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The Horror of Stephen King's Stereotyped Female Characters

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Part I, Critical Essay

Stephen King is well known for his horror novels set in familiar regional locations, especially rural Maine where he grew up. Similar to the settings of his novels, King's characters are also grounded in realism. Critics have suggested that King's characters are not mimetic, but instead rely upon archetypes and stereotypes. In this essay, I will examine three Stephen King characters to explore the opposition between mimetic characters and characters who rely upon archetypes and cultural stereotypes.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle trace the realist tradition back to the nineteenth-century British novel wherein the novel seeks to answer the question 'Who am I?' through mimetic characters. Bennett and Royle's definition of a mimetic character, "whereby what is primary or original is a real person, and a character in a book is simply a copy of such a person," can be seen in many of King's works (65). The nineteenth-century British novel indicates the importance of words toward developing a character, both on page and in reality. As Uri Margolin writes of character construction, "individuation, or the ascription of properties to an individual picked out by a referring expression, is essential" (Margolin 72). Characters are made up of several varying and interacting traits. Bennett and Royle create a list of requirements that when put together, create mimetic characters who may imitate reality. First, the character must have a believable name and must do and say things that most people would accept in reality. Second, the character must have a degree of complexity; they must possess several different traits that are at times contradictory in order to appear lifelike. Bennett and Royle further explain, "he or she should be, to some extent, unpredictable, his or her words and actions should appear to originate in multiple impulses" (65). Third, the complexities of the character must also come together into a single identity, creating a balance between contradiction and unity. Most of King's characters

have common names – Carrie, Annie, Karen, Beverley, Wendy, Margaret, etc. – and most of the characters lead fairly normal lives – doctors, teachers, janitors, writers, schoolchildren, etc. King’s characters, in the nature of horror fiction, are often faced with extraordinary situations during which they are forced to make quick decisions. These decisions at time may be contradictory. Despite these contradictory decisions, the characters possess a single identity through which they make decisions. In these ways, King’s characters may be regarded as realistic.

While the above remains true, it’s important to look more closely at these characters and explore their typological backgrounds, many of which may appear familiar and even similar. In her article “Archetypes, Stereotypes, and The Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives,” Terri Frontgia argues against the use of archetypes and stereotypes, considering them as “boxes” that imprison female characters into roles (15). This begs the question, Do archetypes do more harm than good? Do common cultural stereotypes? While archetypes are formal roles based commonly in mythology and a history of texts, stereotypes have direct cultural correlations and limitations. Frontgia provides an example using the Greek Goddesses Athena, Demeter, and Aphrodite. Respectively, these Goddesses “are all distinctive expressions of the diverse aspects – such as “independent,” “vulnerable,” and “alchemical” – which can be found in any woman” (Frontgia 16). A character may reach out of an archetype role, but any overlapping stereotypes still restrict and limit their mimetic values as well as their potential. Frontgia uses Carol S. Pearson’s observation that “[Limiting] *stereotypes* are laundered, domesticated versions of the archetypes from which they derive their power. The shallow stereotype seems controllable and safe, but it brings then less, not more, life” (qtd. in Frontgia

15-6). If this is the case, then why does King seem to rely upon these types to build his characters?

There are certainly contradictions to be found within King's characters that make them seem like complex mimetic characters. For example, how Carrie is strong with the manifestation of her telekinetic powers, but weak and subservient in social interactions and situations. However, critics, notably Linda Badley, Gail Burns, and Melinda Kanner, have noted how King's characters have often relied on stereotypes drawn from cultural contexts to complete their characterization, or as a baseboard for King to jump from. While this is true for all of King's characters regardless of gender, this reliance on types is especially true for female characters, regardless of their role within the novel. Here, I will focus on examining the stereotypical representation of female characters in King's horror fiction as well as the archetypes upon which King's characters are based.

In her book *Writing Horror and the Body*, Linda Badley identifies King's early writings as containing three elements: a "voice," "improvisational tone," and "archetypal characters." Badley goes on to explain that, "while [King] continued to cultivate "voice" or textuality, he sharply restricted character and situation in order to examine writing itself as a mode of knowing and as a speech act" (Badley 53), specifically when he wrote *Misery* in 1987. This character sacrifice is also apparent in the gendered situations Badley notes in her book, especially within *Misery*. Badley provides in depth analyses of King's craftsmanship through the lens of the physical bodies of his characters, specifically focusing on the role of gender as embodiment.

Misery features the Vengeful Mother archetype Annie Wilkes, the antagonist to protagonist Paul Sheldon. She is an obsessive psychotic kidnapper with a twisted mothering complex. While Annie doesn't have any legitimate children, the fictional character Misery,

written by author Paul Sheldon, is treated and revered as if she were her own child. The Vengeful Mother is described by Robert King in his essay “A Regiment of Monstrous Women: Female Horror Archetypes and Life History Theory” as protecting her offspring “to horrifying effect” (29). This is seen from Annie’s kidnapping of Paul Sheldon, forcing him to write a new Misery novel, and the extremely violent and psychotic acts she’s willing to commit to bend Sheldon to her will and save her “offspring.” As Robert King suggests, the Vengeful Mother, in her psychosis, has surpassed the reach of reason. Annie’s psychosis can be seen vividly in the following scene wherein Annie confronts Paul for ‘killing’ her beloved fictional character/ fictional daughter Misery:

“I don’t want her *spirit!*” she screamed, hooking her fingers into claws and shaking them at him, as if she would tear his eyes out. “I want *her!* You *killed* her! You *murdered* her!” Her hands snapped shut into fists again and she drove them down like pistons, one on either side of his head. They punched deep into the pillow and he bounced like a ragdoll. His legs flared and he cried out.” (King, *Misery* 45)

Annie does not accept Misery’s fictionality. For her, Misery is a real person – Misery is the child she vows to keep safe, but who is ultimately killed by the Father, Paul Sheldon. This loss is more than Annie can handle rationally, and so she reacts how a mother would react to the loss of their child. Because Annie is the Vengeful Mother, she cannot react in any way other than irrationally. Annie’s size is also focused on to display her strength and power over Paul. Annie’s body, with “feminine curves” is representative of a Monstrous Mother body (Brady 58). Annie is the bearer of life, but also the one who can take it away.

The Mother is represented as well through Rachel Creed in King’s *Pet Sematary*. Gail Burns and Melinda Kanner’s critical essay “Women, Danger, and Death: The Perversion of the

Female Principle in Stephen King's Fiction" addresses the relationship between women and evil in King's horror fiction as well as male envy of female sexuality. Burns and Kanner write of female characters, "King himself and critics alike have commented that he cannot write convincing female characters." This is likely due to the reliance on cultural stereotypes. Further, as they investigate *Pet Sematary* and other works, Burns and Kanner reveal how King "draws upon and reinforces widely, if unconsciously, shared cultural myths about the female principle" (368). Burns and Kanner argue that King's female characters are not mimetic, as discussed in Bennett and Royle's chapter on "Character," since they are neither three-dimensional nor carefully crafted.

As Burns and Kanner suggest, King's female characters reinforce shared cultural myths of the female principle – or in other words, King reinforces culturally accepted female stereotypes. See how Rachel Creed, the Mother, welcomes Louis Creed home after his stressful first day of work in King's *Pet Sematary*:

She had made a stroganoff which had been simmering during the bathtub episode, and Louis, who would have sworn at four o'clock that he would next want to eat sometime around Halloween, ate two helpings.

Then she led him upstairs again.

"Now," she said, "let's see what you can do for me." (King, *Pet Sematary* 68)

Ever the good wife, Rachel knows exactly how to help her husband after a difficult day. Rachel may represent the archetypal Mother, but she also dutifully performs her position as a stereotypical Housewife. She uses her body in a sexual manner and her skills as a housewife to relieve Louis' stress. She assures him that their children are safe at a neighbor's house, being taken care of while Rachel takes care of Louis. It is not only Rachel's physical acts, but her

alignment to gender constructions and the expectations of a housewife that soothe her husband. Rachel's "pathological inability and unwillingness" to discuss death is eclipsed by her necessity to fulfill her duty as a good housewife (Burns and Kanner 371).

Different from the Mother and the Vengeful Mother archetypes, King also makes use of the Monstrous-Feminine through pubescent Carrie White in *Carrie*. Following her argument that every human society has a conception of the monstrous-feminine, or in other words, the effect of abjection upon women, Barbara Creed uses Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in her essay "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection" to dissect the archetypes present within *Carrie*, specifically the mother-daughter relationship. Creed argues that the maternal figure is abject due to conflicting desires. These desires are seen within Carrie's need for her mother's love and approval despite her fear of her mother. Creed writes that in King's *Carrie*, "the mother speaks for the symbolic, identifying with an order which has defined women's sexuality as the source of all evil and menstruation as the sign of sin" (256). Carrie's exploration of puberty mingled with her supernatural abilities, specifically within the realm of horror, elaborate the perceived sinfulness of her femininity. Creed uses abjection to show how female archetypes are present through the 'perverse pleasure' of viewing horror.

Perverse pleasure is abundant in King's first novel. He begins *Carrie* with this explicit scene:

Girls stretched and writhed under the hot water, squalling, flicking water, squirting white bars of soap from hand to hand. Carrie stood among them stolidly, a frog among swans. She was a chunky girl with pimples on her neck and back and buttocks, her wet hair completely without color. It rested against her face with dispirited sogginess and she simply stood, head slightly bent, letting the water splat against her flesh and roll

off. She looked the part of the sacrificial goat, the constant butt, believer in left-handed monkey wrenches, perpetual foul-up, and she was. She wished forlornly and constantly that Ewen High had individual – and thus private – showers, like the high schools at Westover or Lewiston. They stared. They always *stared*. (King, *Carrie* 4-5)

Carrie's physical body is what is important in this scene – not her mind or character. Right after this explicit display of body, under constant view of her peers, Carrie undergoes her first menstrual period. Julia Kristeva argues that menstruation, a ritual of defilement, threatens the mother. She writes that menstrual blood “stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (qtd. in Creed 255). Carrie's telekinetic powers manifested greatly one afternoon when she was a child, but were then hidden away again. It wasn't until she reached her period, deemed impure by her mother, that the telekinesis could no longer be contained. In the end, Carrie uses her telekinetic powers to murder her overbearing fanatic mother, as well as most residents of her hometown, reinforcing the monstrosity of her only recently acquired femininity.

Part II, Creative Writing

In what follows, I present four brief narratives that follow the same general scenario, *a woman is home, someone or something keeps knocking at her door, but she doesn't know who*, from the point of view of four different characters. The first three are based on the typologies of King's characters, Annie Wilkes, Rachel Creed, and Carrie White. The fourth does not rely on a typology. After, I present a comparative analysis of these narratives.

Character Typology Inspiration: Annie Wilkes, *Misery*

The Knock: Version 1

Nora Johnson had been on the run from small town police officers for half her life. After she'd had Rebeca, she had to straighten herself out. She had to be an upstanding member of society.

That's what she told herself in the mirror every night when she donned her janitorial uniform. Cleaning at the local hospital was the only job available for an ex-mob daughter this side of town – the side where people didn't ask questions. And if they did, they didn't ask again.

Nora stared at herself now. Her uniform squeezed against her stomach, fat rolls bulging out at odd angles. Her breasts peaked out of the top of her shirt. She got fat after she had Rebeca. Her father would have killed her if he was still alive.

From the back of the motel room, Rebeca began to cry. Nora took one last long look at herself in the dirty mirror, disgust clear on her face. If she'd never had that little brat, she could still be rolling dough in the family business. Who knew Iowa's largest crime family would be so uptight about children out of wedlock?

Rebeca, lying on her back, looked up at the ceiling fan as she wailed. Is this what Nora gave her life up for? A five-year-old who still wet the bed every night? Who barely talked, instead made incomprehensible gargles and cried constantly? This wasn't the first time Nora looked upon her daughter with the same disgust she gave the hallway mirror.

"What's wrong with you?" Nora asked. Her voice sounded like her mother's.

Rebeca continued to cry without pause.

"I should have fucking listened to my mother," Nora muttered. "Maybe I wouldn't be in this mess."

Mother's worldly warnings still echoed in the back of her mind. Trust no man. Make your own money. Don't get fat. You can't make money if you're fat.

Nora had already fucked up all three. The janitorial job was just a cover for the IRS. Cousin Robby was the one who slipped her Caron family money at the local McDonald's every Thursday night. While she'd never trust another man again, she had allowed herself to trust that stranger five years ago, but all that got her was knocked up and knocked out of her family empire. Oliver tried to leave when he found out. Nora locked him in the motel room and forced him to observe her growing pregnancy. Once she began to show, he'd stopped eating. Nora kept him tied to an old chair until his skin became white. Even then, she kept him there for four more months until she gave birth. Only then did she get rid of his corpse.

A harsh knock on the motel room door caught Nora's attention. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Everyone in this town knew Nora didn't do business at home.

Nora practically stomped her way across the two-room motel suite and threw the front door wide open.

"What the fuck do you want?" Nora hissed.

There was no one there. She stood there for a moment, her mouth gaping like a fish. The November air was sharp against her bare forearms. Nora glanced down both ends of the hallway, then over the second-floor railing that overlooked the dimly lit parking lot. There were two junkies getting high in a parked car, but no one else was around.

It's stress, Nora thought. Rebeca had been driving her up a wall ever since Nora took away her diapers and Rebeca was forced to shit herself or use the toilet like a functioning human being. Nora walked back inside and shut the door. She leaned her back against the door and shut her eyes. What she needed was a needle.

Nora ignored Rebeca's cries. She locked herself in the bathroom and lifted the toilet tank cover. There, inside two plastic baggies for extra protection, was what Nora needed. She exhaled in relief before she grabbed for the bag.

Just as her fingers brushed the wet plastic, another knock sounded against the motel room door. Nora was sure she heard it. She froze. If she didn't answer the door, they'd go away. Seconds ticked by, the hand on her watch clicked as the minute passed. Rebeca continued to cry.

Another knock, this time twice in a row. The fist sounded heavy, incessant.

Now, Nora was getting mad.

She replaced the tank cover. Walking through the kitchen, Nora grabbed a butcher's knife out of the second-hand knife block. Fingers tight around the handle, Nora swung the door open.

The knife was slicing in the air before Nora registered the doorway was empty.

A hard ball of fear lodged its way into Nora's throat alongside frustration. She didn't bother looking around this time. She closed the door until she heard a soft click and walked into the kitchen. She sat at the small kitchen table and lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. The butcher's knife was abandoned on the sink counter.

Did her family learn of the money she'd been receiving? Did Robby sell her out? Was this because of Rebeca? It had been five years since her birth; but perhaps they were biding their time, waiting to see if Nora would get her killed all on her own. She wasn't sure she wouldn't.

Rebeca's cries grew louder. Nora's hand shook furiously.

She finished her cigarette, snubbed the butt on the kitchen table, and slowly walked to the room she shared. Rebeca was sat up in bed, tears streaming down her cherry face.

Nora backhanded her daughter. Rebeca's cries ceased. She looked upon her mother with genuine confusion. When she didn't find any remorse in Nora's eyes, she began to cry once more.

"So help me God, I will kill you tonight," Nora screamed.

An image of the butcher's knife gleaming with bright red blood flashed across her eyes. Yes, that was what she had to do.

Nora ran back into the kitchen, her heartbeat thick in her ear.

The butcher's knife was gone.

Nora's spine tingled from her tailbone to the base of her skull, the static climbing each vertebra like a snake. Feet frozen to the ground, Nora scanned the kitchen, her eyes flashing back and forth back and forth back and forth. There was no one here.

This was it; this was Nora's breakdown. Her eyes were playing tricks on her.

The bedroom door slammed.

Rebeca's cries turned into screams. The mothering instincts inside of Nora told her to run to her daughter. *No*, Nora reminded herself. She had a life to live, and she planned on living that life with or without Rebeca in it.

A loud pounding sounded against the bedroom door from the inside. Reality set in. Nora needed to leave now. Nora grabbed her truck keys off the kitchen counter and ran for the motel-room door. She'd ask God for forgiveness later.

Nora opened the door, and as she stampeded through the threshold, she saw too late the butcher's knife flying at her neck.

Character Typology Inspiration: Rachel Creed, *Pet Sematary*

Karen Johnson locked the bathroom door behind her. This narrow, white tiled, sterile mirrored room was her sanctuary. The door lock was her guardian angel. That metal lock was the difference between six needy children bringing her past the brink of hysteria and a few moments of blessed silence and a stolen cigarette from the pack she hid in an old box of tampons.

If that lock ever broke, Karen didn't think she'd make it another day in Matt's house. Because this was *his* house after all, right? Matt paid the down payment. Matt paid the mortgage. Matt paid for their groceries, their electric, their heating, their gas. Karen was just living in it, keeping order throughout chaos.

She was a good wife and a good mother, just like her mother and her mother's mother were before her. Karen came from a long line of *good* wives. She kept a clean house, she was an excellent cook, and her children were all happy and healthy. Except for Marco, who was diabetic, but five out of six was pretty good.

There was a scuffling outside the bathroom door. Karen recognized Marco's hesitant steps. She sighed under her breath.

"Mommy?"

That tiny squeal irked her. She considered not answering. She'd barely had time to crack the window and light a hidden cigarette before Marco – of *course* it was Marco – needed her attention.

"Mommy will be out in just a minute, hun," Karen said. She took a long drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke out the crack in the window. Karen left a can of aerosol nearby in case any leftover smoke turned the bathroom air stale.

"But I'm hungry now," Marco whined.

Karen swore under her breath. Her youngest wouldn't graduate from high school for another fifteen years. Karen was nearly forty, she needed to get out of this house.

"I said I'll be out in a minute." Karen let her irritation bleed into her tone. A mistake. Marco began to cry on the other side of the door. A small, or maybe not so small, part of Karen was pleased by the effect she had on this child. Marco's quiet sniffles turned into sobs by the time Karen finished her cigarette. Her mothering instincts won out as she flushed the butt down the toilet and sprayed the room so that it smelt like lavender.

Karen opened the bathroom door with an apology on her lips. The words were cut off as someone knocked on the front door. Karen frowned. Matt's house was half a mile from their closest neighbors. Besides, it was the middle of the afternoon, everyone should still be at work – everyone but Karen, of course, who didn't need a job. Her husband was a doctor, after all.

Even Marco with his limited six years of life sensed the oddness of having a visitor. He followed her to the front door, clinging to her neat floral patterned skirt. Karen smoothed down her cashmere sweater and patted away any flyaway hairs. She was the image of perfection.

Karen opened the door with a plastic smile, but the smile drooped into confusion as there was no visitor to be found. Karen leaned out the doorway for a better look, but all she saw was Matt's perfectly manicured lawn.

"You heard someone knock on the door, right?" Karen asked.

Marco nodded. He looked just as confused as she felt. Flashbacks to pranks played on the homes of geeks, goths, and losers back in high school came flooding back. It had been years since teenagers left shit on peoples' doorsteps. What were they up to now? And why the Johnson house?

“Get inside,” Karen ordered. For once, Marco obeyed. Karen shut the heavy glass front door and flipped the dead bolt.

“Lily?” Karen called, “Skylar?”

Marco ran ahead of Karen into the parlor where she’d left her two youngest. They were still playing with the baby dolls they’d been transfixed by for the past three months.

Lily looked up at her and asked, “When will Daddy be home?”

Karen gnawed on her bottom lip. She was unsettled by the ding-dong-ditch, which she was sure was what had just happened, and found herself wondering the same thing. Matt had worked an overnight at the hospital. He told her last night he’d pick up the boys from soccer on his way home.

“Just as soon as he picks up your brothers.”

Lily went back to her dolls without acknowledging Karen had said anything at all. Skylar had never looked up. Her girls, only the last two of her six children, couldn’t care less about their mother. They only cared about Matt.

Karen figured it was inevitable. Not only was she sure all her children knew Zachary, her oldest, was her favorite, but Karen just didn’t have the same amount of energy to keep up with her children as she did fifteen years ago.

Marco pulled on the sleeve of her blouse. “I’m still hungry.”

Karen barely stopped her eye from twitching. Marco was always hungry. If she didn’t get this under control soon, he’d end up getting fat. Karen could not have a fat child; he’d ruin her perfect family.

“How about some celery?”

Marco scrunched up his nose.

“I want a Pop-tart.”

“No,” Karen said. “I’m making dinner soon and you’ll spoil your appetite.”

Marco’s eyes were still red from crying. Now fresh tears formed. He looked up at Karen using the sad eyes Jared, her third son, always used to get Karen to do whatever he wanted. Jared was cuter.

“I’m not changing my mind,” Karen said. “Celery or nothing.”

The tears flowed down Marco’s cheeks. Karen wanted to give in, but she was too afraid of social backlash if her family wasn’t perfect. Hardly anyone knew Marco was diabetic, Karen had made sure of that.

Karen looked at the clock; three twenty-one PM. Matt was always home with the boys after an overnight by four. She could deal with Marco until four, then he’d bother Matt and Karen would pretend to be so busy in the kitchen or fussing over her older boys she wouldn’t notice that Matt was irritated by their child.

A double knock sounded against the glass of the front door.

Karen looked at her son. “Stay here with the girls.”

Marco had the good sense to stop crying and nod.

The glass of the front door was so frosted that even in full sun – today was cloudy – Karen wouldn’t have been able to tell if there was anyone standing on the other side.

Karen cracked the door open with a semi-shaky “Hello?” When there was no immediate answer and no immediate figure in her field of vision, Karen pulled the door open wide.

Nothing.

Frustration boiled in Karen’s veins. She was popular in high school and she was still popular in town among her social circles now. She was the pranker, not the pranked.

“I hope you know you’re on private property!” Karen yelled. No response.

Karen slammed the door behind her as she re-entered her house. Lily had begun to cry from the living room.

Karen didn’t take three steps before there was another knock on the door. Her heart dropped to her stomach and she froze mid-step. If only Matt or Zachary were home.

She couldn’t ignore it. Karen turned and reached for the door handle with shaking fingers. The handle turned and she pulled, and just as it always had before, the door opened inward.

Karen wasn’t surprised there was no one there. Still, something felt different this time. The air felt more electric, like there was going to be a summer storm. She stepped out onto the porch, ignoring now both Lily’s and Skylar’s cries. Deep in the back of her mind, Karen wondered why Marco wasn’t crying.

Karen’s gaze began to blur. She thought she might have seen movement near the end of their long, winding driveway.

“Who’s out there?”

Karen took one more step forward just before she was grabbed from behind and pulled against a firm body. A rubber-gloved hand wrapped over her mouth, choking off a scream.

“Me.”

Character Typology Inspiration: Carrie White, *Carrie*

The Knock: Version 3

Henrietta Greene had been born in a wooden shack of a colonial home thirty-eight miles west of central Ontario. She was born, screaming, on an old mattress above the same hardwood

floor which Henrietta walked over every single morning when she readied her first cup of coffee and every single night when she staggered off to bed.

The idea of moving away from this house was ever present in Henrietta's mind. She yearned to be free of the walls' echoing whispers (the whispers were worse at night) and the metallic scent that clung to the air despite how many air fresheners Henrietta's mother had fruitlessly purchased until the end of her life last spring.

And yet.

And yet Henrietta found herself clinging to the dilapidated house. The roof was slowly caving in, the yard was in a constant state of disarray, the paint was pulling away from the house, the plumbing barely worked on a good day, and the electricity was spotty; but this was her home.

That spot, right by the kitchen sink. That was where Henrietta was born not sixteen years ago. If she had it her way, that was the very same spot Henrietta would die. Old, withered, a treasure chest of memories at the forefront of her mind. This home was her beginning and her end. Her life right now was just the sticky middle stuff.

The lines in the wood swirled around themselves, constricting in certain areas and loosening in others. Henrietta imagined the lines told the story of her life. Certain swirls were thick and bold, like when Henrietta first bled on a night with no moon. Others, almost cunning in the way they swirled around other lines and between wooden panels, told stories of Henrietta's defiance toward her mother. They told stories of the men Henrietta had lured to her home, only to slice at them with her oyster knife. None of them ever told the police – they couldn't risk admitting to attempted statutory rape. Still yet, there were also thin, scraggly lines etched into the wood. There were scratches in the wood, too, grown deep by years of postponed waxing and

years of Henrietta's nails scratching the surface during particularly harsh punishments for her sinful behavior. The floorboards were dry these days.

She lifted her gaze from the tread-worn wood to the television screen. The sun had set hours ago, a downside to the longer winter season. The only lights that illuminated the room were the television set and the roaring fire in the wood-burning stove behind Henrietta in the kitchen. Mother's life insurance was still paying for the electric bill, but it wouldn't last much longer. Legally, Henrietta's aunt owned the home, but she had never bothered to show up, so Henrietta stayed alone. No one in town cared anyway. Rather than look for a job despite her lack of experience in anything other than common clerical work, Henrietta sat in her father's chair – the one Mother never let anyone sit in even though her father had left when Henrietta was only a baby – and watched TV all day.

She was on her sixth nature documentary of the day when she was disrupted.

There was a soft, low knocking sound coming from the front door. The knocks were so light she could barely hear them, but the thuds reverberated in her chest, signaling their reality. Henrietta paused the television set.

"One moment," Henrietta called. The cat jumped off her lap as she stood. No one ever visited much these days, not since after Henrietta's mother passed. Walking toward the door, Henrietta checked her watch. It was six-thirty in the evening. Most families in Lincoln Harbour were having home cooked meals. She smoothed out any wrinkles from her white satin dress.

Henrietta pulled the door open wide, revealing her barely robed body to the chill night air. Soon, snow would be on the horizon. She pulled her eyes away from the sky to settle on her guest. Her heart thudded to a momentary stop, a quick slip.

There was no one on the doorstep. Brows drawn close together, Henrietta swiveled her head around and searched for any signs of disruption. There was no one to be seen. An owl stared at her from across her overgrown yard.

Henrietta muttered “going crazy” as she turned back into her warm house and shut the door. It rattled in its frame.

Resettled back onto the pull-out couch, Henrietta picked up her bottle of bourbon. The best part of her mother no longer being in the house was that Henrietta could drink however much she wanted whenever she wanted.

The worst part was that she was having trouble stopping. Now she understood why everyone at school called Richard Braswell an alcoholic. Mostly, she understood why he didn’t care.

There were many happy occurrences in the house now that Margaret Greene was no longer an active presence. Henrietta was not convinced that Margaret’s spirit wasn’t trapped here, but she had yet to experience anything unusual.

Well, more unusual.

Margaret had always told Henrietta that ghosts were real. Henrietta’s mother believed that ghosts were messengers from God himself, sent to deliver spiritual guidance to those who were on the road to Hell.

Margaret also believed that trapping Henrietta in a chest for sixteen hours at a time was an appropriate, and regular, punishment for spilling tea from the kettle, burning bread, any dust in the house, or an unsightly blemish. Henrietta did not miss her mother.

She resumed the nature documentary she’d been watching, but she wasn’t paying attention. Her thoughts remained on her mother. “*I can’t believe I ever had a daughter as ugly as*

you.” It was early onset dementia and a rapidly progressing heart condition brought on by years of diet consisting mainly of undercooked red meats that killed her. At least, that was what the coroner had documented.

Henrietta knew the truth. She knew it was the devil himself who had come for her mother, long after her time was due. When he whispered to Henrietta that night to smother her mother with her own pillow, Henrietta hadn’t thought twice. Henrietta was young and strong, scrawny, but strong. Her mother was aging. There wasn’t much of a fight.

No one ever even thought that Henrietta was capable of murder. Henrietta was an outcast at school. Maybe three people at most ever talked to her, but she wasn’t feared. Only the next-door neighbor would have heard the screams, but she was well past eighty-years and could barely hear the smoke alarms when she burned her morning toast.

She knew it wasn’t really the devil who told her to murder her mother. Sometimes, especially in the middle of those cold windy nights, it helped to think she was spurred on by someone greater than herself.

Henrietta’s fists unclenched – when had she clenched them? – at the sudden knock on her door. This time the sound of someone else’s clenched fist was clear against the tarnished wood.

“This better be good,” Henrietta muttered, hoisting herself up from her couch for the second time in just a few short minutes. The bourbon splashed inside her stomach as she made her way to the door. The slits in her dress rose higher up her thighs. Henrietta didn’t bother pulling them down.

There was no one there.

Hot anger coursed through her veins. This had to be Stacia and her gang of overly manicured popular friends playing a trick on her. Of course, she’d noticed the way they all

whispered to each other as she passed through the halls, at the cafeteria, and even as she passed groups while walking to the store in town. They all watched her like she was about to explode, but as soon as she'd walked by, the snickers would start. They always did. And Henrietta always pretended like she couldn't hear them, but deep inside, their laughter echoed.

She scanned for any piles of dog shit, any dumped trash, or stink bombs hidden or placed in plain sight on her front porch, but there was nothing. It was as if no one had ever been there.

If it weren't for the feeling of someone's eyes staring, staring, staring...

"Go home," Henrietta called into the lightless front yard. Her voice echoed in her ears. "You're not funny and I'm not falling for it."

She slammed the door behind her and turned the porch light off. Stacia and her friends could rot in the dark for all she cared. She smiled at the thought of one of them, maybe senior quarterback Billy Chilers, twisting his ankle in one of the bunny holes that pocketed her yard. Billy had tried to corner her in the empty girls' locker room last year after gym class. Henrietta bit his tongue so hard when he'd pushed her up against the wall that he'd needed stitches. He hadn't come near her since.

She felt the vibrations through the door before her ears registered the sound. The smile dropped from Henrietta's lips.

Henrietta whipped the door open once more. There was no one there, but the air was thick as if she was standing toe to toe with someone she'd hated her whole life.

The idea that this harassment was not at the mercy of deranged, but overall harmless, teenagers chilled Henrietta's skin. Goosebumps rose. Hairs stood on end. Fingertips sizzled. The warmth in her belly turned to ice.

Henrietta took a hesitant step onto the porch. "Hello?"

There was no answer.

A soft warm breeze from behind the house caressed Henrietta's skin under the satin. For a moment she allowed herself the comfort. The air was so thick she could barely breathe.

Barely above a whisper, "Mama, is that you?"

A cold leather-gloved hand clamped down over her lips.

Character Typology Inspiration: N/A

The Knock: Version 4

Margaret Novun finished washing the dishes and immediately sat down in her plush recliner. The arthritis – practically running its course through her entire body – was particularly destructive in her knees today.

Margaret needed to keep up her energy, Chester was coming over later to play bridge. It had been a long time since anyone other than Chester, her neighbor, had visited her room at Sunny Hills. It felt like only yesterday she'd been watching her grandchildren while Michael and Robin worked as elementary school teachers.

One small accident and her only son had sent her off to a nursing home across the state, never to be seen again.

That wasn't entirely true, though. Robin had visited her three months after the imprisonment.

"He's still in the hospital," she'd said. "The doctors are afraid to take him off the respirator." Robin, who'd quit smoking years before Timmy was even conceived, was chain smoking as she told Margaret about Timmy. Margaret hadn't said a single word.

"You know that Michael will never forgive you?" Robin asked. She'd smoked the last cigarette in her pack. She got up and walked to the door. Her hand was on the knob when she

turned back. She'd been so composed the entire time she'd talked about Timmy, but now her eyes were thick with unshed tears.

"I hope you rot in here."

That was the last Margaret had seen or heard of her family.

Life at Sunny Hills wasn't so bad. Cable television always had good reception, water aerobics classes were taught by a muscly twenty-something year old, and the food was decent. Not enough salt, but decent.

Daily bridge games with Chester kept Margaret from ever getting lonely. Chester missed his wife, Clara, who'd died the August before Margaret had arrived at Sunny Hills. At least once per month Margaret woke to Chester's pained cries of Clara's name coming through the wall that split their studios. Margaret had lost Larry to a heart attack when they were still in their forties. She'd been alone ever since. Now, more than ever.

Margaret turned on the television to an old episode of M*A*S*H. She fell asleep sitting up in her recliner before the title sequence could play.

When she awoke, the sun had begun to set. That wasn't surprising. In the dead of winter in Connecticut, the sun went down by four PM. The digital clock in front of the television set read three twenty-one. Margaret stretched her aching bones. All of her joints popped. Chester would be over any minute. She was surprised he hadn't come over already. Perhaps he was napping as well.

Margaret made her way over to the kitchen area of her one room studio, hobbling with her squeaky walker. What would have taken her only a few seconds in her youth now took her nearly a full minute. Not for the first time Margaret regretted growing old. She'd always thought she'd die young. She resented Larry for that.

There was still water in the kettle, so all Margaret had to do was turn on the electric burner. She missed the gas burners in her old home, the one she'd shared with Larry, but she understood why Sunny Hills used electric. Too many old people ready to light the place on fire. She'd thought about it herself on more than one occasion.

A light knock on her door caught her attention. Margaret's brow furrowed. It wasn't like Chester to knock on her door – he always barged in as if her studio was the same as his studio. He always joked they should knock the wall down that separated the two rooms. Margaret checked the calendar she had posted on her wall. She wasn't due for a routine check for another three days.

“Come in,” Margaret called. It was easier for everyone involved if guests just came in rather than wait for her to trek all the way to the door. A long moment passed, and no one opened the door. Margaret cleared her throat and called again, but again, there was no response.

“Probably damn Phyllis,” Margaret mumbled. “That deaf bitch.” Louder, Margaret called, “I said I'm not paying you back, Phyllis, I won that poker game fair and square!”

By the time Margaret made it to the door, she was out of breath and her hands were sweaty where they gripped the walker.

“Can't you ever fucking hear anything?” Margaret asked as she opened the door. Her sneer melted off her lips as her jaw slackened. There was no one in the hallway. No one at all. Margaret looked around a moment longer before shaking her head and heading back into her studio.

“I'm losing my marbles,” she muttered. “Going goddamn C-R-A-Z-Y like Phyllis. Next thing I know I'll be cooking up a storm for my dead husband and trying to tuck my grown children into bed at night. Goddamn loon.”

The squeak of the walker accompanied her back to her recliner. The television was still playing M*A*S*H reruns. It was three twenty-seven – why hadn't Chester come over to play bridge yet?

The usual answer for someone who's missed an appointment in a nursing home came to her: he died. Margaret rejected it. Chester was the healthiest person in this joint. The only reason he'd ended up here was because his wife had dementia and they had no other family to help take care of her. After she died, he just stuck around.

No, Chester was probably just napping. He'd been up late last night crying. Margaret knew this because she'd been right there with him for most of the night, letting him cry onto her shoulder.

Chester still hadn't gotten over the loss of his wife. Margaret was surprised he hadn't passed right after Clara did.

Margaret had never had that sort of connection with Larry. He'd tried to hold her down too much, stick her into the role of an everyday housewife after they married straight out of high school like her father wanted for her. She experienced her first real taste of freedom after he died, even if she missed him like crazy some nights.

Just as Margaret began to consider checking on Chester, another knock sounded against the door.

"Phyllis?" Margaret called. "Is that you?"

Again, no answer.

"Damn bitch," Margaret said, lifting her tired body up onto the support of her walker. Her knees buzzed. "I'm too old for this ding-dong-ditch crap."

The walker and her bones squeaked as she made her way to the door. Margaret threw open the door as forcefully as her eighty-four-year-old body allowed her.

A rasp of frustration escaped her. There was no one on the other side. She didn't like being the victim of a game. She'd already experienced a lifetime of victimhood.

No one at Sunny Hills was fast enough to turn the hallway corner, roughly two-hundred feet in either direction, faster than it took Margaret to get to the door. If there was someone messing with her, they weren't a resident.

"This isn't funny!" Margaret yelled. She glanced down the hallway one more time, straining her ears to hear any footsteps. There was nothing. As Margaret turned back into her studio, Chester's door caught her eye. The door was firmly shut, that was usual, but there was no light coming out from the crack at the bottom. Chester nearly always had his lights on, or at least the light from his television.

Maybe Margaret could just check on him really quickly – just to see if he was okay. If he were sleeping, she wouldn't wake him. Chester slept through anything.

The kettle began to whistle. Margaret stood frozen, her walker shaking in her arthritis-tortured hands, her eyes flicking from her kitchen to the darkness under Chester's door. The whistle grew in crescendo.

Margaret cursed under her breath. She made her way back into her studio, the door thudding behind her. She was halfway to the stove when she heard a child's giggle. The sound was so soft, so quiet, but so, so clear. Margaret felt like cold water washed down her back. She knew that giggle.

"Timmy?" Margaret asked.

Another knock.

“Timmy!”

Margaret rushed to the door, slamming her walker ahead of her in a desperate attempt to quicken her pace. *Damn her old body!* Margaret’s hand slipped on the doorknob as she grabbed it, the sweat on her palm too slippery. The momentum threw her off balance, but it also threw the door open wide. One moment she was standing with the aid of her walker, the next she was flat on her back, legs scattered. They felt wrong.

They didn’t feel like anything.

Margaret’s field of vision was blurry, but it narrowed down on a single pair of bright orange tennis shoes planted in the doorway. The shoes leaked bath water all over the dirty gray carpet as they stepped into the studio.

“Timmy?” Margaret gasped. The air in her lungs felt stale. “Is that you, sweet boy?”

Timmy’s green mouth twisted upwards in a wicked grin. His voice was like sandpaper when he said, “I couldn’t forget about you, Grandma.”

Margaret’s mouth stretched in a silent scream, the kettle whistled on and on, Timmy giggled a harsh, unnatural noise, and the door creaked shut with a slow groan.

Part III, Analysis

Through four original works of fiction, each titled *The Knock*, I have decided to test in a literary experiment the extent to which characters drawn from archetypes and stereotyped characters may influence plot, and to what extent the characters are boxed in by their types. As previously stated, archetypes are rooted in mythology and are commonly used in genre fiction to provide familiarity in a realist text; if the character is believable, then anything can happen in the plot. However, many characters, and potentially especially characters drawn from archetypes,

can be subjected to cultural stereotypes and an essentialist idea of gender. Gender stereotypes are present within all three archetypes I am examining. The Vengeful Mother and the Mother both are boxed in by biological determinism. Because the character is a woman, she is expected to give birth and become a mother. This is not a journey, but a mostly expected part of the character's life. The Monstrous-Feminine, even more so than the Vengeful Mother and the Mother, has roots in an expected part of a woman's life. All female born women are expected to go through puberty and come to terms with their sexuality. The Monstrous-Feminine is an overplayed stereotype of the dangers of not fulfilling this sexuality. The first three versions of *The Knock* feature protagonists who possess the stereotypes and archetypes present within Annie Wilkes (*Misery*), Rachel Creed (*Pet Sematary*), and Carrie White (*Carrie*) respectively. While I focused on the archetypes present within King's characters in my original characters, I also subjected the characters to many of the stereotypes forced upon King's characters. The final version of *The Knock* features an original female protagonist, Margaret Novun, who intentionally strays from prevalent stereotypes and archetypes.

The Knock: Version 1 features the original character Nora Johnson. Nora borrows Annie Wilkes' Vengeful Mother archetype, as a mother who is unwilling to listen to reason. Nora also expresses twisted mothering through her extremely complicated and atypical relationship with her at least partially unwanted daughter, her past obsession with the father of her child, and her extreme delusion and paranoia regarding her own safety no longer under the protection of, and now at odds with, her powerful family. Nora is paranoid from the first knock and reacts irrationally, already screaming on the defense. As the knocks and Nora's paranoia increase, her rationality decreases. The reader never learns the identity of the knocker.

The Knock: Version 2 features the original character Karen Johnson. Karen borrows Rachel Creed's Mother archetype, as a woman who protects her children despite any exterior factors. Karen also expresses traits found within the stereotypical housewife through her inability to think of the home as her own, her neat kept house, her perfect children, and her manicured appearance; helplessness through her desire for a male presence to protect her and her inability to think critically in an emergency; reliance on her husband financially, emotionally, and mentally; and an extreme fear of death. In the end, the reader is left with the unknown.

The Knock: Version 3 features the original character Henrietta Greene. Henrietta borrows Carrie White's Monstrous-Feminine archetype. Henrietta is young, she embraces her sexual body, but she does not embrace shared sexuality. She unsettles adult men. Henrietta also expresses repressed sexuality through her revealing clothing, explicit psychological issues regarding her mother through her mother's lingering presence after death, submissive hormonal insecurity through her inner thoughts toward her classmates, and is surrounded by typical high school 'female drama' regardless of whether Henrietta is truly being harassed by the popular students. Henrietta, recently orphaned by choice, lives alone in her childhood home. She believes that she is being pranked and does not take the mysterious knocking very seriously. It's only when Henrietta believes she's being watched does fear begin to creep its way into her psyche. In the end, the reader is left with the unknown.

The Knock: Version 4 features the original character Margaret Novun. Margaret does not intentionally borrow any archetypes or stereotypes typically found within King's fictional female characters. Margaret is an elderly woman who lives alone in a nursing home. She believes the mysterious knocking is an annoying neighbor; she does not initially consider anything sinister. Even still, Margaret falls victim to her inability to move quickly, and her body takes a physical

role in the story. Margaret is the only one who discovers the identity of the mysterious knocker and confronts them. In Margaret's case, the mysterious knocker is her presumably deceased grandson whom she'd accidentally drowned before being placed in a nursing home. She is able to surpass her role as victim of circumstance and fulfill her role as protagonist. Even if the reader does not know exactly what happens after the studio door closes behind Timmy, the reader knows that Timmy has come to Margaret in order to enact revenge.

While writing the first three stories, I was faced with the limitations that come with relying upon stereotypes. Nora had to be paranoid and had to be delusional. She also had to be a mother, and she had to be vengeful. She needed to react to situations irrationally. There was no option to make her think logically. Henrietta needed to be overwhelmed by her physical body, she needed to be timid, she needed to be a loner, and she needed to have a complicated relationship with her mother. She could not act outside of those roles. Karen needed to stay at home within her husband's world, she needed to be reliant on others, and she needed to be afraid of death. There wasn't any room for contradictions or second thoughts within her character. Because of this, she needed to follow along the predetermined plot. These characters were contained within the limitations of their types, and by extent, by the plot predetermined for them. It's only Margaret, an atypical character, especially for Stephen King's horror fiction, that overcomes these boundaries. Instead of having these events happen to her, she is a vivid life within the events, enacting her own dynamic actions.

While there was far greater freedom while writing Margaret's version of *The Knock*, I still faced limitations due to the intentional avoidance of any types. Stereotypes are problematic, but are generally rooted in degrees of realities. I couldn't allow Margaret to get paranoid, I couldn't allow her to have psychological issues regarding her mother (especially considering

how many women have complicated relationships with their mothers), I couldn't allow her to embrace maternal instincts, and I couldn't allow her to embrace her body in anything resembling a sexual manner. To a certain extent, almost all of these stereotyped traits have degrees in accepted 'normal' characters. Stereotypes are part of our recognition of characters. Without limiting stereotypes, Margaret is able to thrive within her own (though short) character arc. She doesn't remain within the box of a type, but is free to do as she wishes.

When I began this project, I had assumed that creating rigidly stereotyped, cookie-cutter, characters would be easy. Instead, I found myself surprised by how difficult it was to try and truly box these characters into stereotypes and not stray from those stereotypes in the least. I enjoy the freedom of choices (plot, character, style, etc.) that comes with writing fiction. Writing these pieces with the inspiration of the specified archetypes was interesting and at times genuinely fun, but with the added weight of including the stereotypes that surround King's original characters, the process became far more structured and my creative freedom became far narrower. Becoming aware of the stereotypes that create, yet still limit characters, has helped me to see the complexity that goes into creating a character. There is a very fine line an author walks on while creating a character between falling too deep into stereotypes and creating a character who is so unique, they may appear abnormal. As critics have noted, this is a line that King tends to struggle with, usually leaning a little too far into cultural stereotypes that readers can rely upon to understand a character.

Going forward, I will appreciate the balance between types within every fictional character. After examining King's characters, I've come to realize that some of the stereotypes he relies upon are some of the reasons that these characters are so successful, and why the reader cares about these characters. Perhaps readers wouldn't root for Carrie White if they didn't see

and relate to her hormonal teenage confusion. The author must be aware of these stereotypes, as ideas of gender, race, sexual orientation, ableism, etc. are constantly shifting in popular culture. While it is necessary to break free of a mold that is necessitated by the use of types, it is naïve to overlook the roots of the stereotypes in reality and popular culture. Even mimetic characters are subjected to the influence of stereotypes and archetypes. In order to create mimetic characters, these stereotypes must be limited and archetypes must not be relied upon to build characters, but there will always be a degree of stereotypes present in a mimetic character.

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