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## Assunta Assia Zizza, Perspectives on child abuse in Stephen King's Gerald's Game

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“REMEMBERING A THING AND RELIVING A THING DOES NOT CONFER AN OBLIGATION TO TELL ABOUT A THING”: PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD ABUSE IN STEPHEN KING'S *GERALD'S GAME*

In an attempt to reduce the importance of Stephen King's extraordinary success as a gothic/horror writer, Harold Bloom harshly criticizes his work stating that his “triumph is a large emblem of the failures of American education,” and he “will be remembered as a sociological phenomenon, an image of the death of the Literate Reader” (Bloom 2). Through an attentive analysis of Stephen King's *Gerald's Game*, in this article I hope to prove how a popular writer such as King can play an important role in affording his readers deeper insights about socially relevant issues. In the way it addresses the issues of child abuse and women's memory recovery, King's *Gerald's Game* transcends the boundaries of a “regular” gothic horror narrative, thus leveling a profound critique at the social attitude towards these issues in the American society of the 1990s. Although it may have failed to create widespread change in policy or an increase in public attention, an attentive close reading of *Gerald's Game* offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the specific moment in American history from which it originates, besides raising important questions about the diverse ways in which contemporary horror literature manages to catalyze sociological tensions in narrative form.

Published in 1992, *Gerald's Game* is the story of a middle-class woman in her forties, Jessie Mahout Burlingame, who is pushed to kill her husband Gerald when, during an extreme sexual game, he tries to rape her. This episode will trigger Jessie's retrieval and processing of a repressed childhood abuse memory. The rest of the novel is focused on the woman's struggle to overcome the re-living of her repressed traumatic experience and to liberate herself from its consequences.

The troubling nature of *Gerald's Game's* content caused a general sense of unease among its critics. According to them, King's attempt to write something different from the “regular” horror fiction story, that is, a novel which portrays an incestuous father's abuse of his daughter, results in a puzzling mixture of horror elements and psychological issues that cannot be allowed in a popular literary genre such as gothic/horror literature, generally categorized as *entertainment*.

In his review of the novel in *Newsweek*, David Gates defines *Gerald's Game* as “a puzzling performance” through which “King's imaginative gift threatens to subvert the entertainment virtue”(Gates 1). When it comes to the psychological element, that is, Jessie's reminiscence of having been sexually abused by her father, Gates severely criticizes Stephen King's work because:

At the center of the book there is no sci-fi monster from beyond the macroverse: it's Jessie's long-suppressed memory of being sexually abused at the age of ten by her father. No highbrow novelist could orchestrate this episode more cunningly, and its elements echo in the most distant corners of the book: the Marvin Gaye song playing on the radio, the smoked glass through which she was viewing a solar eclipse, the semen she washed out of her underwear. But can horror entertainment accommodate a scene of incest that credibly teeters between the erotic and the disgusting? (Gates 1)

Along the same line of thought, in her review of the novel in *The New York Times*, Wendy Doninger maintains that “there is something deeply troubling about the commingling of the genres in this book” to the point that “horror fiction and psychological thriller wipe each other out: the horror makes us distrust the serious theme and the serious theme stops us from suspending our disbelief to savor the horror” (Doninger E5). Nevertheless, what is most disapproved is once again the child abuse theme the novel addresses. According to Doninger, in fact, “we are also invited to take pleasure in the molestation of a female child, which is titillating as well as terrifying—in a word pornographic”. This explicitness in the description of a recovered memory of abuse, Doninger argues, is so disturbing because it draws

on a specific social issue of the American 1990s, “the contemporary American obsession of those who define themselves as victims and define their lives around their victimization”.

Though it may seem that the problem with King’s *Gerald’s Game* is the mere commingling of genres, what is actually being criticized is the very nature of its content, the detailed description of an incestuous abuse on a child. I would suggest that the reason for such harsh critical judgments is that the novel relates to the taboo of child abuse and its recovery in a too direct fashion to be acceptable at the time in which it was written. The year in which *Gerald’s Game* was published (1992) can be defined as *the* year when social discourses about the interconnection between Child Abuse and Memory Recovery as related to women became socially widespread and accepted. As a popular novelist, Stephen King is likely to have been influenced by the increasing and overwhelming attention towards child abuse and the consequences of the recovery of early childhood traumatic memories. Also, he might have been induced by such an atmosphere to use the inspiration he was receiving from the outside as material for *Gerald’s Game*.

In fact, apart for the main character’s personal story of abuse, the child abuse theme and the rendering of its consequences permeate the novel: for instance, more than once, Jessie suspects that her husband’s perverted sexuality, of which she is the object, might depend on the fact that “someone played a few little games with him on the day of the eclipse” (King 269), a suspect connected to the fact that her own experience of being abused by her father also happened during a solar eclipse in 1964; the tomb thief who breaks into the house while Jessie is tied to the bed only to steal her shining ring is later recognized as a very troubled individual who was severely sexually abused by his aunt and uncle during his childhood; during her college experience, Jessie is pushed by her roommate to take part in a consciousness-raising group in which her constant exposure to stories told by other female students of sexual abuse in their families will cause her departure from the group itself. All these elements being considered, I believe one is justified in assuming that the social and discursive context from which a novel such as *Gerald’s Game* originated deserve further attention.

In 1990, only two years before *Gerald’s Game* was published, child abuse was addressed in a presidential panel in which it was referred to as being a “national emergency” (Greenhouse A13). In the same year, on November 29, the Congress enacted the Crime Control Act, the second section of which was entirely devoted to the Victims of Child Abuse. More precisely, the act enhanced the powers of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention promoting the “technical assistance and training of judicial personnel and attorneys to improve the judicial system’s handling of child abuse and neglect cases and provide administrative reform in juvenile and family courts” (“Bill Summary and Status 101st Congress”). With this act, the deposition of a child became legally protected in every regard, from the ways and the places in which the deposition took place (for the first time, a child was allowed to testify in front of a camera and even outside the court) to the team of experts which had to surround and assist the child psychologically as well as legally.

Not only did child abuse as an issue gain such attention at the beginning of the 1990s, it also became intrinsically connected to another phenomenon which took place between 1985 and 1994: in this time span, the United States witnessed the largest number of women recovering alleged repressed memories of child abuse thanks to the help of a therapist and subsequently leveling accusations against their parents (especially their fathers). This caused a reconsideration of a whole US juridical field and led to questioning the validity of taking a retrieved memory as the sole evidence in a court. Although it is impossible to estimate the precise number of women who, whether by themselves or with the help of a therapist, succeeded in recovering repressed memories of child abuse, the significance of this phenomenon within the psychiatric field itself can be documented by the development of a whole branch of specific literature concerning the binary child abuse/recovered memories of abuse by women.[1]

The mass-recovery of child abuse memories by women which took place during the 1990s needs to be read in close connection with the activism of Second-Wave feminists during the 1960s and ‘70s. Quite paradoxically, all the support for sexually abused women that feminist activism had succeeded in obtaining through the social response elicited during the 1970s gradually faded, until it began to change into utter opposition in the early 1990s.

In her *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi illustrates the various ways in which, during the 1980s and until the end of the 1990s, the American society and media subtly undermined all the achievements that women had obtained through the Women’s Liberation Movement. Through the analysis of a series of popular books and radio and TV programs, Faludi identifies a veritable “backlash psychology” through which “the backlash against women insinuated itself into the most intimate front lines, impressing its discouraging and moralistic message most effectively and destructively, on the millions of women seeking help from therapy books and counselling.” Faludi’s emphasis on a “backlash psychology” is far from accidental, since it was through psychology that all the struggles for independence that women had been conducting during the 1960s and ‘70s were mainly opposed. In fact, the effect of the whole pop-psychology branch that had been developing since the beginning of the 1980s materialized in official proposals of new “feminine” disorders to be inserted in the professional *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the main reference text of American psychiatry.

When, at the beginning of the 1990s, a considerable number of women began to simply denounce child abuse or recover child abuse memories, new “official” ways were sought to oppose the uncovering of these memories or, at least, to reduce their social impact. On the social level, the origin of this generalized hostility towards women who were recovering abuse memories, the majority of which concerned incest cases, can be found in the deep-rooted quality of one of the fundamental cultural universals on which our society is based: the incest taboo. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss theorizes, “the prohibition of incest can be found at the dawn of culture... (It) is culture itself” (41). By acknowledging the breaking of the incest taboo, women’s mass-recovery of incestuous childhood memories at the beginning of the 1990s posed a direct threat to the sacredness of the nuclear family and its patriarchal/paternalistic organization, inevitably perceived as an attack against the core of the typical hetero-normative American family.

The cultural reasons underlying the beginning of this new backlash in the 1990s inevitably became political at a certain point. In order to safeguard the institutional morality and integrity of the American family, women’s attempt to make the American society aware of the reality of (mostly incestuous) child abuse needed to be completely undermined: in other words, the backlash had to begin with discrediting the importance of the feminist activism that

led to this development. As Margo Rivera states, despite the fact that feminist activism of the 1970s definitely helped to raise the social consciousness about the issue of child abuse, by the early 1990s “the forces of opposition to the kind of liberation created in the former two decades became marshalled” to the extent that “the consensus that developed during the 1980s about the prevalence and the harmfulness of childhood sexual abuse turned into a fierce political fight about what can be spoken in public and who gets to say what really happened.” In this specific historical moment, what individuals - especially women - could remember became intrinsically interrelated with who they claimed to be: memory became a “surrogate for the soul” (Hacking 4) and the fight was about “recapturing these souls who had begun to escape from their mental prisons, in which they remembered little and recounted less, and putting them back into solitary confinement where they could no longer challenge the status and the power of those who harmed them” (Rivera 15). The term “fight” that Rivera uses in this case is not accidental: in fact, the period of time in which the social power assets came to be challenged by the mass-recovering or just denouncing of women’s childhood memories became - and is still today - widely known by the epithet of “memory wars” period.

The culmination of the actions meant to instill a distrust of women’s recovered memories of child abuse in the public opinion took place in 1992 with the creation of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. Still existing today, at the moment of its foundation this association presented itself as a non-profit society founded by Pamela and Peter Freyd in response to their daughter’s accusation of having been sexually abused as a child. After having been in therapy because of issues unrelated to sexual abuse for over 10 years, the Freyds’ daughter, Jennifer, recovered repressed memories of her father abusing her during childhood and subsequently decided to sue him. She won the lawsuit in 1993, just a year after her parents created the FMSF. Once again, the search for general consensus about the discrediting campaign against the validity of women’s childhood abuse memories had to be founded on the *fear* of the disruption of the perfect American Family. It was right in this sense that women’s abuse narratives conflicted with the dominant social narrative concerning the institution of the family.

The FMSF’s discrediting strategy was somewhat successful since it led to a shift in the way the media dealt with information: the focus of the whole child abuse question was no longer “the harm of childhood sexual abuse but the extensive reporting on alleged false memory and false accusation cases” (Stanton 13). Moreover, in order to reinforce this line of thought, women who publicly exposed themselves with the confession during adulthood of a repressed child sexual abuse memory accusing one of their parents (usually their fathers) were systematically - and somewhat ironically - labeled by the association as “incest survivors” or “recanters.” Through all these means, the FMSF “attempted to ignite public and legal skepticism about women’s claims of historic abuse by encouraging widespread social alarm about the suggestibility of women’s memories and by pathologizing women through the introduction of a new syndrome” (Campbell 5). It is interesting to notice how the False Memory Syndrome Foundation literally invented also the psychological disorder on which it was founded since, as Campbell notes, the False Memory Syndrome “had no official status as a psychiatric disorder.” The term “syndrome” is in fact deceptive since due to the controversial nature of its origins, the FMS was not accepted as such by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association: thus it had no medical resonance and it still has none today.

The False Memory Syndrome Foundation’s skepticism about the validity of recovered memories of abuse by women was not enacted only through the formulation of an official definition of FMS. In fact, it was through a constant undermining of the therapeutic work of psychiatrists--especially of feminist psychiatrists--that the FMSF gained the widest consensus. According to some FMSF material, “while some reports of incest are surely true, these decades-delayed memories are too often the result of False Memory Syndrome caused by a disastrous ‘therapeutic’ program” (“False Memory Syndrome Foundation”). The association created a new terminology for the therapy which, according to their specialists, was at the heart of the “disastrous” therapeutic program: “recovered memory therapy” was the expression the FMSF used to refer to a large group of therapists engaged in the process of trying to uncover--or even, to create--abuse memories through the use of dangerous suggestive techniques such as, for instance, hypnosis. To FMSF, then, most of the recovered memories of abuse had an exclusively iatrogenic origin, their main hypothesis being that most cases of false memory resulted from women’s involvement in therapy. Thus they advocated the legal positioning of women as therapeutic subjects providing narratives that were “the suspect effect of therapeutic influence” rather than considering them as “collective political testimonies” (Campbell 64).

All these elements being considered, I believe that the tangibly adverse environment around the phenomenon of memories of child abuse recovered by women in adulthood, as well as the subsequent skepticism towards the therapeutic treatment of the trauma deriving from such an experience, need to be taken into account in interpreting the cultural work performed by Stephen King’s *Gerald’s Game*. The novel acquires considerable significance in the way in which Jessie’s relationship with psychiatric therapy and her recovery of the repressed childhood abuse memory are depicted in the novel are placed in the context of the whole discursive frame concerning women and child abuse at the time. The narrative, in fact, reveals a profound critique towards the whole discursive structure created by associations such as the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, which succeeded in creating disbelief to the detriment of all those women who, while being patients, retrieved child abuse memories and later accused one of their parents.

In *Gerald’s Game*, King conceals Jessie’s memory of childhood abuse to his readers until half way through the novel. Jessie’s character is in fact endowed with all the features of a woman suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, thus personifying the typical traumatized woman who unconsciously lives the aftermath of the childhood trauma she has experienced and subsequently repressed.

Jessie’s sense of being objectified is underlined several times at the beginning of the novel and, in this respect, it is worth noting how Jessie herself actually defines her discomfort with being sexually used in medical terms:

there had been *side-effects* she didn’t care for, and that feeling of being demeaned was only one of them. She’d had her own nightmares following each of those early versions of Gerald’s Game. She awoke from them sweaty and gasping, her hands thrust deeply into the fork of her crotch and rolled into tiny tight little balls. (King 21, emphasis mine)

We are thus made to understand that, being passive and thus objectified, Jessie’s role in the course of sexual

activity with her husband provokes several micro-traumas in her subconscious that she manifests through nightmares. The image of her waking up and literally trying to defend her body implies that she lives her own sexuality as being constantly violated during sexual intercourse, since her unconscious memory of the past trauma determines her attitude without her knowledge. The "side-effects" that Jessie experiences are catalogued in the language of trauma studies as symptoms indicating a state of "hyperarousal." In her *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman argues that "after a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go on permanent alert, as if the danger might return at every moment" (Herman 35). This term thus indicates a condition in which the subject somatizes his or her anxiety caused by a past trauma (usually of a sexual nature); the constant thought and fear that it could happen again produces impairing physical effects. Although Jessie does not recall the past abuse she has experienced, it is her *bodily* memory of the past trauma that causes her discomfort when it comes to the expression of her sexuality.

Besides portraying Jessie as a traumatized subject unconsciously suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, King also renders her attitude towards therapy as an extremely distrustful one. This diffidence towards group and individual psychiatric therapy operates as a critique of the coeval social climate by enacting, on a narrative level, the same skeptical attitude around the problem of child abuse and memory recovery that was actually widespread at the historical time in which the novel was written. Child abuse is in fact represented as something which *cannot* be talked about within the novel, and therapeutic treatments are depicted as something to be approached with diffidence, since they allow the uncovering of the uncomfortable truths concerning the correlation between women and incestuous childhood abuse that the social environment depicted in the novel, as well as the actual social environment of the early 1990s United States, were trying to repress. Jessie is *unable* to tell her story either with the help of therapy or by herself since there *must* be no place for it in the hostile social environment where she lives. Through Jessie's experience in the novel, women's access to therapy - whether individual or collective--is indeed represented as useless.

A first hint of the canonical disbelief towards abuse on women is provided in the very first pages of the novel. Because of her dissociative reaction towards the possible reiteration of trauma caused by Gerald's attitude in their arranged sexual game, Jessie repeatedly demands that he unlock her. To her surprise, not only does Gerald ignore her request, but he pretends to believe that by demanding to be released she is in fact trying to tease him. At this point, Jessie realizes that he was "pretending *into* ignorance. Knowing but planning to go ahead anyway. He'd handcuffed her to the bedposts, had done it with her own cooperation, and now, oh shit, let's not gild the lily, now he meant to *rape* her." (31) At the realization that despite her lack of consent her husband is going to use her body for his pleasure, she mentally projects herself in a court, imagining herself divorcing her husband due to his attempted rape of her:

The Judge would believe it all and sympathize with her most deeply. Of course he would. Who wouldn't? She could see herself there on the witness stand and saying, "So there was I, handcuffed to the bedposts and wearing nothing but some underwear from Victoria's Secret and a smile, but I changed my mind at the last minute, and Gerald knew it, and that makes it rape."

Yes sir, that would do her, all right. Bet your boobs. (33)

Jessie's ironic mental projection of herself testifying and being disbelieved in a court connects to the general distrust which was being instilled in the juridical field as concerned cases of sexual abuse reported by women at the time the novel was written. Being a woman of her time, Jessie is well aware of what it means for a woman to report a sexual abuse, let alone a case of attempted rape in a marital frame.

In *Gerald's Game* this skeptical environment is depicted as the main cause conditioning women's recourse to therapy: as in Jessie's case, therapy is only perceived as a means to uncover secrets that society *requires* to remain buried. By constantly stressing Jessie's will *not* to tell her secret *through* therapy, King also succeeds in displaying the double-edged way in which therapy actually affected women recovering abuse memories in the 1990s: while, in some cases, it allowed a woman to remember her repressed memories of childhood abuse and come to terms with them, therapy in all its forms also implied that such recovery acquired a social dimension, exposing the victim to a generally hostile social environment. It is not accidental, therefore, that in *Gerald's Game*, Jessie's recovery does not happen thanks to therapy. Rather, therapy is represented as an incentive not to tell, not to remember in order not to be exposed to the disbelief surrounding the whole child abuse issue.

In describing Jessie's first approach to therapeutic treatment, through a consciousness-raising group, Stephen King provides a detailed temporal characterization. We are told that Jessie

had almost spilled that secret at a women's consciousness group (...) back in the seventies that had been, and of course attending that meeting had been her roomie's idea, but Jessie had gone along willingly, at least to begin with; it had seemed harmless enough, just another act in the amazing tie-dyed carnival that was college back then. (107)

Jessie's first approach to a therapeutic method is thus framed in the context of the 1970s, when feminist activism for women who were victims of abuse, whether incestuous or not, was rising. Psychiatrist Judith Herman argues that this activism, enacted through consciousness-raising groups, "was analogous to that of psychotherapy" but that, unlike the latter, its purpose was "to effect social rather than individual change" (Herman 29). In his depiction of Jessie's first approach to this therapeutic method, King chooses to focus more on the silence that consciousness-raising groups allowed to be broken privately and exclusively among women, rather than on its being broken in the public sphere. This specific way of rendering a child abuse survivor's attitude towards therapy, displaying the effects of external social pressures on her, denounces the impossibility of these therapeutic methods to effect the social change discussed by Herman. Just as "traditional" psychotherapy is aimed only at individual change, the consciousness-raising group represented in *Gerald's Game* only favors the private confession of abuse, paradoxically re-enforcing the prevention of its spreading *outside* the group itself.

Though "there had been twenty women, most sitting cross-legged on the floor in a rough circle - twenty women between the ages of eighteen and fortysomething" who had "joined hands and shared a moment of silence at the beginning of the session" (King 107) from the beginning Jessie is already aware that the initial moment of silence

shared by her and the other women is going to continue after the session is over. The experience she is going through will only allow her to discover

a ghastly gray world which seemed simultaneously to preview the adult future that lay ahead for her in the eighties and to whisper of gloomy childhood secrets that had been buried alive in the sixties... but did not lie quiet there. (107)

Even before the session begins, Jessie already senses that her personal abusive reality is going to remain unchanged. Her reticence will be caused precisely by the reality Jessie is confronted with through her experience in the consciousness-raising group. Even though after the breaking of the silence she is "assaulted by ghastly stories of rape, of incest, of physical torture" (107) and struck by the calmness and resignation with which the victims who share their experiences expose them, the effect of these episodes on her will be to re-enforce her uncommunicativeness rather than increasing her will to speak. Specifically, she will be particularly troubled by witnessing a young woman who, having been abused by her brother, chooses not to tell about her experience outside of the consciousness-raising group mainly because her parents "idolized (her) brother Barry" and her confession would have "killed her mother" (109).

What emerges from Jessie's direct experience of consciousness-raising groups as a therapeutic method is that the confession of an abuse can take place exclusively in the private environment the therapeutic method creates, since there are external social pressures which oppose its spreading outside of it. We are later told that Jessie also realizes that the speaking woman's attitude "hadn't been calmness at all, but some fundamental disconnection from the terrible thing that had happened to her." (111) The consciousness-raising group thus constitutes only a *locus* where this disconnection, this distance from the abuse can temporarily be suspended since the external pressures do not allow its confession. Not accidentally, immediately outside the consciousness-raising group Jessie restores her own disconnection from the abuse. Right after, she will "spring (...) out of her chair so fast she almost had knocked the ugly, bulky thing over" and leave the group. In answer to her roommate's questions, she will deny that her departure had been caused by a personal experience of abuse and repeat that her father "never burned me, he never burned me, he never hurt me at all" (110).

Through his depiction of Jessie's reaction to the confessions of the other women participating in the consciousness-raising group, King also manages to offer a precise characterization of the social pressures a child abuse victim could encounter in confessing her experience. Both in the young woman's account and in Jessie's case, the silence *has* to be kept in order to preserve the "sacredness" of the American family. It was for the sake of preserving this sacredness that women's recovery of incestuous childhood memories was being undermined, a process reaching its highest peak precisely during the years the novel was being written. Jessie's fear of being believed, and thus her self-obligation not to tell, represents her awareness of the threat she poses to the patriarchal/paternalistic organization of the family, inevitably constituting an attack against the core of the typical hetero-normative American family, as well as her interiorized subjection to that idealized norm. Her awareness of the consequences of a confession even leads her to hope that she won't be believed: "if she told, her story would be disbelieved only if God was good. If God was in a bad mood, Jessie *would* be believed... and even if it didn't kill her mother, it would blow the family apart like a stick of dynamite" (109). Jessie's paradoxical hope for disbelief in case she confessed her abuse, because being believed would cause the implosion of her own family, proves the enduring power of the patriarchal family ideal and the hostility of the social climate surrounding the child abuse issue. King's emphasis on this hostility, which prevents a child abuse victim from feeling free to confess her own experience, not only denounces the hostility itself but also prompts a reflection about the fact that such hostility and reticence exist *despite* the possibility to resort to therapeutic methods such as consciousness-raising groups. The pressures Jessie feels because of the possible consequences of her confession will not only make her participation in the consciousness-raising group fruitless, but also determine the gradual repression of her abusive experience.

Not even the individual therapy Jessie undertakes will help her recover her abuse memory. Even though in this case the failure of this therapeutic method does not seem directly related to what lay outside its private dimension, an indirect denunciation of the "danger" of a female-to-female therapist/patient relationship can effectively be read between the lines of the novel. It is not accidental that in depicting Jessie's relationship with individual therapy, King focuses on Jessie's reticence to establish a close relationship with her therapist Nora. What emerges through an attentive examination of the role that individual therapy plays in the *non*-recovery of a child abuse memory in *Gerald's Game* is Jessie's sense of the general suspicion towards memories of abuse recovered through individual therapy that was actually widespread during the 1980s and 1990s.

One of the features immediately emerging from the first fragments of Jessie's experience with therapy is her lack of trust in it. King realistically renders Jessie's approach to therapy: once again, the similarities with the typical patient repressing a childhood abuse is disconcerting. Just like the majority of the women unconsciously affected by PTSD and recovering abuse memories during the 1990s, Jessie starts considering the option of therapy because "she had stated her problem as stress" (54). Though at this point of the novel the fact that she is actually suffering from a childhood trauma is not yet perceivable, her reticence to let Gerald know about her decision "because she knew he would be sarcastic... and probably worried about what beans she might be spilling" already underscores her sense that therapy is something to be hidden not only because it might uncover uncomfortable truths but also because it might cause other people's - in this case Gerald's - irony.

Even though every time she refers to her individual therapy with Nora in the course of the narrative, Jessie repeats, almost with a childish attitude, the mantra-sounding phrase "I liked Nora, I liked Nora a lot" (King 54), her approach is indeed ruinous from the very beginning. In Jessie's case, therapy does not accomplish its primary mission, that is, to help the patient unfold the hidden causes of her problems; rather, she shies away not only from its intrusive element but also because she perceives that it might bring her to establish a dangerous relationship with her therapist, one leading to the uncovering of uncomfortable truths. Even though we are told that "she couldn't exactly remember why she had to quit going to see Nora on Tuesday afternoons," it is implied that these reasons may actually be profound, connected to the threat of establishing a dependency and to the therapy's potentially lethal effect: "if you didn't draw the line somewhere, therapy just went on and on, until you and your therapist doddered off to that great group encounter session in the sky together" (55). Jessie's inner fear of being manipulated by her

therapist prevents her from benefiting from the help therapy could offer to a child abuse victim, in spite of the signs she bears of the weight of her past abuse in her current life, as shown by Jessie's fall back into an abusive situation with her husband Gerald. It is evident at this point that Jessie has internalized the general distrust towards therapy which was typical of the 1980s and 1990s to the point that she decides to quit therapy, only to find herself threatened first with rape, then with death as a result of her reticence and repression.

Because of its narrative intensity in approaching the issue of child abuse and memory recovery, *Gerald's Game* offers a valid example of survival story inasmuch as it convincingly portrays Jessie's effort to recover her abuse memory as well as her struggle to become fully aware of her being a childhood abuse victim. Though *Gerald's Game* concludes with Jessie's full acceptance of her abuse survivor status, her final decision to convey her experience exclusively by way of a private sort of "testimonio" confession offers one more evidence --just as the disastrous role of therapeutic methods in the process of Jessie's recovery - of the difficult position of abuse survivors during the 1990s. At the same time, it provides a perfect example of how horror literature often succeeds in catalyzing contemporary anxieties into narrative form, providing an "outlet to escape into a world somewhat similar where the reader is safe and the protagonist has a chance to survive, often unlike the real world" (Davis 3).

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[1] Some of the major studies on the subject to be taken into consideration are Herman and Schatzow (1987), Femina, Yeager and Lewis (1990), Briere and Conte (1993), Loftus, Polonsky and Fullilove (1994). All of these studies prove the resonance of the phenomenon.

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\* Assunta Assia Zizza ([assiazizza@libero.it](mailto:assiazizza@libero.it)) recently finished her Master's Degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," defending a thesis on child abuse in Stephen King's *Gerald's Game*. She is currently working on her future PhD project, a comparative study of contemporary Italian and American gothic/horror literature from a sociological point of view.

*Gerald's Game* is a 1992 suspense novel by American writer Stephen King. The story is about a woman whose husband dies of a heart attack while she is handcuffed to a bed, and, following the subsequent realization that she is trapped with little hope of rescue, begins to let the voices inside her head take over. The book is dedicated to King's wife Tabitha and her sisters: "This book is dedicated, with love and admiration, to six good women: Margaret Spruce Morehouse, Catherine Spruce Graves, Stephanie Data shows that 5 children die every day because of child abuse. One in 4 girls or 1 in 5 boys is sexually abused. Over 1 billion children worldwide experience violence annually. For 40 years, ISPCAN has worked to reduce this preventable tragedy. Founded by Henry Kempe in 1977, ISPCAN is the only international non profit organization that brings together the range of professionals that work toward the prevention and treatment of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Become a member, volunteer, partner with us, or donate to support training in developing countries. Improve data collection and resources at the national level through World Perspectives on Child Abuse. Child Rights. *Gerald's Game* is different from King's usual work as it's a purely psychological horror. It tells the story of Gerald and Jessie, a middle-aged married couple who take a trip out to their secluded holiday cabin. In an attempt to spice up their marriage, they decide to try a few, you know, games. To make a long story short, Jessie ends up handcuffed to the bed after Gerald suffers a heart attack (don't worry it's all shown in the trailer above so it's not really a spoiler). Advertisement. Almost entirely set in one room, the film will still manage to enthrall you. D