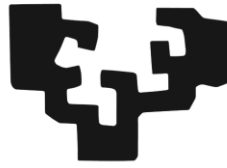eman ta zabal zazu

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Stephen King's Horror
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Abstract

Throughout history, horror literature has passed though many different stages; from early Gothic novelists who often wrote to challenge contemporary society, to modern horror writers with sophisticated and refined techniques. In this essay, I examine the distinct types of horror present in Stephen King's novel *Pet Sematary*; analysing them under the scope of his own distinction between horror, terror and the revulsive; comparing his style with the one developed by previous horror tale writers. King's distinction between the three types of horror separates psychological terror relying on the reader's imagination, from the dread evoked by some physical element, and from the repugnance felt toward the elements he defines as the "gross-out", the explicit depictions of macabre events. These three elements coexist in *Pet Sematary* together with some classical horror tale elements utilized by previous canonical horror writers: Poe's deep psychological profiling, Lovecraft's love for the unknown, or Radcliffe's descriptions of the landscape as the sublime. Incorporating evidence from the novel, this paper explores the main scenes and topics in the novel in order to analyse the methods used by King to transmit a sensation of unrest to the reader, including themes like the portrayal of death in the novel, the description of sombre and dismal cemeteries, the resurrection of dead entities or the appearance of an invisible, but powerful force. Hence, I argue that *Pet Sematary* could be considered to create loathing and aversion through the coexistence of both Stephen King's terror, horror, and revulsive elements, together with classical horror tale elements used by previous writers.

Keywords: Cemetery, resurrection, horror, Stephen King.

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1. Introduction

Stephen King is one of the most prolific contemporary horror writers, having published more than sixty novels and several short stories through more than thirty years of profession (T. King "The Author"). He wrote *Pet Sematary* (1983) in 1983 and based the story on a personal experience that led him to imagine a different outcome, a situation in which he would have had to witness his son's death. The novel combines his personal experience with both supernatural and realistic elements, which are portrayed using his personal style and some elements of previous horror writers as to create the most unwilling situation for the reader. This paper aims to analyse the terror in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, under the scope of his own distinction between horror, terror and the revulsive, and trying to deduce King's intentions together with the reader's reactions in each of the analysed scenes. The reason for selecting this novel relies on my own personal experience while reading it; the fear it inspired on me made me wonder how Stephen King had managed to transmit such an unrest and terrify me in that way.

The paper will be structured as follows: Firstly, an approach to horror literature will be made as a way to understand the nature of the genre and the different contributions of classic writers to it; secondly, information about both Stephen King and *Pet Sematary* will be given as to provide enough background for the understanding of the creation of the book and the writing style of its author; and, lastly, this work will analyse the main themes of the novel and how the author develops them to create his own type of horror.

1.1. The birth of horror literature

In the second chapter of *The Literature of Terror* by David Punter, "The Origins of the Gothic Fiction", we can learn how the Gothic genre was born during the mid-eighteenth century; however, its development was possible due the emergence of a new model of writing, the novel. The change in the English social structures that led to the appearance of a middle-class with a higher purchasing power, together with the increasing in the number of printing-houses, and the reduction of the cost of production of books, augmented severely the number of readers in England and increased the sales of books all across the country. "Under these conditions, the sales of individual works of fiction increased markedly." (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 21). Thus, both the Gothic and the realist novel became extremely popular among the English middle- and upper-class society.

The expansion of the Gothic novel could not be understood without the popularization of the reading habit and the increase in the publication of novels, events that took place between the 1760s and the 1820s (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 21). Moreover, the interest was also enhanced by the new points of view that reading provided, including the clash with the Enlightenment thinking due to the new sentimentalist ideals; "Sentimentalism gave the prevailing tone to fiction; few writers were untouched by its stigma" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 25). Sentimentalism was not only one idea among Gothic writers, but it was "the essence of the Gothic cultural emphasis" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 27) opposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers, who put reason over emotions, "To consider the passions and the emotions as mere subject faculties to be brought under the sway of an all-dominant reason, as the Enlightenment thinkers did" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 24). On the other hand, gothic writers wrote about characters full of sentiment, passion and anguish which opposed to the principles of the time; as Punter states: "we begin to glimpse the possibility of the balance and reason of the Enlightenment being crushed beneath the weight of feeling and passion." (*Gothic Tradition* 26). This new way of writing, together with the challenge to contemporary society, characterized the genre in its early phases and shaped the base for the future development of modern horror literature.

Gothic literature meant to "satisfy an adaptive appetite for vicarious experience with scenarios of danger" (Clasen 355), being considerably influenced by a group of poets that wrote during the decade of the 1740s, whose style is known as the "graveyard poetry". These poets were characterized by their challenging of rationalism and extreme relevance to feelings through their involvement with death, which became the basis for the posterior Gothic literature (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 30). Along with death, Gothic writers aimed to evoke sentiments of fear and unrest through the description of a gloomy landscape and supernatural elements; even at some points "the temporal ubiquity of the Gothic became less important than a sense of fear developed from a source of threat" (Aldana 9).

In addition, in order to understand early Gothic literature, the concept of the sublime should be understood, as it is a key term developed by the first writers of the genre. Early Gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe sought the elements of the sublime in their works, a concept developed by thinkers and writers like Burke, Kant, or Longinus (Corstorphine 6). The sublime refers to an overwhelming grandeur of the natural

elements, something both terrifying and appealing; as described by Tabish Khair: "the "sublime," which is not just horrific but also awe-inspiring and vastly beautiful." (437), thus, early Gothic writers described nature as something both beautiful and dangerous. Moreover, together with the concept of the sublime and the landscape, Gothic writers were distinguished by the importance they gave to both the supernatural and the past. These authors portrayed supernatural elements in their writings, including monsters, "Horror stories tend to be structured around monsters, and most such monsters reflect ancestral danger" (Clasen 358), or events concerning dead entities: "The voice of Death is positively seductive as it portrays the grandeur which awaits" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 34). Lastly, the reappropriation of past was considered a central point in their writing as "Gothic itself seems to have been a mode of history, a way of perceiving an obscure past and interpreting it" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 52).

The novel that is considered to be the originator of the Gothic fiction is *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole. Walpole combined the two most popular genres of the epoch in one single work; realism, which gave his work a historical verisimilitude, being concerned with a general sense of pastness (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 46), and fantasy, the latter being the most predominant one. This novel is considered to be the first "true" Gothic novel for its combination of Gothic elements, which would be used in posterior writings, including the use of a medieval castle as the main setting, the appearance of supernatural elements as ghosts, violent actions, and the portrayal of the prototypical Gothic villain (Cleary 395). All these elements were precisely combined "producing such an exaggerated plot" (Cleary 395) for the purpose of criticizing the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Thirty years after the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, two masterpieces of the Gothic literature were published: Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). These two novels are "interconnected in a complex web of influence, disagreement and rejection" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 55), they both "sought for poetic and dramatic conventions" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 58) that differed from the narrative devices of Walpole; both having been influenced, especially Radcliffe, by the Shakespearean emotions (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 56). Radcliffe's novel has a profound sentimentalist base, focusing on the emotions and susceptibility of her characters (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 67). As Walpole, she locates her setting in a castle, including sublime descriptions of the landscape, where supernatural events come to

happen, and using uncertainty and lack of awareness as the main sources of fear; "Radcliffe cultivates uncertainty in her texts by limiting the reader's knowledge to what her vulnerable heroines know." (Neill 169). She produced psychological unrest and suspense through unclear dangers rather than a horrific view of violent events; Lewis, on the contrary, described a more physical apparition of the supernatural, the dangers are more alive and visible, the reader can see and not just believe. (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 61). He portrays "visceral horror" (Cleary 397) enhanced by the reader's imagery, together with supernatural phenomena and explicit violence. Both novels became canonical works for posterior writers and exerted a large influence on subsequent writings.

Regarding early American Gothic, Punter states that its growth was non-native, it did not come straight from new American ideas, but it was the evolution after the influence of the English Gothic (*Gothic Tradition* 173). The early stages of the American Gothic are characterized by the obsession with Europe, mainly with its landscapes and its past. American Gothic writers sought a dark, ruined setting which was incompatible with the contemporary "New World"; therefore, they focused their descriptions of classic Gothic settings in what they called the Old World, Europe, which was full of sublime landscapes perfect for their novels. Thus, American Gothic could be considered a refraction of English literature (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 165), even though American Gothic writers changed the focus of their predecessors; they did no longer seek historical reality, but a carefully studied and depicted psychological profile of their characters. Due to the increasing interest in the psychological status of the characters, the figure of the madman emerged (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 169), and there was one writer who mastered the characterisation of this type of subject, Edgar Allan Poe. Poe has been praised by some of the most important horror writers of all time, with H.P Lovecraft calling him the master of psychological fear (Cisco 201) and considering him the father of the modern horror story: "Poe did that which no one else ever did or could have done; and to him we owe the modern horror-story in its final and perfected state." (Lovecraft 35). Poe's greatest contributions to literature were not his innovative themes, but the staging and narration of his stories, he built "a kind of story which does not move by simple narrative but by spiralling intensification" (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 177). He mastered the abnormal psychological profile of his characters and created morbid psychological situations in their minds; he built a completely new typical protagonist, a dark, handsome

gentleman with a lore of profound secrets behind him (Lovecraft 40). Poe also changed the perception of the natural and the supernatural, he did not follow the previous patterns, he built his own new concept. The elements in stories like *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846) are neither supernatural, nor natural, "but in that the roots of the mind do not in any case accord with conventional versions of the natural." (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 183) and "The horrific immediacy of his fallen worlds offers a hellish vision of the depraved and demonic human will" (Lloyd-Smith 70).

Lastly, before commenting on contemporary terror and the writing of Stephen King, we find late American Gothic, the last step before contemporary horror literature. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth, some authors like Ambrose Bierce, Robert W. Chambers and H.P Lovecraft expressed their own style on their horror stories. Bierce is characterized by his constant relation with death and the violence with which he depicted it (Punter *Modern Gothic* 27); Chambers, on the contrary, was more interested in the psychological aspect of the characters, similarly to what Poe did some decades before (Punter *Modern Gothic* 34). This interest was not shared by H.P Lovecraft, probably the best-known horror literature writer of the early twentieth century. His style combined fear to the historical past, as seen in previous Gothic writers, and fear to the future and what society may become into (Punter *Modern Gothic* 37); combining these two elements with the unknown, what he considered to be the source of the strongest fear (Lovecraft 4). His ideology influenced severely his writing; as he was a racist, he described as monstrosity and demonized everyone that was not part of what he considered "normal", he considered non-human everyone that was a member of another American ethnic group (Punter *Gothic Tradition* 40).

Apart from his literary contribution, Lovecraft also provided one of the deepest studies in horror literature and the concept of the cosmic horror in his book *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1973). However, he was not the first one to use this term, as before the Lovecraftian interpretation of the cosmic horror there were other theories that linked the term to the atmosphere in a literal sense, an atmosphere "involving a disturbing intimation of threatening immensity" (Moreland 16). In his conception of the cosmic horror, Lovecraft alternates the adjective "cosmic" with various nouns: fear, panic, terror and horror; but all combinations refer to the same concept and serve the same three functions (Moreland 19): They distinguish Lovecraftian cosmic and the traditional interpretation of the *cosmos*, they differentiate from the actual meaning of the emotion

they signify, as Lovecraft thought that "cosmic fear" was something deeper than the simple emotion, and, lastly, the use of these nouns interchangeably breaks the distinction between terror and horror made by previous writers like Ann Radcliffe or Edmund Burke (Moreland 20).

1.2. Stephen King and his conception of horror literature

Stephen Owen King was born in 1947, in the city of Portland, Maine. His parents divorced when he was a child and he and his brother David were raised by their mother in Wayne, Indiana. The three of them returned to Maine to take care of his grandparents and they would establish themselves there for the next years, time when Stephen would complete his studies at the High School and University; later, Maine would become the place where King located various of his novels. He graduated in English and already showed his love for writing and literature by publishing various columns in the University newspaper. In 1967, he sold his first short story to Starling Mystery Stories, which was called *The Glass Floor;* but it was not until 1974 that his first novel, *Carrie* (1974), was published by Doubleday & Co. From then on, King has published 65 novels and more than two hundred short stories, some of which have become masterpieces of horror literature and have had several cinematographic adaptations. King has been awarded *The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters* (2003) and the National Medal of Arts (2014) among others. (T. King "The Author").

His works prove the influence he received from previous horror writers, as he uses similar techniques to those used by authors like H.P Lovecraft or Edgar Allan Poe. The psychological relevance of the characters in the stories written by Poe can also be seen in King's writings, with the figure of the madman appearing in his writings. In *The Mist* (1980), King transmits a deep psychological terror though his characters, and it is evoked into the reader by leaving open possibilities to the imagination (Burger 80). Moreover, apart from the relevance he gives to the psychological condition of his characters, he also uses different themes in his novels as a means to transmit fear; among those themes are the deep dark forest full of shadows and strange entities (Downey 83), the appearance of terrific animals (Murphy 263), the alive past that still has its own voice today (Marsden 163), or the apocalyptic view of the world with supernatural elements threatening what is known until now (Marsden 165). Lastly, one of the features that most distinguishes King's narrative is his optimistic view of the endings, as some of his novels end with a

sensation of hope about what is coming (Burger 92), although not all of his novels end with a hopeful situation.

As H.P Lovecraft did, Stephen King also wrote his own theoretical analysis of horror literature, transmitting his own ideas about the genre and studying its cultural significance in his book *Danse Macabre* (1981). According to Alissa Burger, this book continues where Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in* Literature left, "In many ways, King's *Danse Macabre* arguably picked up where Lovecraft left off" (87). Nonetheless, King also analyses the horror pieces published after *SHL* and added his own ideas to the definition of the cosmic horror provided by Lovecraft; apart from making his own distinction between horror, terror and what he called the revulsive (Burger 79). King made this distinction in a vertical form, this is, he located terror above horror, which at the same time was located above the lowest one, the revulsive level; "the genre exists on three more or less separate levels, each one a little less fine than the one before it" (S. King *Danse* 56). King describes terror as the finest of the three, the one that relies exclusively on imagination; the author does not have to describe what there is in the scene or what the dangers may be, it is the reader's mind which imagines what may be there and what creates the sensation of unrest in the mind: "Terror is the sound of the old man's continuing pulsebeat in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (*Danse* 57). On the other hand, horror needs some kind of physical reaction, something physical and visible causes the reader to experience that sensation of fear, it "is slightly less fine, because it is not entirely of the mind." (*Danse* 56). And, lastly, the revulsive level, also called the "gross-out" (*Danse* 59), would be the least fine of all, in which King included those explicit descriptions of murders, rapes or accidents that do not cause the same sensation of fear or unrest, but of disgust because of the revolting nature of the events that are taking place (*Danse* 57). The death of Victor Pascow or Gage in *Pet Sematary* could be considered to be at the revulsive level of terror according to this description. These three levels of the genre are recognizable in King's works, and he combines them as a means to evoke the deepest of the dreads.

1.3. *Pet Sematary*

Pet Sematary is a novel written by Stephen King and published on the 14th of November of 1983 by Doubleday, being King's last novel published by this company. The novel has its origin on Stephen King's own thoughts and fears, feelings that came to his mind during the period of time in which he worked at the University of Maine. He moved to a new house near a road, a terribly busy road with many cars and trucks crossing just in front of the main gate; and it was this same setting that he built in his novel and marked the destiny of the Creed family. Stephen lived with his wife, his daughter, his son, and his daughter's cat, Smucky; although, this last one was going to be killed on the road not long after their arrival. The road had warned them once, but there was still a second warning coming as their little boy was going to run in the direction of the road, with Stephen running after him, trying to stop him. Luckily for the King family, their son fell at the grass before arriving on the road; it was like a miracle, whether it was the child alone who fell, or it was Stephen himself who pulled him down he could not tell (S. King *Pet* xv).

All these situations led Stephen King to imagine a different situation, he wondered what would have happened if his son did not fall, what would have been of his life? Would he have been killed by the roaring truck that was crossing or would he still be alive with them? This "what if" question gave birth to the novel, *Pet Sematary* was born from the realisation of the biggest fears of its author; in his words: "I found myself not just thinking the unthinkable, but writing it down" (*Pet* xvi).

However, despite the novel having proved that it is genuinely liked by the public and that the general reader does not find anything "too much" in it; Stephen kept it away for many years, for he believed he had gone too far this time. He considered it too distressing, maybe not for the public, but to his personal feelings; his own experiences were reflected in it, it was his son who nearly died on that road, and imagining the atrocities narrated in the book in his own flesh was too much for a man's mind. For this reason, he starts his introduction with this statement: "When I'm asked (as I frequently am) what I consider to be the most frightening book I've ever written, the answer I give comes easily and with no hesitation: *Pet Sematary*" (*Pet* xiii).

The novel provides many situations that foster the creation of suspense, fear, and terror; some of them are more visceral and some more psychological, the range of techniques used by the author is extensive and assorted. Death is the main concern in the

novel; it is a crucial part of the way in which King transmits fear to the reader and it is also a very important part in the narrative of the story, as the death of the characters does not only affect the reader's sensations while reading, but it also alters the events and the decisions taken by the characters.

2. Stephen King's Horror

2.1. Death in *Pet Sematary*

Death is present from the beginning of the story, "You must be thinking that death is all we talk about around here, Louis." (*Pet* 67), and remains as one of the main concerns until the very last scene, in which his wife's death causes Louis' ultimate level of madness. Stephen King portrays the deaths of Victor Pascow, Church, and Gage to provide both physical and psychological elements that cause unwillingness and disgust on the reader; combining his three types of terror as a means to evoke the strongest dread.

2.1.1 Victor Pascow

The first instance of death in the novel comes with the death of the university student Victor Pascow. The morning Louis Creed starts his work as the head of the Maine University medical services, a new case arrives to the infirmary, and this case would mark him and would become the beginning of the degeneration of his mental health. While Victor Pascow was jogging through the campus, a car ran over him and drove him headfirst into a tree, causing him several lethal wounds. Even though the students that were with him took him as soon as possible to the infirmary, there were no longer any possibilities for his life, he was going to die. His skull was crashed, he had a five-centimetre-wide hole in his head, and his brain was coming out of his cranium together with a yellow viscous fluid; he was no longer a thinking body, he was in the way to becoming a piece of flesh. In spite of his condition, he was still able to pronounce some last words that would terrorize Louis. Pascow told Louis about the Pet Sematary, a small cemetery built by children to bury their pets that he had recently discovered, and he called him by his name; he knew his name, despite they had never seen each other before. This incident would leave a scar on Louis and would be very present in his relationship with death for the rest of the story.

As aforementioned, the death of Victor Pascow can be considered to be at the revulsive level in Stephen King's distinction of the genre, as it does not rely on the imagination of the reader, but on a physical, explicit description of an event that aims to

create disgust rather than fear. Indeed, the brutality of the event and the great number of details in the description are the elements that foster the sensation of disgust on the reader, who is shocked and impressed, the same way as Louis is when he sees Victor for the first time, "the hole in his head, oh Christ, the hole in his head" (*Pet* 85). Furthermore, the depiction of the broken bones and neck, together with the blood and fluids coming out of his dying body enhance these sensations; however, there is one specific detail of his portrayal that makes the scene even more macabre, Louis' comparisons of Pascow's head-hole: "It was like looking through a broken window. The incursion was perhaps five centimetres wide; if he had a baby in his skull, he could almost have delivered it, like Zeus delivering from his forehead." (*Pet* 84). This is the definition of what Stephen King calls the "gross-out" in horror literature, the creation of such a macabre and disgusting event that both the reader and the main character would remember his dying, smashed body every time Pascow is mentioned. Nevertheless, the death of this character does not end with the mere description of his death, but King also included elements contributing to other levels of terror. His last words talking about the Pet Sematary, and calling Louis by his own name contribute to a psychological level of terror; these unsettle Louis, who is shocked by his words and fosters a sensation of unknowledge on the reader, who wonders who this character is, and why did he say what he said. The sensation of unknowledge, of being in front of something you do not understand and do not know where it came from is what Lovecraft described as "the main source of fear" (Lovecraft 4), and has been endlessly repeated in horror literature.

Regarding his role in the story, Victor Pascow could be considered the beginning of something in the novel; his death was the first one of a series of deaths that both Louis and Steve Masterton, the other doctor that was present the day Victor died, would have to witness, "Steve himself had attended four funerals since the death of Victor Pascow" (*Pet* 557). His death seems to be the trigger that precedes all the misfortunes that Louis Creed would have to suffer, Pascow was the one that brought death closer to the main character and he would become its representative in Louis' eyes. There is a scene in which Pascow appears in Louis' room at night, he wants Louis to follow him to the Pet Sematary; this scene could be the representation of his closeness to death, he takes Louis from his world into the world of the death, and there is nothing he can do, he feels forced to follow him and enter his world. "The compulsion to follow was strong, but he did not want to be touched, even in a dream, by a walking corpse. But he did follow." (*Pet* 101).

From this moment on, Victor Pascow would be in Louis' mind every time he had to face death "here it is, Pascow all over again" (*Pet* 133), he would have to deal with his memory, Pascow would become the half-living representation of death for Louis.

The fear transmitted through the character of Victor Pascow, as seen above, is a combination of the three different levels proposed by King in *Danse Macabre*. The apparition of his corpse in Louis' room mentioned above, would correspond to the second level of the scale, horror, which relies on a physical element in order to transmit fear and unrest to the reader. However, there is also deep psychological terror regarding this character; he is constantly appearing in the main character's mind and reminding him that he is present in his life, as Louis was in his death. Indeed, Pascow is always where death is, he returns to Louis' mind to torment him, he is constantly showing Louis that death is everywhere and will destroy his entire world, "Your destruction and the destruction of all you love is very near, Doctor." (*Pet* 106). Moreover, he also makes an apparition in the mind of Louis' daughter, Ellie; he appears in her dreams during the climax of the novel, just when Louis is planning the burial of Gage in the Micmac cemetery. Victor appears in her dreams and tries to take Ellie to the Pet Sematary, as he once did with his father; he wants to advise the family about what Louis is going to do, he wants them to see what Louis is capable of and how mad he has become. "Paxcow took me to the Pet Sematary and said Daddy was going to go there and something terrible was going to happen." (*Pet* 429).

The character of Victor Pascow is crucial for the development of the novel, he is the responsible of creating terror not only on the reader, but also on the main character, who also contributes to inspire it on the reader through the first-person narration of the story. The mastery with which Stephen King develops the three levels of horror in this character helps to unsettle the reader and create the sensation that every time that Pascow is mentioned, something bad is going to happen. It is as if he is always going to be the precedent of a catastrophe, the previous event to something that would change the course of the story.

2.1.2 Church

In a cold Thanksgiving afternoon, after Louis had decided not to travel with his family to Chicago, Louis received a call; a call that would force him to make a difficult decision. It was Jud, his elderly neighbour, on the other side of the phone, and he told him that there was a dead cat on his lawn; and, of course, it was Church, his daughter's cat. The cat had probably been struck by a truck and sent over to the neighbour's lawn, breaking his neck, and instantly killing him. Now it was Louis' time to take care of his duties, he had to decide what to do with the cat's corpse and whether to tell his daughter or not. He proceeded to take the cat and put it into a plastic garbage bag, noticing that his dead body seemed to weigh a lot more than the alive animal did. Yet, after Jud asked him whether he loved his daughter or not, both men took everything they needed to bury the animal; but they were not going to bury him in the Pet Sematary, but in the Micmac burying ground, whose relevance will be later analysed.

As for Church's death there are not many elements that correspond to the revulsive level, as the cat was "in no way mangled or disfigured" (*Pet* 156); however, the blood coming out from his mouth and his half-open eyes give the corpse an evil and disgusting look. Indeed, the main focus of this scene is on the psychological terror transmitted through the description of the environment and the atmosphere; a freezing Thanksgiving afternoon in which there is no one and no sound in the street, just Jud standing still on his lawn in front of Louis' dead cat "he looked like a piece of statuary, just another dead thing in this twilight landscape where no bird sang" (*Pet* 155), where even "the landscape had a dead look" (*Pet* 155). The focus on the description of the landscape in this scene could be traced to the relevance of the Gothic landscape and their sublime potential, as "The motifs, settings, and themes of landmark novels and short stories have themselves become markers of Gothic indexity" (Aldana 1). This scene illustrates the "terror deriving from the familiar inmates instead of some external threat" (Lloyd-Smith 75); all recognizable, familiar elements, but in a dark and sombre environment. Church's death could be considered to be the beginning of the real plot; as, thanks to his death and posterior resurrection, Louis discovers Ludlow's deepest secret, the Micmac cemetery, which later would provide him the possibility of bringing his own son back to life.

2.1.3 Gage

The last, and most important death of all, is the one that leads to the climax of the story, the death of Gage William Creed. Gage's death is the reflection of Stephen King's actual fears; as mentioned before, the scene in which Gage is ran over by a truck, corresponds to an event that happened to his own son in the real life, wondering what would have happened if his son did not fall before the road. In this scene, Gage is playing to run away from his parents, running uncontrolled, eluding his father's hands; but there is a turning point when gets too close to the road, and the sound of a ten-wheeler resounds. "Gage's forward motion had carried him out into the road, and the truck had been thunder" (*Pet* 313). His death is narrated through the memories of a devastated Louis Creed, who remembers his son's death scene while he is welcoming all the guests to the funeral. He narrates from his own perspective how Gage approached the road and how he, after the truck had hit and ragged him all over the place, ran down the road shouting Gage's name, as if something could be done for his life, "I was screaming his name over and over again, almost as if I expected he would still be alive, me, a doctor." (*Pet* 321). His clothes were spread through more than a hundred yards of road, leading to the wrecked, inanimate body of who once had been his little son. "It hit him and killed him and then it dragged him and you better believe it was quick." (*Pet* 321).

Similar to the death of Victor Pascow, Gage's death does not only correspond to one of the levels of horror sorted by King, but it is a combination of different levels, as to find the way to unsettle the reader the most. Louis' memories mentioned above show a level of repulsiveness that, although are not comparable to the roughness of the description of Pascow's body, could be considered to be the part of "gross-out" element mentioned by King in *Danse Macabre*. Moreover, the moment in which Louis is running towards Gage after he has been hit by the truck, and keeps finding his ripped, bloody clothes in his way, leads the reader to come into his own conclusions and imagine the dead body and its actual aspect. Relying on the reader's imagination for such a macabre image could be considered to form part of the finest of the three levels, terror. "I ran ten yards and there was his baseball cap and I ran twenty yards and there was one of his Star Wars sneakers" (*Pet* 321).

This death is the originator of the insanity of Louis Creed, who, after attributing the responsibility for the death of his son to himself, added to the previous knowledge of a burying ground with the power of resurrection, degenerated into a state of madness.

"Madness was all around him, softly fluttering as the wings of night-hunting owls with great golden eyes: he was heading into madness." (*Pet* 422). Indeed, Gage's death could be considered to be the beginning of the climax where all the main events of the story take place, and where King includes more elements that can be traced to inspire some sort of fear on the reader. Nonetheless, the most terrifying apparition of Louis' son occurs nearly at the end of the story, when he comes back to life as an evil entity, although the different portrayals of resurrection and the influence of the cemeteries will be analysed in the following sections.

2.2 The role of cemeteries in the novel

Cemeteries play a crucial role in the plot of the story and in the creation of a frightening atmosphere; however, there is a difference in the role of each of the three cemeteries that appear in the novel: the Pleasantview cemetery in Bangor, the Pet Sematary, and the Micmac burying ground. The former is the least relevant one in terms of the plot, as it is the place where Gage is buried after his death, therefore, where Louis has to enter in order to recover his little boy's corpse; but, unlike the other two cemeteries, there is no further narrative about this cemetery to increase its mystique or make it more frightening than a regular cemetery. In this scene, King focuses on a deep description of the landscape, including tombstones, shadows and noises in order to create a sensation of suspense, a feeling of a danger that could emerge from the shadows at any time; the fear to the unknown is very present in this scene and it is profoundly transmitted into the reader. "The street was silent again except for the constant beat of the wind, rustling the trees and tumbling his sweaty hair over his forehead." (*Pet* 457). Furthermore, the first-person narration of Louis Creed gives the reader access to his own thoughts and feelings during the exhumation of Gage's corpse, which makes the reader put in Louis' shoes and experience his own tension and the madness that leads him to commit such an act.

On the other hand, there is the Pet Sematary, the cemetery that gives name to the novel. This cemetery is located in the woods behind the house of the Creeds, and is only accessible through an earth path. This cemetery was created by the earlier generations of children that lived in Ludlow, who carried their dead pets and buried them there all together; as the time passed, there were more local children that buried their pets there and it ended becoming something like a tradition. But there is something peculiar about this cemetery, all the handmade tombstones were located in a very specific pattern, they formed a perfect spiral. Moreover, a pile of fallen trees marks the limit of the cemetery,

although on the other side of the pile, the path continues into the woods. Louis compares the fallen trees to the skeleton of a dead monster, like if something supernatural had happened there. "A dragon's bones, left here in a giant cairn" (*Pet* 47). The close relationship between small children and death results disturbing, it is as if they organized to keep this cemetery clean and ordered, as if it was a ritual; such organization among kids during a long period of time could make the reader wonder what really happens with death in this village and why their relationship with it has been so close for such a long time. "Kids going up there and tending the graves, keeping the path . . . fucking morbid is what it is." (*Pet* 57). The combination of the elements of the landscape, the strange pattern in which the handmade tombstones are aligned, and the reaction of some of the characters to this environment, create unwillingness and uncertainty; even though it may seem an innocent practice performed by the local children, it feels as if it was something wrong with that place.

The "Micmac burying ground" is the last cemetery to be mentioned in this paper and, despite not being the one that names the novel, it is the most relevant one in terms of effect on the plot. This cemetery is located following the path blocked by the pile of dead trees, becoming a contiguous part of the Pet Sematary, for which it is necessary to walk above the pile to cross to the other side. This pile could be considered to act as a barrier, as an advertisement of what is coming if you go further into the woods; the people who want to arrive to the Micmac cemetery will have to cross the barrier of the dead and enter a liminal space where there is no distinction between death and life. "For a moment Louis saw the Pet Sematary as a kind of advertisement" (*Pet* 389). The entrance to this new world leads to the appearance of several supernatural elements, as if those creatures that cannot live in the world of the alive lived in this place; there are different allusions to voices, lights, or sounds, including the presence of the Indian spirit called the "Wendigo". "Then a shrill, maniacal laugh came out of the darkness, rising and falling in hysterical cycles, loud, piercing, chilling." (*Pet* 170).

In order to understand the importance of this cemetery and the spirits behind it, it is necessary to understand its background, not only in the novel, but also the exoticism and alienation related to the Indigenous culture in the United States and its effect on American literature. The reason for the multiple apparitions of Indian related elements such as religious traditions, burial grounds, or dead spirits, relies on the "battle for spiritual as well as territorial control over American soil" (Porter 45). There has been a

conflict between the non-native and the native culture, which has been depicted in different ways depending on the side from which they looked; seen in the first American settlers, who already demonized Indian peoples, "Mary Rowlandson, characterized Indigenous peoples as godless, crazed demons" (Porter 50), and saw their cultures and religions as something dangerous and fearful. Hence, the fear not only during the first settlements, but also in posterior times, evolved into an exotification of the Indian customs, and the "Fear of Indian vengeance and a dread of the revivification of the legions of Indian dead remains a central trope within the stories America tells itself" (Porter 52). As a result of this fear to the Indigenous traditions, an obsession with Indian burial-grounds emerged, which can be seen in several works of American horror literature, and in various of Stephen King's novels (Porter 52); and, therefore, fomented the use and appropriation of Indian spirits as a source of terror in the genre, as seen with the "Wendigo" in *Pet Sematary*. "We are in an era in which appropriation has become the dominant cultural tendency informing all relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the Americas" (Kulchyski 615).

The atmosphere and mysticism created around this cemetery already advise the reader that something is going to happen there. King provides small pieces of information that both Louis and the reader have to decode in order to understand the meaning of that place; and, most importantly, imagine the final outcome. Moreover, apart from the actual purpose of the cemetery, resurrection, there are much more hidden elements attached to it, as King builds a path between the alive and the dead, the path between the Pet Sematary and the Micmac burial-ground. This path could be compared to one of the first travels to the Underworld seen in literature, Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus meets the dead in the Hades after following his own path to it (Porter 46); the same way as Louis will meet the reborn after facing the Indian spirits in his way to the burial-ground. Together with this use of Indian spirits as a terrifying element, there is also an instance of appropriation of a burial procedure in the novel, as after burying their dead in the Micmac cemetery it is necessary to follow an Indian tradition, building a mound of stones as a landmark, a cairn. Through all these descriptions of the landscape, the woods, and the burial process, King is able to create an atmosphere of psychological terror, it is not something physical that creates the unwillingness, but the mere imagination of the sensations the character's may be feeling together with the creepy stories behind the cemetery.

Through the portrayal of the three different cemeteries, King inspires a deep psychological terror; as the mere descriptions of the environment in the scenes he stages unsettle the reader and contribute to the first level of his scale. Besides, the apparition of ghosts and spirits in the way to the Micmac cemetery could be considered to form part of the second level, horror, as they also rely on a visual element for the same goal.

2.3 Resurrection and its effect on the characters

Resurrection is very closely related to the two major themes that have been commented until now, death and cemeteries, as these two elements were crucial for all the resurrected beings to be able to come back to life. The unknown powers of the Micmac burying ground bring back to life those who are buried there, however, they are no longer the same; hence, all the cases of resurrection in the novel show that after the living beings die, they come back to life somehow different. "They had all come back changed, and the change had been noticeable in all cases" (*Pet* 393).

Within the cases of resurrection in the novel, two different attitudes can be distinguished; some of the reborn beings return as evil, mean, and dangerous creatures, while others return different, but not necessarily bad. "I'm telling you, Louis, because you've got a different kind of pet now. Not necessarily a dangerous one, but . . . different." (*Pet* 212). Both Church and Spot, Jud's childhood dog, came back to life as different animals, they no longer acted like they used to, their nature had changed "what about the way he is? Muddled . . . that's the best word of all" (*Pet* 393). They just did not seem normal animals anymore "Most of them just seem . . . a little stupid . . . a little slow . . . a little . . ." "A little dead?" (*Pet* 346); yet, both Louis and Jud were able to live with them without further problem than a feeling of loathing towards them. These first examples of resurrection foster the reader's disgust rather than fear; they are not a threat, unlike the next reborn beings, but something that anyone would like to live in contact with.

Besides, there are three different cases in the novel in which, after their contact with the world of the dead, became mean and dangerous creatures, they became monsters. The first case that is mentioned in the novel is what Jud called an exception, the only animal he knew of that had returned being dangerous, Old Zack McGovern's prize bull, Hanratty. "That bull turned mean, really mean. But he's the only animal I ever heard of that did." (*Pet* 346). Moreover, the other two cases of reborn beings that became evil were not animals, but human beings. Jud narrates the death and resurrection of Timmy

Baterman, a young Ludlow teenager who died during the Second World War and returned home inside a coffin. After his father buried him up in the woods, his body moved again, yet, he could not be considered to be alive again. "Timmy Baterman was like that, Louis, like a zombie in a movie" (*Pet* 361). His movements were not the ones of a living person, he even walked bad, "It was like watching a crab walk" (*Pet* 367); his contact with death had changed him, and "he knew things" (*Pet* 368), he knew everyone's deepest secrets, as if someone had given him some kind of power. King relies both on the reader's imagination and on a physical contact with this "zombie" for his transmission of fear and disgust, he combines horror and terror to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Timmy could be considered to be an advertisement for Louis: look at what Gage can transform into if you do what you are thinking about; however, it did not work, he brought Gage back to life and he created a monster that would change his whole life.

Gage's resurrection constitutes the climax of the story, the scene when the reader knows that something is going to happen, but does not know neither what, nor when. It is this uncertainty again what King plays with, "the horrifying reality of the unseen and unremitting threat can never be defeated or even truly known" (Burger 92). He stages a scene that he has repeated in more than one of his works; the aggressor that waits patiently for the scared victim to be in the perfect position to be attacked, with Gage in *Pet Sematary* and Jack Torrance in *The Shinning* (1977) playing this same role. "Gage?" Jud gained his feet at last. From one corner of his eye he saw the roll of cigarette ash in the Jim Beam ashtray. "Gage, is that y—" (*Pet* 523). Gage ends up killing both Jud and his own mother, with no hesitation, neither regret; he is no longer a child, he seems to be possessed and, definitely, by something evil. King's combination of terror, horror and revulsive elements in a single scene aim to inspire all the possible types of terror on the readers: Gage's pale, stinky body wearing the suit with which he was buried, his knowledge of Jud's deepest secrets and his threatening attitude; these all are elements that evoke fear and panic, this is the most important scene of the novel, he wants everyone who is reading the book to be terrorized.

King gives an end to a story about death, magic, and resurrection with the staging of several killings and the appearance of different supernatural phenomena: including both the Lovecraftian "vast and monstrously incomprehensible threat" (Burger 90) and the developing of the prototypical Poe madman with the psychological degeneration of Louis Creed. "Poe, who knew a thing or two about both madness" (Gruesser, 86), already

depicted this same degeneration in *The Fall of the House of Usher* "he is merely chronicling Roderick's precipitous descent into madness" (Gruesser, 80), which may have been one of the models for King's creation of the character of Louis Creed. He combines his own style with some of the most characteristic elements of classical authors to achieve his ultimate goal, create a horrific story that would inspire terror on the readers.

2.4 The God of the dead things left in the ground

The last element to be commented in this analysis is the influence of some strange force that alters the behaviour of the characters and makes things happen; it seems that there is something that forces some of the characters to do what they do, it is inevitable, they are not able to elude it. From the moment in which Jud showed the powers of the cemetery to Louis on, this force seemed to have an effect on some characters; they were influenced, even controlled, "But was he really controlling his own actions? Why couldn't he summon up Gage's face, and why was he going against everyone's warning" (*Pet* 458). Perhaps it could be a mere attraction to the unknown "They love the unknown the way a mapmaker loves unexplored territory" (Cisco 205), but even the characters show a certain sensation of control over them "It was as if there was a magnet somewhere out in those woods and he could feel it pulling at something in his brain." (*Pet* 565).

Louis calls it the "God of the dead things left in the ground" (*Pet* 472), but there is no information about its precedence neither its existence; however, Jud feels its influence and is convinced it comes from somewhere in the woods, "How far does its influence extend?" (*Pet* 350). He blames himself for the death of Gage, for he thinks he awoke the power of the cemetery, and this power exerted an influence on their lives that caused the Gage's death. In the final instances of the novel, there are various references to this force and its power over different characters; both Jud "But he knew better; in his heart, he knew better. It wasn't just him. He hadn't simply fallen asleep on watch; he had been put to sleep." (*Pet* 521) and Rachel "Something is trying to keep me away from him." (*Pet* 505) acknowledge that something had controlled them, creating the perfect scenario for Gage's resurrection to happen without any setback. Whether this power over the characters can be attributed to the "Wendigo", God, the Devil, or some other unknown spirit they find no answer.

"This idea of the forest Devil as a dark alternative to the Christian God is seen in several horror texts" (Parker 286) King relies on this creature, an invisible force coming

from the woods, to subject the characters to temptation and make them commit unthinkable acts, "From shared Native American mythologies about such forest monsters as the Wendigo, to the many stories about the arboreal natives and their mysterious ways, to stories of those seduced in the woods by the Devil himself." (Parker 279). Through the multiple mentions to this "force", without any further explanation, King plays with the reader's unknowledge; there is no information of what is really happening there, and this is what King uses to evoke his psychological dread. He tries the reader to come to his own conclusions, to imagine this devil in his mind, he wants to disturb the reader's mind with an invisible element, just fostering imagination; this manipulation of the reader's imagination is Stephen King's actual definition of terror.

3. Conclusion

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that *Pet Sematary* is the dreadful combination of its author's personal, unthinkable fears and his own writing style, which was heavily influenced by previous canonical authors of the Gothic genre. As aforementioned, his own fears constitute the base of the story and provided him the idea that would later be developed into this novel. Moreover, he relies on the three levels of terror he differentiates in *Danse Macabre* to stage the story in the most frightening and horrific mode; he combines revulsive scenes, where he makes macabre descriptions of corpses, with physical elements such as ghosts, sounds or lights, and the creation of a dark and sombre atmosphere to evoke rejection and unsettlement. The coalescence of the three during the whole novel, together with the combinations between them through the scenes, are some of the main identifiers of King's personal writing style.

As for the influence of previous horror fiction writers, some features corresponding to their style could be found in the novel. The portrayal of Louis as a madman could be attributed to the prototypical character depicted by Poe; with the character's psychological status degenerating through the novel, until, in the final instances, Louis becomes completely mad and is no longer responsible for his acts. In addition, the use of the landscape and the woods as something both powerful and threatening could be traced to the first Gothic writers, such as Ann Radcliffe, with their descriptions of the overwhelming and horrific landscapes of the Old Europe. Finally, there is one feature in the novel that could be attributed to H.P Lovecraft, which is the use of the unknowledge as an irrefutable source of fear; with King providing small pieces of information to lead the reader to his own conclusions, relying on the power of

imagination. For all this, *Pet Sematary* could be considered a modern horror masterpiece for its combination of fear-transmitting resources and the overwhelming impact it has on the reader; however, further research could be conducted as to analyse more in depth King's writing style and his endless means to evoke dread and unwillingness.

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