



## **World Conference on Social Sciences, Law and Public Policy**

Hosted Online from Toronto, Canada

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> May 2026

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### **PENNYWISE AS PROOF OF A BROKEN SYSTEM: SYSTEMIC DYSFUNCTION AND COMMUNAL COMPLICITY IN STEPHEN KING'S *IT***

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#### **Abstract**

In most people's minds, Pennywise is a monster - a shape-shifting clown that emerges from the drains of Derry, Maine, every twenty-seven years to devour frightened children. The more disturbing truth of *It* (1986) is the antithesis of the monstrous spectacle, this paper argues. Pennywise is less the source of Derry's problems than a manifestation of them. He's the example of the system that has failed the children already. Derry's adults have long learned to avert their gaze, its institutions have learned to forget and its everyday cruelties – bullying, domestic abuse, racism, neglect – have been quietly normalised. It's only because the town has created the environment in which a clown can keep eating that he's so successful.

**Keywords:** Stephen King, *It*, Pennywise, systemic dysfunction, structural violence, bystander effect, communal complicity, childhood vulnerability, horror and social critique.



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The novel ultimately suggests a difficult truth: Pennywise acts as a community's systemic dysfunction given concrete form. This paper reads the threat as one that is not separable from the social order that sustains it and which a conventional horror reading would isolate the supernatural threat from. The only thing the monster can be read as is a reflection of, of all the adults that chose not to ask what happened to a child that they didn't know.

This argument is made precise in terms of three theoretical lenses. First, Johan Galtung's notion of structural violence is that the violence is not done by a person or persons who are identifiable but is embedded in the structure of a society itself; in his own example, one husband beating his wife is personal violence but a structure that keeps a million people in avoidable suffering is structural (Galtung 167-191). Derry is a building that is just like this. The threat to its children is diffuse, ubiquitous and anonymous – that's what makes it so difficult to name and so easy to endure. Second, the bystander research of Latané and Darley clarifies how that toleration works: the more people who witness an emergency, the less felt responsibility of any one of them; the more people who are in the town who assume someone else will do something, the less likely that someone will actually do something (Latané and Darley 215-221). Third, Penny Crofts, who reads the novel, calls the result by its name and the townspeople's complicity and “conspiracy of silence” is the real horror of the novel, the soil in which the supernatural evil grows (Crofts).

With these lenses, what critics may consider background episodes become foreground. Recurring adult indifference is not something convened for the purpose of the novel: it is the novel's structure. The casual brutality of Henry Bowers, free from all the restraints that should have curbed him, is not just a subplot, it's the daily face of the same indifference that allows the clown to operate. Beverly's home, Eddie's stifling mother, Ben's isolation and Mike's



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experience of racial hatred are not distinct woes set up for atmosphere; they are orchestrated statements that the kids of Derry are unprotected by design. Pennywise thrives in a community that is already deeply troubled.

This is a way of reading King that is in keeping with an increasing body of scholarship (including my own) that sees his fiction as a serious social and ethical investigation, not genre entertainment. In my analysis of *The Green Mile*, I have suggested that King's focus is on the intersection of race, disability and carceral power and how the institutions produce and legitimise harm to the vulnerable (Ochilov et al., "Race, Disability and Abolition"). A similar concern is evident here: It's a prison, it's a small town, both are machines that determine who suffers and who doesn't. In a companion study of *The Green Mile*, the phenomenology of pain and healing is developed, with King placing the failure of the institutions on and in the body itself (Ochilov et al., "Between Flesh and Miracle") - a frame that is useful to apply to *It*, where children's suffering reveals the consequences of communal neglect.

Two additional strands of my work help to focus the current argument. First, in my analysis of moral dissonance and the potential for repair in popular supernatural fiction, I have explored how these stories can be seen as testing the ability of a community to recognize its own culpability and to make amends or to simply reset (Ochilov, "Magic at the Crossroads"). It provides the darker response: the town forgets, the silence falls and the structures stay the same even if the monster is vanquished. Second, my comparative study of King's American supernatural fiction and Nazar Eshonqul's supernatural fiction of Central Asia provides methodological justification for reading King's "monsters" as culturally and socially coded rather than literal (Ochilov, "Transcultural Magical Realism"). The lens this comparative paper is under the authority of is an permission to look at Pennywise not as a monster to be justified but a symbol that invites



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interpretation - a shape who renders a neighborhood's concealed dysfunction obvious.

The argument is a provocation with a purpose for the conference. But, if Pennywise represents systemic failure, its demise does nothing to fix the issue. This is confirmed by the novel itself: the children that survive grow up, forget and Derry returns to its forgetful routine. The building that creates the horror is not destroyed, just the most obvious manifestation of the horror is temporarily taken away. That's why the finish doesn't seem like a win but like a delay – the underlying social conditions remain unchanged. On this reading, King's horror extends beyond the figure of Pennywise. It is about the ease with which decent people create and sustain conditions in which the unprotected are consumed and the ease with which decent people forget they have created and sustained such conditions.

The paper ends with a call to action for a portable systemic reading. The interpretive model I have developed here - monster-as-symptom, town-as-structure, silence-as-mechanism - can be extended throughout King's oeuvre and beyond, to any story that features a spectacular evil that obscures the ordinary, distributed and institutional evils that enabled it. The novel functions as a critique of community failure as much as a work of horror. What is Pennywise isn't the only thing that remains a question but what kind of community makes a Pennywise inevitable?

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