

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
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**ANALYSIS OF THE AUTHORIAL TECHNIQUES  
USED BY STEPHEN KING IN *MISERY* (1987)  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Stephen King is a renowned contemporary author, who has published over fifty novels, many of them bestsellers, and who has pushed the thriller and horror genres into new heights. This thesis aims to locate and analyse different authorial techniques, like choosing narrative perspectives, establishing pace, and building suspense, to gain a higher understanding of King's phenomenon and to aid future aspiring authors, literary critics, and researchers.

The techniques are analysed in his 1987 psychological thriller *Misery*, and the analysis itself is based on theories and research done by literary critics and academics. To keep it concise, not all the aspects of writing are analysed, but the focus will lay on three major elements: the perspective; the pace; and the suspense.

After introduction, the second part of the thesis introduces Stephen King and his importance in the literary landscape as well as the literary praise and criticism Stephen King's writing has received from other critics and scholars.

The second part analyses these elements by first establishing their core meaning, then finding examples of them used in *Misery*, and finally explaining how and why King has chosen to use them to elevate his writing.

Finally, the fifth part concludes and summarises the thesis and theorises about the implications and possibilities of further research on this subject.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	5
A. Brief Introduction of Stephen King .....	6
B. Significance of King’s Authorial Techniques in Horror and Thriller Genre ....	6
C. Thesis Statement: Analysing King's Writing Techniques in the Context of <i>Misery</i> .....	8
I LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
A. Brief overview of Stephen King’s literary career .....	8
B. Rationale for Choosing <i>Misery</i> as the Focus .....	9
C. Summary of the Plot of <i>Misery</i> .....	10
D. Mention of Literary Criticism on Stephen King's Work.....	10
E. Mention of Literary Praise on Stephen King’s work .....	11
F. Study of King’s Authorial Techniques.....	12
II KING’S AUTHORIAL TECHNIQUES IN <i>MISERY</i> .....	14
A. First-Person and Third-Person Narrative Perspectives .....	14
1. Analysis of How Narrative Perspectives Contribute to Understanding Fear and Identity .....	15
2. How different perspectives influence the reader .....	17
B. Pacing.....	18
1. Three Avenues of Analysing Pace.....	19
2. Exploration of Pace in <i>Misery</i> .....	20
C. Suspense.....	23
1. Importance of Suspense in Thrillers .....	24
2. Building of Suspense in <i>Misery</i> .....	25

CONCLUSION.....	26
A. Restatement of Thesis .....	27
B. Significance of King's Writing Techniques .....	27
C. Future Research and Implications.....	28
1. Brief Mention of Possible Directions for Future Research .....	29
2. Implications of the Study on Understanding Horror and Suspense in Literature .....	29
REFERENCES .....	31
RESÜMEE.....	32

## INTRODUCTION

Exploring Stephen King's authorial techniques unveils a nuanced tapestry of storytelling craftsmanship that should hold significant scholarly interest. This is why this thesis will undertake a rigorous examination to analyse King's use of narrative strategies, pacing techniques, and choices of perspective, with a specific focus on his seminal work, *Misery*. By engaging in close textual analysis, this study aims to elucidate the underlying mechanisms through which King elicits a spectrum of emotions, including fear, suspense, and intrigue, in his readers. Through meticulous scrutiny and scholarly interpretation, this paper endeavours to shed light on the factors that distinguish King within the literary canon and contribute to his enduring influence on literature, while aiming to deepen the understanding of the art of storytelling and its broader implications within literary discourse.

In order to keep this work more concise, it will not focus on all of the aspects which go into writing, but only on three important elements: choosing narrative perspective; manipulation of pace; and building suspense. This approach will keep the thesis better structured, but will also omit a lot of information about the other elements, such as creating dialogue, symbolism, motifs, etc., leaving a lot of room for and inviting future research on this topic.

The structure of the analysis will thus follow a set pattern, of introducing the element or technique used, and then give examples of King's uses of said elements from his psychological thriller *Misery*.

## **A. Brief Introduction of Stephen King**

A writer with a troubled past, Stephen Edwin King was born in Portland in 1947. His father left when he was young and this made the early years of his life more difficult since his mother had to raise him and his siblings alone. King got married in 1971 and he published his first book “Carrie” in 1974 (King, DeFilippo n.d.: para 1-8). During his early years, King struggled a lot with alcoholism and drug abuse and in an interview with the Rolling Stone he talks about how writing *Misery* was his own internal fight to be freed from this self-made prison. King reveals how he sympathised with the protagonist of the story Paul Sheldon in his fight for independence. How Sheldon was completely at the mercy of the manic Annie Wilkes and how his only retreat and coping mechanism was to escape into the world of writing fiction. By creating the monster Annie Wilkes, King personified his own inner demons and was able to leave this past behind. King puts it poetically: *Misery* is a book about Cocaine. Annie Wilkes is Cocaine. She was my number-one fan.” (Greene 2014: 3)

## **B. Significance of King’s Authorial Techniques in Horror and Thriller**

### **Genre**

Stephen King has been widely regarded as “The King of Horror” in the recent past. He has gotten more praise than any of the other thriller writers and has been compared to the all-time greats like Edgar Allan Poe (Kurtz 2020: 53). In his works, King draws inspiration from and puts to use different aspects of all of the wide variety of horror stories from the past and thus, by drawing inspiration from the past, he shapes and moulds them to fit his own distinctive style (Indick 1982: 5).

Laura Christie (2017: 7) argues that King finds and brings forth the hidden fears or “phobic pressure points” and by focusing on this rediscovery of fears from childhood he

re-establishes their existence. This is one of the reasons why many critics believe that it is King who brought the horror genre into mainstream media.

This statement is even shared by the author himself who believes in how he has improved the horror genre, even though he really does not believe in classifying books into genres (Greene 2014: 1). King expertly uses his own past experiences and inner fears to draw inspiration from and believes wholeheartedly that by bringing our own daily horrors into the daylight, it will be the best way of dealing with them. If the inner fears are not dealt with early, they will fester, mutilate, and grow into deadly monsters. (Christie 2017: 7)

One of the aspects then is how King localises his horror. It focuses on the emotions, experiences and happenings of a community, a small town or even only a single person (as is the case in *Misery*). This way, even if he is keen towards the supernatural, the monster might not be a ghoul or a ghost, but a fellow man, a family member or even the protagonist himself. (Indick 1982: 5-10) The fact that the victim might be a common person built a more personal fear in the reader (Senf 1994: 210).

Today, King as a writer of horror and psychological thrillers is emulated the same way fantasy writers draw inspiration from Tolkien (D'Elia 2007: 28). King of course does not argue that he has indeed drawn much inspiration from the great classics of the past like Poe or Stoker, but he also feels that by reaching the hearts of so many readers, he would also like to be considered as one of the great horror writers, since, as King (2000) wrote in his autobiography: "He could be in worse company". (Bloom 2007: 27)

The choice for choosing King also stemmed from a more personal standpoint. Having read many of his books, his autobiography "On Writing" was strongly influential in me personally becoming more aware of my hope of becoming an author myself.

## **C. Thesis Statement: Analysing King's Writing Techniques in the Context of *Misery***

This thesis investigates the many great authorial techniques that King employs, like his choices for narrative perspectives, the different pacerings, and his suspense building skills. Through this investigation it aims to understand their significance in distinguishing him from other contemporary writers. Through an objective analysis of these elements, drawn from examples within the text, the research seeks to provide insights into King's craftsmanship and its impact on his reputation in the literary landscape. Focused on his novel *Misery*, the study examines King's use of these aspects and seeks to provide insight into King's craftsmanship and its impact on his reputation in the literary landscape.

## **I LITERATURE REVIEW**

Today, Stephen King is already a widely known author for multiple generations. This also means that many of his works have been read and analysed by prestigious academics and literary critics. While King is most definitely a well-established popular writer, some literary critics like Harold Bloom, Gary Hoppenstand, and Ray B. Browne argue that his literary work does not stand up to in-depth criticism (D'Elia 2007: 1). While most criticism focuses on his ideas and originality, then this paper will look at the critics who have reviewed and analysed Stephen King's writing style and techniques.

### **A. Brief overview of Stephen King's literary career**

In an interview, when asked why he would choose to write in a genre that was not popular at the time, King (2014: 1) explains that he felt he had no choice in the matter, that it was what he was drawn to. He wished to write like the authors he grew up with and if he

had chosen any other, it would have come out passionless and would not have had the same effect. He is content with his choice and feels that he has even expanded and evolved the horror genre in the process.

Over the period of his long writing career, Stephen King has in total written over fifty novels and 200 short stories as well as five non-fiction books, some of them under the pseudonym Richard Bachmann. He has sold over 300 million copies and is considered one of, if not the most, successful authors of all time. (King, DeFilippo n.d.: para 16)

## **B. Rationale for Choosing *Misery* as the Focus**

*Misery* was written when King was already an established and a successful writer who had developed his own style and a way of writing. In his autobiography he confesses to substance abuse and how the fight against it is what spawned the basis for *Misery* (King 2000: 106). King (2000: 107-109) also admits to how he was aware of his self-destructive ways and how the books he wrote during the period were metaphors for drugs and alcohol. The creation of the psycho nurse Annie Wilkes was what helped King finally overcome his addictions: “Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie’s pet writer”. For this reason, the character Paul Sheldon is the closest the reader can see Stephen King personified during the darkest time of his own life. If Stephen King is indeed most well known for how he tackles fear and identity in his books, then in *Misery* the reader can see the internal monologue and shift in identities of the man who created them all.

Unlike many of his other books, *Misery* does not have any supernatural elements and it only has two main characters, meaning they are incredibly detailed and get a lot of attention. By viewing Annie Wilkes as being addiction personified, there is a clear conflict between good and evil. However, Douglas Keeseey (2002: 70) believes that Annie can be

seen as much more and his beliefs are supported by others like Carol A. Senf (1994: 210-211), who argues that Annie can also represent manic depression and focuses on similarities between creativity and insanity.

### **C. Summary of the Plot of *Misery***

*Misery* is a book about a successful author Paul Sheldon who is kidnapped by a super-fan Annie Wilkes after his car crashed. Annie will keep Sheldon in hostage until he writes the final addition to the collection of his novels featuring a beautiful woman Misery. In his captivity, Paul Sheldon is tortured both physically and mentally and his only hope is to write his way out.

### **D. Mention of Literary Criticism on Stephen King's Work**

Stephen King's commercial success has often worked against him when it comes to viewing his works as "serious literature", branding his works with words like "shallow", "escapism", and "boarding lounge fiction" (Cowan 2018: para 7).

In his essays about Stephen King, Harold Bloom (1998: 2) writes how King's prose (his works *The Shining* and *Carrie*) is undistinguished and there is no depth to it. He feels that the characters are shallow and do not evolve throughout the novel. However, even he admits that King has a way of creating powerful images, but he still states that the images themselves are not that great but just a result of King heaping-up a strong central image (Bloom 1998: 2). He argues that the fact he is writing about King at all already marks the downfall of a generation of readers and how his triumph illustrates the failures of youth reading (Bloom 1998: 2).

For *Misery*, the story only focuses on two characters (Paul Sheldon and Annie Wilkes), their evolution and how they affected each other, and the entire story was building

up towards a final confrontation. Stephen King himself in an interview with the Rolling Stone later dismissed this criticism by saying that Bloom is wearing his “ignorance about pop culture as a badge of intellectual prowess” (Greene 2014: 1).

While Bloom dislikes King’s imagery and characters, Hoppenstand and Browne take issue with his use of language. One of the reasons which have been attributed to Stephen King’s success, is how easy to read his books are. His language is understandable, he rarely uses flourishes and sticks to more common phrases and simpler sentence structures. Hoppenstand and Browne feel that reading King will make the reader oblivious to style (Hoppenstand and Browne 1987: 2). With that statement, similarly to Bloom, Hoppenstand and Browne feel the degradation of the readers where they do not care about how well the story is told as long as they manage to get through the book.

In *Misery*, the use of outdated or illustrious phrases is minimal, yet this does not take away from the effect which they create. The crux of the story is about a modern person and his thoughts and the simplicity of the language allows the reader to better connect with the character, not view him as an artificial sufferer.

Overall, there are many critics who have attacked Stephen King’s ideas and his style. Still, the fact remains that Stephen King is one the most widely known, read, and sold contemporary authors, and while there is room for improvement, his phenomenon and success cannot be ignored.

## **E. Mention of Literary Praise on Stephen King’s work**

While Stephen King does have critics and academics who dislike his work, he also has many admirers, who try to analyse and find deeper meaning in his writings. Jenifer D’Elia (2007: 1) describes King as not only an acknowledged master of horror and gothic, taking King to the same level as classics such as Edgar Allan Poe and Bram Stoker, but

also an “unacknowledged chronicler of his nation, and an unappreciated observer of the American psyche.” She believes that by analysing King, it is possible to understand the mindset and ethics of the average late 20th century person (D’Elia 2007: 5). Because he is so immensely popular and widely read, this means that his works speak to a wide spread of people .

Another argument for critical reading of King’s work is presented by Andreas Huyssen (1986: 9) where he argues how academic dogmas are preventing people from understanding modern writing. For him, it is important to admit that the differences between mass media and high literature are becoming less distinguishable and how modern artists are finding success in incorporating this mass culture into their own works. He inspires researchers to see this movement as an opportunity for growth, instead of lamenting for the lost times.

While it is true, that King’s popularity and financial success have largely stemmed from how easy it is to vividly grasp the scenery he paints and how his symbolism is understandable for even less educated readers, it should not be seen as a weakness of his craft, but rather an ability of a highly intelligent writer to tell incredible stories with simple tools.

## **F. Study of King’s Authorial Techniques**

To gain a clearer picture of the complexities of King’s writing and his ability to instill fear in his reader, one can review the works of many of his literary critics.

Laura Christie (2007: 4) gives examples of King’s ability to play on the repressed juvenile fears, how repressing emotions eventually causes trauma and damages both inner and outer worlds. She finds that King purposefully focuses on traumatic incidents and anxieties, to find the unconscious pressure points of his reader and by drawing them out

into the open, he creates a personal monster for every reader (Christie 2007: 4-5). Similarly, Heidi Strengell (2007: 111-112) draws attention to how King marks the evil of adulthood, by creating characters with deep flaws, such as alcoholism and abuse, which resonate with personal traumas of the reader, make his protagonists juvenile and helpless, and create monsters of pure evil out of people themselves.

This deep dive into the characters of King's writing is further expanded upon by Douglas Keesey (2002: 53), who analyses King through a Freudian theoretical lens. He makes connections between the antagonist Annie Wilkes being the phallic mother and protagonist Paul Sheldon's journey to escape her a journey of him getting rid of dependency and becoming his true self. (53-57). By psychoanalysing the characters Keesey demonstrates how they evolve and change throughout the book, directly contradicting the statement of Harold Bloom, who found King's characters incredibly shallow (1998: 2). The psychoanalytical approach is also taken by Carol A. Senf (1994: 211) who analyses how manic depression creates a monster out of Annie Wilkes. She praises King for finding horror not only in the supernatural, but also in how intense madness affects a person who has it (Annie) as well as a person who has to closely experience and endure it (Paul).

Just as important as the characters is the choice of the story's narrator. Andrea Schwenke Wylie (2003: 116-118) identifies and separates different ways of narration, and how they affect the story. With the help of their research, the readers of Stephen King can better understand the thought process behind the uses of choices of narrative perspectives.

Collectively, these analyses illuminate King's ability to evoke fear and nuance in his characters and narratives, contributing to reasons for searching his texts for a deeper meaning.

## II KING'S AUTHORIAL TECHNIQUES IN *MISERY*

This part of the thesis will focus on the analysis of *Misery* and look at three different authorial techniques of Stephen King: narrative perspective, pacing, building suspense.

### A. First-Person and Third-Person Narrative Perspectives

To define “narrative perspective”, first one has to understand what is meant by “narrative”. According to Carroll (2001: 22-23), a narrative is a series of events, where the previous states of affairs all (at least to some level) are responsible for the new events and have a unified topic. It cannot be a single event, nor can the events be disconnected from one another. Simply counting different events will not make a narrative. Similarly “perspective” does not just mean a point of view. While it is true, that part of the definition is the spatial point of the narrator, it also encompasses their ideals, morals, views and attitudes (van Peer and Chatman 2001: 5).

How the writer chooses the narrative perspective will strongly affect how the reader is going to perceive the characters and whether or not their actions will be justified. By using a close perspective: that is a first-person or restricted third-person, the central character will be much more personal and will develop an intense relationship with the reader (Wylie 2003: 116).

Both styles of narrating are engaging and limited in their field of knowledge, yet they do serve different purposes. While in first-person narrative the narrator and the subject are the same, making the telling of the story also more personified and colourful, then in restricted third-person narrative the narrator is present with the purpose of telling the protagonist's story while drawing minimal attention to themselves. This way the narrator

can take a more neutral stance and give better explanations and clearer descriptions of events and happenings than a character would inside the situation. (Wylie 2003: 117-118)

By establishing the differences and admitting the similarities between autodiegetic (narrator is the protagonist) and heterodiegetic (narrator is restricted to the protagonist's point of view), it will be easier to understand and analyse how Stephen King chooses and uses narrative perspectives to convey the two main characters of *Misery*.

## **1. Analysis of How Narrative Perspectives Contribute to Understanding Fear and Identity**

In *Misery*, both of the main characters (Paul Sheldon and Annie Wilkes), are narrated from third person. Even so, the main focus of the narration is always on Paul Sheldon and the only knowledge the reader has about Annie is that which Paul discovers. By keeping this third-person narration thus restricted, Stephen King not only immerses the reader with Paul's internal struggles and inner monologue, but is also able, in various scenes of the novel, to give a broader perspective of the events which are unfolding.

A great example of how King uses one character's fear to shape identity, is when he has Paul introduce the book's antagonist Annie:

*.../ she gave him a disturbing sense of *solidity*, as if she might not have any blood vessels or even internal organs; .../ her eyes, which appeared to move, were actually just painted on. .../ Like an idol, she gave only one thing: a feeling of unease deepening steadily toward terror. Like an idol, she took everything else. (King 1987: 9-10)*

Of course, Annie Wilkes, in (hypothetical) reality, was just a somewhat strong woman, with strong mental disabilities. However, the reader is not getting her description from a neutral standpoint. Paul Sheldon has just survived a horrible car crash which made him unconscious for several days, and has been recovering thanks to a strong drug which she keeps feeding him. Paul Sheldon is high and in pain, not understanding his

surroundings nor how he got there, so he channels his fears by creating a monster for himself, mostly as a coping mechanism.

Since the narration is restricted to Paul, who is held captive in an empty bedroom in a secluded cabin for almost the entirety of the novel, the reader is immersed in his internal struggles, fears, and emotions. He goes through an intense identity crisis and self-reflection, as he grapples with the physical and psychological torture inflicted on him by Annie.

The reader is witness to this shift. In the beginning, Paul is still trying to cling onto his old self: a successful writer, who is accustomed to freedom and independence. However, when he realises how defenceless he is against Annie, he starts to lose his old identity: he becomes vulnerable and anxious. He is entirely dependent on Annie and her mercy. He understands how much more powerful Annie is than him and becomes more and more submissive with each punishment inflicted upon him for acting up. Still, as he begins to heal and become more aware of his surroundings, Annie's presence becomes less overbearing and he starts to build up a new identity, a less superficial and a more profound one.

All of those stages can be seen in how Paul rationalises the situation for himself: He had tried to argue with Annie about a book he wrote, so Annie made him take his medicine with rinse water from cleaning (King 1987: 28-33). This was the first punishment and started the collapse of his old and proud writer-identity: "Anger the moon which brought the tide? What an idea! What a *bad* idea!" (King 1987: 33).

The more Paul is tortured, the less of an identity he has. This is best shown when he is forced to write a book for Annie and a letter falls off the typewriter:

"Of course he was going to ask Annie for nothing, much less demand. Once there had been a man who would at least have *asked*. /.../ Better that way. Better not to ask. Better not to provoke." (King 1987: 285-286)

Paul has become Annie's pet writer. She is completely overbearing and Paul is willing to do absolutely nothing to even slightly inconvenience her. His fear of Annie has become superior to any other need or want he might have.

Eventually, Paul did manage to hatch a plan to kill Annie and escape, but the experience left him heavily scarred with trauma:

"He was drinking too much and not writing at all. His dreams were bad. /.../ He only wanted to get it behind him and find the *next* book... but as dry days became dry weeks became dry months, he had begun to wonder if there ever *would* be a next book." (King 1987: 411-412)

He still sees Annie in his dreams and during the day, being constantly haunted by his fear of her even nine months after the incident.

To summarise, by using a restricted third-person narrative, King is strategically in control of the perspective, which he uses to slowly shift and reveal the character's identities. This deliberate approach heightens the suspense and fear as readers gradually uncover the layers of the character's true selves. By not having a single first-person perspective, King has a strong authorial control over narrative which allows him to manipulate how not only Paul, but the readers experience the psychological fear of the character.

## **2. How different perspectives influence the reader**

Even when using the restricted third-person perspective, which should arguably be more neutral, than the emotional first-person perspective, still, the closeness to the protagonist affects the readers standing on the characters. They wish to see the protagonist succeed, and anyone, who is against them, are simply "the bad guys".

In the beginning chapters of the book, Paul has no idea where he is or what has happened. Since he has no understanding of the outside world, most of the story is introspective, while describing everything he sees as monstrous and scary. It is important

to understand that Stephen King has purposefully set the scene this way, so that the reader would have an easier time knowing who to root for, and who to curse at. With the book's progression, Paul is recovering and finding out more about the world outside his cabin, and also, the first monstrous description of Annie will also start to shift. Paul will start to make sense of her actions, her reasoning and mannerisms, her likes and dislikes, and so on:

Annie Wilkes had her own interior set of rules: in her way, she was strangely prim. She had made him drink water from a floor/bucket; had withheld his medication until he was in agony /.../ but she would not take the money from his wallet. (King 1987: 193)

He realized he was seeing her with all her masks put aside—this was the real Annie, the inside Annie. /.../ He had seen her low before, but he'd seen *nothing* like this; he wondered if she'd ever *had* a low as low as this before. This was how depressives got /.../ it was the psychotic despair of the woman. (King 1987: 211-213)

Annie is no longer described as a “solid idol giving a feeling of terror”, but a sick and depressed woman, who needs psychological help from a professional. In the book, when the reader learns about Paul Sheldon, they become aware of a self-centred alcoholic with multiple ex-wives and drug abuse problems. Still, he is the hero, and she is the villain.

While King did admit that Annie Wilkes was manifested from his own demons of self-destructive drinking and drug abuse, then while working on the book and developing the character further, he admits that he was empathising with her and understood her reasoning. He felt that, while terrifying, Annie was also to be pitied (King 2000: 194-195).

With both characters becoming more developed as the story progresses, it is important to note how the perspective can be used to strongly shape the understanding of good and evil, of excusable and inexcusable actions, and how a skilled writer can use this tool to shape the identity of the characters.

## **B. Pacing**

When talking and reviewing “pace”, it is important to first define what one means by it. It is a term in narrative whose meaning has fluctuated and changed with almost every

literary movement since the classics of the 19th century (and most likely even earlier). The reason why the definition of the term is so evershifting, is due to how many different ways there are to analyse it. In his book “The Pace of Fiction” (2021: 4-6), Brian Gingrich determines three main ways on how to view the pace of narration: The rhythmic pace, the temporal pace, and the reader-centric pace. However, he admits that no one of the three is perfect, but the true meaning of the term lies in the interplay of all of them. Based on his statement, this analysis of King’s *Misery* will thus also focus on all of those aspects of Gingrich’s pace.

### **1. Three Avenues of Analysing Pace**

By analysing pace as a form of rhythm, one will have to dissect the narration and view it as a pattern: The commas and exclamation marks will create a viewable pattern, which will create a rhythm and from there they can determine the pace. Still, Gingrich (2021: 4) admits that just as a pattern is not always a rhythm, so is not a rhythm always the pace. The main difference being that the pace must always be moving towards a conclusion. To do this it must have a climax, moments of closure and non-narratable time frames. This makes it uneven and fluctuant. A rhythm *can* be found, but only for sentences or paragraphs. Still, at least rhythm is a good starting point to better understand the workings of the pace.

The temporal narrative pace does not focus on the grammatical aspects, like rhythm does, but more on the narrative ones. It analyses whether the narrative is written as a “scene” or a “summary” (Gingrich 2021: 5-8). For example, when the narrative goes over a lot of (narrative) time in only a few sentences (“It took them four days to reach the mountain.”; “Afterwards things were never the same.”), then the temporal narrative pace is fast. This is called “summary”. However, when the narrative is going at so-called “real-

time” speed, where every action and sentence is described (or even taking the time to describe the nature and emotions of characters), then the temporal pace is slow. This is called “scene”. By this definition of pace, the main angle of analysis is looking at the flow of time inside the narrative, and how much of it the paragraphs cover. King mostly uses this temporal pace to show the evolution of and change within his characters.

The third, and most important way of analysing pace, is the reader-centric pace. This method looks at the narrative not at the grammar, nor temporal level, but from how entranced and fast does it make the reader turn pages. The velocity and the adrenaline that words in the paper are able to generate. Gingrich (2021: 4) argues that every book has a certain velocity in its narrative, and when it changes from its neutral steady speed by change of acceleration, it is possible to analyse the pace of a chapter in a book. Still this way of thinking assumes the finding of the neutral speed against which the rest is compared, making it speculative and unique for every reader. Still, it can be seen as the most important way of analysing pace, when trying to understand the techniques that are used by King.

Thus by being able to see the complexity and difficulty that comes with understanding and viewing the narrative pace, the reader is able to use all three versions and see the technique of King from all three viewpoints. Still it is important to not put too much emphasis on any one version, since the “true pace” can be found in the working of all three together. Pace is not just “fast” or “slow” and only by correctly using them together can an author write a great book.

## **2. Exploration of Pace in *Misery***

Stephen King’s *Misery* is a psychological thriller. While it does have action and chaos, most of the book is focusing on the build up, with the pay-off being sudden,

explosive and final. Of the three types of paces, the rhythmic pace is most likely the one that is the most subtle, but which separates good writers from great ones. Being able to not just weave narrative, but make it flow and sound poetic is a skill that Stephen King has sharpened for decades. In *Misery*, this is most vividly noticeable, when the narrator describes the inner train of thought of Paul Sheldon. He is a fiction writer with a vivid imagination, so his thoughts should also be more vivid and chaotic. This chaos of the mind can be witnessed, when Sheldon was struggling with the pain in his legs:

Up on the stand. When they put me up on the stand in Denver.  
*Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?*  
*("I don't know where he gets it.")*  
*I do.*  
*("He's ALWAYS writing things like this down.")*  
*State your name.*  
*("Nobody on MY side of the family had an imagination like this")*  
*Annie Wilkes.*  
*("So vivid!")*  
*My name is Annie Wilkes. (King 1987: 40)*

In this scene, Paul Sheldon is having multiple thoughts at once. King then proceeds to use all the mechanical tools the writer has, to make sure the reader feels what Paul is going through. The scene is set with standard text, with Paul recalling the words Annie had spoken to him previously. Then, every sentence is put into italics to indicate the people talking in that imaginary scene, but every sentence has a separate line and between each of them a third level of unconsciousness enters, separated by quotation marks and brackets, where Paul recalls another memory of his mother. In summary, Paul is remembering the words of Annie, which trigger a second level imaginary scene, which trigger a third level memory. King has made sure that the reader understands this and that they change their tone between reading every line differently, as well as making sure they stress the word "ALWAYS" by putting it in all capital letters.

Temporal pace is also used by King to make sure the main focus of the book stays on the evolution of Paul's identity. With multiple instances of flashbacks, dream sequences

and time jumps, King is able to keep the reader's attention over the period of 6-8 months of Paul's captivity. The "summary" as opposed to the "scene" does not mean, however, that King has simply (and dryly) written "after 2 months..." but even here King showcases the multitude of tools authors have to make sure the reader does not feel like they missed something important:

*He had been that man, and he supposed he ought to be ashamed, but that man had two big advantages over this one: that man had two feet . . . and two thumbs. /.../ Outside his window, bees buzzed*  
It was the first day of summer. (King 1987: 286)

Here, the last scene for the reader was where Annie had cut off Paul's foot with an axe, but the information that Paul had also lost his thumb, is new. The final sentence also lets the reader know that the summer had arrived, meaning that between the last scene and this one, over three weeks had passed. This paragraph was the beginning of the "summary", where Sheldon recalled all that happened during the weeks. Since the reader understandably focuses on those parts less, King had immediately mentioned the most important part, the cutting of the thumb, as well as the new time: summer.

Thirdly, the reader-centric pace is the one that is most noticeable for readers. For analysis, it is best viewed in scenes, where the pace can be viewed as fast and chaotic, since those, for *Misery*, are rarer and thus contrast heavily with the rest of the dialogue and inner monologue heavy narrative:

*"ANNIE OH PLEASE DON'T HURT ME!"*

Her eyes were mild and drifting. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm a trained nurse."

The axe came down /.../ Pain exploded up his body in a gigantic bolt. Dark-red blood splattered across her face like Indian warpaint. It splattered the wall. /.../ He looked unbelievably down at himself. The sheet was turning red. He saw his toes wriggling. Then he saw her raising the dripping axe again. (King 1987: 279)

In the scene where Annie cuts off Paul's leg, all the building of suspense finally explodes in a gory scene, where dialogue is short and witty for Annie, since she is in control, and loud and desperate for Paul, since his foot is getting chopped. Here, every sentence has to carry a lot of meaning and can be viewed separately, as a flashing image of

the horror taking place. Those scenes have multiple sentences with less than five words, making the reader speed through many of them in a much shorter time, giving them a lot of flashing images, the sense of urgency, and a feeling of chaos. After the dialogue, readers' attention is first drawn to the axe, the suffering Paul, then Annie's face, then the walls, the cut off leg, the sheets, and then the axe again. This makes the reader have to focus and take in a lot of different information at a very short interval, giving the sense of chaos and overstimulation. While short, the sentences then have to be vivid and contain strong and easy to imagine imagery, like wriggling toes or the warpaint like blood on Annie's face. When most of the book so far has only been dialogue, descriptive narration, and Paul's thoughts, this scene serves as an incredibly strong contrast and makes it incredibly memorable for the reader.

By using pace in all its forms, Stephen King is able to not only keep the reader's attention, but to play with, and even horrify it. King has made sure that every line in *Misery* serves a purpose and this attention to detail is why he is put onto a pedestal by many aspiring writers.

### **C. Suspense**

Suspense, while easier to grasp than pace, is by far the most well known quality of King's books and the most refined tool in his writer's kit. By making the reader care deeply about the characters and keeping them in a limbo between knowing and unknowing, King is an expert in creating suspenseful situations which hold the reader's attention for the whole journey. With most of the book being all about the fear of Annie and rooting for Paul's survival, keeping the suspense is critical to ensure that the reader feels the expected emotions and does not get bored while waiting for the pay-off. To make sure of the

narrative success, King has to be knowledgeable of his craft and carefully sculpt the expectations and fears of the reader to best suit the book's interests.

## **1. Importance of Suspense in Thrillers**

Being able to build and hold suspense is arguably the most important aspect of creating a successful psychological thriller. Maria Anastova (2019: 1) defines suspense as the main tool authors use to generate interest by creating interest and emotional attachment to future experience. Such an experience would be, for example, a dangerous chase, where the reader does not know the definitive outcome, but is rooting for a certain one.

This tap dance between having to wait for an outcome, either pleasurable or painful, is what keeps the reader interested, but the bigger the suspense, the better has to be the pay-off. If the suspense is being built over something trivial or unimportant, then it is just a boring book. Since the point of building suspense is to hold onto the reader's attention, if they do not care about the outcome, the author has failed (Anastova 2019: 6-8). The same problem arises if the pay-off comes without or with very little suspense. That way it does not feel earned. Finding the balance of building the suspense and complementing it with the right pacing, is what makes King a popular thriller genre author.

When trying to define suspense, then, the author has to focus on three set emotions: hope, fear, and anxiety. The reader has to hope for the good outcome, fear for the bad one, and thus feel anxious. This is why the suspenseful scene cannot feel entirely hopeless, nor can it be too easy for the protagonist to get their wish. (Anastova 2019: 8) The author has to view the situation as a scale. By adding something to be hopeful about, something must be added to fear for as well. The more weight added on both sides, the bigger the stakes, the higher the level of suspense.

## 2. Building of Suspense in *Misery*

First examples of King's masterful suspense building skills can already be seen in the very first pages of the book (King 1987: 9-10). As soon as Annie enters the narrative, she is instantly creating an atmosphere of unease. Her calm and harmless demeanour does not fool the reader and they will already start to worry about the safety of the protagonist Paul, who is going to be at her complete mercy.

The reader also soon discovers how unstable and unpredictable Annie Wilkes really is. She has horrible mood swings, acts erratically and believes that everything she is doing is for the benefit of them both. Even when it involves making Paul drink the dirty rinsing water (King 1987: 33), making him burn the manuscript of his new book (King 1987: 61) or even amputating his limbs (King 1987: 279). This wild behaviour keeps the reader constantly on the edge since even the smallest things might make Annie boil over, and since Paul is always testing the waters and trying to find the means of escape, the threat of a new and even more creative way of torture might just be around the corner.

Throughout the book, there is not just one final confrontation, but smaller ones, whenever Paul had again tried to leave his prison. Those smaller scenes always ended with Paul failing miserably and being dominated and punished for his arrogance. The fact that Paul is always coming up with new and ingenious ways of finding freedom and the fact that Annie is always ready for them, further increases the futility of trying to escape. However, this makes the final confrontation even more suspenseful. The reader finds out about his plan as soon as Paul plots it (King 1987: 356-359), yet during all its steps, there is an overwhelming amount of fear of it not working. Annie Wilkes had been built up as always watching, always knowing goddess (King 1987: 263), so when everything is finally set up, and the sound of her coming towards the room is described (King 1987: 392), the mix of hope, fear, and anxiety is at its highest.

For all the suspense and build up to have meant something, the final conflict and its resolution are not clean. Annie does not die when the Royal typewriter falls on her back (King 1987: 394). Nor did she yield to being burned alive (King 1987: 394) or go down when the burning *Misery* manuscript was being shoved down her throat (King 1987: 396). *You are in error, Paul. You can't kill the goddess. The goddess is immortal. Now I must rinse.* (King 1987: 398)

During their conflict, Annie's language is also what indicates that Paul had finally done something she had not expected. Annie never swore, never drank alcohol nor did she smoke, and she strongly judged Paul for indulging, yet in their final showdown, she calls him a "lying cocksucker" (King 1987: 395). When she finally goes down, Paul has to crawl out from under her (King 1987: 400). With this final feat, Paul had finally broken free from her oppression and the suspense, which was built throughout the book, had had a climactic showdown and a satisfying ending.

These examples are just a cherry-picked few used to demonstrate how Stephen King employs various techniques to build suspense in *Misery*, creating a gripping and immersive reading experience that keeps readers on the edge of their seats from start to finish.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this thesis explored Stephen King's mastery in evoking fear and complexity within his narratives through a multidimensional analysis conducted by various literary scholars. The main areas of focus were King's authorial techniques, particularly his mastery in building suspense, choice of narrative perspective, and manipulation of pace.

King strategically employed a restricted third-person narrative to create emotional attachment to protagonist Paul Sheldon while maintaining a degree of distance. This choice

enhanced reader engagement while allowing for a nuanced exploration of character psychology.

Additionally, King's adeptness in suspense-building culminates in a rewarding final showdown between Annie and Paul. The hope for a potential redemption and the possibility of escape; the fear from unsettling images and chilling descriptions; and the anxiety of impending danger. By intertwining all three King created a rollercoaster of emotions that compels the reader to keep reading.

The analysis of pacing encompasses rhythmic, temporal, and narrative elements, elucidating how King orchestrated the reader's experience through careful control of paragraph structure, font usage, punctuation, and the passage of time within the narrative.

Through these techniques, King captivated readers and kept them interested until the final pages were turned.

## **A. Restatement of Thesis**

This thesis investigated Stephen King's authorial techniques, aiming to understand their significance in distinguishing him from other contemporary writers. Focused on his novel *Misery*, this study examined King's use of pacing, narrative perspectives, and suspense-building skills. Through an objective analysis of these elements, drawn from examples within the text, the research seeks to provide insights into King's craftsmanship and its impact on his reputation in the literary landscape.

## **B. Significance of King's Writing Techniques**

Studying Stephen King's authorial techniques holds significant academic and literary value. King's prominence as a storyteller spans across genres, making his works an intriguing subject for analysis and exploration. Through an examination of his narrative

strategies, pacing methods, and choices of perspective, scholars can gain valuable insights into the craft of storytelling. Understanding King's techniques allows for a deeper understanding of his work and provides insights into the complexities of constructing engaging narratives.

Moreover, studying King's authorial techniques offers broader insights into the art of writing itself, serving as a valuable resource for both scholars and aspiring writers seeking to enhance their craft.

Overall, delving into King's techniques contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding literature and storytelling, fostering a deeper appreciation for the nuances of the literary craft.

### **C. Future Research and Implications**

The implications of this thesis for future research are expansive and promising. Through an in-depth examination of Stephen King's authorial techniques, numerous avenues for further investigation emerge.

Moreover, investigating the reception of his works in different cultural contexts may reveal how his narratives resonate across diverse audiences and by delving into the psychological and sociological implications of King's storytelling could deepen our understanding of the themes he explores and their broader societal significance.

Lastly, examining the influence of King's techniques on contemporary literature and popular culture could provide valuable insights into his enduring impact as a storyteller.

Overall, this thesis serves as a springboard for future research endeavours that have the potential to enrich our understanding of literature and storytelling in meaningful ways.

## **1. Brief Mention of Possible Directions for Future Research**

Further research on Stephen King's authorial techniques could take various directions, including comparative studies with other prominent authors to identify unique stylistic elements. Exploring the evolution of King's techniques over his extensive career could offer insights into his growth as a writer and changing literary trends.

Additionally, analysing the reception of his works in different cultural contexts may uncover how his narratives resonate across diverse audiences. Investigating the psychological and sociological implications of King's storytelling could deepen our understanding of the themes he explores and their broader societal significance.

Furthermore, examining the influence of King's techniques on contemporary literature and popular culture could illuminate his lasting impact on the literary landscape.

## **2. Implications of the Study on Understanding Horror and Suspense in Literature**

The study of Stephen King's authorial techniques holds implications for understanding horror and suspense in literature at large. By examining King's narrative strategies, pacing methods, and choices of perspective, scholars can gain valuable insights into the mechanics of eliciting fear and suspense in storytelling. Understanding how King manipulates these elements not only enriches our understanding of his craft but also provides a framework for analysing horror and suspense across a wide range of literary works.

Moreover, insights derived from studying King's techniques can inform discussions about the psychological and emotional impact of horror narratives on readers, contributing to a broader exploration of the genre's themes and cultural significance. This nuanced

understanding fosters a deeper appreciation for the diverse ways in which literature can evoke fear and suspense, enriching the study of the genre as a whole.

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# RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Lohe Isok**

**Analysis of the Authorial Techniques Used by Stephen King in *Misery* (1987) /**

**Stephen Kingi autorlusvõtete analüüs 1987 aasta raamatu „Misery“ põhjal**

Bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 32

Stephen King on maailmakuulus kaasaegne autor, kes on kirjutanud üle viiekümne teose juba mitmele põlvkonnale ning kes on viinud põnevus -ja õudus lugude žanri uutesse kõrgustesse. Selle bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida erinevaid võtteid, nagu narratiiv perspektiivi valik, loo tempo valimine, ja pinge kruvimine, et saada parem arusaam Kingi kui autori fenomenist ja toetada tulevasi ilukirjandus autoreid, kirjanduskriitikuid -ja uurijaid.

Uurimuse näidisteoseks valiti Kingi 1987 aastal valminud psühholoogiline põnevik “Misery” ning analüüs sellest põhineb akadeemikute ja kirjanduskriitikute uurimustel ja teooriatel. Et töö oleks hoomatav, ei kata see uurimus kõiki kirjutamisel olulisi elemente, vaid keskendub kolmele olulisele elemendile: perspektiiv; tempo; ja pinge.

Vormilt on töö jagatud kuueks osaks. Peale sissejuhatust on esimene sisu osa mõeldud Stephen Kingi ja tema teoste tähtsuse tuvustamiseks ja samuti arutleb see kirjandusala kriteeriumide ja ülistuse üle, mida Stephen King on saanud teistelt kriitikutelt ja õpetlastelt.

Teine sisu osa analüüsib eelpool mainitud elemente, defineerides esmalt nende tähenduse ilukirjandusmaailmas, seejärel tuues välja näiteid nende kasutamisest “Misery” põhjal, ja viimaks seletades lahti, miks ja kuidas Stephen King on otsustanud neid kasutada, et oma teose kvaliteeti tõsta.

Viimane peaukk teeb kokkuvõtte uurimuse teemadest ja tulemustest, ning toob välja võimalusi edaspidisteks uurimusteks samal teemal ning nende olulisusest kirjandusmaailmas.

Töö tulemuseks sai valmis arusaadav ja fookusega analüüs kõigist kolmest aspektist. Uurimus mõtestas lahti, kuidas perspektiiv mõjutab lugejat, kuidas teineteisest erinevad “rhythmic, temporal, narrative pace”, ning kuidas King kasvas pinget raamatus “Misery”.

Märksõnad: Stephen King; Misery; Narrative Perspective; Narrative Pace; Suspense

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