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Doing It: Sexuality and Repression in Stephen King's *It*

Senior Paper

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Stephen King is considered by many to be the master of modern horror, having written over fifty novels and several short stories and screenplays (Burger 1). His work has been adapted into movies, audiobooks, radio dramas, and even the odd Broadway show. More recently, King has been the subject of criticism in the literary community, with many questioning his literary merit in the face of his “best seller status” and “mass-marketability” (Burger 1). Whatever the case may be, the sheer volume of his work speaks for itself, spanning nearly five decades and totaling over 350 million copies sold (Burger 1). In the span of his career, King has dabbled in many diverse genres, ranging from traditional Gothic horror narratives, families, and domestic abuse, to science-fiction/fantasy, mystery and crime. One of the most defining features throughout his work, however, has been his focus on children and coming-of-age stories. The majority of King’s “most memorable and important characters, and the ones to whom we, as readers, grow increasingly attached” are children (Magistrale 58).

While most of King’s novels embrace this theme to some extent, it can best be seen in his 1986 novel *It*, which pits seven children against a shapeshifting monster that takes the form of whatever its victims fear the most. This creature, referred to only as “It,” returns to the characters’ hometown every twenty-seven years to feed on children. When It surfaces in 1958, the children band together, drawn to each other through their shared experiences as outcasts. Each of the children is burdened with some “physical or social handicap” (Brown) for which they are bullied and ostracized—Beverly is physically and sexually abused by her father, Eddie has asthma, Bill has a stutter, Richie has an immature sense of humor and glasses, Ben is overweight, Mike is one of the few black people in Derry, and Stan one of the few Jewish people. This, along with the realization that each of them has had an encounter with It, leads them to form the Loser’s Club. The Losers are temporarily able to defeat It in 1958, agreeing to meet again if It ever resurfaces.

Twenty-seven years later, in 1985, they return to face It once more. The novel weaves between the two time periods, linking the seven's experiences as children in 1958 with their experiences as adults in 1985.

One of the novel's most defining traits is its focus on the transition from childhood to adulthood. Setting the novel in two separate time periods focuses attention on the element of psychoanalytic repression that can happen as one transitions from childhood to adulthood. When the Losers return to Derry as adults in 1985, they have no memory of their experience as children. It is only by facing It once more that they are forced to relive their childhood experiences and remember what it was that allowed them to defeat It in the first place. The children in *It* have repressed the "handicaps" or traits which defined them as children as a way of coping with their experiences with It—and by extension, their first steps into the uncertain and frightening world of adulthood. These traits return to haunt them later as adults, having become alien after such a long process of repression. One of the children's "handicaps" plays an especially vital role in this transition from childhood to adulthood—Beverly and her experience with her father's sexual interest in her and subsequent blossoming of her own sexuality. Abused by her father as a child, Beverly represses her experiences well into adulthood. When she returns to Derry as an adult, she is forced to relive her childhood experiences and remember what it was that allowed her to defeat It in the past. Through this process of repression and recovery, Beverly is ultimately able to embrace her own sexuality, free herself from her father's influence, and successfully transition into adult life. In presenting her this way, King offers an alternative to standard representations of women and women's sexuality within the horror genre. Furthermore, because King's readership is huge and many people find his work entertaining, he provides a potential for reshaping narratives about women's sexuality, thus establishing his literary merit.

Sexuality—and in particular, women’s sexuality—has long played a role in the horror genre. Women often find themselves occupying one of two positions in the horror genre—either the “monstrous feminine” or the “final girl” (Driscoll 229). The former is characterized by a fixation on female genitalia and sexuality as objects of horror and disgust—in many science fiction works, such as Ridley Scott’s *Alien* franchise, the monster is often slick, with ridged or rippled skin, and emerges from the laying of eggs or cocoons, images evocative of birth and female genitalia (Tudor 60). The final girl, in contrast, is a projection of male views onto female sexuality (Driscoll 228-9). She is the sole female character left alive by the end of the slasher film—Jamie Lee Curtis’s character Laurie in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* franchise is a prime example. While her female friends engage in sexual activities throughout the film, she remains largely abstinent, occupied primarily by her responsibilities as a student and a babysitter. This, Martin argues, reflects the male gaze because, “She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way [...] the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality” (1). In other words, it is clear that the final girl exists purely for the male gaze. She does not have any sexual agency of her own, but instead, by abstaining from the same sexual activity as her female peers, remains an empty slate onto which males can project their own fantasies and views. Both the monstrous feminine and the final girl, while occupying positions of sexuality within the horror genre, exist mainly as objects for disgust and spectacle.

Beverly’s sexuality, therefore, becomes important in understanding her character and the position she occupies in the novel. Like other women of horror before her, Beverly is defined mainly by her sexuality. She is sexualized constantly throughout the novel, first as a child in the 1950s and later as a full grown woman in the 1980s. As a child, she receives special attention from

nearly every male member of the Loser's Club. For example, while leaving school for summer vacation, Ben sees Beverly and notes everything with "his lover's eye" (King 167): the pattern of her skirt, her hair and skin, and a golden ankle bracelet which causes him to have a feeling that is, "huge, inarticulate, mercifully brief; perhaps a sexual pre-signal, meaningless to his body, where the endocrine glands still slept almost without dreaming, yet as bright as summer heat-lightning" (King 167). Ben's obvious sexual attraction to Beverly, signaled by King's reference to a "sexual pre-signal" and "endocrine glands," are purely physical, based on her clothing and appearance. Richie likewise sexualizes Beverly throughout the novel, reflecting at one point that, "He liked her, in short, because she was a good guy. Still, he had once or twice caught himself wondering what color underwear she was wearing under her small selection of rather faded skirts, and that was not the sort of thing you wondered about the other guys, was it? And, Richie had to admit, she was one hell of a pretty guy" (King 333). Here, Richie acknowledges that, while he considers Beverly a friend in as equal a sense as any other "guy," he still recognizes her fundamental differences from himself and his male friends. Like Ben, his fixation on her physical appearance—her skirt and the color of her underwear—reveals that he, to some degree, still views her as a sexual object, despite his obvious value of her as a friend.

Beverly is likewise sexualized by the adults in her life, primarily her father. When Beverly first encounters It, it appears to her as "a gout of blood [that] suddenly belched from the drain" of her bathroom sink (King 378). Hearing her scream, her father Alvin rushes in and instead of comforting his daughter, his initial reaction is to say, " 'Was someone peekin at you, Beverly?'" (King 378). Then, as King writes, "His arm shot out and his hand gripped her arm hard, sinking into the flesh. There was concern on his face, but it was a predatory concern, somehow more frightening than comforting" (378). The father, along with being an obvious domestic abuser, as

we see here and later on in the scene, is also heavily implied to be a sexual abuser. His initial concern for Beverly does not arise from a fatherly, protective place, but rather a “predatory” one, as if Alvin finds the idea of anyone “peekin” at Beverly more of a challenge to his sexual dominance than a threat to his daughter’s safety. Furthermore, Its appearance as a gout of blood is especially significant, given that it is what draws Alvin to the bathroom and Beverly. While the male members of the Loser’s Club encounter It in secluded, dangerous spaces and see It as typical stock horror figures—the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the Teenage Werewolf, the Japanese monster Rodan—Beverly has her experience in an intimate home setting, getting splattered with blood in the bathroom as she gets ready for bed. The entire scene is very reminiscent and suggestive of first-time menstruation. As Driscoll writes in reference to first-time menstruation, “As a child, the girl is positioned as not fully female or feminine, and at adolescence she both loses and gains sex/gender identity” (87). Thus, Beverly’s experience with It in this scene and all its connotations of menstruation signals her gaining her sexual identity as a young woman.

In experiencing this metaphorical menstruation, Beverly gains a new sense of her own sexuality, one that she did not previously have. Her father’s involvement with the scene, aside from representing the ways in which she is sexualized by others, also serves to further cement the idea that Beverly is a sexual being, that she has a sexuality that is apparent to herself and others. This can be seen in the scene the morning after her father beats her. In this scene, she wakes, and looking at her breasts in the mirror, decides:

They were extremely small [...] but they were *there*. It was true; childhood would end; she would be a woman. She smiled at her reflection and put a hand behind her head, pushing her hair up and sticking her chest out. She giggled a little girl’s unaffected giggle...and

suddenly remembered the blood spewing out of the bathroom drain the night before. The giggles stopped abruptly” (King 383)

This scene is especially relevant when considering the notion of childhood innocence and how it plays into the transition between childhood and adulthood that all children must inevitably experience as they grow up. This is one of the greatest hallmarks of King’s work—many of his novels, such as *The Shining*, *Firestarter*, and *Carrie*, all feature child protagonists who must undergo various trials and tribulations in their path to adulthood. In *It*, this transition is largely signalled by Beverly’s experiences with sexuality, as Magistrale notes, writing, “[King’s stories] employ sexual initiation as a symbol of the child’s emergence into the brutality characteristic of King’s adult world” (72). In this passage, Beverly acknowledges her own sexuality—her decision to look in the mirror and “stick her chest out” reveals her obvious knowledge and enjoyment of the process. Her “little girl’s giggle,” a moment later, however, suggests that she is still only on the threshold of growing up, delighted by the idea of adulthood but unable to conceive of it fully. The blood in the sink further reflects Beverly’s hesitations about adulthood and her fear of acknowledging her own sexuality as a result of her father’s interest in her. There are other meaningful instances of Beverly’s sexuality later in the novel, but before addressing them, I would like to discuss childhood sexuality in general, how it emerged, and how it plays a role in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Children’s sexuality has long been a marker of the transition into adulthood, both in a real-world sense and a literary one. The acknowledgement of sexuality in children is an uncomfortable one for many of us—we do not want to think of prepubescent children witnessing sexual acts, having sex, masturbating, or even knowing that their parents and other adults have sex. It seems immoral, inappropriate, and deeply taboo. But this sense of children’s sexuality as taboo is actually

fairly recent and arises from the image of the child as it was conceptualized by Victorians of the Romantic Era. Before that time, children were very much a part of adult life. As Winn notes, children of the medieval and Renaissance period would have worked right alongside their parents—cooking, harvesting crops, sewing, weaving, et cetera. They would have slept and eaten in a communal space and therefore likely would have witnessed sexual acts between their parents (Winn). Furthermore, adults of this time period occupied a rather childlike position themselves. In a time when there were no business meetings or corporate lunches like those of the modern day, adults occupied themselves with what we would now consider more childish activities—tag and blind man’s bluff, singing songs and telling stories (Winn). The line between childhood and adulthood was deeply blurred and therefore the idea of “childhood innocence” as a separate state of being did not really exist. It was not until much later, in the 1800s, that children first began to be seen as separate entities from adults. Winn cites the development of a “more complex and industrialized society [that] kept middle-class children out of the work force and required them to develop new skills and disciplines” as the reason for this change in perception (Winn 3). Suddenly, children were seen as precious objects, to be protected at all costs. Knowledge of any aspect of the adult world—including sexuality—was off-limits, as it would corrupt their innocent state.

This is the state of innocence in which the Losers find themselves when the novel begins. The children’s portion of the story is set in 1958, a time that Winn refers to as the “Golden Age of Innocence.” If there was ever a time to be a child, this was it—back then, candy sold for only cents at the general store, movie tickets might only cost you a dollar or two at most, and you could ride your bike anywhere you wanted. It was a time of safety, predictability, and above all, fun. But aside from its obvious sense of fun and carefree living for children, the late 1950s and early 60s were actually a time of great social upheaval—parents were divorcing, children were being left to

themselves more and more, and single mothers were going out and getting jobs (Winn). This can be seen in King's descriptions of the types of jobs held by the adults of Derry—Ben's mother, for instance, "worked forty a week in the spool-and-bale room at Starks Mills in Newport, and after work days when the dust and lint had been particularly bad, she sometimes coughed so long and hard that Ben would become frightened" (King 176). The working parents and caretakers of the 1960s forced children into an earlier state of adulthood than they normally would have entered, thus "weaken[ing] the protective membrane that once sheltered children from precocious experience and knowledge of the adult world" (Winn).

However, as Winn later notes, "Children who are pushed into adult experience do not become precociously mature. On the contrary, they cling to childhood longer, perhaps all their lives." This can best be seen in Beverly's experiences with her sexuality. As a child, she has to endure the sexual objectification by her friends and her father. Her encounter with It reveals her fear of accepting her own sexuality as a result of her father's interest in her. In becoming an adult, Beverly clings to this childhood fear, albeit unconsciously. As an adult in 1985, Beverly finds herself married to a man named Tom Rogan. Tom, like Alvin before him, is a domestic abuser, and beats Beverly on several occasions throughout the novel. In one particular scene, he slaps her across the face after she disobeys his wishes by smoking a cigarette inside their car. As King writes of their encounter, "[She said] '*You can't...you aren't supposed to hit me. That's a bad basis for a...a...a lasting relationship.*' She was trying to find a tone, an adult rhythm of speech, and failing. He had regressed her. He was in this car with a child. Voluptuous and sexy as hell, but a child" (104). This passage reveals that Beverly has carried the difficulties of her childhood through with her to adulthood. She marries a man just like her father, who not only beats her like her father did, but also conflates his physical abuse of her with his sexual attraction to her. Secondly, as Tom

himself notes, her childishness and sexuality are tied together, much the same as they were when she was an actual child. Furthermore, she tries, and fails, to find “an adult rhythm of speech,” which suggests that by not resolving her obvious childhood issues with her father, she has been unable to move on from childhood and instead, as Winn notes above, failed in many ways to properly transition to adulthood.

This failure to properly transition from childhood to adulthood forms the core basis of the novel’s main argument in many ways. The other members of the Loser’s Club, like Beverly, also find themselves struggling to adjust to adult life. On the surface, they seem very well off—Bill is a famous novelist, Eddie runs a limousine company for celebrities in New York, Richie is a D.J. in Los Angeles, Stan is a successful tax accountant, Beverly owns a fashion company, and Ben is a world renowned architect. But their successes belie the horrors they have carried over from their childhoods and into their adult lives.

As children, each member of the Loser’s Club was inflicted with various “social or physical handicaps,” as referenced earlier. Beverly’s “handicap” is her troubled relationship with her father. As discussed previously, her interactions with It reflect this fear—because It takes the form of whatever Its victims fear the most, Its choice to appear as a gout of blood reflects Beverly’s fear of oncoming womanhood and blossoming sexuality, which is in turn reflective of her fear of attracting her father’s unwanted sexual attention. Though Beverly’s struggle with sexuality in her transition to adulthood is a key facet of the novel, it is just one example of the many ways that King explores this transition. Like Beverly, the other children in the Loser’s Club also suffer from various “handicaps.” United by their shared status as outcasts, these handicaps drive the children together and cause them to realize they have each encountered It in a different form—Eddie in the form of a rotting leper; Richie in the form of a giant eyeball; and Bill in the form of his dead

brother, Georgie, killed by It a year previously. Like Beverly's experience with the blood in her bathroom, these forms are all indicative of the children's private fears.

Eddie is a particularly strong example of this. Throughout the novel, it is emphasized again and again how he suffers from a crippling case of hypochondria. He is dominated by an overbearing mother who restricts him from the most menial of tasks for fear of irritating his asthma—he is not allowed to play baseball, use an X-ray machine, or even slouch for fear of injuring his lungs (King 90-4). As a result, Eddie's "handicap" becomes a fear of disease and death, reflected back at him by It in the form of the leper. Richie and Bill are also strong examples. Richie's "handicap" is his thick eyeglasses that cause him to be bullied and tormented by older kids. As a result, his fear of the eyeball reflects a literal embodiment of his handicap and the shame and fear he feels as a result of it. Likewise, Bill's greatest fear stems from the guilt he feels for the death of his brother Georgie. King writes that after Georgie's death, Bill's parents became more and more withdrawn and by the time the novel begins, they barely speak to Bill anymore. His "handicap" then—his stutter—can be seen as symbolic for the difficulty he feels in talking about his brother George and his inability to clearly communicate his feelings to his parents.

While these "handicaps" put the children at odds with their fellow peers and even the adults in their lives—Eddie's mother, for example, or Bill's parents—they are ultimately able to use them to their advantage. As Magistrale writes, "Against these oppressive legions, King's children are often endowed with uncommon powers and traits, and these special attributes, combined with a native shrewdness and acute perceptivity, help distinguish them from the adult world while aiding in their survival" (59) In other words, the "handicaps" that hold the children back and make them feel outcast are ultimately what allow them to fight back against It.

This can be seen throughout the novel in many places. In one particular passage, when Richie and Bill go to confront It, It appears to them in the form of the 1957 horror movie character, the Teenage Werewolf. Just as It is about to seize them, Richie uses a packet of sneezing powder and one of his “Voices”—the childish imitations he does of adults in his life—to fight back against It. And to Richie’s surprise, it works: “There was still anger in Its face, but there was also pain—it was unmistakable. Bill might have hurt it with his dad’s pistol, but Richie had hurt it more” (King 363). While Bill’s father’s gun—an adult weapon owned by an adult man—fails to have any meaningful effect on the monster, it is Richie’s childlike belief in his own jokes and immature sense of humor (the very traits that made him an outcast among other children) that ultimately wounds It.

Eddie has a similar encounter with It later in the novel, when the children descend into the sewers where It lives for a final confrontation. There, It greets them in the form of Richie’s giant eyeball. While the other children freeze up in terror and are unable to move, Eddie uses his inhaler—the symbol of his outcast status and childlike dependency—to spray a blast of medicine into Its eye, screaming, “[IT’S] BATTERY ACID!” (King 983-4). Eddie’s childlike belief in the power of his imagination is enough to hurt It, sending it back into the tunnels.

Bill likewise is able to use his “handicap” to confront It. When It tries to attack them for a second time, Bill recites a tongue twister that his mother taught him as a way to overcome his stutter. As King writes: “*‘He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts!’* Bill thundered. He advanced on the George-thing. *‘You’re no ghost! George knows I didn’t mean for him to die! My folks were wrong! They took it out on me and that was wrong! Do you hear me?’*” (1056). The tongue-twister, like Eddie’s inhaler and Richie’s sneezing powder, hurts It enough to send It running away into the darkness. The fact that Bill’s mother of all people was the

one to teach him the tongue twister is especially relevant, as it reflects Bill's ability to overcome his grief, fear, and sadness and use them against It. Eddie says as much later in the novel, reflecting that "That was always what was at the bottom of it. Just being scared. That was everything. But in the end I think we turned that around somehow. We used it. But how?" (King 276). By conquering their fears and the limitations pushed on them by the adult world, the children are able to fight back and defeat It for the first time.

Out of all the children, Beverly's experience with It in the tunnels is perhaps the most meaningful in terms of making the transition from childhood to adulthood. After the children defeat It for the first time, they go to leave the tunnels where It lives and return to the surface. As they do, however, the magic that seemingly united them as a group and gave their handicaps power seems to fall apart, and they become hopelessly lost in the dark. As they deliberate about what to do next, Bill hears Beverly undressing in the darkness. King describes the children's reaction to this unexpected turn of events, writing: " 'What are you doing?' Richie asked, and his shocked voice cracked on the last word. 'I know something,' Beverly said in the dark, and to Bill her voice sounded older. 'I know because my father told me. I know how to bring us back together. And if we're not together we'll never get out' " (1030-1). Then, one by one, Beverly has sex with each of the boys. After the act is over, the children regroup and remember how to retrace their steps.

This scene, though potentially problematic in content, is packed with meaning. To begin, I want to look at the language used within the quote above. As Beverly is undressing, Bill notes that her voice "sounded older." This comes into contrast with the immediately preceding description of Richie's voice as "shocked" and "cracked." This signals to the reader that Beverly is already on the verge of something that the other children—the other *boys*, specifically—cannot understand. She is calm, collected, prepared for the task ahead, while the other boys can barely comprehend

what is happening. Furthermore, Beverly's reference to "my father told me" signals to the reader that she, like the other children, is finally able to face the very fears that were holding her back. Just as Eddie was able to combat his mother's overprotectiveness by using his inhaler, and just as Bill was able to confront his parents' emotional absence by using the phrase they taught him, Beverly is able to use her greatest fear—her father's possessiveness over her sexuality—and instead use it to defeat It one more time and lead the lost children out of the tunnels. This is the apotheosis of what Walkerdine discusses when she writes, "There are two kinds of sexuality: an infant one about bodily pleasures and an adult one which imposes a series of other meanings upon those pleasures" (261). Throughout the novel, Beverly has had to contend with the sexuality imposed upon her by her adult father and It insofar as it represents the fears of adulthood. It is in this scene that she finally asserts her own sexuality and uses it to her advantage.

As the scene reaches its end, Bill comes to Beverly last. In perhaps the greatest assertion of female sexual agency, Beverly experiences her first orgasm, reflecting as it happens that:

And she feels the thing begin to happen—something of which the girls who whisper and giggle about sex in the girls' room have no idea, at least as far as she knows; they only marvel at how gooshy sex must be, and now she realizes that for many of them sex must be some unrealized undefined monster; they refer to the act as It. Would you do It, do your sister and her boyfriend do It, do your mom and dad still do It, and how they never intend to do It (1039-40)

This quote is enormously significant when seen in the light of the novel's overarching theme and argument. Here, Beverly establishes two things through her observations. One, It undoubtedly acts as a metaphor for adulthood. Second, sex is a definitively adult act, and by participating in it, Beverly and the other members of the Loser's Club have made the final transition into adulthood.

King unites these two ideas by using the literal the word “It,” in capital letters, as the creature’s name is spelled all throughout the novel, to describe the act of sex. “It” and sex are the same thing—the ultimate representation of adulthood. Furthermore, the idea that these other children are unable to conceive of sex as anything other than some “unrealized undefined monster” reflects their childlike state and immaturity. Because they are not able to see It as the other children have—both in Its literal monster form and Its more symbolic appearance in the act of sex—they have not progressed into adulthood as Beverly and her friends have. The Losers’ previous interactions with It were just steps on the journey towards a loss of innocence and a crossing over into adulthood, culminating in the sexual act that Beverly initiates as a final assertion of her sexuality and a facing of her fears.

With the act finished, the children emerge from the dark, dank wetness of the sewers, reborn both literally and symbolically as adults. They vow to reunite if It ever reemerges, and then go their separate ways. As the years pass, the children begin to forget each other, their experiences in Derry, and even It itself. By the time the novel resumes in 1985, they have no memory of each other or the vow they once made as children. And despite their seeming victory over It in 1958, the Losers slowly discover their symbolic transition into adulthood has not been as successful as it first would seem. As Alegre writes, “Happy and unhappy endings send King’s children in troubled directions that can only result in badly adjusted adulthood, for the children of his fiction must be inevitably traumatised by the horrific experiences that King builds around them” (106). Despite seemingly finding a happy ending after defeating It in 1958 and conquering their greatest fears, the adult Losers suffer from a variation of the same troubles that plagued them as children. As established previously, Beverly marries a man just like her father, who beats her, physically abuses her, and retains ownership over her sexuality. She was so badly traumatized by her

experiences with It as a child that those experiences carry over into adulthood. But she is not the only one.

When we meet the Losers in 1985, King gives his reader a brief snapshot into each of the adult lives and the troubles that still plague them. In Eddie's snapshot, he is revealed, first of all, to have clung to his dependency on medicine and pills—not just an asthma inhaler this time, but “Anacin, Excedrin, Excedrin P.M., Contac, Gelusil, Tylenol [...] B-simple and B-complex and B-12 [...] Kaopectate, Pepto-Bismol, and Preparation H [...] Chloraseptic, Cepacol, Cepastat [...] Valium, Percodan, Elavil, and Darvon Complex” (King 79-80). The sheer volume and potency of the medication in Eddie's medicine cabinet reveals two things: one, despite his confrontation with It in the form of the leper decades ago, he has failed to conquer his fear of death and disease, instead relying on pills and medications as a method of coping with it. Secondly, it reveals that his mother's preoccupation with his health is still negatively affecting his life as an adult.

Eddie's mother's influence over his adult life can further be seen in his relationship with his wife, Myra. Upon introducing her, King writes, “Eddie did not need a shrink to tell him that he had, in a sense, married his mother. Myra Kaspbrak was huge. She had only been big when Eddie married her five years ago, but he sometimes thought his subconscious had seen the potential for hugeness in her; God knew his own mother had been a whopper” (81). This quote establishes that there is a definitive link between Myra and Eddie's mother in that they physically resemble each other. But even more telling is King's use of the words “shrink” and “subconscious.” These two words are both strongly associated with the practice of psychiatry, with a shrink being another word for a psychiatrist and the subconscious being an area of the mind often explored in psychiatry and, to an even greater degree, psychoanalysis. Along with the children's memory loss, King's apparent reference to psychiatry and psychoanalysis suggests that the problems affecting the

Losers in their adult lives are due to the psychoanalytic practice of repression, especially as it is described by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay, “The Uncanny.”

Freud’s explanation of repression is closely tied to his concept of the “uncanny,” which he seeks to define throughout the first half of his essay. He begins by saying that “doubling”—the process by which “the subject identifies himself with someone else” and repeats various features and character traits—is a vital part of his definition of the uncanny (234). Throughout the novel, King uses the term “doubling” in a variety of ways. The first arises when Bill receives a phone call summoning him back to Derry and he tells his wife Audra he must return to fulfill a promise he made as a child. In describing why he must go, King writes:

‘Until Georgie died, I stuttered moderately,’ Bill said, and already he had begun to hear words double in his mind, as if they were infinitesimally separated in time; the words came out smoothly, in his ordinary slow and cadenced way, but in his mind he heard words like *Georgie* and *moderately* overlap, becoming *Juh-Juh-Georgie* and *m-moderately* (132)

First, King’s specific use of the word “double” seems intentional, especially given his earlier reference to psychiatry and psychoanalysis in describing Eddie’s interactions with his own wife. Furthermore, Bill’s experience of doubling falls in line with Freud’s definition rather well. In remembering his brother Georgie, Bill identifies himself with someone else: he identifies his adult self (the man who pronounces “Georgie” and “moderately” in a “slow and cadenced way”) with his child self (the boy who stuttered “Juh-Juh-Georgie and m-moderately), by “repeating various features and character traits”—in this case, his childhood stutter.

This is not the only instance of doubling that King provides. Later in the novel, as Bill takes a taxi on his way to meet the other adult Losers, he passes many familiar landmarks of his youth: the old Home Hospital, the field where he and his friends used to play, and the library. Many of

these landmarks, however, have either been built over or added onto to the point where they are barely recognizable: the Home Hospital has undergone renovations, a mall has replaced the field, and a new restaurant has been built. For each of these scenarios, King provides a reference to doubling. When Bill passes the field where he and his friends used to play, he “felt a queer doubling sensation in his mind” (459-460); later, as he approaches the mall, “[Bill] felt that queer doubling sensation again;” (460); even upon seeing Mike in the restaurant, Bill again feels, “That sensation of doubling, but now it was much, much worse” (461). King’s extensive use of the word doubling in such a short span of pages seems highly significant, serving mainly as evidence for the argument that he is intentionally invoking Freudian psychoanalysis as an explanation for the Losers’ poorly adjusted adulthoods.

This idea that King is intentionally invoking psychoanalysis is further supported by his application of Freud’s definition of the uncanny itself. While doubling introduces the concept of repetition—the idea that certain traits and features recur throughout one’s life—Freud takes this one step farther by arguing that a frightening or uncanny element first must be something that is repressed into anxiety and then later repeats. Second, the uncanny element must be familiar and “old-established” in the mind, but has become alien through the process of repression (Freud 241).

In *It*, this repression of the uncanny emerges mainly through King’s representation of the children’s repression of their childhood memories. As the children grow and mature into adults, they gradually repress the frightening or uncanny element in their lives—their handicaps, which were embodied in the form of *It*—until all memory of them fades. These uncanny elements later recur or repeat in the children’s adult lives—Beverly marries Tom, Eddie marries Myra, and Bill relies on writing horror novels as a means of expressing the guilt he feels for the death of his brother. As adults, these uncanny elements are “old-established” in the Losers’ minds, having

existed since childhood, but have since become alien and unfamiliar through the process of repression.

While all the Losers experience an alienation of their repressed memories to some extent, Beverly's experiences with Tom remain the strongest example. Throughout their relationship, there is a pattern of abuse and sexual domination that Beverly either fails to recognize or refuses to acknowledge as reminiscent of her father. Oftentimes, Tom will beat Beverly and then the two will have sex, similar in many ways to how Alvin would first beat Beverly as a child and then make some sort of sexual comment, such as his reference to somebody "peekin" at her in the bathroom scene. This behavioral pattern can be seen in Tom's reaction to Beverly after learning that she intends to return to Derry. As she prepares to go, Tom grows angry and thinks to himself, "He wanted to see that look in her eyes, that look of fear and terror and shame, that look that said *Yes you're right I deserved it*, that look that said *Yes you're there all right, I feel your presence* [...] For now, school was in session. The old one-two. First the whuppin, then the fuckin" (King 111). At this point in their relationship, Beverly is still in her repressed state, as submissive and fearful of her husband as she was of her father when she was a child. The psychoanalytic connection between Tom and Beverly's father can further be seen in Tom's reference to "whuppin," which is the exact same word used by her father in the bathroom scene. Tom's use of the word "whuppin" is an instance of psychoanalytic doubling—it occurs in two different periods of Beverly's life, but recurs under similar circumstances. Therefore, her experience with repression emerges through a troublesome trend in which both her father's violence and Tom's are followed with comments or acts that sexualize her. For Beverly, physical abuse is commonly tied with her sexuality, which understandably results in repression and the need for reclamation.

This makes Beverly's reaction to Tom's comments all the more meaningful. After Tom makes it clear he intends to beat her for going to back to Derry, Beverly fights back with objects from their bedroom. Surprised, Tom notes how:

All of that wide-eyed nerviness was on her face now. But not just there; it was all around her, an aura that seemed almost visible, a high-tension charge which made her suddenly both more alluring and more dangerous than she had seemed to him in years. He was afraid because she was here, all here, the essential *she* as apart from the she Tom Rogan wanted her to be, the she that she had made (108)

This quote reflects Beverly's reclaiming of her own sense of self, one that is not imposed upon her or defined by anyone else. This can be seen in King's reference to her as "the she that she had made"—in this moment, Beverly does not need to be defined by a man to have value and worth. This can further be seen in Tom's reference to her as "alluring." Like other men before him, Tom is again attempting to impose a sexuality upon her. But in this instance, her physical attractiveness is no longer for his benefit and enjoyment. She is not a sexual object to be enjoyed, but instead is "dangerous" and self-assertive. After years of abuse, Beverly is able to acknowledge her repressed emotional traumas by finally standing up to Tom.

Her return to Derry, therefore, continues the unearthing of her repressed memories and the long awaited resolution of them. When she meets the fellow Losers at a restaurant in Derry, they agree to wander the city in the hopes that they will encounter It and regain some of their memories. Beverly does so, where she meets It in the the form of her father. At first glance, Its choice to appear as Alvin Marsh seems both a little obvious and rather tame—as readers, we already know that Beverly's worst fear is her father and we have seen It in much more gruesome, frightening manifestations prior to this one. However, this is precisely what makes Its decision to appear as

Beverly's father so significant. It reflects Beverly's growing awareness of her own fears: if she can acknowledge what frightens her is her father, then that is one step closer towards resolving her repressed trauma.

Beverly's final unearthing of her repressed memories comes when she returns to the hotel where the Losers are staying. She visits Bill's room and they have sex. As she reaches orgasm, the mental block on her memories fades away and she is at last able to remember her experience in the sewers, saying in shock, "All of you? I made love to all of you?" (King 892). This memory from deep within her subconscious symbolizes the final culmination of Beverly's repressed traumas emerging. They surface during an act of sex, the same as when they were first formed—despite having been back in Derry for a day, it is not until she has sex with Bill that she fully remembers the encounter with all of the boys in the sewer. Furthermore, her memories come surging back the same instant as she experiences orgasm. This is similar to the revelation she had while reaching orgasm in the sewer scene. Beverly's female orgasm, therefore, can be seen not only as an act of great empowerment, but from a more symbolic standpoint, the literal and metaphorical peak of knowledge. In the moment in which she climaxes, Beverly is able to remember the traumas of her childhood and in doing so, resolve many of the issues which have been haunting her in her adult life. As Tudor writes, "The primary focus for [...] repression is sexuality, and horror, in a variety of ways, acts as a channel for expression of the repressed affect" (57-8). Beverly's sexuality, therefore, not only defines her as a character but ultimately ends up being the vehicle through which she expresses her repressed emotions.

Her choice to have sex with Bill in specific is also significant. As a child, she had sex with each of the boys as a way of asserting that she had *a* sexuality, that she was not afraid to acknowledge herself as a sexual being and defy her father's expectations of her sexuality. Having

sex with Bill as an adult woman is made even more significant by the fact that, as a child, her father:

Had loved her, and in some ways she supposed that had everything to do with why she had fallen so desperately in love with Bill Denbrough [...] because of all the boys, Bill was the one who projected the sense of authority she associated with her father...but it was a different sort of authority, somehow—it was authority that listened (King 536).

By having sex with a man that reminds her of her father, Beverly is acknowledging that she can love a man with authority. Bill represents everything that male authority can be—it is not necessarily something to be feared, like Tom, Alvin or It, so long as it is kind, respectful, and equal in power to her own. The argument could be made that by submitting to a man of authority, Beverly has not become truly sexually empowered, but instead is still in her repressed state. However, I see her choice to have sex with an authoritative man more an act of acknowledgement and forgiveness for her father's actions. It reflects Beverly's ability to finally move into a healthy adult relationship, thus completing her transition from childhood to adulthood.

This, in turn, reflects the greater theme/argument underlying the novel. As an adult, the dilemma facing Beverly stemmed from two inability, which Magistrale notes as “an inability to return to childhood and remember the magic of those moments [and] the failure to understand the significance of an event that happened during that time period—an event that is repressed rather than resolved as one grows older” (147). In returning to Derry and engaging with It once more, Beverly is able to recognize, remember, and resolve her repressed emotional traumas. Furthermore, by having sex with Bill, her childhood friend and ally in the fight against It, she returns to the state of sexual agency she had as a child, thus empowering her in a way that she never experienced as an adult prior to her return to Derry.

This paper has sought to establish the ways in which King offers an alternative to stereotypes of women and women's sexuality within the horror genre. Beverly, while still defined by her sexuality, as is common with women in horror, instead uses her sexuality to empower herself, rather than being seen as an object of disgust or spectacle. This makes Beverly unique not only among archetypal representations of women in horror, but also among King's own history of female characters. As Burger notes, quoting Magistrale in *Stephen King: America's Storyteller*, " 'During the first two decades of his career, several feminist scholars observed that the roles King traditionally allotted women in his fiction and specifically female sexuality itself were patronizingly restrictive and frequently negative' " (87). In the 1970s and early 80s, King was often criticized for writing women who were either " 'barely distinguishable Barbie dolls' or seductive embodiments of evil' " (Burger 87). In a later attempt to redress these criticisms, much of King's work in the 1990s, such as *Dolores Claiborne* (1992), *Gerald's Game* (1992), and *Rose Madder* (1994), featured "female protagonists struggling to free [themselves] from an abusive relationship" (Harris). Furthermore, King's female characters of this time period are largely asexual—they are older, savvy women who rely on instinct and intellect to survive, and so, their sexuality is not given much as much of a focus. Beverly is unique because she bridges the two. She maintains the tradition of focusing on women's sexuality in horror, but she retains a greater degree of empowerment and reflects for King a turning point in his depictions of women in horror.

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