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Thanatography in Stephen King's short stories: the triumph of the fantastic genre

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Mémoire de Master 1 Recherche - Études du Monde Anglophone:

« Thanatography in Stephen King's Short Stories: The Triumph of the Fantastic Genre »

A literary study of a corpus of five short fictions : « Willa », « You Know They Got a Hell of a Band », « That Feeling You Can Only Say What It Is In French », « The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates » and « Afterlife ».

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:	5
I) THANATOGRAPHIC WRITING	9
A) THANATOGRAPHY	9
1) <i>Modes and Voices of the Narrative Entity</i>	10
2) <i>The Trope of Prosopopeia</i>	11
B) THE JOURNEY OF THE DEAD	11
1) <i>A New Kind of Ghost Fiction</i>	11
2) <i>Passing on to the Afterlife</i>	14
3) <i>Confronting Death</i>	15
C) A BRUTALIZING RITE OF PASSAGE.....	17
1) <i>The Character's Uncertainty and Denial</i>	17
2) <i>The Loss of Memory</i>	18
3) <i>The Loss of Language Skills</i>	19
4) <i>The Loss of Vision</i>	20
II) A LIMINAL PLACE IN SPACE AND TIME	21
A) THE AFTERLIFE SETTING: SITTING IN LIMBO.....	22
1) <i>A Place that Looks Like Hell</i>	22
2) <i>A Heterotopic Liminal Space</i>	24
B) VISUAL AND TEMPORAL DISCREPANCIES: A SENSORY DEFAMILIARIZATION	26
1) <i>The Familiarization with a Foreign Environment: Confusion</i>	26
2) <i>The Trope of Defamiliarization</i>	28
3) <i>The Unsettling Time Discrepancies</i>	31
III) THE SUPERNATURAL'S CLASH WITH THE DOGMAS OF GOD	34
A) THE FANTASTIC'S RULE OVER RATIONAL THINKING.....	34
1) <i>The Hesitation of the Characters</i>	35
2) <i>The Affirmation of the Fantastic</i>	36
B) THE UNKNOWN: THE TROPE OF TERROR	36
1) <i>The Fear of the Unknown</i>	36
2) <i>The Omnipresence of Death</i>	40
C) KING'S FANTASTIC IMAGINARY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE RELIGIOUS WORLD VIEW.....	43

1) <i>Religion Anchored in American Society</i>	43
2) <i>Religion as an Ominous Instance</i>	44
3) <i>Ritual Reenactment: The Trope of the Afterlife</i>	46
4) <i>Alternative Representations of the Afterlife</i>	48
CONCLUSION:	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	54

“To die, to sleep -
To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub,
For in this sleep of death what dreams may come...”
— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*¹

“Soon you will be where your own eyes will see the
source and cause and give you their own answer to the
mystery.”
— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*²

¹ Shakespeare, William and Harold Jenkins. *Hamlet*. London: Methuen, 1982.

² Dante, Alighieri, C. H Sisson, and David H Higgins. *The Divine Comedy*, Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1993.

INTRODUCTION:

Roland Barthes believed in the mortality of each second as it passed and of each word as it was pronounced, for a lover's speech and the time spent with them, to him, were only alive in their immediate occurrence:

La voix de l'être aimé je ne la connais jamais que morte, remémorée, rappelée à l'intérieur de ma tête, bien au-delà de l'oreille; voix ténue et cependant monumentale, puisqu'elle est de ces objets qui n'ont d'existence qu'une fois disparus.³

For Barthes, speech can only exist through its death and the memory of its passing left behind as it dies. He establishes a parallel between the sound of words being pronounced and the essence of a person, who, in the same manner, cannot exist in life without 'dying'⁴ first. The symbolic linguistic reflection on the inflection of a voice translates Barthes' attempt at deciphering mankind's own ineluctable mortality.

Everlastingly, in philosophy as well as in literature, the inevitable death of each individual that constitutes the whole of humanity has been the most centric and recurring of topics. Besides the inevitability of death, what has fascinated thinkers and writers are the factors of death that cannot be explained, one could say the 'mysteries' that surround this final act in life. These individuals set their interest in the thought that perhaps dying is not as final as it may appear, and through this contemplation, the notion of the afterlife emerged. The trope of the afterlife has been present in literature and folklore since the birth of writing. Mythological texts and legends such as the ones provided by the Ancient Greek societies and later by Judaism (in the form of the Biblical scriptures) have told tales of men exploring the possibilities of life after death.

Today, Stephen King is one of the most prolific and famous American authors that continuously tackles the issues of death through fictional literature. His genres of predilection, fantasy and horror, have allowed him to expand on the mysteries that surround death with imaginative and innovative themes and techniques, detaching himself from the former melancholic reflections on man's mortality and asserting his works as unpretentious literary entertainment for the masses. In this sense, King's constant search for new topics and narrative plots have led him to explore this

³ Barthes, Roland. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977.

⁴ Here, the act of 'dying' can be understood, according to Barthes' philosophy, as the fact that a human being can exist only through another mind's recollection, through the emotional and neurological construction one makes of another person that is no longer present or alive.

existentialist enigma of life after death. Many critics have overlooked this topic and have studied Stephen King through his most famous novels and their film adaptations such as *Carrie*, *It*, *The Shinning* and *Cujo*, only to cite a few. Most of the remaining studies have focused on King's treatment of certain horror themes such as pyrokinesics, mental illness and his recycling of well-known horror tropes such the vampire or the haunting ghost. However, little attention has been paid to his collection of short stories despite the fact that it represents a great proportion of his whole literary corpus. Nevertheless, some short fictions have stood out among others, one could think of "Children of the Corn" from 1977 and "1408" from 1999. In the case of these two short stories, the attention that has been given to the texts is also related to cinema, for both have been adapted to the big screen in 1984 and 2007 respectively, highlighting once again the recurring treatment of this author's work. Hence, the interest of the present study is firstly that very little to none academic studies could be found about the trope of the afterlife in Stephen King's bibliography, presenting a void in academia that we will shortly attempt to fill. Secondly, we have selected a corpus of short fictions in order to broaden the critical and academic dialogue on Stephen King by focusing on the author's literary format that is most neglected until this day and generally understated in contemporary society that prefers longer formats in literature or even their subsequent visual adaptation.

The corpus at hand has been chosen from Stephen King's entire short stories collection. Out of over one hundred short stories, five of them have been selected as representatives of one common theme: the trope of afterlife. The first one of these short stories, "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" was taken from the 1991 collection *Nightmares And Dreamscapes*. The second comes from the 2002 collection *Everything's Eventual* and is called "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French". The following two "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates" and "Willa" were published in the 2008 collection *Just After Sunset*. The fifth and final short story for this corpus is "Afterlife" and was published in King's latest short fiction collection *The Bazaar Of Bad Dreams* in 2015.

The dominating literary trope of the afterlife that binds these five short fictions together calls for several different perspectives of analysis. In this corpus, the notion of the afterlife primarily raises questions concerning the setting. How does Stephen King represent the environment of the afterlife in these short fictions? In this sense, the contemporary societal constructions of life after death that prevail in American

society will be contrasted with the different settings King provides for his stories. This American collective imaginary related to the life of the deceased is closely linked with the religious beliefs that predominate in the United States. Indeed, the Christian notions of heaven, hell and even purgatory highly influence the five short stories under study, and even more so, the narratives are influenced by the moral values attached to each of these notions. However, Stephen King detaches his fiction from the imaginary of the Christian dogmas to offer the reader an innovative treatment of the scenery in which the characters evolve. Michel Foucault's theories on heterotopia will serve the description of the narrative techniques at work in Stephen King's construction of the afterlife setting.

Quant aux hétérotopies proprement dites, comment pourrait-on les décrire, quel sens ont-elles? On pourrait supposer, je ne dis pas une science parce que c'est un mot qui est trop galvaudé maintenant, mais une sorte de description systématique qui aurait pour objet, dans une société donnée, l'étude, l'analyse, la description, la "lecture", comme on aime à dire maintenant, de ces espaces différents, ces autres lieux, une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l'espace où nous vivons; cette description pourrait s'appeler l'hétérotopologie.⁵

The heterotopic space points to the distances established between what is known and recognizable and what is "different", thus it translates the liminal nature of the specific narrative genre we are dealing with in this corpus. In this sense, a new perspective of analysis appears and calls for the study of the protagonists and the way they are presented and given a narrative voice. Firstly, we will see how narrative polyphony is accomplished by the use of prosopopeia (a central trope to our study for a great amount of the characters are deceased) that allows for the silence of the dead to be broken. The treatment of the narrative voice given to these characters will be explained through the notion of 'thanatography'⁶. Originally posited by Jacques Derrida, the notion was used to describe an author's personal morbid imagination that lead to a contemplation of death. Nowadays, the term 'thanatography' has evolved and it is used to describe the literary genre in which the diegetic narration takes place from the afterlife. Secondly, to understand better the genre, we will attempt to show

⁵ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49. The text was originally presented at the French "Conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales", and it was based on a lecture given by Foucault in Tunisia on March 1967. The text was never revised and corrected by the author and so Michel Foucault only allowed its publication in 1984.

⁶ The notion originally appeared in Derrida's *Otobiographies* (see following footnote), in which he studied Nietzsche and other writers' treatment of death in their autobiographies.

how the characters are depicted in these five thanatographies. For this, Rachel Falconer's notion of the 'descent narrative'⁷ will come to use in order to describe the journey that the deceased protagonists undertake. Her definition of what constitutes hell in contemporary Western culture and literature will serve our description of the hardship the characters go through.

Thus, several questions are to be addressed in regards to the afterlife and the individuals that take action in it, we will see how the environment influences the characters in the five short stories. For this, an in-depth analysis of the setting will be necessary to understand the literary techniques put to use, as well as the themes put forward. How are these characters presented and in what manner does their deceased state affect the narrative? We will also attempt to bring about a general reflection on the literary genres at play in this corpus: What does the thanatographical genre imply in the context of the afterlife. Moreover, what do these short 'narratives-from-beyond' say about the fantastic genre? We will also try to highlight the means by which this corpus presents an innovative treatment of the topics and the literary tropes at work. In short, how does the thanatographic genre bring about a liminal afterlife setting in which the fantastic genre challenges the preconceived notions of the afterlife?

Following this line, we will dedicate a first part of the study to prosopopeia and the internal focalization in the five short stories that allows the thanatographic writing to present an innovative treatment of the deceased characters in this corpus that suffer throughout their journey in the afterlife. A second part will then reveal how the fractured representation of the protagonists mirrors the heterotopic afterlife settings they are suffering from due to the literary technique of de-familiarization and the liminal nature of the environment. Finally, this borderline afterlife space will bring about frightening religious notions of life after death such as hell and damnation, only to have them debunked by the triumph of the fantastic genre as an alternative to the afterlife experience Christianity imposes on modern society.

* * *

⁷ Falconer, Rachel. *Hell In Contemporary Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

I) THANATOGRAPHIC WRITING

In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself
within a dark woods where the straight way was lost.
— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

A) THANATOGRAPHY

This first part of the analysis of the corpus will deal with the notion of thanatography previously discussed in the introduction. Coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the term ‘auto-thanatography’⁸ was originally used to describe the literary phenomenon in which when dealing with an autobiography, one is automatically led to deal with the subsequent treatment of death (thanatos) as the counterpart of the narrative of life. Derrida believed that in each literary account of a writers’ own life, a reflection on death could also be found. In this sense, the notion of ‘auto-thanatography’ has often been paraphrased as “the writing of one’s own death”⁹ and interpreted as the writers’ melancholy drives.¹⁰

Derrida’s notion of auto-thanatography has evolved since it was introduced and today it has taken on a far more literal definition. Indeed, contemporary auto-thanatographies are actual tales from the afterlife, told by the dead themselves. Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*, a novel that tells the story of a dead teenage girl looking down at the world of the living as her murder is solved, stands as one of the most memorable instances of the genre. The corpus at hand has the discriminating characteristic of depicting its characters in the afterlife, a place radically opposed to the world of the living, and thus carries out Derrida’s literary reflection on the writing of death. The characters in the corpus are then, for the most part, deceased, and the reader is invited on a journey through the afterlife. However, this primary analysis will focus on the construction of the thanatographic narrative devices at work in the corpus, rather than on the issues of the afterlife as a constructed space.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Otobiographies: L’enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre*. Paris: Galilée, 1984.

⁹ Deanda, Elena. “On Joy, Death, And Writing: From Autobiography To Autothanatography In Clarice Lispector’s Works”. *Working Papers in Romance Languages* Vol. 1. No. 1 (2006): n. pag. Web. 4 Sept. 2015.

¹⁰ Bennett, Alice. “Unquiet spirits: death writing in contemporary fiction”. *Textual Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2009) : 463-479.

1) Modes and Voices of the Narrative Entity

It is important to initially state that all five short stories that constitute this corpus present the same narrative characteristics that can be described using Gérard Genette's terminology¹¹, as an extra-hetero-diegetic narration, i.e., third person narratives in which the narrator is not a character in the diegesis. However, the distancing effect created by the narrative voice is largely balanced out by the use of internal focalization from the perspective of various deceased protagonists. This mode of focalization allows the reader to have a direct insight into the main characters' feelings and train of thought post mortem. In "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", for example, the main character's stream of consciousness is delivered to the reader through series of recollections of the past and reactions to the environment. Another short story, "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band", even narrates the protagonist's dream visions, embedding different layers of internal insight. Internal focalization creates an effect of literary identification, with which the readers of the stories find themselves identifying with the deceased protagonists through the insightful account of their emotions and actions. In each of the stories internal focalization is associated with one character in particular in order to enhance the process of identification.

Furthermore, to support the internal focalisation's rendering of the different characters' thought processes, yet another narrative device is summoned. The narrative voice makes use of free indirect speech to limit the distance established between the characters and the reader. In "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French" the italics used in the text point to the words that Carol hears in her head and that she herself is unable to make sense of: "*Floyd, what's that over there? Oh shit.* The man's voice speaking these words was vaguely familiar, but the words themselves were just a disconnected snip of dialogue, the kind of thing you heard when you were channel surfing with the remote." (402, 416) The reader receives this piece of dialogue in the same manner it reaches Carol; without any further information on the context of enunciation. Free indirect speech is a way for the narrator to insert snips of dialogue into the narration, thus blurring the distinction between two for the reader. The use of internal focalization on the afterlife characters and free indirect speech to transmit their thoughts establishes a link

¹¹ Genette, Gérard. *Figures III*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972.

between the protagonists and the reader, facilitating the readers' interest in the deceased character.

2) The Trope of Prosopopeia

Bearing in mind the thanatographic nature of the corpus under study, it is mandatory to pay special attention to the main literary figures of speech in the texts. Here again, we turn to characterization and the choice of putting in action deceased characters. This characteristic of the corpus makes of prosopopeia the dominating figure of speech. Prosopopeia is defined firstly as “a figure of speech in which an abstract thing is personified” and furthermore as the “figure of speech in which an imagined, absent, or dead person or thing is represented as speaking.”¹² This figure of the-voice-from-beyond is present in all five short stories under study and manifests itself in over twenty different characters. Each short story displays at least two dead characters speaking from the afterlife, contributing to the polyphonic mode of thanatographic story-telling. From a narrative point of view, the corpus is not true to the strict contemporary definition of auto-thanatography due to the lack of a homodiegetic narrator. However, these short stories make up for this lack of a first-person narrative with the internal focalization on deceased characters and an omniscient narrator. This allows us to treat these five stories as the very character-driven thanatographic literary corpus that it is. The writing of death is first and foremost constructed through speech; with the figure of prosopopeia and the account of the main characters' speech and thoughts. Let's turn to the manner in which the narrative renders the experience of life after death.

B) THE JOURNEY OF THE DEAD

1) A New Kind of Ghost Fiction

The importance of the narration of the experience of death is the reason why we begin with a study of characterization and the narrative strategy that lies behind it. All five short stories could be characterized as examples of ghost fiction, but the genre is revisited and presented to the reader from a different perspective. Originally, ghost fiction was produced by gothic writers, such as Walpole with *The Castle of Otranto*

¹² "Prosopopoeia - Definition Of Prosopopoeia In English From The Oxford Dictionary". *Oxforddictionaries.com*. N.p., 2016. Web. 12 Feb. 2016.

and Anne Radcliffe with *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in narratives focused on the effect that ghosts would have on the world of the living. Indeed, the trope at that time was that of haunted spaces such as castles and forests discovered and explored by living characters. The actual ghosts were “non-characters”¹³ that had no real acting part and almost never spoke. Later, a shift in literature was brought by Edgar Allan Poe; his fascination with death and its rituals made the gothic genre take a turn towards a new level of terror. This topic is best exposed in Poe’s well-known short fiction, for example with tales of deceased wives haunting their husbands such as “Ligeia”. This kind of gothic characterization of ghosts would give little importance to prosopopeia, contrary to King’s tales of the dead in which we find that the ‘ghosts’ not only speak, but are in fact the protagonists of the stories. “Willa”, for example, tells the story of ghosts that roam the world of the living after their death by train accident. In this story, what is central to the plot is the ghost’s experience of death, not their interaction with the living. This is made clear to the reader by the internal focalization of the narrative voice and the prosopopeic voice-from-beyond. Indeed, “Willa” can be described as a contemporary version of ghost fiction, one that focuses on the experience of afterlife for the dead characters, not for the ones that are alive. The fact that David and Willa, the deceased protagonists, go about in the world of the living is trivialized in the plot: “He thought they [the ghosts]¹⁴ would stay here now, and that from time to time people would see them. 26 might even get a reputation for being haunted, but probably not; people didn’t think about ghosts much while they were drinking, unless they were drinking alone” (38). King sets the focus of the five stories on the deceased characters and more importantly on the way they go about in the new environment they inhabit. We can see how the reader’s identification with the deceased characters is accentuated by this trivialization of the interaction between the world of the living and the afterlife.

Another literary device put to use to underline the importance of the deceased characters in thanatography is the “psychological” descriptions that King makes of these. If we consider the characters of the corpus overall, it could be said that they are made to appear unwell both mentally and physically. Their suffering is described throughout the stories in an effort to create an emotional response in the reading

¹³ The term “non-character” is borrowed from Alice Bennett’s article “Unquiet spirits : death writing in contemporary fiction”. She used it to describe the same type of haunting ghost characters we are analyzing.

¹⁴ Added from the original text for comprehension purposes.

audience. For example, the bureaucrat from the short story “Afterlife” is described in the following terms: “Harris looks tired. Harris looks bored” (197). Similarly, the secondary characters in “Willa” are presented as being somewhat bored: “people either strolled aimlessly or simply sat on benches under the fluorescent lights. The shoulders of the ones who sat had that special slump you saw only in places like this, where people waited for whatever had gone wrong to be made right” (8). We can see that in two very different settings, the characters seem to experience the same torment of waiting for something that never comes and not having any occupations to entertain themselves while they do so. Furthermore, some of the characters in the corpus experience physical discomfort such as hunger and thirst in the afterlife, as is the case of James in “Afterlife” who says: “Mostly what I’d like is some water. I’d kill for a cold bottle of Dasani.” (102) Each of the characters in this corpus suffers in some way whether from physical or “psychological” ailments, encouraging to reader to respond to suffering as well. There is a reversal in the mode of writing ghost fiction as the non-character haunting-ghost is replaced in King’s fiction by the “haunted ghost” protagonist that pains to overcome the struggles of the afterlife.

In order to reinforce the reader’s immersion in the account of the afterlife experience, these five tales of the dead appear to be told in real time only a few instants after the characters have died. The tales begin shortly after the characters have died if not a little before the time of death such as in the case of “Afterlife”. The afterlife stories begin in medias res, immersing the reader in a story already in motion. “You Know They Got a Hell Of a Band” is particular in the sense that the story starts out with a couple of living characters, Mary and Clark, that come across a mysterious town called Rock and Roll Heaven in which the inhabitants are all dead American celebrities and musicians of the 1960s. By the end of the story, Mary and Clark come to the realization that they will never leave Rock and Roll Heaven, and that it very well might be hell. The story’s excipit hints at the fact that the initial characters are somehow dead by association with the town, without having really died in the traditional fashion: “when she took Clark’s hand it was like taking the hand of a corpse” (417). Other deceased characters of the corpus could be described as fairly classical, such as those present in “Willa”, in the sense that they are dead from the beginning of the story until the end. Three out of five of the stories that constitute this corpus do not explicitly indicate, in the incipit, that the characters are deceased.

The sense of immediacy conveyed by the fact that the narrative is set so close to the time of death is enhanced by the use of the present tense in “Afterlife” and “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”. The first sentence of the latter reads: “She’s fresh out of the shower when the phone begins to ring, but although the house is still full of relatives – she can hear them downstairs, it seems they will never go away, it seems she never had so many – no one picks up” (99). On the one hand, the use of this tense creates a strong narrative immersion for the reader, and on the other hand it creates a link between the characters and the readers due to the fact that they are put on the same ground and have the same knowledge of what is happening. Thus, the corpus presents a series of deceased protagonists that are atypical; on the one hand due to their central role in the plot and, on the other, due to the extensive psychological and emotional profile Stephen King allows them to have which creates an identifiable account of the afterlife for the readers. The narrative unfolds in what seems to be real time, allowing the audience to synchronize, once again, their reactions to the plot with that of the characters.

2) Passing on to the Afterlife

These stories can be described as stories of passage, from the world of the living to the afterlife. “A half-moon rose between two peaks and sat there, casting a sickroom glow over this stretch of the highway and the open land on both sides of it” (10). As we can see from this landscape quotation from “Willa”, the subject matter at hand is the “stretch of highway” which appears to be central to the scenery. A binary structure emerges from the scene through the use of expressions such as “half moon rose between the two peaks” and “the open land on both sides of it”. These images depict symmetry in the landscape that highlights the central axis that is the “highway”. The overall plot of the corpus consists of characters passing on to the afterlife and what happens to them once they are dead. The journey of the dead as a narrative trope is conveyed throughout these stories by actual modes of transportation. In fact, all but one of the deaths occurred in a train, a car, or an airplane and all five narratives are shrouded with the lexical field of transportation and displacement. This metaphorization of the passage from life to death mirrors some of the modern clichés in popular culture that are attached to death such as the “train to heaven” or the “highway to hell”. The image of displacement is another element of narration that sets

the emphasis on characterization. The reader is led to follow the characters along their difficult post-mortem journey. Furthermore, we can also note that the characters are also lost in their travels. James from “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates” is in a place that reminds him of Grand Central station and where “there are doors going everywhere” (102), only he says to his wife: “I don’t know which door to use” (103). “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”’s very first sentence is “When Mary woke up, they were lost” (1). Later on in the story, being lost will eventually lead the couple to their death. During this journey from life to the afterlife, the characters have to face their condition in a post mortem state of confusion. These five short stories could be described as travel narratives, for most of the characters continue in death the journey they were on instants before they died. Thus, the reader is led to accompany the protagonists through this journey, as well as to contemplate along with them the frightening topic of death and the question of what comes after it.

3) Confronting Death

As we have already established, the journey the characters are on is one filled with hardship and suffering. Due to the fact that these stories are told so soon after the passing of these disturbed characters, we get to see how they react and cope with their deaths. One could say they do so in a slow manner because, in most of the stories of the corpus, the certainty of death is delayed until the denouement, faithful to the tradition of short story telling. Indeed, one of the most used definitions of the short story was given given by Poe in 1846; he describes it as “a brief tale which can be told or read in one sitting”¹⁵. According to James Cooper Lawrence, this definition implies two discriminating criteria to a short story: brevity and “the necessary coherence which gives the effect of totality”. Suspense is said to be one of the writers’ many tools that allows that coherence and that effect necessary to engage the reader.¹⁶ This literary technique is used in “Willa”, “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band” and “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, and thus, it dominates the corpus. These stories present a building up of the narration towards a climactic denouement that acknowledges the reality of death. This kind of epiphany comes to the dead characters themselves (and

¹⁵ Poe, Edgar Allan. “Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews”, Library of America (1984) pp. 569-577.

¹⁶ Lawrence, James Cooper. “A Theory of the Short Story” *The North American Review*, Vol. 205, No. 735 (1917) pp. 274-286.

the readers as well) that throughout the stories are retained in a state of ignorance. However, it is not entirely the case of “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates,” where it is the recently widowed character that comes to accept her husband’s death.

In his study of the fantastic subgenre of horror and what he calls the paradox of horror¹⁷, Noël Carroll presented his view that the nature and appeal of the horror genre lies in the narrative structure. He believes that every horror story is constructed around the “complex discovery plot” scheme (or a variation of this structure) that consists of four parts: the onset of the plot, the discovery of the supernatural being or event, the confirmation of its existence and finally the confrontation between good and evil (humans and monsters). Carroll’s theory can be applied to the five short stories for, even if there are no horrific monsters in the corpus, the narrative structure is constructed so as to build up suspense and curiosity for the reader, until the denouement, which in these stories serves the purpose of the confirmation of life after death. Carroll goes as far as to assert that the anticipation of the denouement is the only valid reason as to why a person would subject oneself to being horrified.

In the same spirit as the “complex discovery plot” theory, another literary tool known as the cliffhanger is employed in this corpus. Designed to leave the reader wanting more information, the cliffhanger adds to the stories’ mystery before death is revealed and thus fulfills Poe’s requirements of coherence and effect. It is present mostly in “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French” where the narrative is constructed into a climax several times, and each time is left hanging as Carol suddenly wakes up from what appears to be a dream. After each one of these fractures in the story, the narration is brought back to the initial incipit scheme, on the one hand delaying the final revelation and on the other creating a feeling of curiosity and suspense in the reading audience. But if the realization is delayed in such manner, it is not just to appeal to the reader’s curiosity on a structural level. On a diegetic level, we see that the characters appear to have no other choice than to ignore their state, for the journey of death is presented as a brutalizing ritual of the senses that does not allow a clear understanding of the situation.

Characterization is put to the service of the plot for it is the characters’

¹⁷ Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy Of Horror, Or, Paradoxes Of The Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 99-158. Noel Carroll uses the expression “the paradox of horror” to refer to the question of why would people read horror fiction if being horrified is in itself an unpleasant experience.

difficult experience in the afterlife that dictates the narrative structure of the five short stories. The denouement of the plot is delayed until the very end of each story, thus prolonging the hardship both the characters and the readers have to endure.

C) A BRUTALIZING RITE OF PASSAGE

1) The Character's Uncertainty and Denial

Indeed, confusion reigns over the characters present in this corpus, making the afterlife experience difficult to accept as a reality. One example already considered is that of the widower Annie in “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, whose disbelief at her husband’s death leads her to hopeful speculation and even aggravation. In the beginning, “her first confused thought is that he must have missed the plane in London, even though he called her from Heathrow not long before it took off” (100), ignoring all the facts that make it impossible for her husband to still be alive. This denial later leads to frustration as she is confronted with reality and declares: “But I don’t understand!” (100) The main character in “Afterlife”, Bill Anderson, also seems to be uncertain concerning his state of being as we can see from the beginning of the narration after he has passed away: “He’s wearing the pajamas he died in (at least he assumes he died)” (190). The characters of the corpus experience disbelief with several different degrees of intensity: Bill for example is close to Annie in the sense that they are mostly confused, while other characters are much more oblivious and go as far as to deny their situation.

Denial is very present in both “Willa” and “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, where David keeps repeating, “We’re not lost” with “the voice of a man who still believes he is dreaming” (413). In “Willa”, it is the secondary characters that are the most in denial, some of them even turn to violence in a desperate attempt to silence those who speak out the truth: “She seemed about to say something more, but before she could, her mother suddenly slapped her across the face hard enough to expose her teeth in a momentary sneer and drive spit from the corner of her mouth” (34). The confusion that reigns over the characters creates doubt in the reader as well; are the characters really dead or will there be a turn of events? The reading contract could then appear to be broken by the ambivalence of the text and the uncertainty of the prosopopeic voices. However, as we said, characterization is in the service of plot in this corpus, and the suffering of the characters of these stories is an ominous indicator

for the readers of the thanatographic nature of the texts. Here we find the hesitation Tzvetan Todorov spoke of when describing the Fantastic genre.¹⁸ The characters, as well as the readers, are unsure of what can be considered a certainty and what is not.

2) The Loss of Memory

Along the same line as the discomfiting hesitation experienced due to what appears to be an account of afterlife, the characters are presented as having some intellectual and even physical disabilities that adds considerable difficulties to their understanding of the situation. The first of these disabilities is the inexplicable loss of memory experienced by several characters. Mary and Carol, from “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band” and “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, both experience the same kind of amnesia; these two women cannot seem to remember their dreams. Mary dreams about a jukebox that is filled with human organs and blood, and in her case this nightmare could have had a premonitory function and perhaps could have steered her and her husband away from Rock and Roll Heaven where they find a jukebox similar to the one that announces death in Mary’s dream. It is part of Stephen King’s narrative strategy to insert dream visions in the narrative so as to diffuse and prolong the hesitation concerning the outcome of the stories. In “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, the situation is similar for Carol that, as we have seen previously, experiences several ‘nightmarish visions’ that could have helped her understand what is happening. The first time Carol wakes up from what is described as “a nightmare” (412), she is asked about the contents of her dream and answers: “I don’t remember” (412). It is only the second time that she has almost exactly the same nightmare that she understands that she is not dreaming but is, in fact, dead. In both cases, the loss of memory serves the purpose of delaying the character’s realization of his/her state, thus maintaining the narration in an initial state of confusion.

On a slightly different note, we also encounter characters that forget linguistic elements of speech as a result of the loss of memory. It is particularly the case of Harris, the manager in “Afterlife”, who is unable to remember correctly the name of the protagonist, William Andrews and keeps calling him “Anderson”. More than just a symptom of the character’s trauma, Harris’s speech impediment poses the question

¹⁸ See page 31.

of the characters' general lack of communication skills. These characters could be considered as the mirror image of the reader, who also might struggle to read the ambivalent messages the texts send.

3) The Loss of Language Skills

Ever since Ferdinand de Saussure's teachings were posthumously published in 1916, the field of linguistics has embraced the dichotomy of speech and language. In his terms, this dichotomy can be further explained as the distinction between the acoustic image of a word, the "signifier", and the concept behind it called the "signified"¹⁹ Understanding the nature of these concepts and their arbitrary relationship comes naturally to any person whose physical and intellectual abilities to communicate have not been tampered with. It is not the case of the characters present in this corpus, since they seem to be lacking both of these human faculties. Different types of impaired communication can be found in the corpus, which correspond to lower and higher degrees of disability in the subjects and in the modes of enunciation. In "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates", Anne receives a telephone call from her husband who is in an afterlife setting, and she describes this communication as a "non-connection" (104). By saying this, the character points to the fact that however ordinary the conversation may appear, the deadly nature of it only accentuates the distances that separates the living from the dead, making it impossible to even speak of a connection whatsoever. Indeed, communication is hard to establish in the short stories at hand, for many of the subjects are struck dumb and speechless. In "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", in which the title itself hints at a linguistic obstacle of forgetting the word "déjà-vu", Carol "tried to scream. Tried to scream" (412) without ever being able to. In this respect we could also quote from "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates", where Annie is in the same situation as Carol: "For a moment she can't speak or even breathe" (99). In both instances, it is when the characters are confronted with the reality of death that they become mute. French philosopher Georges Gusdorf believed that speech was a human tool to interpret the world. He said: "Le monde s'offre à chacun de nous comme un ensemble de significations dont nous n'obtenons la révélation qu'au niveau de la

¹⁹ Saussure, Ferdinand de et al. *Cours De Linguistique Générale*. Paris: Payot, 1995.

parole. Le langage, c'est le réel."²⁰ If language is indeed reality, then the lack of language can be considered as the denial of the real world, or perhaps as the representation of a world too unreal to describe with words. When we transpose this notion to the characters of the corpus, we realize that their loss of language skills equates with the impossibility to grasp the situation they are in. As far as the reader is concerned, this impossibility to embrace reality becomes the essence of suspense and anticipation built in the narratives. We are dealing here with the issue of literary language through the topic of broken communication, as is the genre of thanatography through the figure of the voice of the dead; *prosopopeia*. It is indeed the figure of speech adequate to characterize the impossibility of the living to communicate with the dead. It is also necessary for such stories that wish to depict a vivid afterlife experience for the reader.

4) The Loss of Vision

Likewise, the reader's vision is subjected to the failing vision of the characters. The final impairment that the process of dying has imposed on these deceased travelers concerns their ability to see. The character's loss of vision implies two things; not being able to see what is around them and consequently, not knowing that they are dead. This characteristic of the corpus can be found in "Willa", for example, its first sentence being: "You don't see what's right in front of your eyes" (7), a sentence that Willa repeats to David three times in the story. A semantic field of sight is scattered throughout this narrative and it mostly concerns sight being impaired: "At first he couldn't read the two lines at the bottom at all; at first those two lines were just incomprehensible symbols, possibly because his mind, which wanted to believe none of this, could find no innocuous translation" (30). Here we clearly see how losing the physical capacity of vision is linked to the denial of one's death. Other short stories such as "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French" and "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" also present the same premise of delaying the climatic revelation scene by blinding the characters. It is the case of Clark, from "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band", who is the last to realize the hell he has arrived in despite his wife's warnings: "Mary kicked his ankle –hard—but Clark

²⁰ Gusdorf, Georges. *La Parole*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986. pp. 37-38.

didn't seem to notice. He was staring at the redhead²¹ again, and now his mouth was hung on a spring" (10). The characters' ability to reason through sight is here annihilated by the very ghost that threatens his life, leaving him no choice but to stay oblivious to danger. The character's loss of memory, speech and vision are examples of how characterization is used to serve the purpose of the plot, that is to say, the purpose of instilling in the reader the desire for the denouement. The impairment of the human capacity to reason through memory, speech and the senses enhances the initial state of confusion for the characters and subsequently for the readers. It eventually leads to a total loss of control over the situation: "she could do nothing" (418) as it is said about Carol in "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French".

These five thanatographic narratives are the stories of tormented and fragmented characters rationally experiencing what seems like irrational situations of life after death. Their senses have been impaired throughout this brutalizing journey to the afterlife in order to delay their understanding of reality and thus the reader's understanding of the plot. We will now take a closer look at the elements that are external to the semi-auto-thanatographical tales and their protagonists by focusing on the various settings of the narratives. What is it about the environment that allows such fractured narratives?

II) A LIMINAL PLACE IN SPACE AND TIME

Through me you go into a city of weeping;
through me you go into eternal pain; through
me you go amongst the lost people
— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

It is crucial to study the afterlife setting in which the characters take action in order to fully understand the state they are in. The setting and the characters are often interrelated in literature, for one influences the other, as it does in real life. In the corpus under study, Stephen King makes use of the trope of prosopopeia to explore different backdrops that could be appropriate for an evocation of the afterlife, and he

²¹ « the redhead » is actually the corpse of Janis Joplin, animated by the town of Rock and Roll Heaven, Mary has already identified her and is seeking to get away from that place.

is supported by the very format of his narratives. It is said that the short story allows little character development and privileges the elements of setting on account of its length²². However, we have seen how in this corpus, Stephen King puts an emphasis on issues of characterization in order to obtain a gripping narrative structure. The following study will aim at analysing how the setting for these five short stories is constructed and the effect these complex and liminal frameworks have on the narration.

A) THE AFTERLIFE SETTING: Sitting in Limbo

1) A Place that Looks Like Hell

Seeing that the general setting of the corpus is the afterlife, and knowing Stephen King's inclinations for horror and terror, one could expect that the setting would actually be hell. Rightfully so, the word "hell" is mentioned in several of the five stories; more than three times in "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band", where the title itself implicitly alludes to an afterlife hellish scenario, and once in "Afterlife". Interestingly, Stephen King himself describes "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", as a hell narrative in the 2002 Scribner edition of the short story collection *Everything's Eventual*²³:

I think the story is about Hell. A version of it where you are condemned to do the same thing over and over again. Existentialism, baby, what a concept; paging Albert Camus. (423)

Here, King makes an explicit statement about what could only have been the readers' personal conclusion for the story never certifies that the narrative takes place in hell. King also comments on the short story "Afterlife" in *The Bazaar of Bad Dreams*²⁴, but this time, he does not pronounce himself on the interpretation of the story. He merely presents all of the well know societal speculations about the afterlife such as "heaven, hell, purgatory and reincarnation"²⁵ (187), and introduces the short story by telling the reader what he would want the afterlife to be:

²² Lawrence, James Cooper. « A Theory of the Short Story ». *The North American Review*, Vol. 205, No. 735 (1917): 274- 286.

²³ King, Stephen. *Everything's Eventual*. New York: Scribner, 2002. Stephen King commented the theme of hell in an explanatory paragraph printed right after the short story's end.

²⁴ King, Stephen. *The Bazaar Of Bad Dreams*. New York: Scribner, 2015. However, this explanatory paragraph was presented before the short story.

²⁵ King, Stephen. *The Bazaar Of Bad Dreams*. New York: Scribner, 2015. pp. 187

What I'd like – I think – is a chance to go through it all again, as a kind of immersive movie [...] This story isn't about such a rerun – not exactly – but musing about the possibility led me to write about one man's afterlife. (187)

This particular story does not deal with the theme of hell, but as we can see from this quote, hell is still present in the collective imagination when dealing with the topic of the afterlife. The stories that have not been mentioned this far do not allude linguistically to the concept of hell but do represent it symbolically.

Overall in the corpus, the concept of death and hell is furthermore supported by the trope of the 'descent narrative'. The notion of the descent narrative was thoroughly exposed by the literary critic Rachel Falconer in 2005 in a book²⁶ where she analyses literary works about literal or symbolic descents into hell. These stories range from the fantastic genre to realism, portraying characters that are alive as well as deceased. The themes of the descent narrative are however all the same: hardship and suffering in hellish conditions. One of the most memorable instances of the genre of the descent narrative is Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, in which he describes his journey through hell, purgatory and paradise as a metaphorical journey towards God. The descent narrative scheme is very present in the corpus under study (especially in "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", "Willa" and "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band") and a general downward movement enhances it. This movement is conveyed by the modes of aerial transportation crashing from the sky in "Afterlife" and "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", and trains falling from cliffs in the case of "Willa". The characters in "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" also experience a descent for they are going "down the road" as they approach Rock and Roll Heaven, even though it is only symbolically their cause of death. This descent leads the characters to the town and consequently to a hellish afterlife in which they are trapped in suffering.

In this same short story, Mary and Clark are also said to be trapped by their natural environment as they head towards their doom: "with the piney woods pressing in close enough on both sides to keep the patched tar in constant shadow" (373). A sense of claustrophobia emerges from this hellish natural landscape, foreshadowing the couple's unfortunate destiny in Rock and Roll Heaven. In "Afterlife", the tortured character Isaac Harris also experiences entrapment in his afterlife for he is confined to

²⁶ Falconer, Rachel. *Hell In Contemporary Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

the office he used to work in when he was alive, surrounded by “files [...] piled two feet high” (192). It is clear that the subjects of these stories are suffering from their condition, but, as we can see, the fact that they are in hell is not presented as a certainty. The question of what and where is the afterlife is crucial to the development of the plot, as well as it is the general appeal of the thanatographic genre. King delivers with this corpus a thrilling approach to said genre by avoiding any clear and final response to the readers’ interrogations.

2) A Heterotopic Liminal Space

Indeed, if we take a closer look at the context of the occurrences of the word “hell”, we realize that the term does not quite define the actual settings of the stories. For example, James from the short fiction “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates” is unable to identify the place where he is when he says: “I don’t exactly know where I am” (100). In the same sense, William Andrews cannot clearly identify his location after he has passed away: “When the brilliance dims, he’s not in heaven or hell. He’s in a hallway. He supposed it could be purgatory” (190). This uncertainty concerning the setting in which these characters go about reflects the liminal nature of the setting. The last quote from “Afterlife” mentions both heaven and hell, but more importantly it posits the notion of purgatory. Purgatory is commonly associated with the catholic dogmas of life after death as an in-between place in the afterlife, but it is not where our characters are either. Truly, ‘in-betweenness’ is the predominant trope in the corpus at hand, not purgatory or hell. This liminal space has no name and refers to no known afterlife setting, but reminds us of Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia²⁷. Composed of the prefix hetero which in ancient Greek (ἕτερος) means “other” or “different” and the Greek morphemes οὐ meaning “not” and τόπος, meaning “place”, it can globally be defined as a “no-place”. It is a space where the accepted rules of society do not apply because the subjects evolving in it are ‘neither here, nor there’, but rather in a place that refers only to the otherness of imagination. This imaginary borderline space can also be considered as an intermediary place in which the characters are not really meant to stay. This idea is supported by the trope of travelling formerly mentioned, that implies there is still more displacement to come. The deceased character James in “The New York Times at Special Bargain

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. "Des Espaces Autres". 1967. Lecture.

Rates” confirms this assumption when he says: “But there’s no sense staying here” (103). James appears to be in a transitional place and is surrounded by other deceased characters that have already left this liminal setting by crossing the threshold of the train station by means of the doors present in this place. All of these ambiguous descriptions of the afterlife setting hint at the fact that there are still unknown and unspoken elements to the afterlife. They fail to satisfy the readers’ desire for answers and instead, place them in the very same in-betweenness the characters are subjected to.

The notion of the liminal space is furthermore supported by physical liminal states in the characters themselves: The following quotation from “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French” exemplifies this at best: “all at once you realize you’re edging out of the land of fun and into the Kingdom of Nausea” (414). Here, we get a sense of liminality by the use of the verb “edging” which contains the word ‘edge’ understood as a limit or a border. The character, in this case Carol from “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, is said to be passing from one place, “the land of fun”, to another, “the Kingdom of Nausea”. These two elements are explicitly described as geographical spaces (“land”, “kingdom”) and thus serve as metaphor for the characters’ state of transition in the corpus. The fact that these places they occupy appear foggy and liminal is due to the ambivalent imagery that is attached to its description. Indeed, the narrative representation of the different settings of the corpus is shrouded with discrepancies that allow us to consider it as a new kind of heterotopic landscape of the afterlife. Heterotopias abide by six defining principles, one of them being its ability to juxtapose in its space several other places that would be incompatible in a real-life scenario. The discrepancies in the description of the settings in this corpus correspond to this partial definition of heterotopia as a place where opposing elements coexist. Indeed, we notice that the texts are shrouded with visual and temporal discrepancies that aim at de-familiarizing the characters, causing them further confusion and suffering.

B) VISUAL AND TEMPORAL DISCREPANCIES: A Sensory Defamiliarization

1) The Familiarization with a Foreign Environment: Confusion

However, in order to make the characters' de-familiarization within this liminal space have the most impact and effect, first they undergo a process of (false) familiarization with their surroundings. In this sense, one can begin by mentioning the presence of well-known figures whose faces the protagonists are familiar with, such as celebrities in two of our short stories; "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" and "Afterlife". In the first of these two, the main characters arrive in a town where all of the inhabitants are deceased celebrities from the music scene of the 1950s and 1960s. Amongst these are Elvis Presley performing the role of the town sheriff, Janis Joplin as a waitress and Ricky Nelson as the cook, only to mention a few. The second story, *Afterlife*, also attempts to familiarize the main character²⁸ by including in his afterlife experience a picture on the wall portraying the faces of people he met during his life, as well as recognizable celebrities: "The guy in the joke toque is Ronald Reagan" (191), says the narrative voice with a comical tone. This familiarization of the characters with their environment is extended to the scenery as well, which means that the characters are reminded of things they knew from their past life in the new and unknown landscapes of the afterlife. It is the case in "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" where the familiar setting reminds the characters of "Norman Rockwell's painting illustrations [...] of Currier and Ives" or even "The Peculiar Little Town in *Twilight Zone*" (181). These two last elements of familiarization respectively introduce contradictory reactions to the narrative of the liminal afterlife panorama; on the one hand creating a comforting feeling of familiarity (with the picturesque depiction of America) and on the other, generating a sense of unease (conveyed by the reference to the liminal *Twilight Zone*) due to the impossibility of this transgression of the 'real life' in the afterlife.

To accentuate the characters' and the readers' unsettling sense of familiarization, King makes use of descriptive realism and verisimilitude. In an attempt to represent familiar things as they truly are and with detail, King delivers a physical and sensory description of the scenery. He relies on the senses that have not been impaired by the

²⁸ Naturally, the reader is also the object of this familiarization through his identification with the characters and their sensations and feelings.

rite of dying (the sense of sight for example) to convey realism in the narrative. These physical experiences can manifest themselves through hunger for those who are dead and do get hungry such as James from “The New York Times at Special Rates”, and hearing and smell for the rest of the deceased characters in “Willa” and “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”. “The smells of beer, sweat, Brut, and Wal-Mart perfume hit him like a punch in the nose” (17), here we can see how David experiences a strong and violent (“punch”) physical reaction to a sensory experience related to scent. David has not yet realized that he is dead, so this kind of realistic sensory experience serves as an anchor to his belief that he is alive and physically present in the honky-tonk. Sensory experiences establish a connection between the characters and the environment as in “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band” where Mary realizes the danger she and her husband are facing and seeks a way to compose herself:

Still pressing her crossed toes tightly together, she picked up the napkin the waitress had left, wanting to feel its texture – it was another connection to the world and another way to break the panicky, irrational [...] feeling which had gripped her so strongly. (394)

For Mary, establishing physical contact with the napkin is a reassuring gesture that is in contrast with the metaphorical grip that panic has got on her. She paradoxically wishes to be re-connected to “the world” that threatens her, in an effort to cope with reality. We can see how sensory experience is put to use in this corpus to give a sense of false reality to the characters. This is done so with the same intent as the familiarization of the characters to the afterlife environment, in order to better de-familiarize them and the reader.

The final literary tool used to familiarize the characters with the unknown environment is analepsis. Several of the characters in this corpus experience flashbacks of their childhood and adulthood while they are in the afterlife. In fact, analepsis is present in all five short stories that constitute this study’s corpus. Here is an example of one of Carol’s recollections from “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”:

She had worn it, all right. At Our Lady of Angels grammar and middle school she had worn it, then at St. Vincent de Paul high. She wore the medal until breasts grew around it like ordinary miracles,

and then someplace, probably on the class trip to Hampton Beach, she had lost it. [...] Mary on that long-gone medallion and Mary on this billboard had exactly the same look, the one that made you feel guilty of thinking impure thoughts even when all you were thinking about was a peanut-butter sandwich. (406)

As we can see this analeptic episode establishes a correspondence between life and death by the means of the Mary medallion, blurring the already imprecise lines Carol uses to divide her life from her afterlife. Placing life memories in the afterlife setting causes a sense of familiarization in the characters that recognize elements of their lives in a setting that has never before been encountered. Several other stories deconstruct the chronological order of events by embedding into the main narrative stories of the characters' life. The effect is double for it creates ambivalence and confusion both for the characters and for the reader, making it hard to distinguish the past from the present.

2) The Trope of Defamiliarization

In order to maximize the state of in-betweenness, after the familiarization with the unknown territory of the afterlife comes the de-familiarization with this same environment that becomes increasingly strange and threatening. The following quotation offers an accurate definition of the literary trope that is predominantly at work in this corpus. Originally coined by Victor Shklovsky in 1917²⁹, the notion of defamiliarization was originally employed to describe the artifacts used in literature to create a strong impression on the reader. This reflection on the processes of literary interpretation sparked by the use of the defamiliarization technique has been carried out in recent studies in a manner that truly echoes the literary techniques at work in these five stories:

Defamiliarization of that which is or has become familiar or taken for granted, hence automatically perceived, is the basic function of all devices. And with defamiliarization come both the slowing down and the increased difficulty (impeding) of the process of reading

²⁹ Shklovsky, Victor. « Art as Technique ». *Russian Formalist Criticism: four essays*. Translated and with an Introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 1965. "The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (Shklovsky 12)

and comprehending and an awareness of the artistic procedures (devices) causing them.³⁰

This definition of defamiliarization, similar to that of Shlovsky, supports our idea that this trope is utilized to delay the moment when the characters finally understand that they are dead, for it posits the belief that defamiliarization adds difficulties to the comprehension of a given diegetic situation. We can also affirm that in this corpus, seeing as the reader only detains the information that the characters have themselves, defamiliarization is extended outside of the diegesis and also concerns the people interpreting the literary text.

The protagonists of the stories experience a feeling of unease upon perceiving the liminality of the environment. In “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, the setting is described as “simultaneously unreal and too real” and also as “so similar... but so different, too” (388). The logical connectors “and” and “but” testify to the duality of the landscape that contrasts what is recognizable and familiar with what is new and appears “unreal”. This creates a sense of displacement for the characters that is intensified in a gradual manner as the following quote suggests: “a growing sense of dislocation” (192). Similarly, when Carol (from “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”) begins to recover the comprehension abilities she lost to defamiliarization, she realizes that something is wrong with the feelings she is experiencing: “It’s just too strong, not normal” (415). She also starts noticing the discrepancies and abnormalities in the props of the setting: “She looked at the speedometer and saw it was calibrated not in miles an hour but thousands of feet” (419). What was at first abnormal, such as a very strong sense of *déjà-vu*, quickly becomes an impossibility. With this last quotation, we revisit the idea that the rules of the heterotopic afterlife are not the same as those that can be applied to life, opening a door to a new kind of reality.

We find this notion of a new reality based on old familiar elements of the world of the living in “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates” with the description of this story’s afterlife setting. James describes this environment in the following manner: “Looks like Grand Central Station.[...] Only bigger. And emptier. As if it wasn’t

³⁰ Margolin, Uri. *Russian Formalism*. The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

really Grand Central at all but only...mmm...a movie set of Grand Central” (102). Recognizable aspects of the afterlife setting are gradually revealed as alternatives-from-beyond to what they could actually be in the world of the living. The transfer made between the world of the living and the afterlife can be considered as an unnatural transgression, and subsequently, it is treated as something too abnormal to be accepted as reality. Rosemary Jackson delivers a precise and insightful description of the term “uncanny”, commonly used in literature to refer to what is strange and unsettling.

“As Freud points out, there are two levels of meaning to the German term for the uncanny, *das Unheimlich*. Both levels are vital for an understanding of his theory in relation to fantasy. *Das Heimlich*, the un-negated version, is ambivalent. On the first level of meaning, it signifies that which is homely, familiar, friendly, cheerful, comfortable, intimate. It gives a sense of being ‘at home’ in the world, and its negation therefore summons up the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, strange, alien. It produces a feeling of estrangement, of being not ‘at home’ in the world. [...] *Das Heimlich* also means that which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, secreted, obscured. Its negation, *das Unheimlich*, then functions to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight. The uncanny combines these two semantic levels: its signification lies precisely in this dualism. It uncovers what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.” (65)³¹

The dual and ambivalent nature of the term ‘uncanny’ encapsulates to perfection the literary scheme at work in this corpus. Indeed, the process of defamiliarization we have exposed serves the same purpose as the uncanny; producing a feeling of estrangement and the subsequent desire to “dis-cover” what hides behind the unfamiliar.

The general trope of dislocation of familiar elements and the resulting defamiliarization has an array of negative consequences on the characters of this corpus, ranging from denial to liminal states, as we have already touched upon. Another of the effects that the heterotopic and liminal environment has is that it isolates the characters and causes them to partially lose their identities. Some of the secondary characters in the short stories (at least two) appear to be ‘non-characters’ in the place they occupy: Bill from “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French” is only a product of Carol’s afterlife imagination and thus has no connection to the afterlife world. He is the only one not to react to the discrepancies in the scenery: “the

³¹ Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Routledge, 2003

speedometer froze at sixteen thousand feet and then blew out, but Bill appeared not to notice” (420). Carol is alone with her afterlife constructions, even though she can interact and even enter a dialogue with her husband.

This makes of Carol a confused and isolated character unable to interpret the environment due to the familiar faces and objects that surround her. The feeling of isolation attached to the main character accentuates the reader’s identification with the plot, for the focus of the internal focalization is set on one individual. Other characters also suffer from isolation, such as the ones in “Willa”, a story where we can find an exhaustive lexical field of absence and isolation. Willa herself is described as a sort of ‘absent presence’ at the beginning of the narrative: “a cry of absence, absence in the heart” (8)³², even though she is the eponymous character of the short story. Her physical absence at the beginning of the story and her emotional distance throughout the story makes of her fiancé, David, an isolated character. Furthermore, everyone in “Willa” is cut off from the world of the living, including from the animal world, as the episode with the wolves testifies to.³³ Even though the characters in “Willa” are ghosts in the ‘real world’, the world they belonged to in their former lives is not quite the one they are in the diegetic time, which delays their comprehension and subsequent acceptance of their deceased state.

3) The Unsettling Time Discrepancies

We have spoken of the visual and sensory discrepancies present in this corpus, which cause the characters’ displacement in the afterlife setting. The last elements of defamiliarization are a series of unsettling temporal discrepancies present in the text. In this sense, the first thing we will comment on is the fact that, in several of the stories that constitute this corpus, we do not know with certainty what date it is. For example, in “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, everything is related to the 1950s decade, from the décor to the townsfolk, whereas the story takes place in times contemporary to the time of writing. When Mary and Clark first arrive in Rock and

³² This passage is a quote from the poem “Winter Remembered” by John Crowe Ranson. The poet also uses this figure of speech to express nostalgia about a loved one that has been distanced from the subject that is speaking. However, in John Crowe Ranson’s text, the object of affection seems to be truly gone, unlike Willa, who is mostly emotionally distant.

³³ In this passage of the short story, David and Willa encounter a pack of wolves on their way back to the train station. Willa, upon realizing that the wolves seem to actually see the deceased characters, tries to approach them. The pack of wolves gets absolutely frightened when they discover the true nature of the couple, and runs away from them to Willa’s great sorrow.

Roll Heaven, Clark comments on this discrepancy in the setting by saying: “It’s all fifties stuff” (390). This observation will later serve the couple as a clue as to where they have arrived and just how peculiar Rock and Roll Heaven really is. For the person who reads these stories, the chronological discrepancies are indicators of the fantastic nature of the texts, for it depicts sceneries too odd to be real. However, they also serve the purpose of the readers’ defamiliarization and do not actually facilitate the process of denouement.

Similarly, the main character in “Afterlife” finds himself confused due to the many contradictory indications concerning the date. In Isaac Harris’ office a calendar marks “March of 1911” as the date, whereas the pictures on the walls of the hallway indicate that it is “1956” (192). To top off these already confusing and conflicting indications, he realizes that the subjects portrayed on the photographs do not correspond to the people that should be depicted according to the year indicated: “He [Bobby Tisdale, a college classmate] was probably on earth in 1956, but would have been in kindergarten or the first grade, not drinking beer on the shore of Lake Whatever” (191). The confusion that William Andrews is experiencing in this passage of the text can be compared to the confusion the characters in “Willa” experience when they try to figure out what year it is.

‘Willa’, he said, ‘what year is it?’ [...]
‘Nineteen ... eighty-eight?’
He nodded. He would have said 1987 himself. ‘There was a girl in there wearing a T-shirt that said CROW-HEARTS SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF ’03. And if she was old enough to be in a roadhouse--’
‘Then ’03 must have been at least three years ago’. (25)

The characters in “Willa” are initially off by almost twenty years for the date actually is 2007. This creates a fracture between the world the characters think they posthumously inhabit and the one they actually do. Their confusion and hesitation exudes from the fact that they evolve in this liminal space. This particular discrepancy is due to a displaced perception of time passing once the characters are in the afterlife.

Indeed, several of the characters experience the feeling that time is somehow different in the afterlife. In “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, the deceased character James believes he has only been dead for a few minutes when in fact it has been two days, as his wife informs him. However, James is the only character of the corpus that finds his experience in the afterlife accelerated. Truly,

most characters confirm the general opinion that time is extremely long in hellish afterlife scenarios. In “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, we find this description of time that reads: “A million years, and that’s only the first tick of the clock” (417). Here, time in the liminal setting of afterlife resembles the descriptions of time spent in hell, as it is generally conceived mainly due to religious imagery.³⁴ We reencounter this trope elsewhere in the corpus, for example in “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, where the excipit of the story expands on the suffering that awaits Mary and Clark.

How long do they go on?”

Sissy didn’t answer for nearly a minute, and Mary was getting ready to restate the question, thinking the girl either hadn’t heard or hadn’t understood, when she said: “A long time. I mean, the show will be over by midnight, they always are, it’s a town ordinance, but still... they go on a long time. Because time is different here. It might be... oh, I dunno... I think when the guys really get cooking, they sometimes go on for a year or more. (19)

We can see how in this frightening liminal afterlife scenario, time appears to be distorted in the same way as in “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”. Time is said to be much longer in Rock and Roll Heaven than it would ever be in real life, a few hours seeming to last over a year to the characters’ great disbelief.

The temporal defamiliarization adds to the hellish portrait of the afterlife and impairs even further the characters’ interpretation skills as did the visual and sensory discrepancies. Stephen King makes fright real for the characters by placing them in a borderline afterlife scenario in which rational thinking fails them against the rules of fantasy. Somehow, in this heterotopic place, the characters have to read past the several stages of defamiliarization by closely interpreting their environment. Thus, they eventually manage to unveil the information that has been kept from them. Similarly, the reader gradually discovers in this corpus new layers to the trope of afterlife and seeks out the revelation of truth in the end, as well as the characters do.

³⁴ Indeed, the idea that hell lasts an eternity is conveyed by religious scriptures, most notably the Bible: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shunt out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” (2 Thessalonians 1:9) The power of these scriptures lies in the very idea of eternity, for it has the same purpose that it has in King’s thanatographies; to instill fear in the reader of the text.

III) THE SUPERNATURAL'S CLASH WITH THE DOGMAS OF GOD

Thus every nature moves across the tide
of the great sea of being to its own port,
each with its given instinct as its guide.
— Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

A) THE FANTASTIC'S RULE OVER RATIONAL THINKING

The study of the characterization of the protagonists and of the construction of the liminal afterlife setting has now revealed a complex thanatographic narrative strategy. These five short stories are a reflection on the thanatographic genre as a means to explore new horizons in fictional literature and the various settings it can provide. They are also a reflection on humanity dealing with their own mortality. This third part of the analysis will deal with the fantastic and horror genres of literature clashing with social and religious beliefs in an effort to expand on the mysteries of the afterlife.

We can see in this corpus that Fantasy takes over the narrative and rules over rational thinking through the characters. Tzvetan Todorov masterfully described the fantastic genre, let us remind ourselves of his precepts on fantasy and hesitation:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.³⁵

In this quotation of Todorov we encounter the themes of duality and in-betweenness that characterized the characters of this corpus as well as the liminal space they inhabit. This description of the fantastic genre already posits a confrontational opposition between the supernatural and “the laws of nature”. However, it is the characters’ hesitation that allows the fantastic to take over in these five short fictions.

³⁵ Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach To A Literary Genre*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1973.

1) The Hesitation of the Characters

Throughout the corpus, as we have said, the characters are brutalized both physically and ‘mentally’ which leads them to a culminating state of hesitation. In “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, Annie recognizes her deceased husband over the telephone, however he is not his normal self, he is said to be “sounding uncharacteristically hesitant and unsure about himself” (99). James, in fact, will be hesitant throughout the short story and especially when he has to choose a door and move on in his journey in the afterlife. Despite the fact that James already knows that he is dead, he still experiences the hesitation Todorov spoke of. For this character, fantasy takes the form of the unusual and unexpected afterlife setting for the story, a place that resembles Grand Central Station where you have to either take an elevator or a door to leave. In a similar manner, the protagonist from the short story “Afterlife” knows that he is dead but is also in a difficult position during his first moments in the afterlife setting: “Bill walks down there, hesitates, and then knocks” (192). We can see how, in this sentence, the mental act of hesitation is isolated by two commas and placed at the very center of the sentence, surrounded by the first and the last action verbs that gravitate around Bill’s underlying uncertainty.

Globally present in the corpus, the trope of uncertainty allows us to encounter varying representations of hesitation. In “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, the main characters are incredulous upon reaching their final and fatal destination. Mary says to herself: “It’s got to be a joke [...] A town called Rock And Roll Heaven? Puh-leeze” (380). Here, the first indicator of hesitation is the question mark in the second sentence, which clearly translates Mary’s uncertainty, even though it is constructed as rhetoric and meant to reassure her. The two other sentences are a testament to the story’s comical tone³⁶ that, when contrasted to the gravity of the situation, creates irony and reveals the characters’ nervousness. The characters in this story try very hard to appear determined but as we can see it is only a false attempt. When they are confronted with the manifestation of the supernatural, it takes a considerable amount of effort for them to manage to cope with the hesitation of the fantastic irrupting in what they thought was normal (after)life.

³⁶ The comical tone is conveyed in this passage by the use of the word “joke” and the onomatopoeic expression “Puh-leeze”.

2) The Affirmation of the Fantastic

The fantastic affirms its dominating position when it finally takes a full grip on the characters' rational thinking, when there can no longer be a reasonable explanation for the things that are happening to them and around them. This realization comes early for some characters such as Bill from "Afterlife", other take more time. In the beginning of the story, Will sees the logical discrepancies depicted on the pictures on the wall and he affirms: "it doesn't make sense" (192). The possibility of the setting of the story being the world the character knew has now vanished with a shift in perception due to the truth-revealing discrepancies. At this point in the narrative structure of the stories, what the characters feared and was concealed from them in the beginning is a certainty now; they are truly in a different kind of world, however this new space remains mysterious: "There was something too sweetly balanced about the church steeples [...] The homes all looked impossibly neat and cozy" (381). This quote from "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" describes the hellish town as an impossibility in relation to what could be acceptable in a world ruled by the 'laws of nature'. This inconceivable environment challenges any rational explanation that the characters might provide to reassure themselves. The scenario is too perfect to be true, too clean and too neat, as if part of a movie set, to belong to the world of the living. The realization comes late in the narration for some characters such as Mary who is already trapped in Rock and Roll Heaven when she faces the supernatural: "but these rational thoughts had no chance against the dead certainty in her guts: she was seeing a ghost" (393) The character realizes upon facing the unknown realm of fantasy that she is entering what Todorov would call the 'marvelous' where the supernatural is accepted as real, and in this case it reveals itself as frightening. Many pages after she first began to feel that something might take a dangerous turn, she suddenly feels the certainty that things are very wrong. At this moment, a shift occurs in the stories, for suspense is replaced by fear, exposing the true nature of thanatography: terror.

B) THE UNKNOWN: THE TROPE OF TERROR

1) The Fear of the Unknown

Indeed, the trope of terror is very much present in this corpus, and it manifests itself under different forms in all of the stories. In these short fictions, terror is mainly related to the notion of death and to the idea of the unknown. There is a numerous

amount of rhetorical questions in the corpus about what the uncertain future holds, and most of these interrogations are left unanswered both by the characters and the narration. In “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, the reader gets an insight into Carol’s stream of consciousness that reveals how hesitant and afraid she is: “And, after all, they were bound to come out somewhere, weren’t they?” (4) The multiple commas used in this sentence translate the character’s hesitation, as well as the tag question at the end of the sentence. What started out the sentence as an affirmation reveals itself as a failed attempt at reassuring oneself. It is implied by all of the markers of hesitation that even if the characters are bound to “come out somewhere”, the place where they will end up will not be a pleasant one. Furthermore, if we take a closer look at the way dialogue is constructed in “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, we realize that most of what Anne does is ask questions to her husband. The first time she speaks in the story, she manages to ask three questions in only six words: “James? Where are you? What happened?” (100) Her worries mainly concern her husband’s condition as well as the place he is in, and she manages to obtain some answers a few pages later. However, these answers are partial and correspond to her husband’s personal perception and do not allow her (or the reader) to draw conclusions about the afterlife. To enhance this dissatisfaction, the telephone conversation connecting the living with the dead is cut short by the phone’s dying battery, leaving an even larger number of questions unanswered. The thanatographic corpus under study takes inspiration from the traditions of the murder mystery and autobiographical genres in which interrogations are of outmost importance to the plot. In an article entitled “Unquiet spirits: death writing in contemporary fiction”³⁷, Alice Bennett analyses the narrative tools of auto-thanatographies and establishes a link between this genre’s recurring plots and the ones in murder mysteries. She says:

“In contemporary fictional autothanatographies posthumous voices are used for a fictional investigation of the ideal possibility of total biography and total knowledge, offering a retelling of a life that is apparently perfected by its completeness. However, this is consistently combined with plot formations that are taken from the death-inflected genres of the murder mystery and the ghost story, which emphasise the plots that emerge when writing happens after (a) death.” (465)

³⁷ Bennett, Alice. “Unquiet spirits: death writing in contemporary fiction”. *Textual Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2009) : 463-479.

Indeed, these two genres attempt to make sense of past lives or strange and deadly events. It is typical of both these genres to organize their narratives in order to culminate in an unraveling of truth. Terror in this corpus lies in the fact that the uncovering of truth is never actually accomplished in these five stories, leaving both the characters and the reader with uncertain information and unanswered questions such as ‘what comes after death?’ One particular passage of the short story “Afterlife” epitomizes the dominance of the trope of the unknown:

Harris makes a fist and knocks on the end of the pneumatic tube hanging over the laundry basket, making it swig. ‘CLIENT WANTS TO KNOW WHY WE’RE HERE! WANTS TO KNOW WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT!’
He waits. Nothing happens. He folds his hands on his desk. (198)

Here, we can see that even Harris who is said to be some sort of employee of whoever is running the afterlife, is not given any answers as to the sense of life and death. There is a comical note to the fact that information could come through a “pneumatic tube hanging over the laundry basket” as if it were dirty laundry. This image destroys the credibility of the search for answers, as does Harris’ nonchalant attitude and over-the-top tone when he asks these questions.

The characters that lack knowledge in the corpus are the ones that are the most confused and that go about wandering aimlessly. Harris is very much a part of this category, as are, for example, the characters in the abandoned train station in “Willa”. Contrary to the eponymous character and her fiancé, the rest of the characters have not accepted their deaths and in consequence, cannot leave the train station that they believe is going to save them. They are bound to wander this deserted scenario until truth hits them as it did Willa in the beginning and David later, once she had convinced him. Without the knowledge of truth, the acceptance of this new reality is impossible. We can see this idea best exemplified in the pilot from “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”. In this story, James is ready to leave the train station through one of the doors, however the pilot of the plane that killed them all is not. James establishes a perfect link between the acceptance of truth and the character’s immobility in the following description of the pilot’s state: “And the pilot keeps screaming. Or maybe it’s the co-pilot. I think he’s going to be here for quite a while. He just wanders around. He’s very confused.” (104) In this passage we reencounter a type-character of the corpus, one that is confined in the liminal afterlife setting due to

his lack of knowledge of reality. The sight of this kind of characterization is frightening to those who are aware of the situation such as James and the couple in “Willa”. Their goal is to unravel the mysteries of their afterlife and to stay away from deluded characters. Generally though, not much is certain for the characters, even for those who are aware of their death. In spite of the narrative voices being extradiegetic, the readers have no further information as to what becomes of the characters. However, it seems somewhat inevitable that what awaits them are bad things.

Indeed, the corpus is shrouded with elements that suggest a negative and destructive future in the liminal afterlife. In “That Feeling You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, the couple is driving to their final and deadly destination and the narration points out at this inevitable outcome before it is truly revealed to all: “Sure enough, the road petered out. Over the first hill, the yellow line disappeared again” (374). The images of the destruction of the road and the disappearance of the yellow line foreshadow the deaths of the characters. Also, the use of the adverbial idiom “sure enough” accentuates the inevitability of this fate.

Furthermore, the descriptions of natural sceneries around Rock and Roll Heaven accentuate the ominous tone of the text and of the ambiance in general.

The balsam smell of the trees was heavenly, and she thought there was something beautiful about the silence, unbroken as it was by the sound of any motor [...] or human voice... but there was something spooky about it as well. (376)

As we can see in this story, the description of the natural scenery is one more element of narration used to convey the dangerous unknown. The description of the forest sets a spooky mood, and with it, instills fear in the characters and perhaps also in the reader. Another way to convey the inevitable danger inherent to the unknown is the use of the simple future that leaves no possibility for change. In “Afterlife”, for example, the manager Isaac Harris explains to Bill what will happen if he does not accept his death: “You will have a fleeting sense, almost a surety, that there is more...[...] But it will pass [...] You will die of the same cancer.” (198) Sometimes in this corpus, the dominant trope of the unknown allows certainties to be pronounced about what will happen in the future. As we can see from the last quote, these certainties only affirm terror for the deceased characters, for they confirm the suffering that awaits them. Terror is experienced in a gradual manner in the short

stories under study, gaining in intensity as the notions of the unknown and death are explored.

2) The Omnipresence of Death

Death is vastly explored in this corpus by the means of the thanatographic narrative technique and the different fictional afterlife settings. This is done with the intent of adding emotional impact to the stories on the level of the diegesis as well as for the readers. Death is omnipresent in these stories as the thematic fuel for the effects required by the genre of horror fiction. Throughout his lifetime work, Stephen King has repeatedly made use of the theme of death to convey fear and horror. King published a semi-autobiographical book called *On Writing* in 2000, in which he affirms his fascination with the theme of death. He shares with the reader a personal memory of a time when he was five or six years old, when his mother told him about the different people she had seen die in her life. Stephen King then makes a statement about how he never forgot those stories.

On some other day she told me about the one she saw—a sailor who jumped off the roof of the Graymore Hotel in Portland, Maine, and landed in the street.

“He splattered,” my mother said in her most matter-of-fact tone. She paused, then added, “The stuff that came out of him was green. I have never forgotten it.”
That makes two of us, Mom.³⁸

In this corpus, Stephen King explores his childhood fascination with death. His memory of his mother telling him frightening stories of people dying and committing suicide has been transposed in this corpus in an equally terrifying afterlife setting.

On the one hand, horror in this corpus is represented by the vitality of the dead in two of the five short stories; “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates” and “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”. In the first of these stories, fear is experienced by a woman who tries to understand the vitality of her deceased husband, and in the second, we read about a group of deceased musicians that have inexplicably come alive. On the other hand, two of the stories depict horror by expanding on the fear of dying; those stories are “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French” and “Afterlife”. In these two stories, the fear of dying manifests itself in the fact that the

³⁸ King, Stephen. *On Writing*. New York: Scribner, 2000. Print.

characters are so reluctant to accepting their deaths that they relive their afterlife several times in a cyclic manner. “Willa”, the last of these stories, could fit into both of these categories, for it depicts the vitality of the deceased as well as the fear of dying of said deceased characters who cannot manage to see the reality that is exposed to them by the eponymous character.

Furthermore, the presence of the lexical fields of fear, anger and violence in these short fictions enhances the trope of horror. These three notions, in that order, function as a gradation of the different emotions the characters go through. One passage that epitomizes this general movement towards violence can be found in “Willa”, where the fear of accepting one’s death pushes a mother to be violent towards her own child: “Without looking in her direction, Georgia Anderson flipped Willa the bird. Her other hand shook Pammy back and forth. David saw a child flop in one direction, a charred corpse in the other” (35). The final image in this sentence reminds the reader of the brutal conditions of death for the characters in “Willa”. Furthermore, the harshness of the image is enhanced by the fact that it is a child’s burnt body that is depicted.

Indeed, the trope of death prevails in this corpus, but since the majority of the characters do not realize that they are dead, this trope is mostly alluded to in numerous ominous narrative items that can be found in each of the stories. For example, in “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, a loop is playing in Carol head as a foreshadowing mantra: “all the hard days are coming.” This mantra that announces the hardship and suffering that is yet to come is supported by a series of morbid images that flash through Carol’s stream of consciousness. As we have already commented, several characters in this corpus experience flashbacks or analeptic episodes, that transpose the characters to a different time and make them relive events from their past lives. Some of these analeptic episodes can be included in the corpus’ lexical field of death for they call to remembrance morbid events of the main characters’ lives. It is the case for Carol who is reminded of a difficult time in her life that corresponds to the event of an abortion:

Horrible as it was to say, things had started turning around when she lost the baby. [...] Lost the baby, had a miscarriage –they all believed that except maybe Bill. Certainly her family had believed it: Dad, Mom, Gram. ‘Miscarriage’ was the story they told, miscarriage was a Catholic’s story if there ever was one. (410)

Death appears to be central to Carol's recollections of her past as a time of suffering. Thus, the trope of death becomes ubiquitous; it is present in the time of the diegesis, and it is furthermore transposed to the characters' past as well. So great is the trope of death in this corpus that it also represents an entity of the future. The presence of the trope of death in future scenarios is interesting due to the fact that it concerns characters that are not yet dead. Indeed, in "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates", death is transposed to the future by the means of a deceased character's deadly premonition. James gives his wife a couple of confusing messages before the telephone conversation is ended, and Annie understands these messages to be warnings of accidents that will happen in the future. Here again, we find that time discrepancies make the reading of the diegetic information difficult. James says to his wife: "And don't go to the bakery anymore on Sundays. Something's going to happen there, and I know it's going to be on a Sunday, but I don't know which Sunday. Time really is funny here." (103) What James predicts is confirmed when the bakery explodes on a Sunday leaving Annie unharmed thanks to the premonitions from beyond. Thus, the trope of death is introduced to the corpus by the means of prolepsis. This literary device places the theme of death in an alternative future setting. The introduction in the narration of future deadly scenarios confirms one more time the omnipresence and inevitability of death.

Death in this corpus of short fictions is represented as a frightful event from which the characters suffer due to a lack of knowledge about their own condition, and the unpredictability of place they inhabit. Here, the trope of the afterlife that has inspired such number of literary works is explored through the literary genre of horror and its themes of predilection. The logical imaginary backdrops one could imagine for these stories from beyond are those commonly known to modern society. However, in this corpus we find horror and the fantastic pushing the limits of these predictable backdrops. A considerable amount of the societal imagery attached to the notion of the afterlife is depicted by different religious beliefs existing in modern culture. The following is a partial study of the treatment of religion in these texts that challenge our preconceived notions of the afterlife.

C) KING'S FANTASTIC IMAGINARY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE RELIGIOUS WORL VIEW

1) Religion Anchored in American Society

In this corpus, the thematic and symbolic trope of religion is very present. All of the five short stories display expressions or allusions to religion. The semantic field of religion and religious belief is conveyed first and foremost by the afterlife imagery. The dogmas of faith such as heaven, hell and purgatory are often mentioned in the corpus, and, as they do in American popular culture, they remind the reader of the close link established between religion and the afterlife. The theme of religion is epitomized in “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, where religion establishes a link between Carol’s past life (in the form of memories from her catholic upbringing) and her afterlife (with the reappearing images of the Virgin Mary). Other instances of the lexical field of religion establish a connection between religion and American society. It is the case in “Willa”, where the characters come across a bar with a patriotic sign displayed outside the building:

The bar was a horseshoe with a neon replica of the Wind River Range floating overhead. It was red, white, and blue; in Wyoming, they did seem to love their red, white, and blue. A neon sign in similar colors proclaimed YOU ARE IN GOD’S COUNTRY PARTNER. It was flanked by the Budweiser logo on the left and the Coors logo on the right. (18)

This description of the front of a Wyoming bar anchors religion as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the United States of America together with American brands of beer, the colors of the American flag and the natural landscape of the Wyoming Range of mountains. All of the elements of this description are here to offer a picture of America and affirm the central position religion has in it, in the passage as well as in American popular culture. The use of the capital letters conveys a sense of glorification of “God’s country”, as do the colors of the sign by association with the colors of the American flag. We get a sense of the importance of religion in regards to the ‘real’ world and the diegetic world; God’s country is in fact Wyoming as well as the characters’ afterlife environment. A similar rhetoric can be applied to “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, where “Lou Reed’s Busload of Faith” (372) is playing on the jukebox while Mary and Clark begin to understand the terrible situation they are in. In the 1950’s Americana setting for this after life ‘resting’ place, the reference to Lou Reed has two different functions. First, it conveys that feeling of the dinner being

a true American experience with the music of one of the country's biggest icon. Second, it establishes a link between that musical American identity and the religious faith Lou Reed is singing about. However, if we take a closer look at the lyrics of Busload of Faith, we realize that the song depicts religion in a rather negative way, saying that "you can't depend on God" to protect from the harshness of life. For the readers who do not know the lyrics to this song, the reference could be interpreted as a celebration of religious belief, multiplying the possible readings of the text. On a diegetic level, Mary herself begins to turn to religious belief: "And Mary found herself praying – really, really praying – for the first time in perhaps twenty years. Please. God, make him see it's not a joke." (395) The theme of religion has been transferred to the characters as they attempt to find courage in their distress. In this sense, we realize the number of characters in the corpus that are themselves representative of the notion of religion, simply because of their names. There is Mary, recently discussed, who not only bears the name of a religious icon but also turns to religion herself as we have seen. There is also David from the short story Willa, as well as Isaac and Andrews from the short fiction "Afterlife", and finally there is James from "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates". We realize that at least one main character in each short story bears the name of a Christian figure, thus highlighting the trope of religion in the corpus.

2) Religion as an Ominous Motif

If we take a closer look at the manner in which this prevailing religious theme is presented we can see religion as an ominous instance that is sometimes responsible for the character's pain and suffering. Here, we find again the theme of death to be associated with religion. In "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", death and pain are announced through religious symbols such as "three crosses on the right side of the road" (404), indicating where three people have died. The crosses' function is that of a mirror, showing the characters in denial that they are deceased as well. However, the characters do not come to this realization at first, and so the indicators of death are multiplied throughout the text. Still in the thematic of travelling, the protagonist, Carol, is depicted as being on a journey that can only lead to death and eternal damnation: "They were going to go down this road and down this road, they were for the white Crow Vic and the white Crow Vic was for them, forever

and ever, amen.” (419) This passage constitutes the moment in the narration when it is finally stated that the story being told is about the afterlife and that there is no alternative scenario to the characters’ outcome but eternity in a hellish cycle. The passage is constructed to resemble a Christian prayer, with the repetition and variation of certain elements of the sentence, as well as the common final expression of faith, “amen”, at the end of the passage. The function of the quote is to reaffirm Carol’s final judgment pronounced by the repetition of the terms “ever” and “down this road”. Furthermore, the chiasmic structure at the center of the sentences creates a link between the road and eternity, between man and the afterlife construction religion has reserved for him. Due to the fact that the corpus under study is influenced by the genre of horror, it is only logical that the fate reserved for the deceased characters would be one in which the characters suffer.

In fact, the corpus reflects the Christian religious belief that a person’s afterlife can be either a reward or a punishment for the said person’s life choices and actions. If the person was good during his life, he deserves Heaven, if he was a bad person he is going to Hell. In the short story “Afterlife”, for example, Isaac Harris explains how he is trapped in his afterlife job as a manager of the newly deceased characters due to his wrongdoings when he was still alive. In fact, his boring confinement serves as punishment for having killed 146 of his workers by leaving the emergency exits locked during a fire. For this reason, Harris is confined to his earthly office in the new afterlife setting as if he were serving time for the crimes he committed during his life. This idea that the dead characters are in their respective afterlife scenarios due to life mistakes that need to be redeemed is found in several of the short stories. In “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French”, Carol experiences remorse as she remembers some incidents of her life that make her reflect upon the role of religion in a person’s life. On this subject she says that “God says take what you want... and pay for it” (410), implying that nothing is free in life and that everything will be accounted for in the afterlife. The reader does not get the impression that Carol is paying for one particular incident in her life in the same manner as Harris is, but we understand from this passage that she does have some redeeming to do in her liminal and hellish afterlife setting.

However, Christian belief allows for people to confess and repent for their sins, the following quotation from the Bible exemplifies this: “He touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and

your sin is forgiven.”³⁹ In the short stories, we also find this idea that people can repent for their sins. For example, in “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, Mary and Clark are lost and Mary suggests to her husband that they turn around, to which Clark answers: “Uh-huh. Now if you only had a sign that said REPENT.” (2) This can be interpreted as Clark’s wasted chance to accept his wrongdoings and consequently save himself and his wife from damnation. In Christian ideology, a person’s punishment for his life sins comes in the afterlife as this following quote from the Bible shows well: “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”⁴⁰ Clark’s comment from “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band” foreshadows what happens to the couple at the end of the story: Clark will carry out being stubborn and not accepting his mistakes and for this he is condemned to remain in the hellish town of Rock and Roll Heaven.

3) Ritual Reenactment: The Trope of the Afterlife

Furthermore, we can see that the theme of religion in the afterlife setting also manifests itself through the notion of ritual reenactment. As we have previously observed, the characters of this corpus experience a sort of rite of passage from life to death and they continue this journey in the afterlife. This rite of dying takes on a ceremonial and religious tone when it is combined with narrative repetition. In some of the short stories, ritualistic reenactment is conveyed linguistically by the repetition of words or expressions. It is the case, for example, of "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French" where the phrase "all the hard days are coming" is repeated several times throughout the story. The same sort of phrasal repetition is found in "Willa" as well, where the eponymous character repeats three times to her fiancé "you don't see what's right in front of your eyes". This narrative repetition gives the texts a cyclic structure, where certain recurring elements of the narration are put forward. This narrative technique is reminiscent of some religious texts such as the Gloria: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen". This prayer can be repeated up to four times during a catholic mass due to the fact that it encapsulates the Christian belief in the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The intent behind the ritualistic

³⁹ *The Holy Bible*. New York: American Bible Society, 1989. (Isaiah 6:7)

⁴⁰ *The Holy Bible*. New York: American Bible Society, 1989. (Matt 10:28)

repetition of certain phrases is the same in mass as it is in this corpus; to highlight the most important elements of the (ceremonial) texts.

In other cases, ritualistic reenactment is conveyed by a repetitive narrative structure. This characteristic is mostly found in "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French". This short story is basically constructed by putting together three times the same story, as we have already commented on when speaking of Carol's 'recurring nightmares'. Indeed, the whole short story is structurally divided into three parts that are nearly exactly the same story of the couple in the airplane and then driving down to the hotel where they will spend their holidays. Throughout the story, Carol believes she is experiencing a long lasting and powerful déjà-vu but the reality is that she has gone through what is being narrated several times already. At the end of the short story, Stephen King expresses his thoughts about it and tells the reader that he thinks "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French" is a story about hell and that hell is in fact repetition.⁴¹ In this short story, we see Carol going through the same experience three times, but the text implies that there will be many more times to come. Similarly, the short story "Afterlife" presents life after death as a repetitive structure. However, in this case, the character gets a chance to relive his life, not some afterlife imaginary construction as Carol. Indeed, Bill from "Afterlife" learns from the afterlife manager Isaac that he can relive his entire life without any changes, and Bill chooses to do so for the fifteenth time. This means that Bill's character has previously died a total of fifteen times and that each time he has decided to enter an additional cycle of reenactment of his past life.

Furthermore, this proleptic narrative repetition is enhanced by the use of the iterative mode of narration, intended to show how repetitive the afterlife scenario is for these characters. In this sense, Isaac Harris keeps telling Bill that they have gone through what is being narrated several times already: "You always ask the same thing." (192) The iterative mode is also found in "That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is In French", where the characters are said to be constant throughout time and death: "left eyebrow, right dimple, always the same" (403). The repetition implied by the iterative mode gives a great amount of temporal depth to the stories, for the cycles that are

⁴¹ « I think the story is about Hell. A version of it where you are condemned to do the same thing over and over again. Existentialism, baby, what a concept ; paging Albert Camus. There's an idea that Hell is other people. My idea is that it might be repetition. » King, Stephen. *The Bazaar Of Bad Dreams*. New York: Scribner, 2015. p. 423.

depicted carry out the repetitive structure to the fictional past and to the presumable future as well.

In fact, the temporal reach of religion in the afterlife could not be greater for it is said to last for all eternity. According to Christian belief, once a person dies, he or she will spend eternity either in heaven, hell or purgatory. The notion of eternity is very present in this corpus, manifesting itself in all of the short stories under study. For instance, in the final pages of “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”, the main characters encounter Sissy, another victim that has been forced to take on a job and stay in Rock and Roll Heaven. She is the one who explains to them just how long time can be in this hellish town. Sissy tells them that she has been twenty-three years old for “six years, at least. Or maybe it’s eight. Or nine.” (20) Not only has this character lost track of time, but she has altogether stopped aging too, which implies that she could technically stay in Rock and Roll Heaven forever. This idea is supported by the very last sentences of the story in an ominous declaration: “BECAUSE ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE! [...] That’s what I’m afraid of. That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.” (21) The possibility of spending eternity in the different scenarios is the most frightening aspect of these liminal spaces, and as we have said, it concerns the totality of the deceased characters.

4) Alternative Representations of the Afterlife

However, in spite of the overwhelming presence of a religious imaginary related to the afterlife in the texts, religion is not the dominating instance in this corpus. Stephen King presents a number of scenarios that are clearly inspired by the catholic dogmas of faith, but an in depth analysis of these scenarios proves that the ruling literary entity remains the fantastic genre. Rosemary Jackson’s insight into the Fantastic brings us to a closer understanding of the relationship between religion and literature. In her book *Fantasy The Literature of Subversion*⁴², she reminds the reader of Heidegger’s definition of the uncanny:

The ‘uncanny’ is a term which has been used philosophically as well as in psychoanalytic writing, to indicate a disturbing, vacuous area. Heidegger described as ‘uncanny’ that empty space produced by a loss of faith in divine images. Unable to reach, or to imagine reaching, ‘God’s sphere of being’, man is left with a sense of vacancy. ‘Indeed,’ writes Heidegger, ‘in proportion with the

⁴² Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

impossibility [of setting himself in the place of God] something far more *uncanny* may happen...'. (63)

Heidegger defines the uncanny as “a loss of faith”, and in this sense, his argumentation can be related to what the characters experience in the afterlife, where prayers are unheard and questions are unanswered. The void that is left by the lack of faith is here replaced by ‘the uncanny’ as we have pointed out, and most importantly, it is replaced by the Fantastic. We have seen the importance of the fantastic genre in regards to the characters and the hesitation they experience when coping with the irruption of the supernatural in what they thought was normality. Now, the supernatural rules over religion by exposing an array of alternative afterlife representations radically opposed to the teachings of religion. In “Willa” and in “The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates”, for example, we encounter the literary trope of the ghost. In the first story, the ghosts are fairly similar to the ‘haunting ghost’ type of character known to fantastic literature. Willa and David are deceased but can still roam the world of the living, only they are no longer physically visible to the people that are alive. In the second story, James’ characterization is innovative: he is dead in an unknown place and must choose a door in order to continue his journey through the afterlife. Upon learning this, his wife hopes that one of those doors could lead him back to the world of the living. However, she quickly reconsiders her wishes when she imagines the frightening possibilities if her dead husband returned from the afterlife:

Find your way home, she almost says. Find the right door and find your way home. But if he did, would she want to see him? A ghost might be all right, but what if she opened the door on a smoking cinder with red eyes and the remains of a jean (he always traveled in jeans) melted into his legs? (103)

In this passage, we can see how the fantastic genre allows imagination to roam free and thus multiplies the possible outcomes for each story. “Afterlife” is the short story that challenges the most catholic representations of life after death by presenting not one but an array of alternative afterlife constructions.

The first of these alternative constructions is the possibility for Bill to come back from the dead and relive his entire life, which he decides to do yet another time. The idea that a man gets to relive his life after his death is a fictional construction highly in contrast with the religious dogmas of heaven and hell conveyed by Christianity. To accentuate this contrast between religion and the fantastic genre, the narration also

introduces the notion of reincarnation, which is what Bill hopes for at the beginning of the story. In this sense, the fantastic challenges the preconceived notions of the afterlife that the reader might have from religious teachings. Here, it offers the reader and the characters an alternative afterlife scenario borrowed from the Oriental spiritual belief in reincarnation. According to this ideology, Bill could return from the dead as any kind of living being as the following quote shows: “As long as he doesn’t have to come back as a dung beetle, or something.” (192) However, reincarnation is not the subject matter of this story, or at least not in the typical sense for when Bill asks Isaac Harris if he will be reincarnated, the latter answers: “not really.” (192) Indeed, Bill has a choice between reliving his life in a kind of personalized reincarnation and just dying in a straightforward manner that would imply him leaving forever the world of the living as well as the world of the dead. Harris describes the second option as: “you wink out. Poof. Candle-in-the-wind type of thing.” (196) This alternative ‘afterdeath’ scenario is close to the atheist belief that nothing happens after death, except that in “Afterlife”, the notion of nothingness is embellished by the fantastic construction of the afterlife management and the choice Bill has to make.

As we can see, these five pieces of American fiction put imagination and the marvelous forward by debunking Christian constructions of the afterlife. Indeed, there is no reason as to why the protagonists find themselves in difficult and sometimes horrifying afterlife situations; no karmic or spiritual forces are at work. The fantastic can irrupt in any given life, as well as in death, and at any given time. In the excipit of “You Know They Got a Hell of a Band” the narrative voice explains the characters’ fate in the following terms:

She and Clark had stumbled into Rock and Roll Heaven, but it was actually Rock and Roll Hell. This had not happened because they were evil people; it had not happened because the old gods were punishing them; it had happened because they had gotten lost in the woods, that was all, and getting lost in the woods was a thing that could happen to anybody. (416)

This conclusive quote proves well Stephen King’s position in regards to the theme of the afterlife, it is for him yet another narrative item that allows him to expand and glorify his genres of predilection; horror and most importantly fantasy.

* * *

CONCLUSION:

We have attempted to answer the question of how the thanatographic genre brings about a liminal afterlife setting in which the fantastic genre challenges the preconceived notions of the afterlife. This has been done by the means of the study of the main themes and literary techniques at work in the narratives.

In the first part of the analysis of the five short stories, we studied Stephen King's characterization of the protagonists as subjects suffering from multiple sorts of ailments that prevent them from having a clear understanding of their deceased state. As they move forward in their journey through death, the characters are deprived of their language skills, of their memory and even of their vision, placing them in a vulnerable position of ignorance. In parallel, the reader also experiences the deprivation of knowledge through character identification, with the intent of obtaining a suspenseful reading experience. Indeed, in many of the short stories in this corpus, the characters' realization of their own death is delayed in order to obtain a narrative intrigue that leads up to a climactic revelation of truth.

In the second part of this study, we saw how, in order to carry out this narrative structure, Stephen King makes use of the trope of defamiliarization that introduces recognizable elements of life into the unknown afterlife setting, and thus instills confusion in the characters. Faithful to the genres it is rooted in, thanatography makes use of the uncanny to delay the denouement of the plot as well as to create an atmosphere of strangeness. The setting for these stories revealed itself as a liminal space (similar to Foucault's heterotopias) in which defamiliarization is coupled with temporal discrepancies with the intent to maximize the characters' distress.

In the final section, the study pointed out the similarities between the common societal representations of hell and the liminal heterotopic space in which the deceased characters take action. The representation of this hellish setting guided us towards the analysis of the omnipresent notion of religion as yet another familiar point of reference for the characters, as well as for the readers. However, as confusion

concerning the plot and the environment dispersed, the religious trope revealed itself as the representation of a threatening ominous institution. With the characters' eventual realization of their death came the triumph of the fantastic genre over rational and religious thinking. Once the protagonists gave up on rationalism, they gave in to the uncanny and the marvelous and faced the endless possibilities of life after death. In this way, the supernatural manages to fill the vacuum of the lack of religious belief that the fantastic genre might imply, offering various alternative scenarios in which imagination debunks the dogmas of religion.

Our study began by a series of interrogations; one of them concerned the characters and their literary function in the five short stories. Innovation was brought in this corpus by the simple fact that it put in action a group of atypical characters, due to their deceased state. By giving these commonly silenced subjects a voice, Stephen King managed to make of their situation a central focal point of the stories, thus bypassing the general belief that the format of the short story does not allow much room for character development. In this corpus, the treatment of the deceased characters (as well as the polyphonic mode of narration) actually supports the choice of such format, for it gives a greater power to suspense and delivers the necessary effect required for a gripping narrative and a successful denouement. In this sense, one could wonder how prosopopeia and thanatographic writing could be addressed in a longer literary format such as the novel?

Furthermore, we asked ourselves the question of what the thanatographic genre implied in the context of an afterlife narrative. It could be argued that the genre offers Stephen King the freedom to explore the trope of life after death by the means of the characters and the setting. This freedom of writing also exudes from the fantastic genre, which goes beyond any rational or societal preconceived idea one could have about the afterlife and life itself. In this sense, Stephen King goes as far as presenting not only the afterlife, but also the world of the living as a heterotopic space in which the supernatural can emerge at any moment, as "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" affirms in its excipit⁴³.

⁴³ It had happened because they had gotten lost in the woods, that was all, and getting lost in the woods was a thing that could happen to anybody" (416)
Quote from the short story "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band". King, Stephen. *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*. New York: Viking, 1993.

Thus, this corpus can be interpreted as a glorification of the fantastic genre and its creative and imaginative freedom that extends to all aspects of literature and, if one is brave enough to believe, to all aspects of life and death as well.

King makes use of the thanatographic genre to engage the reader into a cultural and almost philosophical reflection on death and the fate of men after it. Through an identifiable characterization of the protagonists, he reanimates in the reader a silenced plight for answers and explanations on the afterlife. Upon reading these stories, we find our total attention focused on the plot, immersed in the climactic diegesis. The suspenseful structure of the narratives and the ambivalence of the setting create the desire for a satisfactory denouement, which never occurs. By exploring the notion of the afterlife, King pushes the metaphysical reflection to the boundaries of the unknown. We are lead, through this corpus, to look beyond the godly and societal explanations of life after death.

Through Fantasy, King draws a spiral-esque trajectory in his reflection; starting with a literary quest for answers on the diegetic ground floor, and ending with a similar (though much more arduous) quest for metaphysical answers on a second level of interpretation. Far from a philosophical study, this corpus leaves the reader on the last level of interpretation with only a hint of spiritual inquiry, for its true purpose is a successful literary experience. That, King delivers in the form of well-constructed and gripping short narratives that explore topics nowadays far from common in the literary realm.

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