

SCARED TO DEATH

STEPHEN KING AND THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

Room and time: Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor), Friday, 4:00-5:30 p.m.

First session: October 14, 2016

Course number: 512.255

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036) · **Email:** stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Description: Stephen King is a cultural phenomenon. With ca. 350 million books sold worldwide, he is one of the most popular American authors of our time (next to romance writer Danielle Steel). His fiction, comprising 54 novels and numerous short-story collections, has often been belittled as mass-compatible and unsophisticated. King himself has humorously referred to the popular appeal of his works as “the pop of King” (playing on “the King of Pop,” a phrase usually applied to Michael Jackson). Since his first novel *Carrie* (1974), King has covered a vast number of literary genres, including horror, fantasy, science fiction, drama, crime fiction, and suspense, winning many prestigious awards (Hugo Award, World Fantasy Award, National Medal of Arts, etc.). This seminar will situate King’s multi-faceted work within the aesthetic frame – and against the backdrop – of the American Gothic, investigating the narrative strategies by which the author explores the darker sides of U.S. history (involving trauma, guilt, and moral abysses). How was King influenced by other authors who employed techniques of the Gothic (such as Edgar Allan Poe, Shirley Jackson, H.P. Lovecraft, and Richard Matheson)? In what way is the horror of King’s narratives linked to the underlying horror of the American past? We will read some of his shorter works (e.g., “The Body,” “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption”) and delve into excerpts from his longer novels (e.g., *The Shining*, *Misery*, *The Green Mile*, *11/22/63*, *Revival*, and *Mr. Mercedes*).

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

Materials: Participants are asked to purchase Stephen King’s novel *11/22/63* (2011) as a hardcopy (7,95 EUR on Amazon) or as an e-book. All other relevant primary and secondary texts will be made available on Moodle.

Aims: The course aims at discussing the main characteristics as well as the aesthetics and cultural function of Stephen King’s literary works.

Assessment: **A.)** regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as **nine** (!) substantial entries in the discussion forum (1/3); **B.)** presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); **C.)** research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

Deadline for Final Papers (including declaration of honesty): Friday, February 10, 2017. *There is no (!) extension of this deadline.* Please indicate on a **post-it** attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

SYLLABUS

14 October Scared to Death – An Introduction to Stephen King

Basic texts:

Jonathan P. Davis, “Introduction” to *Stephen King’s America* (1994). [Moodle]

Tony Magistrale, “Stephen King and the Romance Tradition” (1988). [Moodle]

Stephen King, excerpts from *On Writing* (2000). [Moodle]

John Sears, “Rereading Stephen King’s Gothic” (2011). [Moodle]

21 October Freudian Gothic – The Voice from the Unconscious in “The Boogeyman” (1973)

Main text (required):

Stephen King, “The Boogeyman” (1973) [Moodle]

Additional text (optional): *It* (1986), pp. 3-19, 173-192, 1220-1271.

Keywords: Devil; Freud; Monster; Mythology; Psychological Horror Story; Unconscious.

28 October Pure Horror – Visceral Shocks in *The Shining* (1977)

Main text (required):

Stephen King, *The Shining* (1977), ch. 1-4, 55-57 [Moodle]


Keywords: Alcoholism; Gothic; Haunted Houses; Loneliness; Madness; ‘Redrum’; Repressed Past; Shirley Jackson.

04 November The Horrors of Initiation – Confronting Death in *The Body* (1982)

Main text (required):

Stephen King, *The Body* (1982) [Moodle]

Keywords: Adventure Drama; Death; Dysfunctional Homes; 1st Person Narration; Rites of Passage; Trauma; Youth.

- 11 November** **Independent Study Unit – No class today! Write your 2-page research proposal at home.**
- 18 November** **Imprisonment and the Desire for Freedom in *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (1982)**
 Main text (required):
Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption (1982) [Moodle]
 Keywords: Convicts; Crime Fiction; Homophobic/Homosocial; Injustice; Jail; Mexico; Redemption.
-  **Deadline Research Proposal TODAY, November 18!**
- 25 November** **The Return of the Reader – Writerly Pains in *Misery* (1987)**
 Main example (watching required):
Misery, pp. 1-22 & 319-369 (1987) [Moodle]
 Keywords: Deadly Females; Fandom; Gendered Horror; Psychology; Reader; Writing.
- 02 December** **Mind-Tricking Fiction – Self-Reflection in “Secret Window, Secret Garden” (1990)**
 Main example (watching required):
 “Secret Window, Secret Garden” (excerpt) (1990) [Moodle]
 Keywords: Autobiographical; Bestsellers; Garden Symbol; Mirroring; Shooter Figure; Split Personality; Thriller.
- 09 December** **The End of the Human Race – (Post-)Apocalyptic Imagery in “The End of the Whole Mess” (1986/1993)**
 Main text (required):
 Stephen King, “Night Surf” (1969/1976) [Moodle]
 Keywords: Catastrophe; Diary; End of World; Post-Apocalyptic; *The Stand* (novel); Virus.
- 16 December** **Cheating Death – Magic, Guilt, and Age in *The Green Mile* (1996)**
 Main text (required):
 Stephen King, excerpts from *The Green Mile* (1996) [Moodle]
 Keywords: Death Penalty; Electric Chair; Evil; Guilt/Innocence; Machines; Mouse; Serial Novel.
- 13 January** **Time-Travel Fiction – Loops and Rabbit Holes in *11/22/63* (2011)**
 Main text (required):
 Stephen King, *11/22/63* (2011); esp. chapters 1-2, 8-9, 12, 13. [Please purchase book!]
 Keywords: *Alice in Wonderland*; American Fifties; Eisenhower Era; Rabbit Hole; Science Fiction; Time Traveling.
- 20 January** **Historical Fiction – The Living Past in *11/22/63* (2011)**
 Main text (required):
 Stephen King, *11/22/63* (2011); esp. ch. 17, 21, 23, 26, 28-30 & last chapter (“Citizen of the Century”).
 [Please purchase book!]
 Keywords: Age; Alternate History; Dystopia; Harmonies; Kennedy Assassination; Obdurate Past; Romance.
- 27 January** **Is There a God? The Mysteries of Life and Creation in *Revival* (2014)**
 Main text (required):
 Stephen King, excerpts from *Revival* (2014).
 Keywords: Cosmic Horror; Electricity; ‘Mother Monster’; Life after Death; H.P. Lovecraft; Religion; Supernatural.
- 03 February** **Investigating Crime – The Neo-Noir Formula in *Mr. Mercedes* (2014)**
 Main example (watching required):
 Stephen King, excerpts from *Mr. Mercedes* (2014).
 Keywords: Cars; Change of Perspective; *Christine* (novel); Crime Novel; Hard-Boiled Detective; Madman.

 **FINAL PAPER ON FEBRUARY 10 (FRIDAY)**