

**Macabre Collectibles:
Collecting Culture and Stephen King**

by

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Author's declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Objects have a significant place in Stephen King's horror fiction and the landscape he has created in his numerous novels and short stories. The human-thing relationship in his fiction, however, has been generally reduced by critics to human-machine relationship. Going beyond this reductive duality and putting more emphasis on *things* in King's horror factory is what this project is about. One of the best examples of *useless* objects known as things in Thing Theory is those accumulated as part of a collection. This study addresses the states of possessing and being possessed developed in the context of collecting in King's selected fiction. Collecting in Stephen King involves more than cataloguing horror features and/or random *bric-à-brac*. There are instances in King's novels where characters are described by their collections, to show their obsessions and deviations. This study goes even further and explores the system of collecting in order to discuss King's career, the genre(s) he is associated with, and the social and cultural condition he has been part of. At the end of this journey, he is portrayed as a collectible himself.

Of the four novels read in this study, *It*, *Needful Things*, and *Duma Key* respectively represent three modes of collecting, that is, systematic, fetish object, and souvenir. The last novel, *Misery*, is analyzed in terms of seriality, the intrinsic value common in all collections. This simple categorization, however, is not the purpose of this study. Concepts of hyperreality and simulation have been used to enrich the discussion in a higher level. Following the example of Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality,"

the goal is to re-visit the selected novels to provide commentaries on King's horror fiction and its significance in American popular culture.

The journey begins with the metaphor of *It* as a *Wunderkammer* and King's systematic collecting of relics of an old genre. The order of things and its epistemological implications are discussed in the peculiar space created in the novel as a cabinet of curiosities. The time-space interactions in the anomalous environment within a collection are covered both in *It* and *Duma Key*. Besides a wider range of narrative possibilities, the heterotopic space in King's sanctuary island of Duma Key provides damaged people with an opportunity to re-member and become full again. The therapeutic function of artistic creativity is also discussed in the context of collecting as a creative activity. The significant role of objects in identity formation finds an eerie dimension when pathological and extreme forms of collecting are analyzed in *Needful Things*. Authenticity, which is of great importance in collecting culture, is another theme in King's little shop of horrors. The concept of fake things in this Faustian parable is expanded to a dichotomy between the real and unreal in King's landscape of horror and his writing career. The chapter on *Misery* considers the fate of the popular author (King himself included) in the context of seriality. The confrontation of a serial writer and a serial killer (both considered as collectors) provides us with a dark image of genre writers bound by market demands and celebrity writers threatened by their fans.

Stephen King, in short, has been created and nurtured in a collecting culture along with other related trends like pastiche and kitsch. He is a macabre collector as much as the constant readers who do not miss a single King.

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To Maria and Sophia

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Introduction

Stephen King and His Things

Stephen King is the best-known contemporary horror writer and a major player of the genre in general who has provided his audience with a profound understanding of Americans' fears and forbidden desires during his long career. He has been called "a phenomenon" by Michael R. Collings, among others, partly because he gave new life to the horror genre and turned it into a bestselling one, but mostly due to the fact that his success has not been limited to a few hits only. Since *Carrie* (1974), his debut novel, he has been constantly on bestseller lists and single-handedly has made an industry of selling hardcovers, paperbacks and rights to his novels and stories for cinematic and theatrical productions. Except for his *Rage* (published under the pseudonym Richard Bachman in 1977), which was withdrawn from publication because of some controversies and at the author's request, all of his other books are still in print and every new title remains on the bestseller lists for a few weeks at least.

Although King is mostly considered a popular writer, his works have attracted considerable attention from academia and have been the subject of serious critical publications. His career has been explored in various ways, but one aspect that concerns the present study is the idea of *things* in his horror factory. Objects, with their

unique ability to “mediate emotions, relationships and identities” (Attfield 121), have been the subject of discussions in different disciplines from philosophy to anthropology, and have been treated variably in arts and literature. There are, for instance, schools of writing in which a higher level of priority and agency has been given to objects rather than their common symbolic or metaphoric status in service of characterization or plot development in a fictional work. The *Chosisme* genre, with French novelist George Perec (1936-1982) as one of the best known practitioners, portrays “human life mainly in terms of the characters’ acquisition, use, and disposal of objects” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton xi). In another extreme form, objects as the agent or medium for supernatural or demonic forces and experiences are commonly used in gothic and horror writing traditions. William W. Jacobs’ “The Monkey’s Paw,” Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Bottle Imp” are only some of the more famous examples.

There is, however, a distinction between objects and things in a multitude of publications categorized under the broad name Thing Theory. In an introduction to this relatively new branch of critical theory, Bill Brown tackles the ambiguity in the idea of *thing*. According to Brown, we tend to “look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*),” but we rarely pay attention to their *thingness*. He argues that:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and

exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

One of the best examples of such a relation between humans and *useless* objects is the complex relationship that develops between collectors and things accumulated in their collections.

The idea of things, and not objects with supernatural properties, as the subject of horror fiction presented itself when I was reading the horrible story of the Collyer brothers, infamous for their compulsive hoarding, who were found trapped and dead in their house full of stuff. The picture that Randy Frost and Gail Steketee give of the Collyer mansion in the prologue to a book on compulsive hoarding is quite similar to the image of a haunted house with no ghosts but full of things:

The house was packed with junk—newspapers, tin cans, magazines, umbrellas, old stoves, pipes, books, and much more. A labyrinth of tunnels snaked through each room, with papers, boxes, car parts, and antique buggies lining the sides of the tunnels all the way to the ceiling. Some of the tunnels appeared to be dead ends, although closer inspection revealed them to be secret passageways. Some of the tunnels were booby-trapped to make noise or, worse, to collapse on an unsuspecting intruder. A cardboard box hung low from the roof of one tunnel, and when disturbed it rained tin cans onto any trespasser. More serious were

booby traps in which the overhanging boxes were connected to heavier objects such as rocks that could knock someone out. (2)

The traps served their purpose and kept the intruders out, but the only people ensnared in them were the two brothers themselves. The menace of stuff portrayed in this story made me think of things and collectors in horror literature, particularly the works of Stephen King as one of the most prominent horror writers.

In King's fiction and the landscape he has created in his numerous novels and short stories, objects have a significant place and "the inanimate is animate," as Tony Magistrale concisely pinpoints (*Moral Voyages* 106). The human-thing relationship in King's fiction, however, has been generally reduced by critics to human-machine relationship, and "malevolent machines," in particular (Egan 201). James Egan, for instance, has done a noteworthy study of *Christine* (1983) and some of King's short stories including "The Mangler," "Trucks," and "The Word Processor of the Gods" (Egan 201-204). Egan's analysis is specifically based on being betrayed by technology in the encounter between man and machines and "the complex, perilous relationship of the mechanical to the humanistic, placing particular emphasis on the destructive psychological interplay of machines and their makers" (Egan 201).

Going beyond this reductive human-machine duality and putting more emphasis on things is something rare in such studies. Things (and not machines only) have a great potential to be the subject of critical analyses because they develop on human intentions and emotions, and turn into extensions to human bodies. Only a few critics have studied *Christine* as fueled and driven by the "residues of the feelings of the

people” who have owned the car (King, *The Shining* 278). Christine is the physical embodiment of all the rage (and, of course, the obsessive attachment) that Roland D. LeBay and Arnie Cunningham feel. The car develops a personality of its own from the concentration and attention it receives from the owners, like a prosthesis gradually blending into their bodies. Similarly, the marvelous word processor in “The Word Processor of the Gods” extends the mental faculties of the main character (who is a writer) to the point that he is able to change his immediate environment and rewrite reality.

Machines such as the industrial laundry press machine in “The Mangler” or the lawnmower in “The Lawnmower Man” can also be regarded as merely inanimate objects that come to life and are animated by demonic powers, which is conventional in gothic literature. This perspective is justified by King’s fascination with the uncanny effect in his portrayal of ordinary characters in not-so-ordinary situations. King’s horrible objects are mostly ordinary objects, and the novelty lies in his depiction of the horror of everyday lives in his “kitchen-sink” novels. This is obviously the simplest and most straight-forward representation of the human-thing relationship in the horror genre.

There are also objects used by the main characters to showcase their extraordinary powers. The telekinetic powers Carrie White uses in her bloody revenge in King’s first published novel, or the “token-object reading” or psychometry power that *The Dead Zone’s* Johnny Smith is bestowed with after his accident that enables him to know things about people by touching objects that belonged to them are examples of this type. These are categorized in terms of the agency given to the human end of the

object-human relationship. In such cases, the objects are sort of a medium for the paranormal abilities of the main characters. They are used to embody their supernatural powers and give those powers a more concrete existence.

The Collector King

Generally, there are two kinds of relationships between objects and characters in King's fiction, whenever objects have a significant role in the narrative: the first is when a character is possessed by an object of supernatural nature; the second is when a character is terrifyingly possessive towards things (including objectified persons). This study will address these states of possessing and being possessed in King's selected fiction but within the culturally significant context of collecting. The main focus of this project is collecting behaviors (in the narrators and among the characters) and how the context of collecting redefines and adds other dimensions to the human-thing relationship. These are topics that have certainly been undervalued and mostly neglected in other studies.

It has been mentioned in biographical texts on King that he is a collector himself. In an interview with *Paris Review*, he makes it clear that he collects but is not "a huge collector":

I've probably got a dozen signed Faulkners and a lot of Theodore Dreiser. I've got *Reflections in a Golden Eye* by Carson McCullers. I love her. At home I've got one of those old-fashioned paperback racks they had in drugstores. And I have a lot of fifties paperbacks because I love the covers, and I've collected a certain

amount of pornography from the sixties, paperback pornography that was done by people like Donald Westlake and Lawrence Sanders, just because it amuses me.

Despite what he thinks of the extent of his collecting practices, this study will show how King is a huge collector of macabre ideas and how significant collecting is in his fiction. What he has done for the horror genre and its fans is similar to how he describes one of his biggest sources of inspiration and influence in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*: “In the late 1950s, a literary agent and compulsive science fiction memorabilia collector named Forrest J. Ackerman changed the lives of thousands of kids—I was one—when he began editing a magazine called *Famous Monsters of Filmland*” (22-23). Ackerman, as Don Herron mentions, “filled his California home with countless mementos and books, making it a landmark museum *cum* library to weird pop culture” (“Biggest Horror Fan of Them All” 29). King’s accumulation and repackaging of the famous monsters in his fiction is quite similar to what Ackerman did at his home-museum and in the equally popular medium of a cult magazine in order to revive the genre.

Ackerman’s collection of monstrosities was certainly influential, but King’s fascination with horror fiction started after an accidental encounter with random objects he found in a sort of family museum, “an attic over the garage of an aunt’s house in Durham, Maine” (Reino 2). Among the objects he found, there were “his father’s old Avon paperbacks of horror stories and weird fiction, as well as ... discarded manuscripts of horror stories that Donald King had unsuccessfully attempted to publish” (Reino 2). Aimee LaBrie writes that King spent most of his childhood reading comic books and paperbacks and started writing by copying them; “His mother, after reading his first

story and finding he copied most of it, advised him to ‘Write one of your own, Stevie’” (51). In an account of how he sold his first “book” at the age of seven, King explains how he “novelized” one of the many horror movies he watched when he was a child (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, first released in 1961) and sold at “a quarter a copy” on the playground (*On Writing* 35-39).

The practice of recomposing older materials and reselling them continued in his career and was augmented by his ever-increasing encyclopedic knowledge of the genre accumulated during years of reading comics and paperbacks and watching horror flicks. King’s *Danse Macabre* (1981) is an attempt to acknowledge only some of the authors and directors he has been influenced by. It is a catalogue of King’s favorites for his fans and those who have always been curious to know where all those ideas in his stories come from. The book “reveals a deep reservoir of influences that stretch back to Walpole, Poe and Lovecraft, and forward to Harlan Ellison and a myriad of modern cinema directors” (Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear* 106). Numerous references to other fantasy and horror writers he brings into his writing have been noted as one of the characteristics of King’s fiction.

King’s allusions to popular horror movies, television series, paperbacks, comics, etc. —sometimes so obscure that they are known to hardcore fans only—have made his fiction resemble commonplace books. Old commonplaces were essentially scrapbooks into which pieces of information were accumulated and knowledge was compiled. According to Clive Bloom in his introduction to *Gothic Horror: A Reader’s Guide from Poe to King and Beyond*, borrowing in horror writing is nothing new and because “the repertoire of horror is relatively limited and conservative [...] many authors will

combine or develop elements already known to their readership,” and even mix them with other genres (12). The intertextuality found in King’s numerous references to other literary and popular authors is as conspicuous as the intratextuality of his many references to his other works. His insistence on keeping his fiction local and regional by limiting himself to a handful of place settings has mandated cross-references to recurrent places and people in different novels. Derry and Castle Rock, for instance, are two of his favorite places to set up his small-town fiction. This feature makes one think of King’s long list of novels and short story collections as one giant book published in several installments. Heidi Strengell in *Dissecting Stephen King* summarizes how different prominent King critics see his oeuvre in a holistic view:

Among other King critics, George Beahm, Michael R. Collings, and Tony Magistrale refer to King's body of fiction as "the fictional universe of Stephen King" (*Stephen King: America's Best-Loved Boogeyman*, 188), "King's imagined universe" (*Stephen King as Richard Bachman*, 17), "King's universe," and "King's fictional universe" (*Landscape of Fear*, 26), respectively. (5)

The intricate network of references in King’s fictional works—whether to appeal to popular taste or to exploit readers’ already established network of mental images—is on a par with another distinguishing feature of his body of work, that is, his insistence on mentioning “readily recognizable commercial brand names of contemporary America” (Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear* 54). In his fiction, it is hard not to notice parades of brand names, jingles and catchphrases “of late twentieth-century Western

consumerism” (Sears 9). All the realistic details catalogued in King’s fiction, which make each of his novels a time capsule, can be explained by the concept of a “reality effect,” suggested by Clotilde Landais in *Stephen King as a Postmodern Author* as the guarantor of the success of the supernatural effect (5). A notion originally introduced by Roland Barthes in 1968, the reality effect “is produced through an abundance of connotations of the real which create a lifelike effect: descriptions and details to make a place familiar or identifiable to the reader, precise time and space of the narrative, and coherent characters’ textual identity and psychology” (Landais 5). That is one valid way to look at these features, but the *bric-à-brac* effect the reader gets from such details signals a collecting mentality behind them. The mania for collecting ‘stuff’ which was at its height when King was establishing himself as a bestseller writer surely had influences on King and his audience that will be examined from different perspectives in this study.

Collect the Collector

Collecting in Stephen King involves more than dropping names or cataloguing horror features and/or random *bric-à-brac*. At a deeper level, collecting and collectors are used in characterization. There are numerous instances in King’s fiction (mostly novels and not the short stories) where characters are described by their collections, to show their obsessions and deviancy or how tasteful or reflective they are. In *The Stand* (1978), Nick, the courageous deaf and dumb teenager, who was one of the major characters with a decisive role before he was killed, “had the beginning of a book collection” (652), books from which he mostly gained his knowledge of the outside world and his mature insight. Dan Killian, the executive producer of *The Running Man*

program, as one more notable example, introduces himself as a collector when recruiting Ben Richards for his man-hunt game: "... I'm a collector, you know. Cave art and Egyptian artifacts are my areas of specialization. You are more analogous to the cave art than to my Egyptian urns, but no matter. I wish you could be preserved—collected, if you please—just as my Asian cave paintings have been collected and preserved" (*The Running Man* 51). Another good example is Andy Dufresne in "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption," who collects rocks as a decoy to his escape plan. The narrator lists different kinds of people in prison who start collecting to "divert" their minds and not "flip out": coin collectors, stamp collectors, and postcard collectors (*Different Seasons* 92). What better place to use collecting in order to regain and practice one's sense of ownership and control over things than a prison cell?

There is also Mrs. Anderson, an influential character in "Apt Pupil," whose interest is collecting nineteenth-century postcards (*Different Seasons* 117). What you enjoy collecting "comes all at once," according to her: "[y]ou see something for the first time, and right away you know you have found YOUR GREAT INTEREST. It's like a key turning in a lock" (*Different Seasons* 117). In the same way, Todd Bowden, her teenage student, began his evil bond with Kurt Dussander, the wanted Nazi war criminal, out of a simple interest in death camps, "an interest not much different from the interests of boys who collect coins or stamps" (*Different Seasons* 279), and finally became a serial killer himself. In a similarly extreme case, Ruth McCausland, the town constable in *The Tommyknockers* (1987), has a doll collection and has developed a peculiar bond with the items in her collection. In spite of her career, she is mostly disconnected from the outside world and lives in the miniature world of her doll collection. Long conversations

with inanimate objects have given her the ability to resist the transformation into an alien, or "becoming," longer than the other townspeople.

References to characters' collecting habits and collections might be a common method of creating characters in popular fiction and do not necessarily add any insights, but King's relationship with collecting culture involves more than sporadic collector characters in his works of fiction. This study is an attempt to explore collecting as "a complex and socially constructed activity" (Balkun 80) in order to discuss King's career, the genre(s) he is normally associated with, and the social and cultural condition he has been part of. In one of the seminal theoretical works on collecting, Jean Baudrillard divides objects into "utilized" ones and "possessed" ones based on their functions (*System of Objects* 92). The object that is "completely abstracted from its use" becomes part of a collection and the object of the collector's "fanaticism" (92, 94). This state of being possessed by the possessions is the perfect breeding ground for fears and anxieties. The hunting/haunting experiences explored by King will serve as a springboard to augment our understanding of collecting culture and its implications in his fiction. At the end of this journey, he will be discussed as a collectible himself. He is "one of the most collectible, arguably *the most collectible* of all contemporary American writers" (Schweitzer 153). How this thrilling status keeps haunting the writer is the final point.

Why Collecting?

What makes collecting—of all different aspects of the relationship between man and objects—qualified to be the framework of such an extensive study? Collecting might

appear to be just an ordinary concept but the large number of writings (academic or not) on the topic suggests otherwise. Scholars such as Susan Pearce, Jean Baudrillard and a few others have worked on the topic more theoretically, but the fact is that the majority of the existing texts on collecting and collectors are of a biographical and historical nature. One notable example of a piece on collecting that starts with a biographical account but moves far beyond is Walter Benjamin's essay on Eduard Fuchs (1870-1940). Benjamin focuses on Fuchs as a collector of caricatures, erotic art and genre painting to promote his "materialist consideration of art" and art history (261, 269).

Perhaps one of the most thorough definitions of collecting is suggested by Russell Belk (author of *Collecting in a Consumer Society*) and his colleagues and highlighted by Susan Pearce:

We take collecting to be the selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute.

(qtd. in *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* 3)

There are numerous collections (state or private owned) of antique, rare and precious items, but collecting is commonly known and studied as the middle class's hobby of accumulating and exhibiting mass produced collectibles such as trade cards, postcards,

china figurines, stamps, and so forth. It was actually in the early twentieth century that collecting became possible for members of every social-economic class, regardless of their gender or age.

Before the emergence of the *Wunderkammer* (literally, chamber of wonders), one of the earlier forms of systematic collecting, the term *collection* mostly referred to the accumulation of beautiful and precious objects by affluent members of the society. The classic *Wunderkammer* emerged in the sixteenth century in Europe and originally referred to a room filled with artifacts (antique or not), curious objects and curious animals from all over the world as a precursor of modern museums (Davenne 13). According to Anthony A. Shelton, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, roughly the time when *Wunderkammern* first appeared, “artefacts were valued for their marvelous or miraculous qualities” rather than their pure monetary values (178). However, *Wunderkammer* was still a prerogative of those who had the political and financial means to explore the world in search of exotic objects or at least hire a representative to do so. *Wunderkammer* was “the physical manifestation of [the] newly emerging mentality, which found its [...] myth in the abiding legend of the melancholy prince, not ruling, but ruled by dark, saturnine powers” (Blom 34).

The idea of a *Wunderkammer* with miscellaneous objects collected in one place sounds like something from the past. However, as Umberto Eco shows in his long essay “Travels in Hyperreality” (1975), it still fascinates viewers in our day and has a significant position in American culture. Eco describes a typical *Wunderkammer* as a collection in which

a unicorn's horn would be found next to the copy of a Greek statue, and, later, among mechanical crèches and wondrous automata, cocks of precious metal that sang, clocks with a procession of little figures that paraded at noon. (5)

No matter how incredible such a collection may sound, he believes that there is a large number of similar "collections of inconsequential wonders" all around America: "You have only to go beyond the Museum of Modern Art and the art galleries, and you enter another universe, the preserve of the average family, the tourist, the politician" (6). Strolling around fantastic spaces such as "wax museums, Citizen Kane castles, and Madonna Inns" (31), he repeatedly refers to the hyperreality condition in which real and unreal are seamlessly blended together. With his detailed descriptions of such places, Eco expands on the *Wunderkammer* sensibility and shows how it can be connected with contemporary "American taste and mentality" (5).

According to Jeffrey Abt in his chapter on the origins of the public museum, *Wunderkammer* has had other names such as *pandechion*, *studiolo*, *gabinetto*, *galleria*, *Kunstkammer*, or *Kuntschrank* based on the type of the objects included and the setting (S. Macdonald 120). However, it has often been referred to as Cabinet of Curiosities. In fact, Zoe Trodd in her interesting chapter in *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire* shows how the Renaissance *Wunderkammer* evolved into the eighteenth century American cabinet of curiosities (79). It must be noted that despite the differences between *Wunderkammer* and those later cabinets of curiosities, the two terms may be used interchangeably in parts of this project to avoid complications. The move from *Wunderkammern* and similar practices of making sense of the order of things by

collecting the out-of-ordinary to the unquenchable desire for order and rationality represented in modern museums is accelerated with the Enlightenment and culminates in the early twentieth century. As Hetherington explains in *Capitalism's Eye*, the objects collected in the *Wunderkammern* were “intended as a source of secret or mystical knowledge,” but gradually “that emphasis on the magical is replaced by [...] that of science and empirical knowledge” (18-19). He continues to point out that the great attention paid by collectors to the “heteroclite, that defied the boundaries of existing classificatory order” (present also in popular culture in the form of “freak shows, the display of strange beasts, a fascination with monsters, wax dummies, ghosts, and the exotic”) gradually changed from the seventeenth to early nineteenth century and was replaced by the modern concern for “stabilizing boundaries and getting rid of the possibility of anomaly” in the mid-nineteenth century (Hetherington 19).

In the twentieth century, museums gradually found their social and cultural status stabilized and turned into one of the pivots of national identity. Private collections, in a similar way, still belonged to a handful of prominent figures but became more specialized. The growing consumer culture changed the climate drastically, and collecting turned into a more popular and inclusive pastime rather than the privilege of the connoisseurs. With the growth of consumer culture, as Balkun asserts, collecting became a widespread obsession throughout the twentieth century (11). Collecting was no longer exclusive to a certain age, gender or social class; children and women now had their collections of less expensive and more available collectibles, and “[a]mong the less well-to-do, collecting was a way to imitate the behaviors of the wealthy” (Balkun 11).

Belk, in his "Possessions and the Extended Self" (1988), provides an estimation that in the Western world "around a quarter to a third of all adults are willing to identify themselves as collectors" (qtd. in Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* 1). It is hard to make a close estimation of the number of collectors, but the expanding industry of the memorabilia and collectibles worldwide, the ever-growing number of private collections exhibited in community centers and museums, the large number of swapping and trading forums, and numerous profit-making online shopping services designed for such purposes are supporting evidence. Due to the importance and significance of collecting as an essential part of any culture, it has been the subject of many different studies and will certainly contribute valuable guidelines in a cultural-literary study of the works of an iconic popular author.

There are certain affinities between collecting and horror genre that make it easy to find examples of collecting behavior in different forms of this genre. Critics have discussed collecting in relation to horror literature mostly in psychoanalytic terms, but as we will see in this study it yields to a wider range of observations and examinations particularly in Stephen King's horror fiction. This project will focus and expand on two main topics: how the unique relationship between the collector and the set of objects targeted and acquired, first, "configures particular ways of knowing and perceiving," as Sharon Macdonald suggests (94-5), and second, plays a significant role in character formation and identity creation. The significance and mechanism of the latter is easier to understand since most of us have had such experiences in our interactions with the objects around us, whether as part of a collection or not. Of the former, it suffices to mention here that a major cause of the trend of collecting wondrous objects and

assembling them into a *Wunderkammer* was “a desire for encyclopedism” or a desire to create a microcosm “in a kind of *theatrum mundi*, or theater of the universe” (Robinson 20). Other topics to be discussed in conjunction with collecting will include wonder, monstrosity, desire, and authenticity, which are all of great importance in collecting as a cultural activity.

King and Collecting Culture

Collecting, as a popular activity and a cultural phenomenon, has been chosen as the ground for my reading of Stephen King, since he is both a product of and a major supplier for collecting culture. It is a theme in his novels and a descriptor for the relationship of this phenomenal bestselling author and his fans, who have been collecting King for decades now. In an essay, “On Becoming a Brand Name,” King “identifies himself as a producer (and a product) of horror fiction who is known for his product – a brand name author” (Hoppenstand & Browne 13). King’s fiction obviously portrays the social, political, economic, and cultural anxieties of the country he has flourished in. It has been recommended by critics that “anyone seriously interested in the state of contemporary American taste must pay substantial attention to his work” (Schuman 108). The present study is, for the same reasons, more a cultural study than a literary evaluation of King’s selected works of fiction.

Of the four novels to be discussed in this project, the first three (*It*, *Needful Things* and *Duma Key*) are each from different decades of King’s career and arranged in chronological order. The arrangement is not meant to suggest the development of an idea through his career, but to show how the concept of collecting has always been

present in his works. Furthermore, the first three chapters will cover the three major modes of collecting. In her *Museums, Objects and Collections*, Pearce argues that almost all collections can be categorized under three distinct, but not exclusive, forms: “collections as ‘souvenirs,’ as ‘fetish objects’ and as ‘systematics’” (69). Souvenirs, according to Pearce, are “intrinsic parts of a past experience” and are often associated with “a single person” or “a group of people [...] who function in this regard as if they were a single person” (69, 72). The target of the second mode, fetishistic collecting, is objects of desire. What is common among these often diverse and bizarre collections is “partly the obsessive nature of the act of collection, and partly the lack of an intellectual rationale by which the material and its acquisition was informed” (78). Like the “‘personalia’ or ‘memorabilia’” in souvenir collecting that keep one’s personal histories alive, the objects collected passionately in a fetishistic collection “can make manifest a collector’s personality” (71, 81). However, fetish collections are distinguished from souvenirs by the fact that in fetishistic collections “the subject is subordinated to the objects, and it is to the objects that the burden of creating a romantic wholeness is transferred” (84). The third mode, systematic collecting, is basically concerned with taxonomies and is strongly related to scientific methods of organizing species. This kind of collecting is about organization and classification, and “works not by the accumulation of samples, as fetishistic collecting does, but by the selection of examples intended to stand for all the others of their kind and to complete a set” (87). Systematic collections have a more public (not private) nature, and they are “conceived as display” (87).

In spite of their clear distinctive characteristics, the three modes of collecting often overlap and make gray areas unavoidable. One intrinsic value common in all collections is the concept of seriality that is saved for the chapter on *Misery* – the one novel that is examined out of chronological order. I should emphasize the point that the purpose of this study is not to draw lines between these categories and the King novels associated with them, even if that was possible. The sole purpose of this categorization is to help us understand different approaches to collecting and what they reveal about the human psyche and the relation between self and the outside world. This project will focus on highlighting examples of different modes of collecting in Stephen King's works enriched by discussions of hyperreality and simulation in the background. Following the example of Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality," the study will re-visit a selected number of novels in an attempt to provide commentaries on King's horror fiction and its significance in the American popular culture.

The first novel examined in this study is *It*, a compendium of traditional horror monsters. The magnitude of the story, in terms of the multitude of the monsters (all depicted in a shape-shifting creature) as well as the monstrosity of the physical book, makes it appropriate to call *It* a "dark chest of wonders," the expression King actually used to describe his *The Stand*. King has never shown reluctance in making a collage of traditional tropes and characters to populate and run his own circus of horror. The novel *It* is not the first work in which he uses the well-established themes and tropes of horror genre. One of the best examples of his adaptations is his new rendering of Dracula in *Salem's Lot*, but what is special about *It* is that it is a successful attempt to resuscitate all those monsters in one single novel. This novel is where King brings back

all “the immortal figures in ‘the myth-pool’ of modern horror story” (*Danse Macabre* 50).

In the first chapter, we will see how the tradition of cabinet reading for children resembles novel reading. Allan Hepburn in *Enchanted Objects* writes about books which are actually “a collection of type” (130), and compares a book to a museum in the sense that “both are replete with artefacts and curiosities” (154). This analogy best applies to books of fiction and, especially, King’s fantastic worlds and *It* for its “indulgence in monsters” (Collings, *Stephen King Phenomenon* 31). The early cabinets of curiosities (and even today’s museums) and books are “particular forms of the microcosm” (Hides 15). The monstrosity of *It* (the eponymous character) and *It* (both the narrative and the book as a physical container) will be discussed in Chapter 1 with regard to the microcosm of the town of Derry, which is both metaphorically and metonymically associated with *It*.

The story goes back and forth between 1958 and 1985, childhood and adulthood, past and present. Similar to the iconic glass corridor that connects the adult and child sections of the library in the town, Derry, the novel functions like a kaleidoscope, creating illusions of bits and pieces of memories. As Magistrale mentions in *Landscape of Fear*, “in the course of this novel the members of the Losers’ Club move between the two worlds of their remembered childhood and present adulthood to re-establish their own ‘magic lifeline’” (116). The book, like a cabinet of curiosities, contains a lot of wonders, and wonder is the solution to, first, successfully comprehend the real nature of the shape-shifting monster and its place in the order of nature, and second, find the way to fight it back and eventually defeat it. Adults with their tainted visions and their

crippled rationality are not able to do so, and the characters have to arm themselves with credulity and childlike perceptions to finally achieve their end.

There are similarities between King's fiction (as chests of wonder and encyclopedias of monsters and horror motifs) and one of its counterparts in contemporary American culture, the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* franchise dealing with bizarre events and creatures. The commonalities open up discussions of the role of simulated fantastic worlds and simulacra in the cultural atmosphere King's and Ripley's franchises have been breathing in. Baudrillard's definition of simulacrum as the point at which reality begins to imitate its simulations, first introduced in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), is referred to several times in this study. In Chapter 2, which deals with King's *Needful Things* (1991), this idea will be related to the concerns for authenticity and genuineness in collecting culture. *Needful Things* is basically about unbridled desires to have and to acquire, a critique of America's commodity culture.

In collecting, "the drive to complete the ideal collection can be seen as a drive to complete the ideal self" (Belk 36). Identity formation in relation to objects, of course, is not limited to collectors only and can be a simple correlation between one's self and ordinary household objects, the things one fills one's house and surrounds oneself with: "projecting one's being onto the objects one chooses to live with" (Elsner & Cardinal 3). Collectors learn to be selective in their endeavors to obtain and arrange objects of their desire because it is practically impossible to have a collection of everything and in some cases have every single item in a series. What happens, then, if one is offered the chance to have the ultimate item missing in one's collection, the one that can elevate one's collection from an ordinary selection of interesting objects to one with unique and

priceless ones? By feeding people's desires this way, Leland Gaunt, who owns the mysterious shop, *Needful Things*, pushes the whole town of Castle Rock to the verge of destruction. Acquiring the ultimate piece for their collections brings the shoppers loss and despair. Death is what is waiting for them at the end. Leland Gaunt is an imposter and the merchandise he offers to his customers is illusions only. The victims are so fascinated with his well-articulated pitches and the fake collectibles that they become blind to reality and fall victim to their desires.

When *Needful Things* was first published, reviewer Joe Queenan described it as "the type of book that can be enjoyed only by longtime aficionados of the genre". He found the book "unrecommendable" because:

It is peopled with ultra low-rollers – couch potatoes, barmy widows, small-time hoods – rarely producing a character that an intelligent, *normal* [emphasis his] reader could identify with, much less like.

The book is an unconventional horror novel, and the numerous characters turn out to be the actual monsters when they surrender to their desires. The fragmentary narratives of lives and deaths of these ordinary people build up the holographic picture of the evil of which Leland Gaunt is only a representative. King's book is like Leland's valise at the end of the novel with all the doomed souls locked inside, but it has a better counterpart in the history of collecting. Barnum's "Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome" was a well-known freak show in the 19th century in which people were collected and displayed as curiosities. Such freak shows, as Trodd explains,

“often included [...] pamphlets chronicling the subjects’ life stories: people became cabinet curiosities, and curious stories were central to the cabinet” (79). Trodd continues that later in the nineteenth century, photographic cabinets of curiosities called “carte-de-visite” cards with pictures of some freaks on each card were produced and offered to collectors (79). King’s *Needful Things* is not that different from an album full of tiny pictures of people from all walks of life who metamorphose into freaks after their desires are triggered by Leland Gaunt.

King’s fascination with words, the obsessive accumulation of them in his novels and how he has been accused of logorrhea are also touched on briefly in Chapter 2. Harlan Ellison, another American bestselling author, believes that “King’s novels with the possible exception of maybe *IT* or the *Dark Tower* books could have been told just as well as a novella” (Magistrale, *Hollywood’s Stephen King* 218). In the case of *Needful Things*, a large portion of the text is the fragmentary narration of life stories of numerous characters. Every single person in Castle Rock turns out to be susceptible to Leland Gaunt’s gimmicks and King has certainly found it more effective to tell everyone’s stories rather than recounting an Everyman’s story. No one doubts King’s wordiness, but there are different views regarding this subject. This study will attempt to find narrative merits in such a style of writing with reference to the topsy-turvy arrangement of items in a confused accumulation of objects in contrast to narrative sterility of the orderly arrangement.

Multiple realities and how illusions and simulated worlds may efface reality and take its place will be discussed in Chapter 3 on *Duma Key* (2008). In this chapter, the relationship between creating a work of art and collecting will be explored. The

simplest way to see this relationship is to emphasize the fact that in creative activities putting things together (letters and words in writing and lines and colors in visual arts like painting and drawing) builds a system of meaning in which, as in a collection, every single item is part and parcel of a whole. The heterotopia inherent to such creations is used to explain the peculiar spatial and temporal relationships governing this surrealistic work of fiction. The ambiguous time and place settings of the story, the confusion caused by the meeting of realities, and the perpetual wanderings of the characters in memory lanes to reach stability are examined in this novel.

Memories have a vital role in the therapeutic effects of artistic activities, suggested in *Duma Key* with a supernatural twist. We often try to anchor memories and aid remembrance by collecting objects as souvenirs. These material objects, sometimes totally irrelevant to the occasion they are anchored in, are paired with images that capture those special moments. The characters in *Duma Key* create drawings and paintings in their attempts to re-member and heal their broken bodies and severed lines of memories. After their traumatic accidents, they have also forgotten words and speak and write in a broken language. Sketching helps them match words with mental images and remember the forgotten language. The healing continues only to the point that the characters realize that Perse, the vampire demon, is sucking on their creativity to forge an alternate reality of her will.

References to the nature and function of fantasy literature and King's fantastic worlds in previous chapters climax in this chapter, where resurfacing of traumatic experiences and their possible effects while reading horror fiction are discussed. Similar to characters in King's fiction, the readers lose touch with everyday reality and plunge

into a whirlpool of horror and terror. The analogy between dreaming and consuming the horror genre will be the vehicle to make some comments on King's horror factory. In *It*, the villainous creature feeds on the fears and anxieties that consume children, and in *Needful Things*, Leland Gaunt feeds on his patrons' desires and the consumer culture they have been victims to. *Duma Key's* Perse, in a similar way, sucks on the creative force of the two artist characters. This form of vampirism is best presented in *Misery* (1987), the novel to be examined in Chapter 4 of this study. The author character, standing for King himself, feeds on the fears and desires of the readers, and his crazy number one fan, representing the targeted consumer for such products, on the other hand, feeds on the creativity of the popular author.

Chapter 4 deals with the tyranny of fan clubs, bestseller lists, and genre classifications in the publishing industry. It will explore how prolific and bestselling authors get entangled in series and sequels; how collector-writers such as King are ritually collected by their fans; and how they are branded as genre writers and are doomed to continue as such. King has long gone beyond being a popular author and a celebrity and has become the subject of "an author cult"; Hoppenstand and Browne in their introduction to *The Gothic World of Stephen King* explain his godly position this way:

The physical products of the author's labor, his books and manuscripts, become icons of worship and hence become of immense money value, inflated far beyond a reasonable worth by the slavish drive of the cult follower to purchase, at any cost, those books and manuscripts. (4)

This explanation, of course, applies to those followers who are seriously collecting limited editions of King but can very well apply to those hundreds of thousands of readers who wait for a new King and line up in front of book stores to buy his new titles as soon as they are out in the market. The ritual-like behavior of the followers and Constant Readers (the term King always uses to refer to the body of fans who reads his fiction on a regular basis) is juxtaposed in this study to *Misery's* image of the fans as idols and the sacrifices the author has to make to satisfy them.

Before book publishing turned into a full-fledged industry and mass production of books made them accessible to everyone, and not just a limited number of scholars who were eager and wealthy enough to buy books regularly, book production and book reading were both time consuming and required certain qualifications. In his brilliant criticism of "consumerism of commercial publishing," Michel Butor shows in a concise manner the difference between these two periods:

When the book was a single copy, whose production – required a considerable number of work hours, the book naturally seemed to be a "monument" [...] something even more durable than a structure of bronze. What did it matter if a first reading was long and difficult; it was understood that one owned a book for life. But the moment that quantities of identical copies were put on the market, there was a tendency to act as if reading a book "consumed" it, consequently obliging the purchaser to buy another for the next "meal" or spare moment, the next train ride. (qtd. in Stewart, *On Longing* 33)

In addition to the mass production and consumption of books (and other cultural products), the afore-mentioned repetition and recycling of ideas, images and motifs which has been happening through various media in the past couple of decades draws attention to seriality as a trend in contemporary popular culture. *Misery*'s Paul Sheldon is the picture of the popular author who produces serial and repetitive works to satisfy millions of readers who consume their products. Annie Wilkes, on the other hand, represents readers who read voraciously to put their hands on another book, or just re-read the same title while waiting for their favorite author's next hit. Repetitive print and media products with small variations from one part or episode to the next are so common now that they have become the norm in our time. Such mechanical reproduction and mass distribution of works of popular literature presented in the image of Paul Sheldon as a serial-production machine will be discussed later in the chapter in the context of kitsch culture. Similar to his character, King is believed to be repeating himself and "most of the novels he's written since the early 1990s feel like reruns of his greatest hits, afterthoughts to the titles that still haunt our pop culture's consciousness" (Douthat 14). The repetition factor becomes even more essential when we consider the fact that King's early masterpieces themselves owed much to the works of other authors.

King's *Misery* resembles John Fowles's *The Collector*: Paul Sheldon's (and King's own) situation reminds us of Miranda's, the artist girl who is kidnapped by a killer/collector and becomes part of his collection at the end. The picture of Annie as a serial killer offers the opportunity to discuss serial killing, "the crime of our age" (Richard Dyer, qtd. in A. Macdonald 6), in the context of seriality in the present

discussion. Alzena Macdonald in *Murders and Acquisitions: Representations of the Serial Killer in Popular Culture* argues that

Both the emphasis on the killer's seriality – the repetitive, episodic nature of the murders – and the constant *recycling* of narratives of serial killing are surely an effect of an economic milieu [late capitalism] of rampant production and consumption. (6)

King the collector and serial writer (represented by Paul Sheldon) is eventually collected by his Number One fan and a serial killer. In his collecting mindset, King must be aware of the notion that “any collection comprises a succession of items, but the last in the set is the person of the collector” (Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 97).

Reading these chapters, one must keep in mind that the purpose of this study is not justifying King's literary achievements or asking why his works are not considered as *serious* literature. The present study is mostly focusing on King as a popular author and a product of the popular culture. His image as a collectible celebrity and his frequent presence on bestseller lists for decades were in fact the main reasons to begin this project. Magistrale, as one of the most persistent critics trying to explicate the less appreciated sides of King's fiction to both ordinary readers and literary critics, has tried to promote King's retro fashion in writing. Nevertheless, King has often been criticized for not being innovative and original to the extent that he has been called a hack writer, one who is re-writing the classics only in an inflated style with pretentious references to contemporary American society. Harold Bloom, in Paquette's account, “views Stephen

King as a child who has somehow stumbled onto an adult playing-ground, and he doesn't understand why everyone who comes into contact with this newcomer is so intrigued by his work" (127). The fact is King's collections of scenes and characters from classic horror stories and movies have always excited both the collector-author and the audience by testing their knowledge of the horror and fantasy icons. The excitement one feels by finding references the author has placed in the narrative is comparable to the joy an archeologist feels when digging an artifact out.

Jenifer Paquette states that, "Because the same scenario presents over and over again in King's work, some critics may be tempted to see King as repetitive and unoriginal in his storytelling," and she tries to justify this by bringing examples of other authors who have done the same (148). This project is, in contrast, an attempt to read these repetitions and borrowings in the context of collecting culture and the inherent seriality. It is only because of the utterly derogatory connotations of the term *kitsch* that it has almost been left out of our discussion; however, this study is actually suggesting that King's fiction has affinities to kitsch culture – as one of the characteristics of contemporary Western culture and a trend in collecting – not so much criticizing the quality of his writing, but mostly emphasizing the way he "repackages and stylizes [culture] in a way that reinforces established conventions and appeals to the masses" (Johnston 233). David M. Johnston offers this definition (in an article published in Thomas Fahy's *Philosophy of Horror*) to explicate the role of Kitsch in horror genre, and our study will show how this best applies to the King of Horror's chests of wonder and his macabre collectibles.