantilizing him and threatening to castrate him if he does not use his pen to keep writing about the Gothic romance character, Misery, with whom she has identified. What might be less obvious and more interesting is the fact that Paul's matrophobic fear of Annie may disguise a desire to return to the mother, to regress to a pleasurable state of total dependency and reliance upon the mother to fulfill his every need. The attraction-repulsion Paul feels for Annie reflects his own ambivalence toward a state of dependency, which he both desires as a relief from the burden of independence and fears as a challenge to his hard-won autonomy.

Paul's misery is Stephen King's masochistic fantasy, a nightmare of the male body emasculated, the male psyche

stripped of its independence. And yet not quite, for all of Paul's suffering—and there is an extraordinary amount of it, shockingly detailed, excruciatingly drawn out, and just a chop away from fatal—all this male masochism merely leads to the triumphant assertion of masculinity in the end. As feminist critics have not failed to note, the “violence and bodily invasions in *Misery* begin with Annie's oral ‘rape’ of Paul,” but they “end as Paul shoves burning manuscript-bond down Annie's throat, thinking ‘I'm gonna rape you all right, Annie’” (Bosky 1992, 154). “In order to reassert the gender identity necessary for creativity in Stephen King's metaphorical universe, Annie must be raped. . . . Thus Annie's orifices must be filled—especially her demanding mouth—her power overthrown, and her sexual creative passivity re-imposed” (Lant 1997, 110). The scene in which Paul forces Annie to eat his manuscript may have been inspired by the one in Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*, where the android Ash (Ian Holm) attempts to shove a rolled-up porno mag down the throat of the troublesomely empowered female Ripley (Sigourney Weaver). Scott's film, however, ends with its female hero triumphant, whereas the climax of King's novel involves the reassertion of male force.

To get a better understanding of how the male masochism of *Misery* contains within it a wish-fulfillment fantasy of sadistic male triumph, we might compare the ending of King's novel with another film that closely resembles it, but which, like *Alien*, ends very differently. In Don Siegel's *The Beguiled* (1971), Clint Eastwood plays a Yankee soldier wounded during the Civil War and dependent upon the females in a southern girls' school to nurse him back to health. As Paul Smith (1993) describes the film, the “Eastwood character's lechery toward some of the school's inmates leads to their punishing him by rather hastily (and probably unnecessarily) cutting off his wounded leg—an amputation that is explicitly referred to as a castration” (162). The parallel here to Annie's excessive zeal as a nurse, her gratuitous removal of Paul's foot, thumb, everything short of the “man-gland” itself, is striking (King 1987, 251). However, unlike the phenomenally popular *Misery*, *The Beguiled* was not a success. This could be because, as director

Don Siegel put it, "Maybe a lot of people just don't want to see Clint Eastwood's leg cut off" (Smith 1993, 162). (In the film version of *Misery*, Paul [James Caan] does not have his foot amputated; instead, Annie [Kathy Bates] merely breaks his legs, albeit in a memorably cruel way.) But Smith has another explanation for the unpopularity of *The Beguiled*: he points out that, in contrast to other Clint Eastwood movies where the hero undergoes terrible suffering but ultimately emerges not just intact but stronger than ever, in this film "there is no triumphant transcendence in the end: after the rushed amputation, [Eastwood's] anger and accusations provoke the women and girls to murder him with poison" (162). A dead Eastwood, a dismembered and finally defeated male body, is not one with which movie audiences find it easy to identify. In Smith's view, the lesson to be learned from this movie's failure is "that the masochistic stage of such narratives cannot be presented as a complete castration and that the possibility of transcendence must always be kept available. The masochistic trope in this sense must be no more than a temporary test of the male body" (162).

Smith is describing the action-adventure genre in which male bodies succumb to punishment as proof that they can take it like a man. This "near destruction" is thus merely a prelude to the "final hypostatization of the male body" (161); the physical display that makes the body appear vulnerable, the violation of that body's integrity, is a test of manhood, passed when the "demonstration of masculine destructibility" turns into proof of "recuperability" (156); "the two-stage exhibitionist/masochist process must always be followed by a narrative revindication of the phallic law and by the hero's accession to the paternal and patronizing function of the third stage of the orthodox action movie codes" (159). Carol J. Clover (1992) has argued that this narrative turn from masochism to sadism, from vulnerability to invincibility, holds true for horror too: "Although the odd horror movie does follow a masochistic scenario to its annihilatory end point (*The Incredible Shrinking Man*, for example), most undo the dream or fantasy through an eleventh-hour reversal, longer or shorter and more or less sadistic" (222).

We can now describe *Misery* as a masochistic wish-fulfillment fantasy in which a man flirts with the idea of total

dependency and vulnerability only to master his fear of weakness and to prove his manhood in an act of sadistic triumph over a female body. If we look closely at the scenes in which Paul suffers, we can see how his frightening ordeal is constantly being reimagined as a test of strength: the more horrible the pain, the stronger the proof of his indestructibility and macho omnipotence. Let us take a tour of *Misery*, reading it psychoanalytically for its insights into masochistic proof of masculinity. We might take our cue from the curious simile that likens Paul, as he tries to escape from under Annie's fallen body, to "a man burrowing his way out of a snowslide" (King 1987, 295). In fact, Paul's car did go off the road during a snowstorm. Is everything else—Annie's rescue and subsequent torture of him and his eventual triumph over her—merely a delirious fantasy that he has while trying to burrow out of the snow?

In this fantasy, Paul regresses to the time when he was a young boy completely dependent upon his mother (Annie). Paul's regression is triggered by a midlife crisis: he fears that he is not the man he should be. At the very moment when he is making the greatest effort to prove his masculinity, he is overcome by doubt. Paul has been married, but is twice divorced; he is a published author, but he writes women's romances scorned by male reviewers. Forty-two years old (King was forty when *Misery* was published), Paul is on the road in search of his lost youth, attempting the cross-country trip he had wanted to take since he sold his first novel at age twenty-four (King was twenty-seven when he published his first novel, *Carrie*, about a protagonist with mother troubles).

Tony Bonasaro, the hero of Paul's latest and newly masculinized fiction, is a "slum kid trying to get out of a bad environment" (20)—Paul's own ego-ideal, a boy man enough to break the rules (steal cars) to get where he wants to go. But Paul's visions of triumph are interrupted by fears of failure. Annie is the voice in Paul's head that tells him that his quest for freedom runs the danger of death. Paul begins his triumphant journey, but his self-doubt (Annie) brings it to a premature end: "So he had gone—//—'out like a light! I was sure you were going to die'" (15). Paul courageously determines to strike out for new territory, but his fears (projected in Annie) get the better of him: "he remembered suddenly, on

the spur of the moment, deciding—//—‘that I better get you home right away!’” (14). It is Paul’s lack of confidence in himself that brings him “home” where he can be safe with mommy. Paul has not yet developed the independence necessary for the kind of self-assertion he wants to make. Indeed, Paul’s oral dependencies (“He smoked too much” [6]; he drinks) suggest that he is stuck in an early stage of childhood development. If he hadn’t been “quite drunk,” he would probably not have lost control of his car in the first place (12). If he hadn’t been so dependent on other people, so fearful of their reaction to his manly novel, he would have made a copy of it and thus not have been so vulnerable to Annie’s incendiary critique (which represents his own lack of self-confidence).

Unable to bear the burden of responsibility that comes with adult life, Paul reverts in fantasy to boyhood, even babyhood, to the symbiotic mother-child relation in which all his needs are cared for. Annie is the mother who breathes life into him, feeds him in the womb (intravenously) and then spoon-feeds soft food into his mouth, changes him, helps him urinate, gives him baths, helps him to sit up, nurses him when he gets sick, warns him about playing with cleaning fluid, and buys him typing paper so that he can develop his writing skills. Annie is the good mother of baby Paul’s needy fantasy. But there is a side to Paul that has not given in to helplessness and still struggles for independence. This rebel Paul fears and hates his mother for he sees her as smothering him—suppressing his individuality, stunting his growth, and denying his manhood. The rebel Paul deliberately fantasizes a bad mother, one whose violent opposition to his growth will force him to be a man.

Tony Magistrale (1992) has recently put into words what is surely one of the great truths about King’s fiction: “In Stephen King’s world adult survival is always predicated upon the survival of the child within the adult—the latter’s capacity to summon forth the powers of imagination and simple faith” (132). My argument is that in *Misery* the child within the adult Paul uses his powers of imagination masochistically to conjure up a monstrous mother who forces him to develop the fortitude to survive in the adult world. If you have the sneaking

suspicion (as I do) that a part of King may be enjoying the suffering to which he subjects Paul (much as one side of Paul clearly likes to see his character Misery miserable), perhaps it is because that shattering of Paul is a necessary step in his evolutionary development toward psychic wholeness. As a man, Paul feels incomplete, so the potential male in Paul dreams up a monstrous mother who will beat him into shape.

After describing “images of woman as monstrous-feminine” in the contemporary horror film—“witch, archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, *femme castratrice*”—Barbara Creed (1993) asserts that such childish male fantasies, though misogynist and gynephobic, are one way that boys become men: these images

shock and repel, but they also enlighten. They provide us with a means of understanding the dark side of the patriarchal unconscious, particularly the deep-seated attitude of extreme ambivalence to the mother who nurtures but who, through a series of physical and psychic castrations associated with her body and the processes of infant socialization, also helps to bring about the most painful of separations, necessary for the child’s entry into the symbolic order. (165–66)

As a phallic mother, Annie forces her breath into Paul “the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman” (King 1987, 4). Critics have emphasized the fact that Paul here views Annie’s act as rape, but it is important to note Paul’s description of the result: “he is raped *back into life* by the woman’s stinking breath” (6; italics added). Paul’s horror at the monstrous-feminine resuscitates his masculine will to live. Paul imagines himself being “feminized” (raped, cut open) in order to bring out the man in him. As Freud (1924) has written:

if one has an opportunity of studying cases in which the masochistic phantasies have been especially richly elaborated, one quickly discovers that they place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that

is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby. For this reason I have called this form of masochism . . . the feminine form, although so many of its features point to infantile life. (162)

Annie makes a hole in Paul's body with IV tubes, and she opens a hole in his manuscript like a cigarette burn. Paul's dream of sticking a knife in her throat is countered by Annie's plunging a hypodermic needle into his arm, prompting him to realize, "I'm fucked" (King 1987, 191). Annie takes a knife out of her skirt, and later cuts an "axe-slash" in Paul's ankle; his struggles only make it "open like a mouth," the visible expression of his pain (205). When Paul's cries for help prompt Annie to kill a state trooper (driving a cross into the man's back, then using it to slit open his belly), Paul feels "guilt—like a quick deep stab-wound": Annie invades his mind as well as his body (271). The fear of anal rape—being given an enema with a knife, having a needle stuck up his ass or buckshot up his bumhole—intensifies Paul's feelings of victimization.

With her hair unpinned and loose (like Medusa's snaky locks that terrified men to death?), like a rattlesnake in her ability to strike, and her "solid fibrous unchannelled body" without "feminine curves" or "welcoming orifices" (7), Annie is the phallic mother *par excellence*, but the crucial fact here is that Paul assigns Annie the phallus only so that he may identify with it and appropriate it for himself. Annie is imagined as a stinging Bee-Goddess so that Paul may be inspired to "sting like a bee"—to become a macho fighter like Muhammad Ali (269). Paul's father had been an inadequate role model: "not noticing Paul" (9); advising him to carry a condom but not really telling him enough about how to protect himself against women (a pregnant woman might try to blackmail him into marriage); making light of Paul's pain (Paul imagines his father telling him that the foot amputation is "just a little cut" [207]); and finally "sinking" into death from a stroke (222). (King's own father abandoned him—leaving him alone with his mother—when King was very young.) In compensation, Paul fantasizes a phallic mother from whom he can seize strength, as a masochist identifies with the sadist's power. The



bigger the wounds inflicted by Annie, the better Paul can feel about his strength to survive ("From the big [scars] you get novels" [219]); the more Paul is violated by the phallic mother, the more triumphant will be his final rape of her ("I'm gonna rape you, . . . Annie'" [292]) and the more satisfying will be his sight of her open body ("A huge wound, pink-red" [293]). In psychoanalytic terms, Paul allays his castration anxiety in two ways: first through a fetishistic idealization of Annie as phallic mother (because the thought of her without a phallus makes him fear that he may lose his too), then through an attempt to castrate the phallic mother as proof of his superior potency.

In Paul's imagination, Annie is not only the phallic mother who makes holes, she is also a devouring mother who *is* a hole. Annie's "strange maternal" combination of love and disapproval (13), overindulgence and punishment, is figured as a "batty darkness under the meadow," as "that black look of *crevasse*" in which the son does not find recognition of his desires (201), but instead a "*catatonia*" threatening his self-identity, "a blackness where no flowers grew and into which the drop might be long" (11). However, this hole of self-loss terrifies Paul into becoming a real writer, one who writes as if his life depended on it—"a feeling that was like falling into a hole filled with bright light" (42). To fall into the bright light, Paul must first face Annie's dark maw. He calls on his writer's unconscious, the "buggers . . . busting their balls" (111) where it is "dirty down there in the sweatshops" (109). These homunculi produce the stuff of Paul's manhood; it is the "boys in the sweatshop" who give him a plan of escape: "*burn the mother down*" (262).

Annie's attachment to Paul is represented as a desire to introject her ego-ideal by *eating* him, which is the very image King has used to express his own fear of his fans: "The occupational hazard of the successful writer in America is that once you begin to be successful, then you have to avoid being gobbled up. America has developed this sort of cannibalistic cult of celebrity, where first you set the guy up, and then you eat him" (quoted in Beahm 1989, 247). Like the baby who projects his voracious hunger for the breast onto the mother, fearing that it is *she* who wants to eat *him*, Paul imagines Annie

as an overeater who says to him, "*You look so good I could just eat you up*" (King 1987, 137). Paul is an African dirty bird trapped in Annie's ultraclean urban cage, but the bird is also Annie in Paul's dream of "being eaten by a bird," which must then be shot (24). Paul's difficulty separating himself from his mother makes him wonder whether both will die before he can get out. Annie has no more sympathy for Paul's fear of being trapped than Paul's actual mother did for Paul and his concern over a bird doomed to die in a cage: she calls him "a bawl-baby and a sissy" (27).

But infantilization and effeminization act as spurs to manly individuation. Paul's masochistic memories and his current fantasies of Annie as monstrous maw are called up to empower him. Paul's escape from Annie's house is indeed a "hair-raising" "passage" of self-birth from the womb (76). "Stuck like a cork in a wine-bottle, unable to go either way" (84), Paul is finally "able to squeeze through—barely" (75). "An unmanning guilt" at being out of his room without permission recalls a similar shame over having stolen a cigarette from his (phallic) mother (83). In the end, Paul is able to use his phallic power to lay hold of the door jamb in a death grip and pull himself out, despite Annie's restraining hand on his thigh. To force a separation from her, Paul sees Annie's womb as a tomb, her mouth "the dank red-lined pit of the goddess" (292), her breath smelling "like a corpse decomposing in rotted food" (159). Annie has to be the devouring mother so that baby Paul will see that he can no longer live off her, that he must destroy the dependent female within him in order to realize his independence: "to get out of this, he would have to kill her" (186).

Paul's image of Annie as monstrous womb is related to that of her as castrating mother: she who incorporates Paul as part of her also severs him from himself (his phallus); she who takes Paul into a hole makes a hole where he once was. (John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, which Paul remembers as containing a scene where a "younger son dies, impaled on a gearshift lever" [King 1987, 231], also features a fellatio-castration.) Paul's dream of a rotted, broken-off piling is most obviously an image of his own shattered legs and, after Annie is

through with her axe, of his one leg now missing a foot. However, Paul's trouble in separating himself from Annie also makes the piling, like the bird described above, an overdetermined image, a condensation of him (cut off) and her (as the cutter). The piling is not only his castrated phallus, but also her *vagina dentata*: when the waves that usually cover it draw back, the piling "looked to him like the single jutting fang of a buried monster" (4). Annie is the moon that brings the tide (drugs) to cover the piling (Paul's pain), but she is also the mother who withholds her love and who "castrates" him again and again (foot, thumb, and in his later nightmares, hands and head), reminding him of his dismemberment.

Another condensed image, both castrated phallus and *vagina dentata*, is the broken typewriter. Paul compares the typewriter to Annie herself, "as solid as the woman and also damaged; it sat there grinning with its missing tooth, promising trouble" (55). If he cannot separate from Annie, Paul will end up with the same loose screw and needy emptiness as she. The typewriter that Annie places "between his legs" (53) keeps losing its letters as Paul loses his limbs, making it harder and harder for him to retain his identity as a writer. He cannot name one of his characters "Sean" because that would mean "*just too fucking many n's to fill in*" by hand (97). Significantly, while the typewriter may lack manly, two-legged *n's*, it abounds with womanly *w's*, which figure both female castrator and feminized castrato, as in "*wicked and wretched*" or "*witchlike and wriggling*" (49). Paul's *n's* have been *w*-ed out—"Washed. Wiped. Wasted" (53).

But as a *vagina dentata* threatening a castrated phallus, the typewriter succeeds only in getting a rise out of Paul, the inward upsurge of a "teen-age gunslinger" (like Tony Bonasaro?) who challenges him to prove that he has not broken his "writing bone" (103–4), and who taunts, "'We're going to find out just how good you are, old buddy'" (56). Paul's response to Annie's typewriter, that "instrument of torture" (58), is exactly what we would expect from the male masochist: "avid repulsed fascination"—*avid* to display his potency as a writer; *repulsed* by the terrible challenge to his manhood; *fascinated* by the double bind of attraction-repulsion he is in (59). As Robert Donald

Spector (1984) describes it, the “paradox of cruelty is in the fascination that reader and victim feel toward the very power that threatens them” (26). Paul’s fixation on images of dismemberment can be understood as an attempt to move beyond castration anxiety to a sense of masculine entitlement. After Annie has cut off his foot, Paul’s horror at “the place where he no longer was” (King 1987, 205) is really a goad to “rebellion” so that he “felt himself again” (26). Thus, the voice in his mind of “Ronald Reagan in *King’s Road*, shrieking ‘Where’s the rest of me?’” (35) should be heard in the context not only of a character who lost his legs, but also of the actor who went on to become President. Similarly, while Paul’s dislike of Annie’s calendar picture of a “boy sliding downhill on his sled” may suggest his fear of never being truly free of his mother (an ironic reference to *Citizen Kane*?), we should note that this obsessive image is superseded by a snow scene that reminds him of a “new world” and his “first movie—*Bambi*” (perhaps another ironic allusion, since, unlike *Bambi*, Paul *wants* hunters to shoot his “mother”) (61).

Through Annie, Paul reenacts the traumatic experience of having had a mother who stifled the development of his manhood, but this time Paul ends up the master. As a mother who ironically does not believe in her own powers of creation (98) and as Paul’s number one fan, in “love” with his “creativity” (18), Annie has a severe case of pen(is) envy that leads to an unnatural possessiveness. Her hand on his penis to “help” him urinate is an unwelcome invasion of privacy (88), and Paul’s description of natives who hid diamonds in their rectums and tried to get away from the “Big Hole” before being discovered and hobbled (203) sounds like a boy’s conflict with his mother over toilet training, where he wants to keep his body’s first production (as Freud called the feces). Annie’s jealousy over Paul’s writing ability, over the fact that “he was his own dream-woman when he grabbed hold of himself and jacked off to the feverish beat of his fantasies . . .—you beat a typewriter instead of your meat” (226), shows the sexual repressiveness that results from the mother’s desire to have the son’s phallus for herself. It is no accident that to Paul the smell of Annie’s sweat “was secretive and nasty, like old sheets thick with dried come” (249).

Significantly, Annie may actually have had sex with another artist, after which she invaded his privacy, as if sleeping in the same bed gave her the right to snoop. She finds drugs (his “dirty” secret) and denigrates his artistic ability, eventually dismembering him—or perhaps, as Paul believes, she kills him because he refuses to go to bed with her (194). Annie’s desire for Paul’s pen(is) makes her an incestuous mother, one who infantilizes her son *and* turns him into her sexual slave. As Paul complains, “*What you did was to pull me out of the wreck when I crashed my car and stick me back in the crib again. Two dollar straight up, four dollar I take you aroun the worl*” (66). Like a sexually voracious woman, Annie wants more of Paul than he can give, and when he isn’t “able to write fast enough to satisfy her demands,” she cuts off his thumb (226). (Lorena Bobbitt gave a similar justification—lack of sexual satisfaction—for having severed the penis of her husband, *John Wayne Bobbitt*.) In this connection, we might also consider Stephen King as a “victim of his own celebrity status. . . . When you’re famous, popular, and rich, he has found out, everyone wants a piece of you” (Beahm 1989, 17). “[T]here are those who are not content unless their piece of the celebrity is a bit of cloth torn from his shirt, or a shoe, or the wings of the bat from his private fence which is also a historical landmark” (245).

Annie’s amputation of Paul’s thumb, however, turns out to be a blessing in disguise since it is the organ that Paul used to chew “when he was stuck for a word” (King 1987, 234). Like the phallic cigarettes that Annie has also removed from him (he “had once found it impossible to write if he was out of cigarettes” [235]), the thumb was mainly a crutch that Paul proves he can do without. Paul reacts against Annie’s attempt to get him to internalize the habit of self-mutilation—she wants him to say that he burned his manly novel of his own free will, and she gets him to dream about eating his own thumb—by turning his liabilities into an advantage. Forced to shed tears at the sight of his “weeping stump” (his bleeding hand) (223), Paul nearly dissolves into an hysterical woman, but instead he tropes this shameful expressiveness (he confesses that he was forced to drink rinse water and his own urine) into a demonstration of masculine endurance. Though he humbly claims that these are merely desperate attempts at “self-

preservation" and not "acts of heroism" (70), it isn't long before the sportscaster's voice inside him is lauding his achievements as a way of confirming his manhood and hardening him for the next assault: "Folks, Sheldon has performed heroically today, but this has got to be his last shot" (74). His surrogate mother's dismissive coldness—"God helps those who help themselves" (72)—backfires when Paul deliberately mistakes her attempt to make him admit his dependence on her as a call to self-reliance. Rather than allow Annie's transvestism (her "mannish shirt" [199]) or her transsexuality (the gun in her purse) to confuse his gender identity, Paul refuses to be reduced to the preoedipal, sexually undifferentiated stage of a "blubbing ball of protoplasm" (296) or a "dying tadpole" (167) in Annie's cellar-womb of darkness, "dampness and rotting vegetables" (168). Unlike the infant victims of Annie's "mercy" killings, Paul determines to live long enough to give himself a real name, not one like the androgynous "Girl Christopher" (182), but more phallic: "H. Rider Haggard" (7), tired but still on top; "Hawkeye," who always eventually got the best of "Hot Lips" on *M\*A\*S\*H* (16); "Boynton" or "Roydman" (46); "Tom Twyford" (72); "*Sean*" (97); "El Rancho Grande" (167) or "Peter Gunn" (173); "Wicks" or "McKnight" (299). Lifting the typewriter makes his arms strong; filling in missing letters by himself is painful, but restores his sense of independence as a writer; and striking Annie with the typewriter and making her eat his manuscript become the triumphant assertion of his male identity and superiority. Paul may not be adept at certain conventionally masculine skills—baseball, home repair, being a husband—but he does finally "Go all the way through" his masochistic suffering under Annie (220) to become a successful sadist himself. As a writer, Paul "*can bring it to you and keep bringing it until you holler uncle*" (108).

At this point we may want to ask whether Paul's masochism has any function beyond that of serving as an endurance test that ultimately confirms his (sadistic, sexist) masculinity. Some newer theories of masochism (Deleuze 1971; Studlar 1988; Silverman 1992) have called into question the assumption that the masochist is best defined as someone on the way to becoming a sadist. In a discussion of current cinema,

particularly the horror film, Steven Shaviro (1993) argues that “what inspires the cinematic spectator is a passion for that very loss of control, that abjection, fragmentation, and subversion of self-identity that psychoanalytic theory so dubiously classifies under the rubric of lack and castration” (57). According to Shaviro, the “ambivalent pleasures of the masochistic body provide a rich field for contesting, evading, or eroding phallic power and the global binarization of gender” (59).

Now, I have described *Misery* as ending with Paul’s reassertion of self-control, psychic wholeness, phallic power, and effective differentiation from the feminine (Annie). Actually, though, *Misery* ends with Paul’s renewed fears that the phallic mother may castrate him. This “terror” does goad him to write and to repress or sublimate the pain of “his aching legs” and the fact that “he was weeping as he wrote” (King 1987, 310). Apparently, masochistic fears will continue to inspire Paul to further creative triumphs, but my interest is drawn to those “aching legs” and that “weeping.” What kind of resolution is this? Considering the association of “weeping” with feminization in the novel, is there a certain amount of gender ambiguity at the end as well as ambivalence as to whether Paul is a triumphant sadist (a writer of fiction that can scare us) or still a suffering masochist?

Remembering that in *Misery* Paul identifies both with Annie and with Misery, the suffering heroine of his Gothic novel, we might consider a comment by Paul Smith (1993):

What is common to many of the action movies and westerns of the sort Eastwood makes is the way in which the exhibition/masochism trope and its pleasure/unquiet pleasure, along with their resolution into a triumphalist view of male activity, reside alongside a residual, barely avowed male hysteria.

That hysteria is often expressed narratively as the sensation of the dangers inherent in identification with women. . . . Or else it is a hysterical formation that can be glimpsed in moments of incoherence or powerlessness in the male body and the male presence. (167)



Perhaps Paul at the end of *Misery* exhibits something rather more ambiguous than male self-identity and masculine self-control. Perhaps he is like Geoffrey in the novel-within-a-novel, who is described as having “merely tightened his already hysterically tight hold on himself” (the *e*’s, *t*’s, and *n*’s in this sentence were castrated, then shakily or overemphatically filled in by Paul’s pen) (King 1987, 285).

It is one thing to point out that Paul is not quite the conventional macho man at the end of *Misery*, and quite another thing to argue that he is a feminist. Although I would not want to assert the latter, I would nevertheless like to propose that Paul’s character does show feminist potential. *Misery*, in being a *male* Gothic novel, effects a reversal of the genre: it is Paul, a man, who is trapped by the villainous woman, and it is a woman, Misery, with whom Paul identifies across the gender gap. His desire for her resurrection is his own hope of escape; her fear of being stung by bees is his terror at the phallic Bee-Goddess Annie; Paul’s life hinges on Misery’s ability to escape death: if Misery dies in the novel, Annie will kill Paul, her author.

By identifying with Misery, Paul comes to some understanding of female suffering, and in being forced to prolong Misery’s life as a character, Paul gains an awareness of why a woman like Annie would want such a character to live. Originally, Paul had denied Misery’s independent female sexuality and made her the epitome of maternal self-sacrifice in service to the patriarchal order: Misery didn’t really commit adultery; she merely slept with Geoffrey in order to give her husband, Ian, a son. Misery died giving birth to this boy who will take his place in the now all-male world. No wonder Annie doesn’t like this ending! She and her gender are written out of it. In being forced to deal with Annie’s demands, Paul develops some “empathy” for a woman who must live in a world authored by men (King 1987, 54): “In an act of self-preservation, part of his imagination had, over the last few weeks, actually become Annie” (174). Paul begins to realize how many of the things Annie does spring from her own struggle for survival in a patriarchal society. Paul imagines Annie’s marriage from a potentially feminist point of view, describing her as having



“become part of a socio-sexual corporation called ‘Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Dugan,’” in which Annie Wilkes, the female individual, is hard to find (178). He does blame her for the breakup of the marriage, but then notes, in an unusually nonjudgmental tone, that when her husband divorces her she retakes her maiden name.

When Paul describes Annie as wielding a cross against the state trooper “like a woman trying to kill a vampire” (241), he is being ironic (Annie is the vampire), but also, perhaps, a little empathetic. Paul, who has been attacked for failing to be a serious writer, agrees with Annie that what the press always want is “for you to fuck up” (277); he finds himself “feeling a little sorry for Annie Wilkes” (278). Paul even recognizes that, if the critics pushed him to the limit, he would be tempted to retaliate with Annie-like ferocity: “*Don’t you DARE, you cockadoodie brats! Don’t you DARE turn away from my REAL WORK! Don’t you DARE, or I’ll—// What? What would he do? Cut off their feet? Saw off their thumbs?*” (264). In allowing himself to glimpse “the woman [Annie] might have been” if masochistic suffering had not turned her into a sadist out of self-defense (282), Paul also gains an inkling of who he might become if only he could relax his hysterically tight hold and find some way to be himself without having to imagine female monsters against which to prove his manhood. Masochistic fantasies may inspire his masculine creativity, but while his “legs . . . are singing grand opera” (88), Paul should be more aware of the fact that his eyes are still “weeping” (310).

### Postscript

In Stephen King’s *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000), which appeared after I had completed the foregoing essay, there are statements that resonate with the ideas explored therein. King’s earliest childhood memory is of trying to prove himself as “the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy” (18) by picking up a cement cinderblock all by himself, only to have his manhood deflated by a stinging wasp, causing him to drop the cinderblock “on one bare foot, mashing all five toes” (19).

However, the wasp's sting is not merely symbolically castrating; it also has a restorative effect: "The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration." Similarly, in *Misery* the Bee-Goddess Annie stings Paul so that he may be inspired to "sting like a bee" (King 1987, 269). King calls himself "a *masochistic* lunatic" as a young adult for continuing his self-destructive drinking and later drug use (King 2000, 91), then admits that what inspired him to quit was the invention of "Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer" (98). Yet in order to create such a female as Annie, King found himself inhabiting her psyche and thus empathizing with her, at least to some extent: "In the end, I felt that Annie was almost as much to be pitied as to be feared" (168). "And if I am able, even briefly, to give you a Wilkes'-eye-view of the world—if I can make you understand her madness—then perhaps I can make her someone you sympathize with or even identify with" (191). But when this partial empathy with female "madness" gets too threatening, King disavows it, using her again as the "other" defining his own sanity: "The result [of sympathizing or even identifying with Annie]? She's more frightening than ever, because she's close to real."

Three great remembered pains run through King's memoir of writing: the wasp sting and the cinderblock-smashed foot; a doctor's needle piercing his eardrum after a nurse had laid down a falsely reassuring cloth; and a van that hit him recently while he was on a walk, crushing his leg and almost killing him. In *Misery*, Paul suffers a car accident from which he is rescued by the false nurse Annie, who pierces him with needles and cuts off his foot. As once before when he wrote himself out of his masochistic addictions ("the deep part that knew I was an alcoholic . . . began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters. . . . I wrote *Misery*" [King 2000, 96]), so again after this latest accident, King turns his suffering toward writing horror fiction as a way through the pain: "I gutted it out, as we used to say when we were kids. Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life. That was something

I found out in the summer of 1999, when a man driving a blue van almost killed me” (249).

*English Department  
California Polytechnic State University  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407  
dkeesey@calpoly.edu*

### References

- Beahm, George, ed. 1989. *The Stephen King Companion*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel.
- Bosky, Bernadette Lynn. 1992. Playing the Heavy: Weight, Appetite, and Embodiment in Three Novels by Stephen King. In *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape*. Ed. Tony Magistrale. New York: Greenwood, pp. 137–56.
- Clover, Carol J. 1992. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1971. *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: George Braziller.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1900. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. S.E., Vols. 4 and 5.
- . 1924. The Economic Problem of Masochism. S.E., 19:159–70.
- King, Stephen. 1987. *Misery*. New York: Viking.
- . 2000. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Scribner.
- Lant, Kathleen Margaret. 1997. The Rape of the Constant Reader: Stephen King's Construction of the Female Reader and Violation of the Female Body in *Misery*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30:89–115.
- Laplanche, J., and J.-B. Pontalis. 1973. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton.
- Magistrale, Tony. 1992. *Stephen King: The Second Decade: "Danse Macabre" to "The Dark Half"*. New York: Twayne.
- Shavero, Steven. 1993. *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Silverman, Kaja. 1992. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Paul. 1993. *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spector, Robert Donald. 1984. *The English Gothic*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. 1988. *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Wright, Elizabeth. 1987. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London: Methuen.