

The Clown: The Uncanny and Grotesque in Stephen King's *It*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the rising popularity of the evil clown figure compared to the funny circus clown. It plans to establish that the evil clown trope has resulted from popular culture's obsession with the alternate. Art and movie representations such as the Joker from DC Comics have also contributed to the popular culture's obsession with this archetypal figure. The paper will seek to establish Stephen King's portrayal of Pennywise the Dancing clown in *It* contributing to the general perception of the clown figure as the figure of excess, grotesque, and uncanny. The clown's duality of character makes it complicated, which contributes to the uncanny.

Keywords: archetypal, clown, duality, popular culture, the Uncanny

Introduction:

The clown, meant to elicit laughter from its audience, has arrived at many alternative representations in today's date. The evil clown in popular culture has become more recognized by the masses, which can be attributed to the character of the "Joker" from the DC Comics universe and the formidable Pennywise the Dancing Clown from Stephen King's 1986 novel, *It*. This paper will try to focus on the latter's influence on the imagination of the clown in pop culture and the former's incomprehensibility as a clown in general. Clowns in America were exported from Europe, and the success and popularity garnered by clowns today can be accredited to this export. It is important to note that clowns in American popular culture were gaining a lot of notoriety and a lousy reputation for various reasons. The mask/make-up/outfit added to the antics and theatricality of the clown figure was looked at with suspicion as a farce to carry on anti-social activities in America.

In this context and background, King's Pennywise will be examined and postulated as the product of the popular culture's perception and fear of the peripheral figure. Sigmund Freud's idea of the "uncanny" will also be dealt with to understand the workings of the mind in apprehending what is familiar and what is not. As such, the clown's perception of the other will be studied in the light of the uncanny in *It*. Carl Jung's postulations of the archetypes will also be used to place the clown within the category of the 'trickster.'

The Growth of the Clown Figure:

Karin Paola Meyer, in her essay, "Would you like a balloon? An analysis of the clown in Stephen King's "It"(2018) has drawn a comprehensive timeline of the clown's journey from being a court jester to becoming a menace to society. She states that the clown figure has transformed over the ages and metamorphosed into the subversive character that it is today in literature, television, and by extension, popular culture. The journey of the figure as a court fool/jester in the early 16th century, to the rural clown at the end of the same century, to the clown who performed in circuses in the 18th century to garner more visibility, to the TV clown in the 20th century to the evil clown in the 'present days,' has been tremendous and fortitudinous. With origins in theatre (Commediadell'arte), Clowns were part of the harlequinade, performed in public spaces, similar to masques. Joseph Grimaldi, an English clown of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was one of the first pioneers of the modern clown era. Grimaldi used facial paint and catchphrases, which became quite popular amongst his successors. Grimaldi's most significant contribution is the figure of the 'Joey' clown, which was well-received by the Regency-era English audience.

Although a part of the pantomimes in the form of the harlequinade, Grimaldi is known today as the first modern clown. Andrew McConnell, in his 2006 biography on Grimaldi, says, "Joey had been the first great experiment in comic persona, and by shifting the emphasis of clowning from tricks and pratfalls to characterization, satire and a full sense of personhood, he had established himself as the spiritual father of all those later comedians whose humor stems first and foremost from a strong sense of identity."(McConnell 320) Later in France, Jean-Gaspard Debureau paralleled Grimaldi's success as another clown celebrity whose fame paralleled that of movie stars of this age. Grimaldi and Debureau had tragic personal lives, which were common public knowledge. Also, their performances were laced with dark humor and often directly attacked the establishment; they became the ugly faces of poverty, depression, dysfunctional family lives, alcoholism, and severe personality disorders. The harlequinade form allowed clowns to comment on current events, providing a satirical take on politics, society, and cultural norms. This, however, changed as later clowns turned to mindless and thoughtless acts in their performance as they moved from pantomimes to the circus arena. Nevertheless, the clowns maintained a dark aspect in their performances. Most of them were rather violent, obviously unsettling, bizarre, and simultaneously developed a plot on scene.

Later as the clown started gaining popularity in America, the whole act began to transform and became a domain of children's entertainment. They performed slapstick comedy, often bizarre actions aimed at entertaining young children, and were also available for more exclusive private performances. Bozo the Clown, Ronald McDonald, and Clarabell the Clown became children's favorites and were all the rage in 20th century America. The Auguste clown covered in white and red costumes has garnered more approval than other clown varieties.

The Clown as a Rebel:

The clown often reflects society's perception and treatment of the lower class. The clown dressed in ill-fitting clothes, primarily loose, represents a figure of poverty rather than a luxury. Clowns' behavior and antics are reflective of the absurdity of human existence. Only the rich could afford the entertainment they provided also hints at the more considerable irony. They portray the bizarre in such a manner that it becomes ordinary for the audience and is a scathing comment on human nature and society in general. For an adult, a clown is a source of a scare, absurd and uncan-ny. It is also a figure of the excess, as pointed out by Ken Gelder in the Introduction to *The Horror Reader*.

Many people have Coulrophobia, an excessive fear of clowns in general. It is necessary to ex-amine why such a condition exists when the very existence of clowns is to make people laugh. What makes the clown scary? The clown is the archetypal trickster figure — of comedy and evil, although the latter has dominated people's perception in modern times. William J. Free has pointed out how the contemporary clown represents the grotesque and the absurd in everyday life. The clown is the other who disregards normative and respectable behavior, and one of the ways he achieves that is through "rebellion ."(Free 218) This rebellious streak is what scares the normative and threatens to bring chaos into everyday life, which passes off as acceptable. Since the clown's duality is such that it cannot be categorized, most actions are considered to be harmless and inno-cent.

The clown's actions and theatrics have no limits and reach an ambiguous position where one cannot decide what is acceptable and what is not. In this context, the paper situates the figure of the evil clown, the formation of the grotesque. (Free 217) The evil clown has, in today's date, become more familiar than the circus clown meant to draw out laughter. This has been accredited to the in-troduction of the character Joker by DC Comics in the 1940s, who serves as an adversary to super-hero Batman. Jerry Robinson, the character's co-creator, felt that Batman needed an undecipherable, exotic super villain. (BottleImp) The irony was that the character was sinister, yet at the same time, it had a clownish aspect to it. This paradox is witnessed again in Stephen King's novel *It* in the form of Pennywise, which appeared in 1986.

The Uncanny Clown

This conflicting image of the clown has presented a rife field which makes it an ambiguous figure; therefore, it can be relegated to the area of the uncanny. Freud has defined the term Uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar. This undergoes a process of dissociation from the familiar." (Freud 220) It already appears bizarre due to its weird appearance and gender-defying persona, but also because they are a source of both comedy and evil. This last part makes it extremely difficult for the public to pin it down to an exact area where we can identify the figure's motives and personality.

The Joker is a force of anarchy, a product of a capitalist society divided into the lines of class and communities. Although the character was introduced purely as a hero's nemesis, there is an angle of incomprehensibility that makes it an inch closer to the uncanny. The Joker is unlike any villain to have appeared in popular culture; a figure of anarchy, psychopathy, and the grotesque. Free has pointed out how "the grotesque in art was originally a mode of

rebellion...the grotesque style necessary as a counterbalance.” (Free 217) Even though the Joker is a rebellious figure who promotes anarchy, it still gives rise to the uncanny. The grinning visage is but a front for the psychopathic serial killer as he alternates between the comic and the incomprehensible evil.

King’s titular monster takes on different forms of evil and fear. Its primary condition is that of Pennywise, which brings to mind J.K.Rowling’s boggarts as it changes and manifests itself according to its victim’s deepest fears. Therefore old fears are foregrounded as the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.”(Freud 232) It is to be noted that the characters in the novel *It* do not have Coulrophobia. Yet, every time Pennywise makes an appearance, it is to manifest the repressed secrets and evil of the characters. It frequently uses this form to escape notice as a harmless clown. In the opening scene where five-year-old Georgie Denbrough falls into the trap of Pennywise, who also introduces himself as Mr. Bob Gray, it is precisely because to a small kid; a clown does not evoke any sense of danger or suspicion. Pennywise speaks to Georgie in “a perfectly reasonable and rather pleasant voice” (King 13). Although hesitant initially, Georgie gives in to the clown as he reaches out with his hand towards the boat, and Pennywise bites into him. This scene immediately drives terror to the reader’s heart, and the clown's dissociation with familiarity happens swiftly. Roughly twenty-seven years later, *It* is back as the clown and creates trouble by directly and indirectly participating in several killings. The killing of Adrian Mellon by Pennywise is nothing short of pure malice and hatred that *It* is capable of arousing in the people of Derry.

Looking at Pennywise, the people, especially its victims, go through a sense of anxiety and unease, which is discomfiting for their understanding of the normal. It defied gendered categories as Georgie was puzzled if the clown was “his (or was it her? — George was never really sure of the gender)” (King 13). Pennywise is scary but not in the strict sense of the American Gothic, instead infuses the elements of comedy, tragedy, the uncanny, and villainy. He is the by-product of a post-modern exposition of the American society, which is a hotchpotch of multiculturalism and a troubled past. One cannot pin down Pennywise’s motives, his exact form, or his presence to one point. He is omniscient, ever-present, and always unpredictable. Therefore the methods with which the Losers Club deals and fights with Pennywise are not always successful and always call for more. He will find ways to get back to Derry and America by extension. Its reappearances and immortality are also a means of hinting at America as the breeding ground of gothic, which presents itself as a ripe and fertile ground for *It* to survive and prosper.

The Clown as a Monster

The Uncanny leads to the misrecognition of the clown as a lovable character and therefore leads to terror. What this paper proposes to establish is that the clown does not adhere strictly to a particular category of identification and defies “symbolic boundaries .”(Gibson 237) Paul Santilli, in “Culture, Evil, and Horror” (2007), says that the raw, primitive, uncultured elements cannot be considered part of the culture and that “the antithesis of culture

is not nature but the unnatural—that is, the monstrosity that does not fit into any categories or names.” (Santilli) He is of the mind to refuse bi-nary categorization of the monster figure. Therefore he surmises that “a sort of “third” indeterminate being or event, in some way present to but not re/presented within any cultural scheme.” It is, therefore, what the paper seeks to present that the clown figure comes across as an indeterminate figure, which presents itself as the uncanny. The moment this uncanny attempts an explanation is when the mystery or the fantastic disappears and therefore dissolves the uncanny moment. Terror flourishes only in the uncanny domain as it cannot be explained or demystified.

King brings in the idea of collective amnesia after Pennywise’s every periodic appearance. This is only but a paradox of America’s desire to forget about its brutal and painful past. Forgetting is part of the American unconscious. By the end of the tormenting events, it is not just the Losers Club, but the entire of Derry forgets about their affair with It and their tragedies. The possibilities are ignored for good, as King sarcastically intends for his readers to surmise. In reality, this forgetfulness is a scathing commentary on the American society’s tendency to suppress tragedy, its ever-growing consumerism, its thirst for a progressive future, its propensity to bury secrets, and a scathing attack on the dysfunctional society bereft of apathy, humanity, and love.

The clown is uncanny, which defies society’s conception of the ordinary and familiar. A grown-up man dressing up with loud make-up performing bizarre acts is not only unsettling but also scary due to its unpredictability. The representation and popular opinion of the clown has always been attributed to the side of evil. A circus setup does not evoke fear due to the presence of a large audience and the apparent fact that clowns only appear as a side-act. They provide comic relief and, simultaneously, fill in the time between different acts by other performers. Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, in her article, “The History and Psychology of Clowns Being Scary,” says, “Clowns were...an anarchic presence that complimented the precision of the acrobats or horse riders.”(McRobbie) Therefore it is expected of a clown to appear in a bizarre outfit to make people laugh. So does anyone who is attending a birthday party, a children’s hospital, a local fair, a private gathering, etc., where a clown has been hired to perform to make people laugh.

Contrary to this setup, looking at a clown in a library, in a dark alley, or any other familial place would not bring out the same kind of reaction from a person. Spotting a clown in such areas would not only seem absurd but also disrupts our perception of normalcy and the familiar. We would be unsettled and anxious by wondering what the clown was doing there in the very first place. It is perceived that behind the make-up and the weird costumes, the darkness and evil aspect is masked and hidden.

Conclusion

Another aspect of looking at the clown is that it is a part of cultural production. Since the days of Grimaldi, clowns have been seen in all modes of popular culture, and these modes of popular culture manufacture the image of the clown. Ken Gelder, in the Introduction to *The Horror Reader*, has talked about how criticism related to horror determines the public’s perceptions, “critical dispositions not only depend on what is being looked at, and when, but

will determine what is being looked at (and what is deemed inappropriate, irrelevant, and so on) in the first place.” (Gelder 4)

Post the negative images of the clown in the form of the troubled and erratic personal lives of Grimaldi and Deburau, the serial-killer clown named John Wayne Gacy aka Pogo, DC Comics’ Joker, Pennywise’s evil form, and many other unfortunate incidents involving clowns have slowly degraded the character of the clown. Today, Clowns do not enjoy the same kind of popularity, love, and fascination as they should have. As pointed out by Gelder, they have become figures of excess, a direct attack on the West’s desire and thirst for restraint. The heightened and over-the-top antics and the clown’s pursuit of forcefully evoking laughter make it the figure of excess. Western Enlightenment thrives on controlling this excess and strives for “restraint,” which is evident in the eventual demise of the clown’s popularity.

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