Experienced Intensity through Character Description in Stephen King’s Cell

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Abstract
This essay investigates experienced intensity through character description and development in Stephen King’s *Cell*. The thesis of the essay is that a deliberately produced narrative indeterminacy, used mainly on the level of character descriptions, is what produces intensity by holding the readers of *Cell* in suspense, i.e., in a state of uncertainty. While King might stretch the fundamentals of the classic horror genre, he does not abandon them, experimenting with a genre that makes the readers wonder what to expect next, thereby creating suspenseful questions. Since the focus of the essay is the readers’ reactions on character descriptions, I apply reader response theory and the works of Norman Holland, David Bleich and Yvonne Leffler. The result of the investigation shows that narrative techniques, such as placing brief descriptions of characters in the course of events in the narrative together with altered norms and normality allow the readers to experience heightened emotions and feelings. King alters norms and normality, and presents character descriptions in a fashion that is unexpected; thus the readers do not know exactly how to relate to these character descriptions.

**Keywords:** narratology, apocalypse, zombies, horror, intensity, reader response theory, character descriptions, psychological reader response, subjective reader response
Many people read novels within the horror genre because of the urge to experience a heightened sense of intensity, but what exactly is it that triggers such feelings of intensity? In order to investigate this question I will look at a particular work written by an acknowledged master of the genre, Stephen King’s apocalyptic horror novel *Cell* (2006). The novel is about a cataclysmic event known as The Pulse. A dangerous virus scrambles people’s brainwaves by a signal broadcasted globally over the GSM network, a signal that is carried by every cellular phone operating in the world. The readers are kept in the dark, however, throughout the beginning of the story. All they know is that The Pulse has happened and the effect it has had, but not its cause. Instead they follow the main protagonist Clayton Riddell on his quest to reach his son before the young boy switches on his cell phone. The thesis of the essay is that a deliberately produced narrative indeterminacy, used on the level of character descriptions, produces intensity by holding the readers of *Cell* in suspense, i.e., in a state of uncertainty.

Since my main focus will be the readers’ reactions to particular aspects of King’s narrative technique, the investigation will be based on concepts from reader response theory, a critical school that offers explanations to a variety of factors that make a reading experience intense. “Intense” is a French loan word which means being “[r]aised to or existing in a strained or very high degree; very strong or acute; violent, vehement, extreme, excessive; of colour, very deep; of a feeling, ardent” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The psychological reader response-theorist Norman Holland and subjective reader response-theorist David Bleich show how actions, characters and images that are omitted, incomplete, not clearly explained, or could have multiple meanings generate questions that in turn cause intensity. These generated questions can be usefully discussed with the help of Yvonne Leffler’s narrative theories.

An author can use narrative techniques that engage the readers’ emotions. Holland believes that readers react to literary texts in the same way as they react to events in their every day life (57). He argues that an overriding psychological trait is readers’ need of control. They must find a character to relate to, and this process is all about interpretation. Just as in events in our daily lives, the goal of interpretation for readers is to fulfill their psychological needs and desires. When they read a text that threatens the way they normally interpret texts defense mechanisms set in. These defense mechanisms are experienced as stressful to the readers, which adds to the intensity in the reading experience by generating questions that need answers. Holland refers to these defense mechanisms as our *identity theme*.
Bleich for his part argues that when reading literature, readers interpret the text filtered through their interpretation of the world. When the questions readers ask in connection to a text do not receive clear answers (as in genres such as the detective story) but ambivalent ones, the projection of the world produces a twisted, distorted image; the text does not conform with the idea the readers had from the start, which, as with Holland, in turn leads to intensity. Bleich emphasizes the need for resymbolization (65–66). As infants we learn a symbolization system of an elementary sort that is rendered unsatisfactory as we encounter new objects. These encounters lead to a need for resymbolization, which *Merriam-Webster* defines as “a mental transformation either for better or for worse consisting in the finding of new meanings and new forms of expression for one’s thoughts and desires”. Readers too need to re-define previously known reference points, what Bleich refers to as a resymbolization of readers’ symbolization system, and this process can be explained as a need for interpretation (67).

Leffler, finally, discusses reader response specifically in connection with the horror genre, which to her is an aggravated type of the genre of suspense (*Skräck som fiktion* 28). The readers expect to experience suspense when they read a text from the horror genre. She argues that it is possible to describe a suspense story as a structure of questions and answers. In a horror story, the answers received are ambivalent and generate more questions, what she terms *micro*-questions. Leffler refers to “macro-questions” as all-embracing questions and “micro-questions” as small questions that are constantly asked in connection to the text (*Horror as pleasure* 98–102). It is the micro-questions the readers ask in reference to a horror novel that manifest their feelings of intensity, a stress caused by their need to interpret what they read and then rearrange their symbolization system (as in Bleich).

An author may normally use different techniques to help the readers categorize the different characters as either protagonists or antagonists, thereby helping them to place the different characters in the safe or unsafe department of their symbolization system. Richard J. Gerrig, a scholar in narratology, writes about techniques a writer can use in order for the readers to identify with a character in the story. This identification is needed to establish a psychological connection to the narrative. Gerrig explains that a character with which readers identify must experience a crucial event that arouses empathy (79–80). One condition for identification, Leffler adds, is that the protagonist, unlike opponents or “monsters”, is perceived as a positive character in order to correspond to the readers’ idealized self-perceptions (*Skräck som fiktion* 59). In addition, to assign certain attributes to characters, for example weaknesses, is according to Leffler something that helps the readers to place the
characters of that type with the good guys (Skräck som fiktion 58–59). Leffler also argues that the readers’ sympathies lie with the anticipated victim (Horror as Pleasure 102). The identification can be strengthened by a characterization that is brief and action-oriented. The characters in King’s novels are often described in a protracted manner, but in the quote below from Cell, however, we are introduced very briefly to a character that has sympathetic features and is afraid because he is under attack:

*Look out!* The little guy with the mustache screamed, but he wasn’t looking out, not the little guy with the mustache; the little guy with the mustache, the first normal person with whom Clay Riddell had spoken since this craziness began […]. (King 24)

The character descriptions in this quote are reduced to a minimum and are included in the action of the narrative, a technique that create sympathy for the victims. A presentation of a scene in this manner makes the readers feel like they are part of the story, that they are momentarily sharing the character’s emotions of horror and panic.

However, the main narrative technique that King uses to create the feeling of intensity is a type of character description that goes against these common procedures. While he too may ask his readers to categorize the characters into groups, as well as to identify with the good characters, he as often creates readerly uncertainty. King uses narrative techniques that engage the readers’ symbolization system, creating the need for interpretation and what Bleich terms resymbolization. Readers usually want to feel intelligent and have their questions answered in a predictable manner. When they encounter a character that they have never before met, they ask many questions because it is part of human nature to approach the unknown with caution. The reason for doing so is an attempt to recognize previously known reference points in their symbolization system. It is by characterization and identification with characters that the readers connect psychologically to the narrative, but it is by putting the characters in situations where the readers have to question them that King awakens suspense. Readers of a novel such as *Cell* are forced to ask many questions in order to be able to interpret the new set of symbolization system. Unpredictable or missing answers lead to feelings of insecurity and stress, which is a state of mind that King deliberately wants to create: when the answers do not come as expected or are unwanted, the readers’ minds are jolted. That is when feelings of heightened stress emerge, which adds to the feeling of intensity.

There are many characters in *Cell* that the readers have difficulties to categorize. If they cannot do so, they begin to search for information that will help them with this quest, and if
the information provided is ambiguous, the reading experience is intensified. An example of this technique comes early on in the novel:

Clay didn’t think. If he had thought, Pixie Dark might have had her throat opened like the woman in the power suit. He didn’t even look. He simply reached down and to his right, seized the top of the small treasures shopping bag, and swung it at the back of Pixie Light’s head as she leaped at her erstwhile friend with her outstretched hands making claw-fish against the blue sky. If he missed – (King 11; bold in original)

Coming to this passage for the first time, readers might ask the micro-questions: “Who is Pixie Light”, “Who is Pixie Dark”, “Who is the woman in the power suit and how did she get her throat opened”, or “What will happen if he misses”? The questions are short and intense, because this passage depicts rapid action, in a short period of time. The readers do not know if the characters that are presented in the above passage will be of vital importance to the unfolding of the narrative, nor do they know if these characters are good or bad. The characters are introduced in a way that awakens the curiosity in the readers, who want to find information in the novel about them, a narrative drive that forces the readers to push on in the novel in order to find out what side the newly introduced individuals are on.

Brief character descriptions (sometimes by simply adding an adjective or two to the person in question) is a technique King uses frequently: “‘What’s your name dear?’ asked a plump woman who came angling across to their side of the highway” (King 84). In this quote readers are introduced to a character that possibly could be another protagonist. King thus forces the readers to find information about the character, in order to gain an impression of that character’s features. This particular character is simply referred to as “the plump woman”. However, as the readers continue reading they get more clues about this character, clues that lead to a sense of ambiguity: “Now Alice looked with reflective mistrust at the plump woman…” (King 84). In this quote readers understand that the plump woman may not be a reliable person after all, even though she “looked back at her with sweet interest” (King 85) and “certainly wasn’t one of the phone-crazies” (King 85). Other details are added that increase the uncertainty: “To be approached as if they were at a get-acquainted tea instead of fleeing a burning city didn’t seem normal. But under these circumstances, just what was?” (King 85). Also, the main protagonist’s reaction to the encounter of this character makes readers realize that something is off about her: “‘Alice,’ the plump woman said and her lips curved in a maternal smile as sweet as her look of interest. There was no reason that smile should have set Clay on edge more than he already was, but it did” (King 85). There are
numerous of these types of compressed character introductions throughout the novel, and as can be understood from the quotes above, small, short bursts of information help the readers conclude whether the different characters are dependable. The readers have to base their opinion on the brief information given, thus King is pressuring his readers into making fast decisions. It turns out that the plump woman is a religious fanatic and Clay is forced to take her down, in order to protect Alice. King is deliberately forcing his readers to search for information and by providing brief character descriptions he makes room for interpretation, thereby causing the readers to be easily thrown off guard, and heightening reading intensity.

While the lady in the previous example was introduced in a neutral way, King sometimes uses a technique that involves first giving a character high credibility only to make the readers question it. Searching for information about the different characters becomes a quest in itself alongside the reading of the story, a quest that creates stress. One example of this strategy is when the protagonists come to Gaiten Academy and meet the Headmaster Ardaí, “The Head”. The readers immediately try to place him on either the good or the bad side, which is not too easy as it proves. On the one hand King ascribes features that make the readers find the Headmaster trustworthy and well educated. The Headmaster is an old gentleman with a cane who delivers words of wisdom every now and then: “As in *le moyen âge*. Translation, Jordan?” ‘The middle age, sir.’ ‘Good.’ He patted Jordan’s shoulder” (King 201). This technique makes the readers initially trust what he says, but they are not able to fully place him on the good side. At the same time, however, there is something off about the Headmaster so that the readers cannot really relax and know if he is reliable or not. He is used to inform the readers about the further effects of the Pulse, for example on human evolution, but will he be exposed to the Pulse or turn on our group in some other way? The Headmaster insinuates that he has studied a lot of psychology and states that mankind has a core, a single basic carrier wave, and a single line of written code that cannot be stripped, which he refers to as the “Prime Directive”. He states that if mankind were stripped of all conscious thought, all memory and all ratiocinative ability, what would remain is a terrible madness:

Although neither the Freudians nor the Jungians come right out and say it, they strongly suggest that we may have a core, a single basic carrier wave, or – to use language with which Jordan is comfortable – a single line of written code which cannot be stripped. “The PD,” Jordan said. “The prime directive”. “Yes,” the Head agreed. “At bottom, you see, we are not Homo sapiens at all. Our core is madness. The prime directive is murder. What Darwin was too polite to say, my friends, is
that we came to rule the earth not because we were the smartest, or even the meanest, but because we have always been the craziest, most murderous motherfuckers in the jungle. And that is what the Pulse exposed five days ago”.

(King 217)

The readers are forced to search for information in the text about the headmaster to find out if he will turn into a zombie or not and with everything else going on, this turns out to be a quite excruciating reading experience. King finally lets the readers learn about the headmaster’s fate: he has been telepathically forced to write the word for insane in fourteen different languages and then he has been made to “plunge the tip of the heavy fountain pen with which he had written into his right eye and from there into the clever old brain behind it” (279–80). Killing him in such a fashion enhances the sympathy and empathy the readers have had time to develop for this character. The readers now have a major uncertainty resolved, and they get a sigh of relief when they come to the conclusion that the headmaster did not turn on our friends.

In King’s novels there are usually two sides or two teams that fight each other in one way or another, and the readers are expected to cheer for one of them. When discussing these two sides from a reader response point of view, it is easy to understand that the suspense increases if the readers do not know which side they should connect to, or if they cannot be sure that the side they choose is the correct one. This feeling of suspense adds to the intense reading experience. In Cell, the opponents or the “phone-crazies” are going about their business during the daytime, thus forcing the helpers, or the “normies”, to live by night if they want to avoid confrontation with the phone-crazies. After the helpers have burnt the phone-crazies at the Gaiten Academy in New Hampshire, the main antagonist, The Raggedy Man, communicates with the “normies” by telepathy. However, in a dream the Raggedy Man places his hand above each of the characters in our group and lets it be known (in Latin) that the characters on the helping side are the crazy ones:

And he’d said, ‘Ecce homo – insana.’ And the crowd – thousands of them – had roared back, ‘DON’T TOUCH!’ in a single voice. The man had gone to Clay and repeated this. With his hand above Alice’s head the man had said, ‘Ecce femina – insana.’ Above Jordan, ‘Ecce puer – insanus.’ (King 265)

When The Raggedy Man shows his followers that the helpers are the divergent type of people, our group has become a minority, the readers ask themselves if they should not actually be cheering for the other team? The technique of holding the readers uninformed thus generates micro questions that the readers are made to ask of the text. The readers
are not given any extra input from either the protagonists or the antagonists; they are left wondering what the different teams are up to. This narrative technique creates an informational void for the readers, who are left in a state of uncertainty that makes them ask multiple micro-questions in connection to the novel in order to find out what the teams are up to. The question whether the team the readers are cheering for is the correct one is spelled out by the main protagonist, Clay, who wonders about the people that have started to help the phone-crazies: “When does a collaborator stop being a collaborator? The answer, it seemed to him, was when the collaborators became the clear majority. Then the ones who weren’t collaborators became …” (King 303). This quote underlines one central question the readers have asked themselves in connection to the narrative of the novel. By adding Clay’s interior monologue King heightens the feeling of stress and thereby the level of intensity for the readers.

Omitting information in character descriptions invites interpretation and as new information is added, the number of characters that are in the grey zone of being either helpers or opponents increase. In order for the long list of characters not to be confusing, and add a positive flow of information to the reading experience, King helps the readers by occasionally reflecting back to the different characters in the novel:

He thought of Power Suit Woman and Pixie Light; of the lunatic in the gray pants and the shredded tie; the man in the business suit who had bitten the ear right off at the side of the dog’s head. He thought of the naked man jabbing the car aerials back and forth as he ran. No, surveying was not in the phone-crazies repertoire. They just came at you. But if there were normal people holed up in these houses – some of them anyway – where were the phone-crazies? Clay didn’t know. (King 95)

Even though many of the characters mentioned in the quote above are not yet zombies, they are not on the helping side either, and thus readers may categorize them as opponents. Together with the hoarding zombies on the opposing side, the readers fear the protagonists will run into trouble. There are very few characters that actually turn out to be on the helping side, a fact that makes the readers terrified whenever our group run into other characters.

What creates the intensity can partly be explained by what comes from the unresolved nature of the characters’ fates:

‘What about the man who hit him?’ Tom asked. ‘The crazy guy? Where’d he go?’ ‘Out,’ the desk clerk said. ‘That was when I felt locking the door to be by
far the wisest course. After he went out. He looked at them with a combination of fear and prurient, gossipy greed that Clay found singularly distasteful.

‘What’s happening out there? How bad has it gotten?’ (King 45)

This quote is one example of how King wants the readers to ask questions in reference to the text (as referred to by Leffler as micro-questions). To not to let the readers in on the different characters’ fates is a narrative grip King uses that has the power to hold the readers in suspense. The emotions readers experience when they are being held in a state where they lack information about what is going on in the development of the outcome for the different characters leads to suspense which in turn leads to an intense reading experience when the readers are kept in the dark over an extended period of time. The readers do not know what will happen and want to – need to, find information in the novel in order to be able to interpret the unexpected in this ongoing war between the hoarding zombies and our little group of protagonists. King does not let the readers in on what the opponents are planning, the readers are kept in a form of ignorance and this lack of information leads to an increased number of micro-questions asked in connection to the novel. These questions in turn lead to a feeling of heightened emotion, and as the search for information about the characters’ fates escalates, the reading experience is intensified.

Our group of protagonists meets the phone-crazies from time to time in the novel; a severe source of teeth-grinding fear that intensifies the reading experience due to unusually detailed character descriptions. An example of such an encounter is when our group is leaving the burning city Boston and spots a mechanic eating pumpkins in a garden. The mechanic is wearing an overall with the name George written on his left breast, whereby King is referring to this character as “George the Pumpkin Eater”. As our group lies watching, two more phone-crazies approach: “Oh God, two more’, Alice said” (King 125). The two newcomers are described more thoroughly than many other characters throughout the novel so the readers get a clearer image of just how revolting and terrifying the appearance of the zombies actually are. In doing so, King heightens the sense impression that the phone-crazies create in the readers, and he is doing it with impeccable timing because our group is not on the run at this time but have the opportunity to study the enemy: “Through the open back gate came a woman of about forty in a dirty gray pants suit and an elderly man dressed in jogging shorts and a T-shirt with GRAY POWER printed across the front”. The woman’s clothes are rags and the elderly man is limping badly, and “[h]is scrawny left leg was caked with dried blood, and that foot was missing its running shoe” (King 125). Then, as the elderly man
smashes a pumpkin into two halves, readers are shocked by the rapid action that comes next: “What happened next happened fast. George dropped his mostly eaten pumpkin in his lap, rocked forward, grabbed the old man’s head in his big, orange-stained hands, and twisted it. They heard the crack of the old man’s breaking neck even through the glass” (King 127). In this passage the readers get a clear picture of how terrible the phone-crazies have become, thus invoking their fear of a gruesome outcome. This in turn forces the readers to search for additional information in the character descriptions to lessen their fear of the unknown, a narrative grip that adds to the intense reading experience.

Another obvious source of intensity in a King novel is produced by his antagonists, the “monsters”. In Cell the key antagonist is the Raggedy Man, who King gives features that are both appealing and repulsive, so that the readers do not know where to place him. The Raggedy Man is the President of Harvard before the apocalypse, and after he has had his brainwaves scrambled by The Pulse; all this combined means that the readers cannot possibly know how he will act. Cleverly creating a villain or an antagonist that is not fully repulsive, but has properties that are alluring and sympathetic, King at first makes the readers uncertain whether the antagonist is “rotten-to-the-core-bad” or if he is actually going to be on the helper side after a while. Will there be a “twist in the tale”? There is no way the readers can maintain a steady reference point in their symbolization system to help them interpret such an encounter. As Cell is an American story it is not improbable that at least a few readers are familiar with James Whitcomb Riley’s poem The Raggedy Man, in which the main character is a good guy. When the readers first encounter the character “The Raggedy Man” while reading Cell, they unconsciously strive to find recognition points that place the character in the safe/unsafe compartment in their symbolization system. The contradictory characteristics of this main antagonist’s character make the readers ask multiple questions, and these questions trigger emotions of amazement, surprise, stress etc. Taken together, these emotions cause the readers to experience intensity because they have to resymbolize the known reference points of character descriptions in their symbolization system that they have previously ascribed to a) the President of Harvard and b) the character from Riley’s poem the readers remember to be a good guy. This is another example of how King alters the readers’ points of recognition; he makes the readers continuously question their previously received points of recognition in their symbolization system.

The Raggedy Man in time becomes a main epicenter of fear imposed upon the readers, i.e., another source for an intense reading experience. As the American philosopher Noël Carroll states, the “monsters” need to be frightening to the readers: they need to be
lethally dangerous and preferably psychologically threatening as well (43). Leffler states that when the protagonist encounters the monster, it is not only to appear as a danger to him or her, it must also be perceived as an interesting threat by the readers (*Skräck som fiktion* 42-43). The “monster” according to Leffler, always represents a conflict between two or more culturally established categories and this implies that the design of the “monster” is based on a combination of contradicting elements (47). The properties of the main antagonist should be given attributes partly with the intention to attract the readers’ interest, but also to get the readers to distance themselves from the character. Leffler therefore argues that monsters need to be impure (*Skräck som fiktion* 47), and Carroll adds that their impurity needs to “conflict between two or more standing cultural categories” (43). The Ragged Man embodies a categorical contradiction between man and zombie, and the readers do not really know how to interpret the way this peculiar antagonist thinks or behaves. These thoughts and questions the readers ask about the monster trigger emotions of stress, a heightened feeling to add intensity to the reading experience.

Apart from the threatening and unreliable characterization of the Raggedy Man, King also introduces other features around the “monster” character that produce intensity by playing with readers’ perception of norms, expectations and points of recognition. When the main protagonist, Clay, meets him at the final playing ground in Kashwak, the Raggedy Man explains that he could have brought more zombies/phoners. He does this by entering Clay’s mind and showing him an image of a text written in pink chalk saying: “KASHWAK=NO-FO” (King 293). The readers then understand that the Raggedy Man has unique telepathic powers and does not need to communicate orally (the Pulse has unlocked parts of the human brain that was not used before, and that is why the “phoners” have these telepathic and telekinetic powers). By adding these new telekinetic powers to the Raggedy Man as well as to the other antagonists, King has subverted the norms by which the readers recognize normality. As if trying to keep up with all the different characters that are introduced and following their fates was not enough, adding altered points of recognition and twisting norms and normality, add to heightened feelings of stress and intensity for the readers.

To conclude, narrative techniques relating to characterization are what makes King’s *Cell* an intense reading experience. Rapid characterizations amidst action make the readers experience heightened emotions and feelings. Also, King’s brief character descriptions and introductions are presented in a fashion that makes the readers not know exactly how to relate to the different characters. King deliberately chooses the level of information he shares with the readers, thus forcing them to constantly wanting to read on to find out more. This
uncertainty on the readers’ behalf is a major contributor to the feelings of intensity, which the readers experience throughout the novel. Reversals in which credibility of the characters is questioned places the readers’ minds in a position where they cannot be sure if their previously received reference points are still valid; the readers are being held in an uncertainty relating to which of the two sides the characters belong to. Furthermore, characterization is made in a way that enables the readers to psychologically connect with the characters’ fates, thus making the readers emotionally connected to the characters. Holding the readers in an informational void and forcing the readers into constant resymbolization of their symbolization system in regards of e.g. detailed character descriptions of evil characters and the mixed antagonists in the novel are some of the major factors that make the experience intense when reading Cell. King’s altered norms and normality forces the readers into resymbolization of their symbolization system, a technique that add to heightened feelings of stress and intensity for the readers. Roland Barthes has argued that a book cannot be read with a consistent level of intensity from the beginning to the end, claiming that readers skim and skip certain passages in search of knowledge about the characters’ fates (Pleasure of the Text 9–10). I, however, would claim that Cell differs from that normality because King succeeds in sustaining lengthy suspense in this novel.
Works Cited

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


