Terror in the Cul-de-sac:
The Suburban Uncanny in Late 20th Century American Horror

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Applications</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dedicated to Toby and David Michelson

for always encouraging me to learn,

and to Cameron Michelson,

for always watching horror movies with me.
Introduction

To experience fear is a fundamental part of the human condition, to seek safety, every bit as much. This thesis will be exploring how a manufactured image of American safety and identity in the mid-twentieth century (the 50s and 60s in particular) translated into a new subgenre of horror by the century's end: an unexpected horror of the mundane. By 1990, fear could be found in a suburban kitchen as it could have previously been found in a remote haunted castle. Authors like Stephen King and directors like David Lynch were just a few of the creative forces who made the cul-de-sac a terrifying place to be. This thesis defines this sort of fear as, "the suburban uncanny," a phenomenon wherein creators of horror media exploited suburbia's familiar qualities in order to create a distinctive brand of fear and terror that subverted suburban lifestyles. The suburban uncanny appears quite often in media from the late 20th century— that is, media made by creatives who were born and raised in the newly suburbanized America. This thesis will examine the books *IT, Needful Things,* and *The Stepford Wives;* as well as the films *Blue Velvet* and *Poltergeist,* in order to explore how and why this phenomenon becomes so manifest in the latter part of the 20th century.

In order to understand this multi-genre phenomenon, we must first delve fully into the world that created it: that is, the post World War II suburbs of
America. Post World War II America was a new kind of place to be. Specifically, this was when America became a dominant global superpower. In 1941, shortly before the country entered World War II, Henry R. Luce wrote in Life Magazine that, "the 20th century is the American Century."\(^1\) He declared that, "we are the inheritors of all the great principles of Western civilization— above all Justice, the love of Truth, the ideal of Charity."\(^2\) It was a bold statement, but a statement that many Americans would be happy to validate. And indeed, there was an aspect of prosperity to mid-20th century America. There was an abundance of jobs, people were starting families (this is when the "Baby Boomer" generation was born), and it seemed that there could be no better place to live than the United States of America.\(^3\) Perhaps most significantly, there was a massive population shift from the cities to the newer suburbs as Americans first got to experience what contemporary audiences know as the typical "American Dream"— 2 kids, a white picket fence with a perfectly manicured lawn, and maybe a dog. Take, as an example, the urban center of Chicago. Between 1950 and 1960, the city lost nearly 70,000 residents after decades of rising population.\(^4\) It wasn't just in massive cities— even smaller cities like Gary, Indiana lost nearly half of their populations.\(^5\) As the cities became more and more decimated, the suburbs that

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2 Ibid.
5 Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 2.
surrounded them swelled. The ease of dispersion from metropolitan centers was partially in thanks to the rise of the interstate system. In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, and soon everyone was just a quick car ride away from wherever they needed to be.\(^6\)

There were plenty of other aspects that made post World War II America the perfect environment for the suburbs. There was a massive influx of veterans returning from abroad. There was a housing crisis, as well as new technologies from the war that allowed developers to build housing faster and cheaper. Thanks to the Great Depression, there was also a great amount of free land from foreclosed farms.\(^7\) This resulted in housing soaring in the 50s like it never had before. Between 1930 and 1939, 2,734,000 housing units began construction. Between 1940 and 1949, 7,443,000 housing units began construction. But between 1950 and 1959, 15,068,000 housing units began construction.\(^8\) The building market also encouraged large residential builders, who built three out of every four houses in the Bay Area by 1960.\(^9\)

These large residential builders were able to grow and keep their prices down through techniques that resulted in the homogeneity for which the suburbs

\(^7\) Barbara M. Kelly, Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 22.
\(^9\) Ibid, 24.
became famous for, and which the suburban uncanny would later take inspiration from. For example, consider the building firm Levitt and Sons and their developmental projects—Levittowns. Developer William Levitt postulated that he could use mass-production strategies from military housing projects in order to create homes quickly and cheaply—and so he did. As Barry Checkoway writes, "government research laboratories cooperated with large builders to make advances in materials and equipment, in land development and site planning, and in fast and less costly methods. Mass production and prefabrication promised factory engineering, standardized dimensions, preassembled units and prefitted systems. It also promised more rapid construction and higher production."\(^\text{10}\) The conditions of large builders who had a great deal of available land, a booming clientele, and easier methods of production led to a suburban growth rate that was ten times higher than cities by 1950.\(^\text{11}\) Suburbia was also racially homogenous, due to aggressive redlining policies that kept African American families out. Redlining is a term used to refer to how the Federal Housing Administration would not insure mortgages in African American neighborhoods.\(^\text{12}\) The FHA simultaneously subsidized building companies, like the ones just mentioned, that created neighborhoods for white families.\(^\text{13}\) Although these

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 24-25.

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 25.


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
policies were repealed in 1968, the damage that they had caused made the lily-white suburbs far more difficult for African American families to afford.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, the suburbs remain largely white to this day.

In a sociopolitical sense, mid-century America was a stressful place to live. The Cold War was at its height, and with it McCarthyism and the Red Scare. Under the constant threat of nuclear war, families began to build fallout shelters in their backyards. At the beginning of the 1960s, President Kennedy himself even urged citizens to have them— just before the Cuban Missile Crisis, in fact.\textsuperscript{15} And that's only international crises— this is also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, a bold challenge to the hegemonic white powers of the time. The atmosphere in the country was tense at best, apocalyptic at worst. The suburbs themselves were fiercely racist, as already reflected by the ideologically violent redlining and housing policies.\textsuperscript{16} And yet, American visual culture found itself engorged in a positivity that bordered on saccharine. Ads in \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} presented American life— and, in particular, \textit{suburban} life, as fun and glamorous. There wasn't a single dull color or frowning face in sight. Everyone is clean, everyone is happy, and everyone fits a specific mold of upper-middle-class, white, heterosexual "wholesomeness," with any challenges to that mold dutifully erased from the popular narrative.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Take a moment to compare an ad from *The Saturday Evening Post* with stills from *Poltergeist* and *Blue Velvet*. The kitschy quality and the brightness of 50s advertising are brought to life in these film stills, though these stories tell a distinctively different tale from the ones in advertising. While *Blue Velvet* is a story of murder and violence, the opening scene in Figure 2 is pure sugar-coated bliss—bright blues and reds, and of course, a flawless white picket fence. It is exactly the place where this violence should not occur, and yet, it does.

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In *Poltergeist*, the audience sees the Freeling family sitting in their perfectly modern living room, surrounded by everything the suburban family could want—a television set, a speaker and CD players, gorgeous curtains and furniture—and yet the haunting leaves them frightened and upset nonetheless. As this thesis will explore, it is the area between this disconnect where the suburban uncanny thrives.

An important note—the 1950s marked the era when corporations began marketing their products to children, that is, the baby boomers from the post-war
population boom. Nearly all of the writers and directors that this thesis will be considering, with the exception of Ira Levin, were born in the 1940s, and thus children in an age where they were suddenly a demographic heavily targeted by marketing. Furthermore, the 1950s marked the beginning of using psychology for marketing purposes. As a 1955 ad for Camel Cigarettes said, "it's a psychological fact: pleasure helps your disposition." This linking of happiness and consumption further drove a social need to have the perfect suburban life.

What exactly is the "uncanny" aspect of the suburban uncanny? Sigmund Freud famously defined "The Uncanny" as his 1919 essay of the same name. "The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt," he writes, "in which it wore a more friendly aspect." Uncanniness derives from a deep, if often obscured or imperfectly grasped, sense of familiarity.
An uncanny object takes its sense of creepiness from the fact that there is something about it that the viewer is intimately familiar with—and yet it is not quite that something. Contemporary readers might be more familiar with the concept of the uncanny valley. In this phenomenon, the more lifelike something is, the more appealing it is to the viewer—except when the object is almost exactly, but not quite, lifelike. In such a case, the object appears unsettling.

As this thesis will argue, suburban America and its unique, sterilized culture became the perfect vehicle for the uncanny because of their intense senses of familiarity and homogeneity, where the slightest anomaly can register as off-putting. Consider the massive housing developments that sprang up quickly and efficiently across the country, designed in batches, and not made with the individual in mind. A living room in Washington could look nearly identical to a living room in Pennsylvania, and the families living within them could be strikingly similar too—specifically, in their manner of consumer habits.

As previously mentioned, mid-century America was at the height of the Cold War. Given the ideological nature of this war, mid-century America was also inundated with propaganda—helped by the spread of television into more and more American households. As scholar Nancy Bernhard writes, "we can see how a particular world view, representing particular interests and sometimes extreme

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interpretations of world events, was naturalized as objective, true, and free.”

Propaganda put forward an idealized version of American life and made it the culturally dominant ideal. Corporations, spurred on by the era's prevailing capitalistic spirit, presented themselves as inherently good and patriotic; capitalism and Americanism became synonymous. Using one's purchasing power was displayed as a kind of civic virtue, a way to bolster the American economy and secure the future of industries—and the future of the nation. The nuclear family with strict gender roles was espoused as the best and most American kind of family, and something to which the average American should aspire. And, once this family was created, they could buy homes and consume. As a result, Americans, and suburbanites in particular, were largely seen as a swath of consumers rather than individuals. Such a mindset is best summed up in what is now known as The Kitchen Debate, wherein President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev discussed the merits of capitalism versus communism at the American National Exhibition in 1959. "This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women...I think that this attitude towards

23 Ibid, 6.
24 Ibid, 10.
27 Ibid, 144.
women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives...²⁹ Nixon said.

Fig. 4. Khrushchev and Nixon at The Kitchen Debate.³⁰

Fig. 5. A still from Poltergeist.

²⁹ The Kitchen Debate, 1959, transcript.
Nixon's words highlight how the American mindset connected consumption and capitalism with ease and happiness—a mindset that can be found in every piece of media that this thesis will be examining. Take, for instance, Figure 5—a still from Poltergeist wherein Steve Freeling is selling a house with appliances to a couple, reminiscent of Nixon at the Kitchen Debates. Because, while Nixon claims that the goal was "to make life more easy for our housewives," the true intention was, of course, to sell more things—unnecessary luxuries. Consumption shaped social lives, as demonstrated by the Tupperware party, a "party" wherein women would get together at another woman's house for her to sell them Tupperware.31 Consumption was also tied in with the excitement of young adulthood. A 1957 advertisement for Redbook Magazine described young adults as, "on their own for the first time—and determined not to miss a single new homemaking idea."32 It goes on to describes young adults as being in "a purchasing stage...in for a wild, non-stop ride...a happy-go-spending world."33 This new view of private property was noted as alienating even in its time, however. Scholars like C. Wright Mills noted how, "the severance of the individual from an independent means of livelihood has changed the basis of his life-plan and the psychological rhythm of that planning...the employee's economic life is based upon the job contract and the pay period."34 In other words, in an economic sense, people are no longer

31 Hine, Populuxe, 35.
32 In the Suburbs, (Redbook, 1957), video.
33 Ibid.
living for themselves. They live for their bosses at a large corporation, they buy their home from a large building conglomerate, and they purchase their new Frigidaire refrigerator (often on the installment plan) after a neat cycle of biweekly paychecks. Life has become both monotonous and servile. These notions of what Americans should be, poured into the bubbling cauldron that was the suburban landscape, were the ingredients in a recipe for the bizarre homogeneity of the suburban lifestyle.

The new suburban era palpably exuded and tried to hide a deep discomfort, which strongly affected those living through it. In his book *The Lonely Crowd*, published in 1950, David Riesman explains the newfound suburban pathologies that arise from dissatisfaction with the consumer lifestyle. He writes,

...many of the desires that drove men to work and to madness in societies depending on the inner-direction are now satisfied relatively easily; they are incorporated into the standard of living taken for granted by millions. But the craving remains. It is a craving for the satisfactions others seem to have, an objectless craving. The consumer today has most of potential individuality trained out of him by his membership in the consumers' union. (80)

In other words, the mid-20th century consumer is driven not by genuine need, but by a need to need. It is this insatiable need to need that feeds into the soul-destroying qualities of suburbia—a focus on perfect that will never quite be perfect enough. In this space between realities and imagined need, the suburban uncanny can crawl through and become manifest. After all, not-quite-perfect is the definition of the uncanny valley.
The suburban uncanny has two primary defining qualities that derive from the inherent qualities of suburbia—villainy that hides in plain sight, and a certain aspect of repression that is Freudian in nature. There is always something that is simultaneously hidden and manifest, and it often exploits dangerous thoughts and desires that the all-too-clean suburban landscape has paved over in favor of a false paradise. The monsters from all of the works that this thesis will be examining—It (or Pennywise the Dancing Clown), Leland Gaunt, the husbands of Stepford, Frank Booth, and the ghosts of Cuesta Verde are all very much parts of the environments that they seek to terrorize and exploit. Whether they manifest themselves through suburban infrastructure or as helpful neighbors, they reject the connotations that come with being an outsider. They, at the very least, bear a resemblance to figures representing safety and home, which they use to their advantages to wreak havoc.

And yet, it is in their hidden and repressed aspects that the clarity of their threat comes through. It, aka Pennywise, often appears to its victims as a happy clown from television, yet is a child-eating monster that hides in the town's sewers. Leland Gaunt presents himself as a humble salesman, but is actually a soul-stealing demon. The husbands of Stepford are typical husbands in every way, except that they murder their wives and replace them with robotic replicas. Frank Booth disguises himself as a sharp-dressed man and walks around Lumberton without attracting suspicion, but is a sadistic rapist, murderer, and abuser. The ghosts of Cuesta Verde hide themselves in familiar objects like utensils, toys, and
furniture, but attack with a formidable force that threatens the lives of the Freeing family. The monstrous, hidden aspects of each villain come to represent the dangerous aspects of suburbia/the consumer lifestyle that the glamor of propaganda seeks to cover up. For instance, the husbands of Stepford oppress their wives in the most upsetting way possible—literal murder—but this derives from the fact that actual suburban housewives in the mid-20th century had so little power and were essentially free labor for their husbands that they might as well actually have been housekeeping robot replacements. Frank Booth may be an extreme version of a suburban abuser, but his violence is representative of all of the evil that prospers in suburbia—abuse, discrimination, and fear—that occurs under the safe image of a white man.

Suburban uncanny villains fall quite neatly into an idea discussed in social psychology as "the return of the repressed," attributed to Freud. While Freud's theories have largely been proven incorrect by modern psychological standards, their influences on art and literature of the 20th century make them essential to discuss. In his book *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud writes

...the decisive experiences in early childhood exert a lasting influence, yet in this case the stress falls not on the time, but on the process opposing that event, the reaction against it...as a consequence of a certain experience there arises an instinctual demand which claims satisfaction. The ego forgoes this satisfaction, either because it is paralyzed by the excessiveness of the demand or because it recognizes in it a danger. The first of the reasons is the original one; both end in the avoidance of a dangerous situation. The Ego guards against this danger by repression. The excitation becomes inhibited in one way or another; the incitement, with the observations and perceptions belonging to it, is forgotten. This, however, does not bring the process to an end; either the instinct has kept its strength, or it will regain it or it is reawakened by a new situation.
It renews its claim and since the way to normal satisfaction is barred by what we may call the scar tissue of repression it gains at some weak point new access to a so-called substitutive satisfaction which now appears as a symptom, without the acquiescence and also without the comprehension of the ego. (Section 7)

Simply put, Freud theorizes that psychological dangers and stressors do not go away with time or effort. Instead, they work their way back up to the surface without the knowledge of the working conscience. Characters like It embody this in the most literal sense; it is a part of the town that is largely ignored by the population despite its impressive body count and regular killing cycles, and it physically lurks beneath the town before it resurfaces and continues its carnage. Other villains, like Frank Booth, embody this in a more metaphorical sense—a monster that stands in for the most sinister parts of suburbia and hides under the veneer of a normal, well-dressed man. As this thesis will argue, horror from the late 20th century is tapping into this repression in order to criticize the constructed and whitewashed landscape that is modern suburbia—a landscape the paves over, both literally and figuratively, the griminess, hostility, and violence of American society and covers it with freshly trimmed lawns and white picket fences. However, the danger still finds a way to manifest itself, whether the homeowner's association likes it or not.
This chapter will be exploring how the suburban uncanny manifested itself in late 20th century literature, with a special focus on the work of Stephen King. It will be examining the books *IT*, *Needful Things*, and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* as example cases.

At nearly 1,200 pages, *IT* is a lot to take in. Let us begin by discussing the novel's central character—It itself, aka Bob Gray, aka Pennywise the Dancing Clown. It is the terrifying force behind the story. Every 27 years, it awakens to feed on the people (mostly the children) of Derry, Maine. The narrative focuses on two of It's killing sprees, in 1957 and in 1984. These two dates are of particular interest to this thesis, as they encapsulate both the height of Cold War Americana and consumer culture in the former and the sociological effects in the latter. It's introduction is marked by a distinct sense of the uncanny. As described from the perspective of its six year-old victim Georgie Denbrough,

There was a clown in the stormdrain. The light in there was far from good, but it was good enough so that George Denbrough was sure of what he was seeing. It was a clown, like in the circus or on TV. In fact, he looked like a cross between Bozo and Clarabell, who talked by honking his (or was it her?—George was never really sure of the gender) horn on *Howdy Doody* Saturday mornings—Buffalo Bob was just about the only one who could understand Clarabell, and that always cracked George up. The face of the clown in the stormdrain was white, there were funny tufts of red hair on either side of his bald head, and there was a big clown-smile painted over his mouth. If George had been inhabiting a year later, he would have surely thought of Ronald McDonald before Bozo or Clarabell.
Pennywise looks exceptionally normal to young Georgie because it reminds him of all of the clowns he has seen on television and is familiar and safe with; clowns that he has laughed with. What makes this scenario so odd is, of course, the fact that this particular clown is in the stormdrain— an exceptionally bizarre location to find a clown in. Here we see the juxtaposition of the normal (a clown resembling popular clowns on television) with the absurd (the fact that this clown is not where clowns usually are). Therefore, it should be entirely benign, but there's something off about it. This also places Pennywise squarely in the uncanny valley— life-like but just not quite there. Georgie, however, is a child of the 50s. He was raised alongside his television and if it made him happy on TV, it should make him happy in real life. As previously discussed, marketing in the 1950s was made to target children for the first time. King even makes a special point to mention that had Georgie been murdered only a year later, his killer would have reminded him of advertising darling Ronald McDonald.

As Georgie chats his way closer and closer to his unwitting doom, he provides further description of Pennywise. "He was wearing a baggy silk suit with great big orange buttons. A bright tie, electric-blue, flopped down his front, and on his hands were big white gloves, like the kind Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck always wore," writes King.¹ Again, Georgie is experiencing Pennywise within the context of imagery and characters that he finds safe, happy, and comforting. Disneyland opened its gates in 1955 and famously marketed itself as "the happiest

place on earth." King thus subverts this saccharine, mass-market appeal version of happiness by having his monster take on the qualities of its representative characters. This results in a scathing critique of the kind of phony happiness represented by the world of Disney and the suburbs, to which this sort of "family park" had a mass appeal.

Near the novel's end, the narration shifts to the perspective of the titular monster. It ruminates as the main characters come to try and kill it for the second time, thinking,

It had always fed well on children. Many adults could be used without knowing they had been used, and It had even fed on a few of the older ones over the years—adults had their own terrors, and their glands could be tapped, opened so that all the chemicals of fear flooded the body and salted the meat. But their fears were mostly too complex. The fears of children were simpler and usually more powerful. The fears of children could often be summoned up in a single face...and if bait were needed, why, what child did not love a clown? (1033)

So we see how It takes Americana—specifically, a kind of Americana that thrives on youthful innocence—and uses that to feed. It finds clowns to be the most effective bait because, as in the instance of Georgie, its victims feel most at ease with them. It also notes how it feeds upon fear, which "salts the meat." There is a particularly cruel irony in taking a familiar figure and suddenly transforming it into a horrific nightmare. The fact that these two qualities exist simultaneously within It suggests that they are in fact two sides of the same coin. In other words, everything pleasant has a hidden, dangerous aspect to it. Thus, It becomes a cautionary figure to those who seek comfort—as King seems to argue, there is no
comfort without terror, and to ignore danger (as the suburban lifestyle attempts to do) is inherently self-defeating.

When Stanley Uris encounters IT for the first time, he has a similar experience to Georgie in that joyful, trusted aspects of his youth are taken and corrupted in order to hunt him down. Stanley meets Pennywise at the Derry Standpipe. The Derry Standpipe was responsible for supplying the town with water, and had a gallery level for the townspeople to enjoy views of Derry. However, after a series of drownings in the Standpipe, it is closed permanently to the public. Stanley goes to the Standpipe not to try to explore it, but to look around it for birds, as is his hobby. He ends up walking over to the structure out of pure curiosity after the door blows open and peers inside. The interior of the Standpipe is creepy at first, so Stanley turns to leave, until he begins to hear faint music.

He cocked his head, listening, the frown on his face starting to dissolve a little. Calliope music, all right, the music of carnivals and county fairs. It conjured up trace memories which were as delightful as they were ephemeral: popcorn, cotton candy, doughboys frying in hot grease, the chain-driven clatter of rides like the Wild Mouse, the Whip, the Koaster-Kups. Now the frown had become a tentative grin. Stan went up one step, then two more, head still cocked. He paused again. As if thinking about carnivals could actually create one; he could now actually smell the popcorn, the cotton candy, the doughboys... (429-430)

The scene becomes odder the further Stanley is pulled into the Standpipe. As Stanley continues up the stairs, he notes how,

The calliope music had gotten suddenly louder, as if trying to conceal the sound of the footsteps. He could recognize the tune now— it was "Camptown Races."
Footsteps, yeah; but they weren't exactly *rustling* footsteps, were they? They actually sounded kind of...*squishy*, didn't they? The sound was like people walking in rubbers full of water...He could feel sweaty, oily and hot, running down his forehead. The calliope music had gotten louder yet. It drifted and echoed down the spiral staircase. There was nothing cheery about it now. It had changed. It had become a dirge. It screamed like wind and water, and in his mind's eye Stan saw a county fair at the end of autumn, wind and rain blowing up a deserted midway, pennons flapping, tents bulging, falling over, wheeling away like canvas bats. He saw empty rides standing against the sky like scaffolds; the wind drummed and hooted in the weird angles of their struts...A sudden rush of water spilled down the stairs. Now it was not popcorn and doughboys and cotton candy he smelled by wet decay, the stench of dead pork which has exploded in a fury of maggots in a place hidden away from the sun. (431)

The bait-and-switch with which It attempts to entrap Stanley is Americana-turned-uncanny in its purest form. Stanley is drawn in with It's classic carnivalesque bait— the ephemeral joy that comes with a day at the circus or carnival, the kind of joy that most any child in 1950s America would associate with happiness. It is particularly disturbing, then, how It reshapes every aspect of this imagined paradise just so until it is a child's nightmare. The happy calliope music playing a cheerful tune slowly transforms into a deafening dirge; the scents of sweet carnival food are replaced with the scents of rot. Like Georgie's encounter with Pennywise in the stormdrain, Stanley's encounter rests squarely in the realm of the uncanny. There is of course the initial "not-belongingness" of a carnival in the Standpipe that sets the stage for events to come, and then the slow but dramatic shift from a scene of comfort to a scene of horror. It provides yet another example of the double-sided coin of pleasure and danger. From another perspective, using the Standpipe as a setting for Stanley's terrifying encounter serves to critique the manner in which the suburbs seek to displace an industrial
past. Here there is a building that is tied to Derry’s past that has been abandoned, and a monster like It is able to use it as a weapon against the current citizens of the town. In this case, it becomes deadly infrastructure, like a zombie of the town past exhuming itself to take revenge. King demonstrates the physical danger of abandoning older ways of life.

Pennywise can be interpreted as the most corrupt possible version of Cold War capitalism—a figure that does nothing but take and take and take, both from the viewpoint of the buyer and the seller. This archetype first sprung up in the 1950s, during America's post World War II economic boom. Americans were spending more than ever thanks to an increase in household income. Between 1950 and 1985, average household income rose from around $5,000 to $24,000. During that same period, the expenditure share for non-necessities rose from around 30% to around 50%.² Americans had more money than ever, especially compared to the recent Great Depression, and they wanted to spend it. Likewise, It attacks Derry in cycles, re-emerging every 27 years or so to feed and do literally nothing else. To view It as a reflection of American economic cycles of prosperity and disparity is a lens that identifies it with the archetypical consumer. To return to It's internal monologue near the novel's end, it describes Derry as, "It's killing—pen, the people of Derry Its Sheep...It had made a great self-discovery: It did not want change or surprise. It did not want new things, ever. It wanted only to eat

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and sleep and dream and eat again. This cannot help but call to mind notions of the mid-century American as a consumer first and foremost— and an individual whose primary interests lie in luxury and contentment. Unlike the unnecessarily excessive American consumer, It must feed to survive. However, if It as examined as a reflection of the American consumer, consumption becomes an American livelihood and an absolute necessity within its temporal context.

There is also the simple logistics of the forms that It takes. It is economical and practical in its choices. When It is not taking the form of something to lure in its victims, it is taking the form of something that will really, truly horrify them. As It narrates, "all of the glamours were only mirrors, of course, throwing back at the terrified viewer the worst thing in his or her own mind." The idea of the glamour-mirror will reoccur in Needful Things, but for now, consider that motif within the context of consumption. The 1940s and 50s saw the beginning of major corporations investing in motivation research. Social scientist Pierre Martineau noted how, “in an intelligent, normal person, virtually everything is motivated by subtle reference to the person’s self-ideal—the kind of character ideal he wants to become. ...In this yearning for self-expression, we reach for products, for brands, for institutions which will be compatible with our schemes

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3 King, IT, 1023-24.
4 Ibid, 1031
of what we are or want to be." Essentially, consumers want to buy products that are reflections of who they believe themselves to be. When Pennywise goes after a victim, the victim needs to be able to be scared. That fear is what "salts the meat," makes them taste better to it. So if one imagines Pennywise as a corporate head, it is literally performing a twisted version of motivation research—discovering what its prey both loves and fears, and using that information in order to get the most possible delicious terror it can get out of them.

Pennywise is so involved with Derry that it quite literally is a part of the town itself. Near the middle of the novel, it is revealed how It arrived in the town of Derry. The Losers Club gets together and makes a smoke hole in order to try and have a vision of It's past. Mike and Richie are the only ones who can withstand the ordeal; they witness a scene from a long-gone primeval past of It flying and crashing on modern Derry's location in a fiery inferno. Here this particular analysis faces a dilemma: how can something so old and cosmic in nature come to represent something so era-specific as mid-20th century consumerism? To counter, consider that although It is a general force of evil, it thrives specifically within an Americana-esque zeitgeist. It takes advantage of modern infrastructure and society in order to be more lethal. So while Mike Hanlon points out that It has been here for ages, Richie makes the point that, "It uses the sewers and the drains...they must be regular freeways for It." It has adapted to complex public infrastructure, the essence of modernity in a town, and

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6 Ibid, 212-222.
7 King, *IT*, 773.
utilized that infrastructure for its own purposes. Furthermore, let us consider

what happens when the Losers Club defeats It in 1985. The scene is apocalyptic,
as the town literally implodes upon itself. Take, for instance, this passage,

At 7:49 a series of explosions shook the Derry Mall, which stood on the site
of the defunct Kitchener Ironworks...no one was going to go shopping at
the Derry Mall for a long time...a third explosion ripped through Hit or
Miss, sending flaming skirts, jeans, and underwear out into the flooded
parking-lot. And a final explosion tore open the mall branch of the Derry
Farmers' Trust like a rotted box of crackers...better than $75,000 blew
away, according to the bank's officers. (1089-1090)

It becomes clear that although It is unspeakably old in nature, It has become tied
up with the modern infrastructure of the town, so much so that It's death literally
causes the town's destruction. Arguably then, It physically is part and parcel of the
increasingly suburbanized town, as all of the markers of modernity suffer some of
the strongest hits upon It's demise. Furthermore, this destruction helps to
continue a cycle of consumption, as King writes that:

The blast which tore through Sears lifted off a chunk of the roof and the
rising wind sailed it away like a kite; it came down a thousand yards away,
slicing cleanly through the silo of a farmer named Brent Kilgallon. Kilgallon's sixteen-year-old son rushed out with his mother's Kodak and
took a picture. The National Enquirer bought it for sixty dollars, which the
boy used to buy two new tires for his Yamaha motorcycle. (1090)

It is difficult for an image to be more explicitly metaphorical— a piece of a chain
store destroys a piece of an increasingly defunct industry— individual farming—
and the results of it are sold as a commodity and used to increase one's
purchasing power— and to purchase a shiny new status symbol vehicle,
nonetheless.
When It is awoken, it is by some form of trauma that has occurred in Derry. At the time of the adult portion of the book, the three most recent traumas have political ramifications that are relevant not just to suburban life, but to American life in general. In 1930, It is awoken when a group of racists burn down a prominent African American night club called "The Black Spot," killing many who were trapped inside. In 1957, It is awoken when a young child, Dorsey Corcoran, is beaten to death by his stepfather. Finally, in 1984, It is awoken when Adrian Mellon, a gay man, is assaulted and thrown off a bridge, where It waits to devour him. Each instance reflects a serious problem— racism, domestic abuse, and homophobia. The fact that these situations are perpetrated by Derry's citizens and not It itself reflects society's guilt and complacency in such forms of violence, which it tries to cover up with a veneer of joy— much ask It masks its own danger in a clown disguise. These violent acts feed It's power, and enable it to perform its deadly ritual. Furthermore, they create a physical embodiment of the return of the repressed. It feeds off of this cycle of violence and then, as if nothing had happened, literally goes beneath the town to wait. The town does not discuss It nor does it confront It, instead choosing to bury the pain and hope that it does not return— but, like the repressed, It will always return, more monstrous than before.

It is also important to consider Pennywise's glamours as being reflective of contemporary American society as a whole— literally, reflective. It terrorizes the Losers Club in the form of MGM movie monsters, taking form of a mummy to Ben
and a werewolf to Richie. As previously established, It's *modus operandi* is to take the form of something that Its victim fears most in order to make the victim taste as good as possible. It is not insignificant that multiple characters have fears that they have acquired through consumption of popular media. They are "plugged in" to a web of familiar images that are easy for It to exploit. The murder of Eddie Corcoran presents an interesting case example of this combination of personal trauma and popular culture. Eddie does not come home at night because he has gotten poor grades and school and fears the reaction of his abusive stepfather, who has already killed his younger brother, Dorsey. When It first attacks Eddie, it takes the form of Dorsey's mutilated body. It chases Eddie, changing into the Creature from the Black Lagoon in the interim. When Eddie trips over a park bench and finally gives It the advantage, he hardly believes what is happening to him. "'You're...not...real,' Eddie choked, but clouds of grayness were closing in now, and he realized faintly that it was real enough...and yet some rationality remained, even until the end: as the Creature hooked its claws into the soft meat of his neck...Eddie's hands groped at the Creature's back, feeling for a zipper."8

This bait and switch, this transformation into something personal and then popular, affects Eddie profoundly. It terrorizes Eddie with his own personal trauma, but in the end, It decides to go in for the kill in the form of something recognizable from pop culture. Eddie himself understands that he is dealing with something straight out of the movies, searching for the zipper as It kills him. He is

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8 Ibid, 267.
literally killed by a part of popular culture. By linking Eddie's trauma (in the form of his deceased brother, Dorsey) with a death by a movie monster, King is able to imbue the safe and the popular with a newer, sharper set of teeth.

There are two separate time periods found in the book, and the narrative alternates between the years of 1957 and 1985. While the majority of the story takes place in Derry, Maine, the temporal differences can make them feel like completely separate towns. In 1957, Derry is a small logging town. It is home to a number of independent businesses (like Mr. Keene's drug store and the Aladdin Theater) and is off the beaten path. By the time the protagonists return to it in 1985, it is much more suburbanized. The old Ironworks, a place of It's carnage, has become paved over and turned into the third-largest shopping mall in Maine, which Bill describes as, "really A-A-American, alright."\(^9\) Bill is disturbed by the change, narrating how,

The Bijou Theater was gone, replaced with a parking lot (BY PERMIT ONLY, the sign over the ramp announced; VIOLATERS SUBJECT TO TOW). The Shoeboat and Bailley's Lunch, which had stood next to it, were also gone. They had been replaced by a branch of the Northern National Bank...The Center Street Drug, lair of Mr. Keene and the place where Bill had gotten Eddie his asthma medication that day, was also gone. Richard's Alley had become some strange hybrid called a "mini-mall." (485)

The uniqueness of Derry has been replaced by the sprawl of suburbia, by bank branches and mall franchises. Bill's cab driver explains how they, "tore down most the old stores and put up a lot of banks and parking lots."\(^10\) The logging industry

\(^9\) Ibid, 485.  
\(^10\) Ibid, 486.
that once controlled the town is now irrelevant, which makes one of It's attacks in 1985 particularly interesting: The Paul Bunyan statue.

A grown up Richie Tozier walks around town and sees Derry's massive Paul Bunyan statue. Stephen King based this statue on a real statue in Bangor, Maine, which was donated to the city in 1959. The statue is meant to represent Derry's rich logging history, a history which is obsolete at this point in the story. It makes the Paul Bunyan statue come to life and attack Richie, while saying, "I'm going to eat you up...unless you give me back my hen and my harp and my bags of gold, I'm going to eat you right the fuck up!" It is a two-pronged wave of weaponized nostalgia—firstly, the history of the pre-suburbanized town is literally coming back to attack a former citizen. The industrial economy of the town is gone, instead replaced with an empty symbolic representation. It is appropriate for Pennywise to take on its form—both are hollow reflections that ultimately result out of consumption. Secondly, the statue references Jack and the Beanstalk, a story told to children and surely intended to mentally send Richie back to the days of his youth, when his fears were more concrete and easy to evoke. By reminding Richie of his childhood, It implies that childhood trauma, if not dealt with, will find a way to manifest itself in adulthood. Likewise, societal trauma, if ignored in the ways that America/suburbia has chosen, will still find a way to erupt into the

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12 King, IT, 592.
present. In the Paul Bunyan statue, the buried traumas of Old Derry attack New Derry.

In another of Stephen King’s books, Needful Things, the story’s monster lures his victims by appealing to their desires as consumers. The narrative is set in Castle Rock, a sleepy Maine town reminiscent of Derry in the 1950s. At the beginning of the novel, a store opens up in town called, well, Needful Things. It is essentially a curio shop filled with all sorts of antiques and knick-knacks. Mr. Leland Gaunt runs it, and it has something for everyone— quite literally, all of the people of Castle Rock are able to find the thing that they want most inside the store. In order to purchase these items, one must pay a small price in cash (always no more than what that particular person can afford) and perform a deed for Mr. Gaunt. It is these deeds that lead to Castle Rock’s unraveling.

The underlying premise of Needful Things is the willingness of the inhabitants of Castle Rock literally to destroy their town in the pursuit of physical objects that supposedly hold deep value. Near the story’s end, we discover that these things are not even particularly amazing or special— just pieces of garbage enchanted to look like what that particular consumer so badly wants. Let us analyze these objects through the lens of mass produced objects of the mid-20th century, paired with the gradual disappearance of the economic basis of small-town life. The first person to make a purchase at Needful Things is Brian Rusk, a young and curious child and massive baseball fan. When he first speaks to Mr. Gaunt, he asks Brian what he would like more than anything, to which Brian
replies that he would love a Sandy Koufax baseball card for his collection. Mr. Gaunt goes into the back room and returns,

...back through the curtain. His hair was a trifle disarrayed, and there was a smudge of dust on one lapel of his smoking jacket. In his hands he held a box which contained once contained a pair of Air Jordan sneakers. He set it on the counter and took off the top...the box was full of baseball cards, each inserted in its own plastic envelope, just like the ones Brian sometimes bought at The Baseball Card Shop in North Conway, New Hampshire.
"I thought there might be an inventory sheet in here, but no such luck," Mr. Gaunt said. "Still, I have a pretty good idea of what I have in stock, as I told you— it's the key to running a business where you sell a bit of everything—and I'm quite sure I saw..."
He trailed off and began flipping rapidly through the cards. Brian watched the cards flash by, speechless with astonishment...the contents of the whole store couldn't hold a candle to the treasures tucked away in this one sneaker box. There were chewing-tobacco cards with pictures of Ty Cobb and Pie Traynor on them. There were cigarette cards with pictures of Babe Ruth and Dom DiMaggio and Big George Keller and even Hiram Dissen..."A little of everything, that's what a successful business is all about, Brian...I don't give advice, but if I did, you could do worse than to remember that...now let me see...somewhere...somewhere...ah!"
He pulled a card from the middle of the box like a magician doing a trick and placed it triumphantly in Brian's hand. It was Sandy Koufax. It was a '56 Topps card. And it was signed.
"To my good friend Brian, with best wishes, Sandy Koufax." (41-43)

The scenario that has unfolded before Brian is fantastic, but also thoroughly absurd. Not only does Mr. Gaunt just happen to have all of the rarest and most desirable baseball cards in the world tucked away in a shoebox, but he also has the exact card that Brian wants, signed, with his name; the exact thing that will make Brian happy. Brian is fully immersed in the idea of "buying happiness," which was extremely powerful in the mid-20th century. As previously discussed, American buying power skyrocketed after World War II. The marketing industry
became a powerful force, and it partially worked by linking consumption with happiness. In her essay, "Don't fight it. You can't whip Mickey Mouse," Emma Lambert describes a cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1959, wherein, "the cover displayed a plethora of consumer goods...yet these items stood for something more than their actual or practical use value. [Mark] Gottdeiner comments, 'They stood for something fundamental to the post-war understanding of national identity: a sense of freedom, of effortless ease..."13 She goes on to describe a Disney ad, which "proposed a relationship between purchasing and dream, between the freedom to consume and true happiness.14 While *Needful Things* does indeed take place a few decades after this massive push in advertising that forged the equation between buying and being happy, it undoubtedly grows out of this tradition. This is furthered through the fact that Mr. Gaunt (seemingly) sells the card to Brian for an absurdly low price— eighty-five cents, with the caveat that he will soon throw mud on Wilma Jerzyck's sheets. The ability to purchase the ideal item (and its associated happiness) cheaply— embodies the epitome of the mid-20th century consumerist American dream. The second part of the price— to throw mud on Wilma's sheets— highlights a darker side of consumerism— the empathy thrown away in pursuit of the Object, a theme that will reoccur throughout the remainder of the narrative. In a dream that Brian has,

14 Ibid, 34.
Mr. Gaunt explains how he "came to conduct a seminar in the fine art of dickering." In this relentless dickering, it is the needs of the town to own these objects that cause the town's destruction.

Head selectman Danforth Keeton, another victim of Mr. Gaunt, ends up in the latter's clutches because of his gambling addiction. Mr. Gaunt sells him a game that can predict horse race winners. Prior to purchasing the game, Keeton is already living in fear of a vague shadow entity—a "Them," that wants to make him pay for embezzling town funds (which he has done to cover his gambling losses). Thus, before he even sets foot into Mr. Gaunt's shop, he is already hopelessly lost in a pursuit of spending. Immediately after selling the game to Keeton, Mr. Gaunt asks him if he knows about "Them." He implicitly draws a connection between Keeton's fear of "Them" and the purchase of the toy. He tells Keeton that, "They may be after me. In fact, I'm quite sure of it. I need your help." Keeton, of course, agrees to help, but Gaunt immediately changes the subject to the horse racing game, saying that, "if it does work, and if you can clear your mind of these ephemeral financial worries, come back and see me. We'll sit down and have coffee, just as we have this morning...and talk about Them." To Danforth Keeton, then, not only can purchasing this game solve his short-term financial problems, it can also solve his larger anxieties. He is caught in a cycle of spending, and spending to cover the spending, and spending to cover that. In fact,
when he pays for the game, he uses a bill, "with Thomas Jefferson's face on it—the kind of bill which had gotten him into all this trouble in the first place."

So while he believes he can buy his way out of his problems, it is of course quite the opposite. His inability to actually face his problems, and his hope of finding a solution through the use of the dollar, cement his demise. The two-dollar bill is particularly associated with racetrack betting due to being the minimum amount a person can wager. There is also the symbolism of the two-dollar bill and Thomas Jefferson. As a politician, Jefferson was known to be a strong advocate for American freedoms (at least, for white men). This endless freedom, and of course the free market, ultimately harm Keeton instead. King is commenting on the dangers of the relentless, unmitigated spending that Cold War Consumerism strongly encouraged.

Leland Gaunt takes on a second lackey in addition to Keeton— petty criminal John "Ace" Merrill. Ace is also in a financial bind. His cocaine addiction, as well as his mistakes as a cocaine dealer, have landed him in debt to a more powerful pair of dealers. Like Danforth Keeton, Ace is an addict whose desires to consume have put him in ruin. Mr. Gaunt offers him a map that will supposedly help him find buried treasure hidden in New England in exchange for his services as an employee. If Ace finds these hidden treasures, Mr. Gaunt insinuates, then he will be able to pay off his debt and evade the consequences of his misjudgments and mistakes. Thus, a solution is presented to him in a mode of further

\[18\] Ibid, 279.
consumption— work for me, find the treasure, pay off the debt. The physical pursuit of the object— the search for treasure— as an absurd solution to a problem originating in excess highlights the bizarre nature of the pursuit of objects as the pursuit of happiness. In addition, Mr. Gaunt gives Ace a little something extra with the treasure map— extremely high quality cocaine. King is conflating addiction with consumption and pointing to the deadly end of each, suggesting that they are perhaps one and the same or, at the very least, both end in ruin.

In the end, both Ace and Keeton are killed as a result of their partnership with Mr. Gaunt. Ace has become suspicious of Sheriff Alan Pangborn, who he believes has stolen some of his treasure. Meanwhile, Sheriff Pangborn has fallen under Mr. Gaunt's influence after watching a VHS tape showing Ace to be the cause of a car crash that took the lives of his wife and child— a ploy by Gaunt, of course. By the end of the narrative, the two characters are on a collision course with one another— Ace wants money, Pangborn wants revenge. However, Pangborn is able to break out of Gaunt's spell thanks to the help of Polly Chalmers, who has broken her own spell by destroying the enchanted necklace that Gaunt gave her to ease her arthritic pain. When the two finally meet, Ace is still hypnotized. Ace grabs Polly and holds her hostage while screaming at Pangborn. Polly, who has renounced the consumerist evil of Mr. Gaunt through the obliteration of the desired object, becomes a symbol of the freedom from consumption. She is the first to break with Gaunt and survive, and therefore
becomes a catalyst for others, such as Pangborn, to free themselves. As a symbol of freedom from consumption, it is appropriate that Ace holds her hostage. While there is of course the surface reasoning of Polly being Pangborn's girlfriend, the scene can also be read as status quo consumerism fighting resistance towards it. Ace even speaks in the language of a salesman while threatening Polly, describing how the "offer is good for a limited time only."\(^{19}\) It appears that he has reduced the entirety of his being to the need to possess.

Pangborn spots a mistaken detail in Gaunt's tape that proves it is a fake and confronts Gaunt while Ace still holds Polly captive. He walks towards him, holding a toy snake prank toy, the sort where there's a scrunched up object in a can that pops out at the unsuspecting user as soon as they open the lid. Alan,

\[\ldots\text{Had spun the lid off Todd's last joke...the snake sprang out, and this time it was no joke.}\]
\[\text{This time it was real.}\]
\[\text{It was only real for a few seconds, and Alan never knew if anyone else had seen it, but Gaunt did; of that he was absolutely sure. It was long—much longer than the crepe-paper snake that had flown out a week or so ago when he had removed that can's top in the Municipal Building parking lot after his long, solitary ride back from Portland. Its skin glowed with a shifting iridescence and its body was mottled with diamonds of red and black, like the skin of some fabulous rattler.}\]
\[\text{Its jaws opened as it struck the shoulder of Leland Gaunt's broadcloth coat, and Alan squinted against the dazzling, chromic gleam of its fangs...Gaunt screamed—although with pain, fury, or both, Alan could not tell... (924-925)}\]

Here, Pangborn demonstrates the power of belief in the object to in fact be the power \textit{behind} the object. The regular snake toy becomes an effective weapon against Mr. Gaunt only because Pangborn believes that it will be, just as Gaunt

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 921.
manipulates the beliefs of his victims in order to sell to them. Thus, Pangborn turns the deadly power of consumption back on Gaunt to hurt him, demonstrating the dangers of consumption across the board. Furthermore, Pangborn's diversion turns Gaunt into one of his own victims, ironically, in the same way he captivated his customers—through the distraction of an object.

The reader finally learns what Leland Gaunt's long game has been—collecting the souls of his customers, which he keeps in a valise. The concept of someone selling their soul for something is not a new concept, but King's prose transforms it into a tangible evil of consumerism. Mr. Gaunt, then, is his own sort of consumer—a consumer of his customers' souls. His methods paint consumption in Castle Rock as a cannibalistic activity, whose users literally destroy themselves and put themselves on the chopping block in order to gain their hearts' desires. Mr. Gaunt also sells the people of Castle Rock pistols in the end, so that they may protect their property—which has become their sole focus at this point. So not only do they destroy themselves, they tear apart each other in order to continue their path of deadly consumption.

Mr. Gaunt is a distinctively uncanny villain. Take, for instance, this scene where Polly Chalmers first introduces herself to him.

People usually registered some discomposure or embarrassment of their own when she showed them her hands. Gaunt did not. He grasped her upper arm in hands that felt extraordinarily strong and shook that instead. It might have struck her as an inappropriately intimate thing to have done on first acquaintance, but it did not. The gesture was friendly, brief, even rather amusing. All the same, she was glad it was quick. His hands had a dry, unpleasant feel even through the light fall coat she was wearing. (55)
Leland Gaunt is exceptionally kind and pleasant, but Polly cannot help but feel like there is something wrong about him, especially the feeling of his hands. That unique feeling of "off-ness," the idea that something is almost normal but just far enough away from normal enough to make one uncomfortable, is what places this story firmly within the realm of the suburban uncanny. Leland Gaunt, as well as Pennywise, can easily blend in to the background (in fact, Mike Hanlon's photo album shows that It has been a part of the background noise in Derry for literal centuries). They can operate because they are fairly unassuming, yet the careful viewer understands that something is wrong. Recall that the uncanny works by establishing something as safe and familiar and then twisting it ever so slightly to make it horrifying. To return to Brian Rusk, the enchanted baseball card sold to him by Mr. Gaunt puts him under a powerful spell, so that it feels as if he's actually at the park. He explains he has a visceral experience with the card; he experiences, "smell of grass, sweet and fresh-cut. Heavy smack of ash on horsehide. Yells and laughter from the batting cage." It is the sort of idealized scene that almost seems as if it comes out of an advertisement for baseball cards. It is what a person thinks about when they think of the perfect day out at the ballpark. Compare this scene, then, to Brian's nightmare after he throws mud on Wilma Jerzyck's sheets. Brian dreams that, "the seventh game of the World Series was about to start...Sandy Koufax was in the bullpen, warming up for Da Bums. He was also speaking to Brian Rusk, who stood beside him, between pitches.

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20 Ibid, 44.
Sandy Koufax told Brian exactly what he was supposed to do...the problem was this: Brian didn't want to do it. As Brian argues with Koufax over whether or not he should do this new deed, he is horrified to see the Sandy Koufax is an embodiment of Mr. Gaunt. Koufax says, "'The deal is what I say the deal is, bush.' Sandy Koufax's eyes weren't brown at all, Brian had realized in his dream; they were also blue, which made perfect sense, since Sandy Koufax was also Mr. Gaunt. The once-idyllic baseball scene has become a place of nightmares, which climaxes in "Sandy Koufax" throwing a ball that explodes in blood and viscera just before Brian wakes up. Likewise, recall how Georgie feels safe with Pennywise shortly before his murder due to its resemblance to characters on his favorite cartoons— right before It morphs into a creature from Georgie's fears. Like It, Mr. Gaunt's uncanny existence represents the two-sided coin of suburbia and consumption— danger beneath the pleasantness that betrays the fact that the pleasantness was never actually real to begin with.

The most important point in this analysis of Needful Things is that the objects sold by Mr. Gaunt aren't particularly special at all— in fact, they are nothing more than trivial pieces of garbage disguised with glamour. Norris Ridgewick gets to see what his supposedly special fishing pole looks like without Mr. Gaunt's influence, and discovers that it is actually,

Bamboo. Dirty, filthy bamboo. It wasn't worth everything; it was worth nothing.

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21 Ibid, 328.
22 Ibid, 328.
Norris's thin chest hitched in breath, and he uttered a scream of shame and rage. At the same moment he raised his knee and snapped the fishing rod over it. He doubled the pieces and snapped them again. They felt nasty—almost germy—in his hands. They felt fraudulent. (857)

The happiness that one could supposedly buy is ultimately revealed to be a complete farce. Like mid-century Americana and suburbia at large, it depends on a supposed, imagined nostalgia for the past, and it seeks to obfuscate what is actually real. At this point in the novel, the entire town of Castle Rock is out for blood, murdering each other to gain and hold on to these cheap, useless objects.

The sentimentality behind each of the objects is shallow and empty—an "artificial sentimentality." Artificial sentimentality is the idea of a purchased, mass-produced object somehow being capable of giving its owner a warm and fuzzy feeling inside. In Tupperware's 1948 manual, they described their product as, "objects of great beauty...like art objects ... with the fingering qualities of jade." Tupperware was, of course, not an artistic, jade-like object, but a piece of cheap and simple plastic. The object itself is hardly special, but the idea behind it is what makes it such a powerful tour de force—Tupperware can still be found in many homes to this day. Likewise, many of the people of Castle Rock are enchanted less by the mundane objects than the memories from their lives that they represent and hope to recapture through the purchase of the object, or a fantasy that they hope to gain. Norris Ridgewick's fishing pole brings him back to fond memories of his childhood. Cora Rusk wants to live out her dreams of being with Elvis Presley.

23 Christina E. Bax, "Entrepreneur Brownie Wise: Selling Tupperware to America's Women in the 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 172
Nettie Cobb's carnival glass lampshade reminds her of her own, much-loved collection. Hugh Priest purchases a fox tail like the one his father owned when he was a child. The people of Castle Rock are not, however, purchasing their memories or their fantasies—they are purchasing a cheap reproduction, a mirage that only holds up to the original because of the aura that Mr. Gaunt gives it. The sentimentality is purely artificial, designed to cause them to consume and, in effect, become consumed.

The transactions at Leland Gaunt's store reveal not only the stronghold that consumerism has over the citizens of Castle Rock, but they also the glaring issues that exist just below the town's surface. The novel's narrative takes place over roughly a week's time, and in that time, Castle Rock's social fabric disintegrates with shocking ease. In a way, Leland Gaunt has not brought problems to Castle Rock, but has rather exposed them—for instance, embezzlement, child pornography, and religious intolerance. While the pursuit of the object is indeed vital to Gaunt's plan, he also relies on pre-existing evils to exploit. Like Derry, and the other towns that this thesis examines, the villainy reflects the community's terror back on itself—a terror hidden below the surface, and needing just the right touch to become an active threat to people who have deluded themselves into thinking that they are safe.

Contemporary American cartoon Rick and Morty includes an episode in which Needful Things is parodied. The premise of the episode involves a Leland Gaunt analogue, appropriately named Mr. Needful. He sells cursed objects, but
eventually goes out of business due to competition from the series' main character, who removes the curses with loosely defined science. In order to succeed, he goes online and vaguely adapts his product for a 21st century audience on "n33ful.com." He becomes a Steve Jobs-esque figure, obtains money and power, and hurts one of the series' main characters. While a one-off series joke, it reflects the story's lasting impression upon ideas of consumerism. The fact that Mr. Needful is able to succeed even after his products are blatantly revealed to be cursed, simply by changing his business model, suggests the dominance of consumerism. As it exists in the 21st century, consumerism is nearly inseparable from the idea of brand and brand loyalty, and it is upon 20th century ideas of consumerism that these modern notions are built.

Finally, let us discuss Ira Levin's 1972 novel, The Stepford Wives. The story concerns protagonist Joanna Eberhart as she moves to the seemingly idyllic suburban town of Stepford with her children and husband Walter. Joanna finds the women of Stepford to be disturbingly docile—fossils from an earlier era in the age of women's liberation. They care only about housework, pleasing their husbands, and overall being a perfect archetype from Home and Garden Magazine. It is eventually revealed that the women of Stepford used to be prominent professionals and adamant feminists who were murdered and replaced by robotic replicas whose only purpose is to serve. The conspiracy comes at the hands of their husbands, who eventually replace Joanna.
The town of Stepford represents a tension between the idealized suburban past and a tumultuous present. Suburban development mogul William Levitt noted that a suburban homeowner was, "not just buying a house, he's buying a way of life." However, Levitt's "Levittowns" boomed in the 1950s, whereas Stepford exists in the contemporary era of the 1970s— but were it not for characters like Joanna, it would be nearly impossible to tell. Ads for the second Levittown in Pennsylvania advertised the community as, "the most perfectly planned community in America." An ad in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* advertised it as a package deal— your home, your community, everything was pristine and perfect. "O, there's so much more to see! The all-electric kitchen with its Tracy steel cabinets and stainless steel sinks, the Bendix deluxe automatic clothes-washer, the General Electric refrigerator and range," the ad mused of one of Levittown's many cookie-cutter homes. It went on to say that, "there's a lot of things to come next year. Swimming pools, baseball diamonds, recreation areas, the magnificent town hall with its opera-size stage! Parkway boulevards criss-crossing all sections to avoid traffic jams and make your life a pleasure here." An advertisement for General Electric declared that, "When a woman goes house-hunting, the place she usually heads for first is the kitchen. This is where she spends most of the day. This is where she’s most likely to fall in love with the

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27 Ibid.
house, or reject it. These advertisements heralded a brand of peace and contentment centered on order and domesticity.

Levin’s descriptions of Stepford and the women who live there seem almost directly lifted from these advertisements that promoted the perfect and ideal suburb of the 1950s. Shortly after the Eberhart family moves into their new home, Joanna is introduced to her neighbor, Carol Van Sant. She tries to have a conversation with her, but,

She had to speak loud; Carol had stayed by her doorway, still too far away for comfortable conversation even though she herself was now at the flower bed edging the split-rail fence...Joanna wished that the flower bed and fence weren't there so she could move closer. Or, darn it, that Carol would come to her side of the fence. What was so top-priority-urgent in that fluorescent-lighted copper-pot-hanging kitchen? (8)

As Joanna finds that her neighbors act like the archetype of a 1950s housewife, she also discovers that her new town has all the trappings of the sort of the carefully planned suburb advertised in The Philadelphia Inquirer two decades earlier. The family goes on an outing through Stepford. As Levin writes,

They drove to Stepford Center (white frame Colonial shopfronts, postcard pretty) for discount-slip hardware and pharmaceuticals; then south on Route Nine to a large new shopping mall— discount-slip shoes for Pete and Kim (what a wait!) and a no-discount jungle gym; then east of Eastbridge Road to a McDonald's (Big Macs, chocolate shakes); and a little farther east for antiques (an octagonal end table, no documents); and then north-south-east-west all over Stepford— Anvil Road, Cold Creek Road, Hunnicutt, Beavertail, Burgess Bridge— to show Pete and Kim (Joanna and Walter had seen it all house-hunting) their new school and the schools they would go to later on, the you'd-never-guess-what-it-is-from-outside non-

polluting incinerator plant, and the and the picnic grounds where a community pool was under construction. (10)

Careful roads, new swimming pools, perfect storefronts—just like "the most perfectly planned community in America." Stepford seems to be devoid of an individual identity, being instead defined by the staples of suburbanization like shopping malls, McDonald's, and pristine picnic grounds. Recall suburbanized Derry from *IT*, and how the homogenization and civic development strengthened It. Likewise, a town like Stepford becomes a dead zone where one can easily fall into the repetitive background noise, and its pre-women's liberation atmosphere strengthens the Men's Association to murder and replace their wives. In fact, just by living in Stepford, Walter, a supposedly progressive man, falls into this archaic mindset.

In the book *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, scholar Bernice Murphy discusses depersonalization as a key aspect of zombies (and zombie-like characters, such as the robotic wives of Stepford) in their relation to suburban sprawl. "Levin's androids are incapable of feeling at all," she writes, "Androids, zombies, and alien invaders alike look like people...yet are fundamentally inhuman in their own way. They all 'take over' or otherwise replace those whose appearance they have taken on." Suburbs, in their own way, can be seen a zombies or androids in relation to older and more unique communities. Fictional Stepford looks exactly like Levittown, which looks exactly

like all of the other homogenous developments that sprung up after World War II. One can drive for miles through the suburban United States and the similarities make it seems as though they have barely traveled twenty feet. Kenneth Jackson notes how the suburbs had, "a monotony and repetition that was especially stark in the early years of the subdivision..." However, as previously discussed, Stepford is not a 1950s suburb like Levittown, but instead a suburb that exists in the 1970s. Murphy comments how Stepford, "owes so much to idealized notions of 1950s suburban life, and specifically that way of life as magazines and advertisements depicted it." At one point, doomed Stepford wife Bobbie Markowe even describes the town as "zombieville." Indeed, like zombies and the robots that replace the women, Stepford is but a hollow imitation of a world that did not truly exist. Wives of the 1950s were not happy slaves to their husbands, and were over-prescribed psychiatric medications to deal with their lots in life. The men of Stepford want to live in the world of repression, where all of the issues that they have with their wives (including their wives' free will) are dismissed for their own comfort. The fact that they succeed in this goal paints a pessimistic view of what suburban life does to women and to families—draining them of life and free will.

30 Murphy, "Imitations of Life: Zombies and the Suburban Gothic," 122.
31 Ibid, 128.
The hollowness and homogeneity of Stepford also functions within the realm of the uncanny. From the very beginning, Joanna notices that Stepford and its wives have that "something is off" quality that is the very marker of uncanniness. Joanna notes how,

Across the street, in the Claybrooks' living-room window, Donna Claybrook sat polishing what looked like an athletic trophy, buffing at it with steady mechanical movements. Joanna watched her and shook her head. *They never stop, these Stepford wives*, she thought. It sounded like the first line of a poem. *They never stop, these Stepford wives. They something something all their lives. Work like robots. Yes, that would fit. They work like robots all their lives.* (64)

Even before the reveal that the wives of Stepford are in fact androids, Joanna and the reader can tell that there is *something* wrong with them. Something unnatural. They are housewives beyond the point of being housewives— they don't have a life outside of the home at all. Furthermore, Joanna experiences a creeping horror as her friends— first Charmaine, and later Bobbie— transform into brain-dead zombies overnight, one by one. Charmaine and Bobbie look like themselves but are not like themselves, creating a disconnect that adds to the greater sense of discomfort. After her replacement, the normally casual Bobbie looks more beautiful than she did previously. When Joanna speaks to her on the phone, she sounds "different— washed out."34 The physical differences between the real Bobbie and the replacement Bobbie (and Charmaine) are not major cosmetic changes, but rather adjustments that are just enough to be deeply disconcerting. Coupled with the personality changes that turn every wife into an emotional copy

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of each other, the result is something familiar but different. Creepy. In a word, uncanny.

The robotic replacement wives are designed by a man who was once an engineer for Disney. Disney as an entity has many of the same robotic and zombie-like qualities that characterize the suburbs. Disney prides itself on creating a family-friendly image, and has permanently inserted itself into the American zeitgeist. However, despite the fact that they make themselves appear friendly and approachable, they are still a massive marketing system, designed to spread recognizable images and make money off of those recognizable images. Disneyworld's slogan is famous—"The Happiest Place on Earth," and is reminiscent of Levittown's "perfectly planned community" and of course, the "idyllic" Stepford. Both are artificial creations intended to reinforce an idea that is ultimately meant to profit a small group. Disney's "magic" is about making money for Disney corporate. The docile robotic housewives exist to please their husbands.

Disney is about style and image over substance, much like the wives of Stepford. Ultimately, neither have any sort of real depth. And, as previously discussed with *IT*, Disney's sense of familiarity and inherent association with joy can be used for predatory purposes. Furthermore, just as the husbands of Stepford take over their wives, Disney appears to be a monopolizing force, seemingly friendly, but in actuality ruthless and unforgiving of anyone who gets in their way. Similarly, the suburbs spread virus-like across America, eating up everything in their path.
As in *It* and *Needful Things*, the antagonist utilizes nostalgia and general good feelings to dangerous ends. Pennywise lures its victims with comforting figures like clowns or happy scenarios like carnivals. Mr. Gaunt pretends to sell happiness under the guise of pleasant memories. And for the wives of Stepford, nostalgia for an idealized era that used to be is the cause of their demise. It is *want* that drives the danger throughout all three narratives— and so it is not coincidental that post World War II America had a culture that was deeply entrenched in *wanting* things— things that, if acquired, would make the buyer happy, be it a house in Stepford, Connecticut, or a prized fishing pole.

Ultimately, the villains of the novels discussed here find their success through exploiting what is familiar. Clowns. Board games. A wife making coffee. And yet, their terror leaks through in the ragged edges where they failed a spot check, or in the tiny gaps between reality and the fiction that they have created. This uncanny realm, the space where something is familiar and yet not quite right, percolates down from a society which was full of things to be widely recognizable and trusted, like rows of suburbs or Saturday morning cartoons. As the next chapter will demonstrate, these uncanny qualities found their way into films of the era as well.
The suburban uncanny also manifests itself in the cinema of the era we are covering. This thesis will be examining two significant movies from the 1980s in which the suburban uncanny is plays a central role—Blue Velvet and Poltergeist. Blue Velvet, which premiered in 1986 and was directed by David Lynch, is a disturbing thriller concerning protagonist Jeffrey Beaumont's investigation into the secret horrors of his sleepy hometown. Jeffrey's unveiling of his town's mysteries engages with a concept that we are already familiar with, the very aspect that makes the suburban uncanny what it is—familiarity de-familiarized, the safe made dangerous. The film's opening shots establish this carefully—Bobbie Vinton's perky song, "Blue Velvet" is playing as the camera pans over the trappings of suburbia. There are quiet houses, a white picket fence, green lawns, schools, etc. The screenplay describes these images with sweetness, with descriptive phrases such as, "a very clean uniformed, smiling POLICEMAN with arms outstretched allows clean happy SCHOOL CHILDREN to cross the street safely."1 Not only do these shots establish the setting, they bombard the audience with the imagery of suburbia. The aesthetic of the opening shots also draw upon nostalgia for an earlier, artificial suburb. Sander H. Lee notes how, "the color is lush and vivid, reminiscent of the rich colors we tend to associate with films shot in the 1950s. The combination of color and music is reminiscent of great films like

Rear Window (1954) and Vertigo (1958)...this nostalgic motif continues as we hear Bobby Vinton's 1963 original of the song Blue Velvet...² The audience feels safe and familiar in this fictional suburb, a feeling which will be quickly subverted and demolished—and as these shots of suburbia continue, they become disturbing rather than comforting. For instance, when transferred to the screen, the smiling policeman is a fireman, and he is making direct eye contact with the camera. His smile verges on creepy. He waves slowly and rhythmically, and is riding on a fire truck that meanders its way across the screen. A crossing guard is instead helping the happy and clean children cross the street, but the children do not act like children. They walk in single file, looking straightforward and not interacting with one another. The camera cuts to inside the Beaumonts' home, where a member of the family is sitting quietly and sipping a beverage as she watches a violent film unfold before her. The film presents an idealized version of suburbia where cracks of violence and creepiness quickly establish themselves as inherent aspects of that sort of life.

After these establishing shots, Jeffrey's father suffers some kind of attack and collapses amid the safety of his front yard while his garden hose keeps going—a sign of the indifference of suburbia to the human struggle. Prior to Mr. Beaumont's collapse, the camera pans below the happy green yard into the undergrowth, where beetles crawl and the happy soundtrack turns into an

uncomfortable dirge of rustling. It is not coincidental that the collapse of a father, i.e., partial destruction of the family unit, is heralded by a shot of this dark undergrowth. These establishing shots suggest that although the suburb appears safe and idyllic, danger is still around, and anyone could be a victim. This also establishes insects as evil—they mediate the transition from safety to danger in the opening shot, and continue as symbols of evil throughout the movie. Jeffrey disguises himself as an insect exterminator in order to inspect Dorothy's apartment, and it is indeed he who ends up exterminating the evil that is controlling her life. Finally, when the robins do return and bring happiness, as per Sandy's dream, one is holding a dead insect in its beak. The film, already establishing the uncanniness of the suburban setting, begins its deconstruction of tradition from the very beginning. The rest of the film continues this deconstruction/destruction. Therefore, not only does the juxtaposition of Mr. Beaumont's collapse and the beetles in the undergrowth herald evil, but the collapse of a father and his revival at the end of the movie create bookends to frame the story's interior destruction and recreation of the typical family. From this point, the viewer understands that this safe suburban town possesses a good and evil binary through which the rest of the film must be understood.

The town of Lumberton, where the story takes place, is also interesting to analyze within the lens of suburbanization. While clearly a sleepy suburb when the narrative begins, it is evident from both its name and its general atmosphere that Lumberton is an industrial town turning suburban with time. Jeffrey's family
is tied to a declining industrial past in the process of being replaced by suburbia
due to his father's hardware store. A hardware store indicates that the family is a
part of the past—they sell lumber, as well as the tools to work with it. When
Jeffrey finds the severed ear that begins the narrative arc of the film, it is in a field
of lumber detritus—a mystery brought about by repression of the past. Like the
beetles rustling through the undergrowth, Lumberton's past represents something
buried and repressed by the new, and Jeffrey is inherently connected to this
repressed character—which he begins to uncover when he begins his
investigation into Dorothy Vallens. The audience is alerted to Vallens' life in the
depths of society when Jeffrey first arrives at her apartment complex,
appropriately named "Deep River Apartments." Deep River Apartments is located
on Lincoln Street. Lincoln Street could be named after American president
Abraham Lincoln, which would in turn be representative of happy Americana. But
it is here, in this normal, All-American street, that Dorothy Vallens and her
dangerous disruption of the apparent normality of suburbia exist.

What is evident here are recurring images of the hidden, the buried, and
the repressed. And indeed, these motifs are strongly connected to the suburban
lifestyle, in particular, its elements of homogeneity and abandonment of the past.
The growth of the suburbs killed many cities and small towns. Just as suburbia
attempts to bury the past, Lumberton has buried its dark secrets—secrets that
manifest themselves nonetheless. As film critic Laura Mulvey puts so succinctly,
"the film excavates a topography of the fantastic, of an underworld, out of a social
setting which appears to repress its very possibility.\textsuperscript{3} The suburbs create an atmosphere of artificial perfection; they stoke "not-in-my-backyard" attitudes. Homeowners associations ensure that every blade of grass is the proper length, and the garbage is hauled off every Thursday morning to a place that the residents will never see. One will note that it is easier to notice distinctive cracks in a pane of glass if there are no other cracks surrounding them; likewise, the flawless suburban landscape highlights its hidden horrors in an attempt to keep them under wraps.

*Blue Velvet* deconstructs the safety of the suburbs primarily through their most important denizens— the wholesome, clean, nuclear family. This destruction of the American family is most clear in the character of Dorothy Vallens, her family, and her connection with Frank Booth. Before the movie begins, Dorothy was a normal mother with a husband and a son. This changes when Frank enters the picture, kidnapping her family and forcing her to perform sexual acts for him. He also attempts to control Dorothy in a parental manner— When we are first introduced to Frank, Dorothy welcomes him into her apartment, saying, "Hello, baby." Frank immediately responds, "Shut up. It's daddy, shithead." It is not until their meeting turns sexual that Frank reverses the positions, with him as the child and Dorothy as the mother. In this way, Frank has corrupted the typical notion of the family by replacing both missing members of it (the husband/sexual partner and the child) with himself in a twisted manner revealing of his unsettling

\textsuperscript{3} Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 152.
fetishes. As Tony Williams writes in *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, "a horror film reveals social equilibrium affected by a disequilibrium often caused by monsters. The monster is a feature of most horror films, but it sometimes has connections with a normality to which it is supposedly opposed." Frank is this sort of filmic monster, a man who appears normal, who associates with normal institutions like the American family, but who has taken these normal aspects and twisted them into something utterly horrifying. Near the end of the film, just before Jeffrey kills Frank, he enters Dorothy's apartment to find her husband dead in a chair with his brains blown out and a bandage still over where his severed ear used to be. Frank has stuffed his mouth with a piece of Dorothy's blue velvet robe and bound his hands together. This is Frank's final assault on Dorothy's family—his murder of her actual husband is violently sexual. He has taken the fetish object, a symbol of his domination over his victim's sexual partner, and used it to silence that victim in a manner that is visually reminiscent of oral sex. He has not only disempowered him sexually, he has overtaken his roles as husband and parent.

Oedipal interpretations of *Blue Velvet* dominate academic discourse on the film. As Barbara Creed writes, "Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), is an Oedipal hero. His real father is struck down (by a heart attack); he sets out on a journey, encounters woman as enigma, woman as symbolic mother figure, and makes love to her; finally, he kills the murderous father-substitute - at which point

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some form of normality is restored and the hero is free to take a young woman of his own." The Oedipal Complex, and indeed the classical story of Oedipus Rex, revolves around the perversion of family dynamics. King Oedipus kills his father Lauis and marries his mother Jocasta, and blinds himself upon learning the horrific truth. Freudian symbolism, particularly castration imagery, can also be found throughout the film. For instance, when Mr. Beaumont collapses, he holds the garden hose in a phallic manner. When Frank Booth kidnaps Dorothy's husband, he cuts off his ear, while simultaneously robbing him of his sexual power with Dorothy. The story of Oedipus is, of course, one of the oldest and most well known stories of familial corruption known to Western civilization. By establishing running Oedipal motifs, Lynch explicitly connects his newer story and the more familiar story, which both take something established as normal and safe and makes it dangerous and terrifying. This connects corruption and terror in the suburbs to an entire tradition of corruption and terror, thus doubling down on the horrific implications of the situation. Laura Mulvey makes a special point about Frank Booth as "simultaneously an infant and the monstrous paternal," Oedipus and Laius, respectively, in the Oedipal myth. In this way, Frank corrupts the incorruptible; he takes the world's most dysfunctional family and becomes the literal embodiment of its dysfunction by becoming several of its actors and personifying the conflict within himself.

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6 Mulvey, Fetishism and Curiosity, 143.
Jeffrey is Frank's shadow archetype. During a pointed scene at the end of Jeffrey's "joyride," Frank takes a hit of his favorite gas and declares to Jeffrey, "you're like me." Immediately afterward, he goes into his "baby" persona and tries to fondle Dorothy's breasts. Jeffrey, enraged at Frank for his assault on Dorothy, lashes out at him and punches him directly in the face. Frank drags Jeffrey out of the car, puts on lipstick, kisses Jeffrey, and screams in his face. He threatens to send him a love letter (a bullet), saying that, "you receive a love letter from me; you're fucked forever," before knocking him unconscious. Indeed, Jeffrey could be Frank if Jeffrey fully immersed himself in Lumberton's underworld. As Lee writes, "Frank is Jeffrey's evil double, a man incapable of hiding his inner brutal forces. Jeffrey's search for knowledge has brought him face to face with his sordid inner drives." Like Jeffrey, Frank is sexually involved with Dorothy Vallens and entered her life without her permission. Unlike Jeffrey, Frank is predatory and his sexual relationship with Dorothy is abusive and non-consensual. Frank hides behind a veneer of sophistication, thus splitting his persona between his natural aggressive Id self and his polished, for-the-public self. Frank is thus the uncanny qualities of the suburb personified. He breaks through the cracks of what is normal, often seeming to be a part of the normal that he seeks to disrupt. Therefore, there is a level of poetic symbolism in the fact that Jeffrey kills Frank from the closet, his place of voyeurism, and the place that allowed him to enter the underworld in the first place. He is, in a way, killing a dark part of himself that has begun to emerge.

To continue the idea that Jeffrey is inherently connected to Lumberton's past, than it is an instance wherein a more idyllic and natural time physically overtakes the dangers of modernity.

*Poltergeist* concerns what would be considered a much more "normal" family; a father and a mother, Steven and Diane Freeling, along with their three children, Danna, Robbie, and Carol Anne, who live in a new suburban neighborhood called Cuesta Verde. Whereas *Blue Velvet* deconstructs images of the typical American family, *Poltergeist* is more interested in the typical American family's white picket fence manner of living. The opening shot is set to the national anthem, setting up the sense of Americana that the rest of the movie will work to deconstruct. Suddenly, the triumphant music and the American flag cuts to static— the audience is now watching a television station that has signed off for the evening. It's jarring, and creates a sort of emptiness out of the American imagery. Carol Anne, who is so white and blonde that she could have been ripped out of a 50s Coca Cola advertisement or a Reagan campaign commercial, walks down the stairs towards the static-y television and proceeds to have a conversation with it. It is bizarre, of course, but also fascinating that she would converse with a television set. Such a machine could be viewed as a suburban status symbol. In the 1950s it certainly was, although it was simultaneously viewed as a danger. "The television set was often likened to a monster that
threatened to wreak havoc on the family," scholar Lynn Spiegel writes. And indeed, it is through the television set that the ghosts are able to begin haunting the Freeling home. To return to Williams, this is a monster that is connected to normalcy. The ghosts are able to invade due to the particular suburban objects that the Freelings own. Note that the film is deliberately kitschy and campy for the first twenty minutes. Steven gets into a remote control war with a neighbor during a football game. Carol Anne holds a funeral for her dead bird. It is not until Carol Anne officially makes contact through the television set, with her iconic line, "they're here," that the actual terror begins.

The opening sequence, and indeed, the beginning of the film altogether, is full of images of happy suburbia—a television, a cul-de-sac, etc. The Freelings' home, and Robbie and Carol Anne's room in particular, is full of 80s pop culture memorabilia. We see that Robbie is a fan of Star Wars, Marvel Comics, and football, like countless other American boys. Carol Anne's side of the room presents a stereotypical image of young American femininity—pink, lacy, full of dolls. Ronald Reagan, and his "morning in America" slogan show up in the books that Steve reads before going to bed. Dialogue throughout the film indicates that the family has been working for years to live like this—to have what is recognizably, "The American Dream." Steve works for the building company that sells houses in their neighborhood, making him a peddler of the archetypical American dream. Later on in the film, a scene in the Freelings' kitchen fades into

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an identical kitchen in a home that Steve is trying to sell— their haunting is not particularly special; as we see, any resident could have moved into the one unfortunate house.

The film repeatedly emphasizes that Cuesta Verde is something new built atop the old, be it in dialogue between members of the Freeling family or in the horrific revelations about the cemetery that has been displaced in favor of the housing development. Just before the ghost attacks begin, Robbie complains to Steven about the twisted, gnarled tree outside his window. "It's an old tree," Steven explains, "It was here for a long time. Long before my company built this neighborhood...it knows everything about us. That's why I built our home next to it. So it could protect you and Carol Anne, Dana, your mom and me. It's a wise old tree." Of course, this "wise old tree" is the first object to be possessed and turn against the family, attacking Robbie so that Carol Anne can be taken to the Other Side. Likewise, it is revealed that the development was literally built on top of a graveyard— to Steven's dismay, they moved the only headstones, not the bodies. During the ghosts' final attack on the family, skeletons of the deceased rise from the earth and grab at the living. The tree does not protect the family, and what has been buried does not forget. As history teaches, suburbs were built over the skeletons of industrial cities that made the United States a world power in the first place, turning them from booming metropolises to mere ghosts of what they had
been before. As scholar Robert Beauregard says, "it is as if Americans have struck
a Faustian bargain in which progress has been traded for self-reflection,
compassion, and a sense of history. The result is a moral imagination incapable of
registering the destruction that accompanies advance. " The Freelings, and their
suburb, may have buried the past, but it has come back to haunt and destroy
them.

As in Blue Velvet, the entry of monstrosity overturns family dynamics. The
key conflict in the movie is the kidnapping of Carol Anne, and the family's attempt
to bring her back. The ghosts possess the objects in the household in order to take
her away— the static in the television, the cacophony in the children's bedroom,
etc. The only way to save her, it is revealed, is for someone to go through to the
Other Side, where she is being held, and rescue her. This person ends up being
Diane. We see physical objects tearing the family apart, and familial bonds
bringing it back together. The family dynamic is therefore threatened by the
objects that it supposedly needs for perfection and comfort in post-war America.
Furthermore, by removing the headstones and not the bodies, the development
company has disrupted the bonds between the living beings of the present and the
deceased generations of the past. A daughter cannot go visit her deceased mother
at her final resting place because there is an enormous subdivision built over it.

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9 Robert A. Beauregard, When America Become Suburban, (Minneapolis: University
of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.
10 Ibid, 6.
Diane's journey to the Other Side to rescue Carol Anne spiritually restores the emotional bonds between the family, and between the past and the present.

Near the middle of the film, Tangina, a medium, is brought in to deal with the situation. She explains that Carol Anne is on the Other Side, along with a number of non-malicious spirits and one very, very angry one. As Tangina explains, "Carol Anne is not like those she's with. She is a living presence in their spiritual earthbound plane. They are attracted to the one thing about her that is different from themselves— her life-force. It is very strong. It gives off its own illumination. It is a light that implies life and memory of love and home and earthly pleasures, something they desperately desire but can't have anymore."

Much like the earthly pleasures that the living find themselves distracted with—from Robbie's toys to Carol Anne at the television set— the deceased also find themselves attached to the physical, something that they cannot have. The message is quite clear— obsession with the physical is maddening, distracting and trapping individuals even beyond the grave. There is also a connection to how the spirits in the house often choose to manifest themselves— through physically possessing objects. Carol Anne and Robbie's room, in particular, becomes a hotspot for spectral activity as the ghosts throw knick-knacks and furniture around as in a tornado. Thus, the objects that were once seen as a kind of status symbol or as suburban hallmarks are turned into weapons against the family. There is danger from within, but through purchasing and maintaining these objects, the Freelings have given the ghost a medium through which they are able
to attack. One image of ghostly possession that merits attention is the chair scene. Diane enters the kitchen to find that the ghosts have arranged the chairs around the kitchen table in a flawless circle. She turns around, and within moments, the chairs have re-arranged themselves in a complex stacked tower on top of the table. It seems silly, but it can also be read as an uncanny manifestation of suburban perfectionism and neatness. In fact, the very idea of ghostly possession is straight out of the uncanny valley. The uncanny valley is the idea that something that is very close to lifelike, but just a little bit off, will inevitably be more disturbing and upsetting than something that is far from lifelike. In the case of the Freelings' poltergeist infestation, their objects move around and interact with them while looking like any typical household objects—realistic but very much not.

It is also worth mentioning that there are two kinds of ghost experts brought in to examine the Freeling home. The first group relies more on technology, and while helpful, are ultimately not powerful enough to be able to provide any serious assistance. In fact, one of the paranormal investigators, Marty, becomes distracted with the Freelings' things himself and thus makes himself privy to the ghosts' influence, who cause him to hallucinate that he has torn his own face off. Thus, the physical is presented not only as a medium through which the spirits can invade, but also as a barrier to dispelling them from the house. Tangina, while not entirely successful, does manage to facilitate Carol Anne's rescue from the Other Side. As a medium, Tangina relies on intuition and other
pre-scientific methods for combatting the spirits. Tangina's old-fashioned tactics prevailing over the technology-based tactics demonstrates once again that a respectful connection with the past is necessary to heal the damage done by suburbanization.

At the end of the film, there is a final poltergeist attack on the home that forces the Freelings to make a dramatic escape to a nearby motel. The attack begins with Robbie's clown doll being possessed and attempting to strangle him. As discussed earlier regarding *IT*, the image of a clown is a potent vehicle for the suburban uncanny. Clowns typically entertain and amuse, with the goal of bringing happiness to children. At the same time, the imagery of clowns, with their exaggerated features and bizarre outfits, almost always tend to land them visually in the uncanny valley. At the same time that they are attacking Robbie, the ghosts attack Diane, sexually and physically assaulting her. As discussed with *Blue Velvet*, this is in its own way a corruption of family dynamics. The ghosts are a sexual and physical threat to Diane in her own bedroom, the place where she ought to feel the most secure in both aspects, and where she regularly has sex with her husband. The images of Diane and Robbie fighting their respective ghosts are intercut with one another. Like the tree attack, this is a physical diversion in order to kidnap Carol Anne, who sits in shock as the portal to the other side manifests itself in the closet. This is yet another instance of violence against the family manifesting as a part of suburbia— the repressed violence
against the family that suburbia attempts to hide returns in the form of the ghostly attacks.

In this instance, the portal is slimy and organic, with tendrils literally slithering out from behind the closet door. In fact, if we think back to Carol Anne's initial rescue from the Other Side, when she and Diane fall out of the portal covered in goopy viscera, then it is likely that the entirety of the Other Side possesses this disgusting, gooey quality. This stands in stark contrast to the clean modernity of the life that the Freelings have built for themselves. One might imagine the Other Side to be a carnal place, but most importantly, devoid of the forced order and modernity that make up the suburban landscape. The old— the dead— are pushing through and out of their repressed state to overtake the invading suburbs. Finally, their home— the ultimate object of suburban desire— is literally pulled into the Other Side as the family escapes, and they are physically forced to leave Cuesta Verde. It reads almost as a case of cosmic justice— the suburbs overtook the dead and buried, bulldozed them over to make room for driveways and cul-de-sacs, and now the dead destroy what has displaced them. Furthermore, the story is unable to find any sort of closure until the physical objects of domination— that is, the suburban home itself and everything within it— is destroyed, suggesting that it is the root cause of the terror against the Freeling family.

There is, of course, the question of the angry spirit that Tangina says is the driving force behind the chaos happening in the home. We see what appears to be
a manifestation of this spirit shows up twice—once when Diane is rescuing Carol Anne from the Other Side, and again when Diane is trying to save Carol Anne from being recaptured. In its first appearance, Steven pulls the spirit out of the closet-portal when he tries to pull back Diane. It is an enormous skull, with what appear to be either loose bandages or rotting flesh clinging to the bones and enormous glowing eye sockets. The shock of seeing it forces Steven to drop the rope, threatening Diane and Carol Anne's safe return to the living world. In its second appearance, it blocks Diane from getting into Carol Anne and Robbie's room as the ghosts attempt their second kidnapping. It is massive, white, and bird-like, yet still skeletal in appearance. It is also covered in thin white hair, or some other stringy fiber that hangs off of it like Spanish moss. In each manifestation, it resembles the rotting form of something that is buried in the ground below the suburb—first the human bodies in the cemetery, and later Carol Anne's deceased bird. The evil force can thus be read as the pinnacle of the past coming back for vengeance in the face of invading suburbanization.

Both *Poltergeist* and *Blue Velvet* present, threaten, and critique a particular sort of normality—in both cases, life in the American suburb. Let us compare the opening scene in *Blue Velvet* to the closing scene. A robin, Sandy's symbol of peace, lands on the windowsill with a bug, the symbol of evil, in its beak. There is a montage of flowers against the blue sky and a creepy waving fireman that is nearly identical to the montage at the beginning. Dorothy, no longer dressed in blue, plays outside with her rescued son. The camera pans up to a bright blue sky,
which then fades back into the titular blue velvet. What this shows us is that there has been, on some level, a change. Peace has consumed the evil. Dorothy is no longer in the clutches of Frank. However, uncanny symbolism from the beginning remains that indicates there is still something wrong. The all-too-bright flowers and the bizarre fireman demonstrate how the "off-ness" of the suburb, personified by Frank, continues to exist in its infrastructure and character—visually, not much has changed from the world presented in the beginning. Furthermore, even though the last character shot is on Dorothy and her son, that shot then fades into the symbol of her captivity— the blue velvet. In fact, the blue velvet acts as bookends for the story, and are the first and last thing that the audience sees. Considering that we have been discussing blue velvet as an object of fetishism, control, and repression, placing the entire narrative within it suggests that by the very nature of the suburbs, there is no plausible escape. The underground, the evil bubbling up through the uncanny fissures, will never go away. There is also a resemblance between Dorothy's outfit in the final shot and Frank's "well-dressed man" disguise— namely; they feature a large, brown coat. This clothing choice, followed by the fade into the demonic blue velvet, suggests that Dorothy is not so free after all. She leaves the film surrounded by emblems of her abuse.

Within *Blue Velvet*, there is a dichotomy between red/pink/generally warm colors (good) and blue/generally cool colors (evil). When we first meet Dorothy Vallens, it is in her red and pink apartment, while she wears a pink dress. However, when she performs, she wears a black dress and sings about "blue
velvet." Dorothy is announced in the club as "The Blue Lady." Blue Velvet is also the fetish item that Frank forces Dorothy to wear when he coerces her into performing sexual acts. When Jeffrey breaks into Dorothy's apartment the night that he meets her, she is wearing red—until Frank enters and forces her to wear the blue velvet robe. What we see with Dorothy is a dichotomy between public and private control; between voyeurism and autonomy. Blue is used to control and define Dorothy, whereas red gives her the reins. Likewise, Sandy tends to wear warmer colors like pink and yellow, reflecting how she represents goodness. The robins, which Sandy prophesizes will return to bring happiness, have a red pattern. Warm colors have an earthy and warm connotation, as opposed to the more artificial connotation of cooler colors. The protagonist, Jeffrey, wears mostly black, and alternates between the two worlds. The antagonist, Frank, also wears a great deal of black, suggesting that he is a corrupted version of Jeffrey. There is also the case of the black insects crawling in the undergrowth—the first major appearance of the color after the earthy suburban montage in the opening, heralding the suburban darkness.

In the final scene, Jeffrey wears a white shirt. His mother and Sandy also wear whites and pastels, but Jeffrey's shirt stands out because it is covered in a black square pattern. This suggests that the darkness in Jeffrey, as encapsulated by similarly black-clad Frank, is not gone just yet.

Likewise, at the end of Poltergeist, the Freeling family escapes their home just in time and spends the night at a motel. However, it is only their house that
has been taken to the Other Side—the rest of the neighborhood remains. Furthermore, it is quite possible that the development company will go forward with their plans to expand the suburb, meaning that the problem has not actually been solved. To drive this point forward, the final shot shows Steve taking the television from inside the motel room and putting it outside. While this is played as a bit of a joke, it underscores the point that there is some inherent danger associated with this suburban staple.

In both of these movies, we see the metaphorical paving over of the past by the suburbs, and the reality of that past bubbling up through the fissures in the ideological pavement. Lynch and Hooper (and Spielberg, who is widely believed to have had major creative input on the film) criticize the suburb as a colonizing force that suppresses all that it comes into contact with. However, given the suburb's inherently mundane qualities, the past manifests itself through the uncanny—the emergence of the repressed through what is seemingly normal. By setting their stories in such "normal" places, these uncanny qualities become all the more apparent.
Further Applications

As this thesis has demonstrated, the suburban uncanny manifests itself in a wide variety of media from the latter part of the 20th century. To conclude, this thesis will demonstrate the flexibility of the ideas surrounding the suburban uncanny, and to explore how they manifest in other settings from the era, as well as in other mediums outside of typical pop culture.

*The Thing,* directed by John Carpenter and released in 1982, is one such example. *The Thing* is set nearly as far away from suburbia as possible—in a remote research base in Antarctica—but its themes and plot reflect an investment in the anxieties of the suburban uncanny. In *The Thing,* a team of Antarctic researchers are invaded by an alien life form that can assimilate and mimic other life forms. As the film continues, it becomes harder to distinguish who in the base is human and who has been assimilated, and tensions run high, as no one knows whom they can trust.

*The Thing* is an adaptation of John W. Campbell Jr. novella *Who Goes There,* and by extension, a remake of the previous and 1951 adaptation *The Thing from Another World.* The most glaring difference between the 1951 adaptation and the 1982 adaptation is the nature of the titular monster. In the 1951 version, The Thing is a singular entity that can be combated through teamwork. In the 1982 version, The Thing is far less concrete, and its nature as an assimilating life form means that collaboration between crew members could result in death.
Furthermore, as The Thing assimilates the crewmembers, the threat becomes internal, whereas in 1951, it was purely external.

This is where notions of the suburban uncanny become relevant to the film. Like It, Leland Gaunt, the husbands of Stepford, Frank Booth, and the Cuesta Verde ghosts, The Thing attacks from the inside. It infiltrates the base in the unsuspecting form of a loveable husky dog. It kills while displaying the face of a trusted friend.

Fig. 1. A still from *The Thing from Another World* (above) vs. *The Thing* (below).
Instead of being an entity that can be directly targeted, as the above stills show, the 1982 Thing is a part of the base's infrastructure, so to speak. It uses the familiarity between crewmembers to strike. And it is this familiarity that stokes the paranoia that this film is so well known for. As in classic suburban uncanny media, the fear comes from within. Characters fear each other much like the way Joanna begins to fear her husband after their move to Stepford. So, while not engaging with the specific language of the American suburb, *The Thing* still reflects the fears that those suburbs came to inspire in the more specific works that this thesis has examined.

In a more urban center, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, yet another monster influenced by the suburban uncanny appears—"death fetishist" Donnie Pfaster, in *The X Files* episode "Irresistible." Donnie Pfaster murders young women in order to steal their hair and fingernails. From his first line of dialogue, Donnie is a deeply unsettling character before the audience knows that he is a murderer. He speaks with a slow monotone cadence, barely ever changing his pitch to indicate any sort of emotion. His eyes seem permanently locked in a cold, unfeeling stare. All of that considered, Donnie is also a young white man. He has a clean haircut and dresses in neat button down shirts and slacks. After he murders a sex worker, another worker who was there when he picked her up tells the police that, "he was ordinary. He didn't look like no freak." Donnie is able use expectations about him, expectations that grow out of the patriarchal white hegemony that is so
strong in suburbia, in order to harm others. And yet, as his creepy demeanor demonstrates, the evil finds a way to manifest itself in an uncanny manner.

While investigating the case, Dana Scully, one of the protagonists, finds herself extremely emotionally affected by this particular kind of horror. She finds herself dreaming about the case and imagining a demonic figure. At the episode's climax, Donnie kidnaps her with the goal of increasing his body count and stealing her hairs and nails. From her captivity, she often sees him as this demonic figure instead of his normal self. The evil that he has repressed underneath his veneer of normality thus presents itself psychologically to his potential victim. Donnie's evil also stems from a twisted family pathology. In the episode's final voice over, Donnie is described as "the unremarkable younger brother of four older sisters," and brings Scully to his mother's home in order to kill her in an Oedipal-esque move. He thus presents himself as a villain who not only corrupts family dynamics, but who also seems to represent the kind of suburban patriarchy that reacts violently against women taking any sort of power. Donnie, then, becomes the embodiment of the dangers of suburbia repressed beneath a neat façade that is so emblematic of the suburban uncanny. This is best summed up near the middle of the episode, when Donnie is hired to work as a food deliveryman. One of his clients ends up being a woman with three daughters who has such complete faith in Donnie as a safe figure that she informs him that she always leaves the back door open. Because Donnie does not come off as threatening due to being a clean-looking white man, she fails to recognize the
danger he poses to her and her family— and innocently allows him to continue his cycle of patriarchal violence and familial destruction.

Notions of the suburban uncanny also spread out to contemporary art. Let us briefly examine the work of photographer Gregory Crewdson. His series "Hover" and "Twilight," from the 1990s and early 2000s, play with the eerie and upsetting qualities of suburban domesticity.

Fig. 2. "Untitled (from Hover Series)," 1997 by Gregory Crewdson.
Fig. 3. "Untitled (Ophelia)," 2001 by Gregory Crewdson.

In this image from the "Hover" series, the viewer is privy to what appears to be firefighters putting out a house fire in a suburban neighborhood. It is a voyeuristic aerial shot that puts the viewer at a distance that is far enough away for them to be uncomfortable with their access. While there has clearly been a great deal of damage done in the image, it is surprisingly static. Judging from the water on the ground and the passive stances of the firefighters, it seems as if this fire has already been put out. This begs the question—where are the inhabitants of the home? Have they been killed in the fire or evacuated elsewhere? And regardless, why does this home appear to be so isolated despite being in a neighborhood? Where are the neighbors that should have left their own homes to comfort the
inhabitants of the burning home? Only one non-firefighter can be seen in this image, and they are far removed from the scene—in the back of the image, standing in the middle of the road, observing and not interacting. What Crewdson has captured is the image of a suburban bubble, which is deeply upsetting as it reveals how the neighborhood reacts to tragedy. Simply put, they do not, instead choosing self-isolation. A strong sense of the suburban uncanny radiates from the indifference of the neighborhood. The image suggests, much like in Blue Velvet or The Stepford Wives, that this kind of violence and fear is part and parcel of suburbia—made particularly poignant by the bystander who keeps a distance and is happy to watch the home burn. There is also an unsettling element of cleanliness to the photograph. The chaos looks neat in a way that seems antithetical to the concept of chaos itself—case in point; there is no discernable damage from the fire. The house that has been burning even retains its porch decor, not a single leaf of it ruffled or displaced. Here, the infrastructure itself ignores urgent danger in favor of a stylish presentation. The repressive elements of the suburban uncanny expose themselves nonetheless, resulting in a creepy scene that oozes denial.

Crewdson's Ophelia, from the “Twilight” series, presents the suburban uncanny in an even more direct manner. A woman lies in her living room; face up in receding waters, with a lifeless stare in her eyes. The living room appears comfortable and pleasant, and possesses all the marks of a typical suburban home—a couch, a phone, books, portraits on the wall, etc. And yet, the woman's
presumably lifeless body floats in dark water that could be mistaken for a flawlessly polished floor. The suburban lifestyle, Crewdson's image suggests, is drowning this woman. The title of the painting—Ophelia—is a reference to both the John Everett Millais painting of the same name, and to the character of Ophelia in the play *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is driven mad by the constraints that her society places upon her and her inability to handle them, and subsequently either drowns herself or is so insane she fails to realize that she is drowning. Her death is never seen onstage, and so Millais' painting is an approximation of what he believes it to look like, based on a monologue from Queen Gertrude.

In her insane on-stage ramblings just before her death, Ophelia hands out flowers, which criticize members of the royal family for their wrongdoings.
Millais references this by including them in her death pose.\(^1\) In this way, she dies surrounded by proxies against her—each flower indicating a person who has helped to drive her over the edge in some way.

In Crewdson's photograph, the model, posed similarly to Millais' Ophelia, does not hold anything. And yet, as she is drowning in what is presumably her own home, she is in fact dying surrounded by the instruments of her downfall—the suburban American lifestyle. While *Hamlet's* Ophelia was suffocated by the expectations of being a noblewoman in a world gone mad, Crewdson's Ophelia appears to have been suffocated by the expectations of suburbia and all that her life there entailed. It is classic suburban uncanny—the infrastructure of the suburbs is responsible for the demise of the central figure. Furthermore, as *Hamlet's* Ophelia lost her sanity prior to her death, there is a psychological aspect to the photograph that suggests her anxieties—like water—came up to swallow her. In fact, water damage on the yellow chair and the wall of the stairs suggest that the water is receding. In this way, the water is a literal representation of "the return of the repressed," and has bubbled up to destroy the main figure.

The takeaway, then, is that suburbia's attempts to be flawless and clean-cut are undermined by both its inherent flaws and by the structural issues at hand in greater society. It is impossible to create a flawless life because nothing is flawless, and to attempt to do so is to do little more than to push those flaws away and hope that they do not return. But, as suburban uncanny horror seeks to

demonstrate, not only do these flaws, or evils, find their way back to the surface, but they adapt by becoming a part of the very system that attempted to annihilate them. The suburban landscape, with its emphasis on order and comfort, becomes the perfect vehicle to explore this cycle of repression, return, and destruction. After all, what could be more terrifying than a deadly threat in the safest place imaginable?
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Further Applications

