
The Durability of Style and the Career of Stephen King

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Introduction

When I included Stephen King in my current book project on whether and how changing the way a writer actually produces his or her fiction affects its style, I initially planned to look at the possibility that switching from typewriting to word processing and then occasionally reverting to handwriting might have changed King's style. The more I learned about King's career, however, the more complex and interesting the questions surrounding his style became. In addition to the changes in mode of composition, King's personal life experiences also seemed like potential style-changing factors. In several interviews he details his long problem with alcohol and cocaine addiction. After he got sober, he was hit by a car and nearly killed while taking a walk. This led to a problem with the pain medicine Oxycontin. The changes in mode of composition are interlaced with these periods of writing under the influence. If these complications were not enough, King is also notoriously a crosser of genre barriers, saying "As far as I'm concerned, genre was created by bookstores so that people who were casual readers could say, 'Well, I want to read romances.' 'Well, right over there, that's where romances are.'" (King 2015) Under these conditions, what can we expect about similarities and differences in the styles of his many novels?

The Problem

Laying out the novels and the various possible influences on King's style will suggest some of the investigations that are possible:

DRUNK / TYPEWRITTEN

Carrie	1974; horror
'Salem's Lot	1975; horror
The Shining	1977;
horror The Dead Zone	1979;
Sci fi?	

DRUNK / COCAINE/TYPEWRITTEN

Firestarter	1980; thriller? Sci fi?
Cujo	1977-81; psychological horror
Pet Sematary	1979-1982; horror

DRUNK / WORDPROCESSED

Christine	1983; horror
Thinner	1982; horror
IT	1981-85; horror
Misery	1984-1986; psychological horror
The Tommyknockers	1986 Sci-Fi? horror?

SOBER / WORDPROCESSED

The Dark Half	1987-1989; horror
Needful Things	1988-1991; horror
Gerald's Game	1992; suspense,
horror Insomnia	1990-1993; horror
Desperation	1994-1995; horror
The Regulators	1996; horror
The Green Mile	finished 1996; magical realism?

SOBER / HANDWRITTEN

Bag of Bones	1997-1998; horror
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SOBER / WORDPROCESSED

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon	1999; psychological horror
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OXYCONTIN / HANDWRITTEN

Dreamcatcher	1999-2000; horror
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SOBER / WORDPROCESSED

From A Buick 8	1999-2001; Sci-Fi
Cell	2004-2005; horror
Lisey's Story	2005; psychological horror/romance
Duma Key	2006-2007; horror

Preliminary Analysis: Chronology and Style in Stephen King

I began with an initial test of twenty-six of King's novels, published from 1974-2008, a time-span that covers all of the events mentioned above (Fig. 1). The obvious pattern here is chronological, and the only apparent exception to the pattern, *IT*, published in 1986, was, according to King (1986), written in 1981-85, so that its appearance among the books written in 1977-83 is not particularly surprising.

between 1987 and 1995. Although all of these novels were written on a wordprocessor, it is unfortunate that the first five were written over only about three years, while the second five took eight, but it seemed important to keep the number balanced. An analysis based on the 900MFW almost perfectly groups all sections (about 60,000-70,000 words each) of all novels together. The one exception is a section of the sober *Dark Half* clustering with the last of the drunk books, *Tommyknockers*.

Clearly there is a strong chronological affinity among the novels, even over this relatively short time span.

The grouping by novel is certainly partly a result of topic and theme, given that most of these 900 words are content words, however, so it is important to compare analyses based on function words. In an analysis based on the 100 mfw, some such groups of drunk and sober sections do appear (Fig. 3). For example, there is a nice sober cluster of all of *Desperation* with two sections of *Insomnia* and four of *Needful Things*. But this sober cluster has eight sections of the drunk *IT* as its nearest neighbor, and the sober *Needful Things* joins inconsistent clusters with the drunk *Misery*, *Tommyknockers*, and *Thinner* elsewhere. The earliest and latest novels in this set tend to separate from the rest, and that some chronological grouping seems to remain. Thus there is more mixing of sections of different novels in analyses based on fewer words, but no evidence of an effect of drunkenness or sobriety on King's style. Rather, what seems to happen with the less frequent words is that the reduction in the amount of information available simply results in a reduction of the accuracy of the groupings by novel.

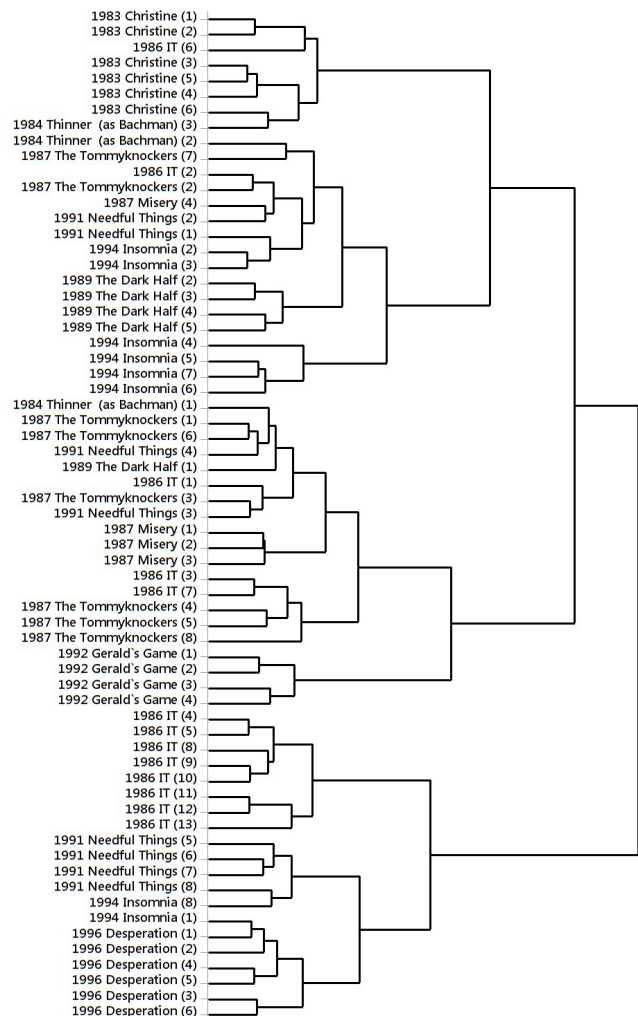


Fig. 3. Five "Drunk" and Five "Sober" Stephen King Novels—1983-1996 (100MFW; Ward Linkage; Squared Euclidean Distance)

Modes of Composition and Stephen King's Style

Preliminary analysis of typewritten and word processed novels does not suggest that mode of composition is an important variable for the study of King's style, though this investigation is

clearly hampered by the fact that the modes of composition are so closely correlated with the dates of the novels. One curious characteristic of King's career, however, is that, years after he switched from type-writing to word processing (1981) and years after he sobered up (1986), he wrote two novels in longhand: *Bag of Bones*, written in 1997-98, and *Dreamcatcher*, written 1999-2000 (see section 2 for details). From the point of view of computational analysis, the cir-

cumstances surrounding the handwritten composition of these two novels are both fortunate and unfortunate. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, King explained his switch to handwriting by saying that he "wanted to see what would happen" if he was forced to slow down

(Lehmann-Haupt and King 1994). In a later interview, however, he gave a different reason for the mode of composition of *Dreamcatcher*:

I don't like *Dreamcatcher* very much. *Dreamcatcher* was written after the accident. I was using a lot of Oxycontin for pain. And I couldn't work on a computer back then because it hurt too much to sit in that position. So I wrote the whole thing longhand. And I was pretty stoned when I wrote it, because of the Oxy, and that's another book that shows the drugs at work."

It may be impossible to separate the effects of Oxycontin and handwriting in *Dreamcatcher*, but testing the novels from just before *Bag of Bones* until just after *Dreamcatcher* will at least determine whether these novels are different from their surrounding novels.

Surprisingly, there is little suggestion of an effect of either handwriting or Oxycontin on King's style. In analyses based on small numbers of the most frequent words, there is some mixing of sections of novels, but not of *Bag of Bones* with *Dreamcatcher*. Only in analyses involving the 990 MFW (Fig. 4) and the 900 MFW do the two handwritten novels mix, and only the final section of *Bag of Bones*. Note how distinct the novels are otherwise. Curiously, however, the pattern in Fig. 4 is not very coherent chronologically either. There is some evidence that genre may be affecting this novel, as *The Green Mile* is sometimes considered magical realism rather than King's usual horror genre, and *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* is sometimes considered psychological horror. The inconsistency of the labeling of King's fiction makes the question of the intersection of genre and style difficult to approach.

Conclusion

There are many reasons to expect variations in Stephen King's style. Yet even factors as seemingly important as whether he is writing by hand or on a computer, whether he is writing drunk or sober or on cocaine or Oxycontin do not seem to be readily detectable in his style.

Further research on the various genres of his fiction and on the nature of the chronological change in his style will be needed, but the most salient aspect of King's style seems to be its durability even where the

events of his personal life lead us to expect significant changes.

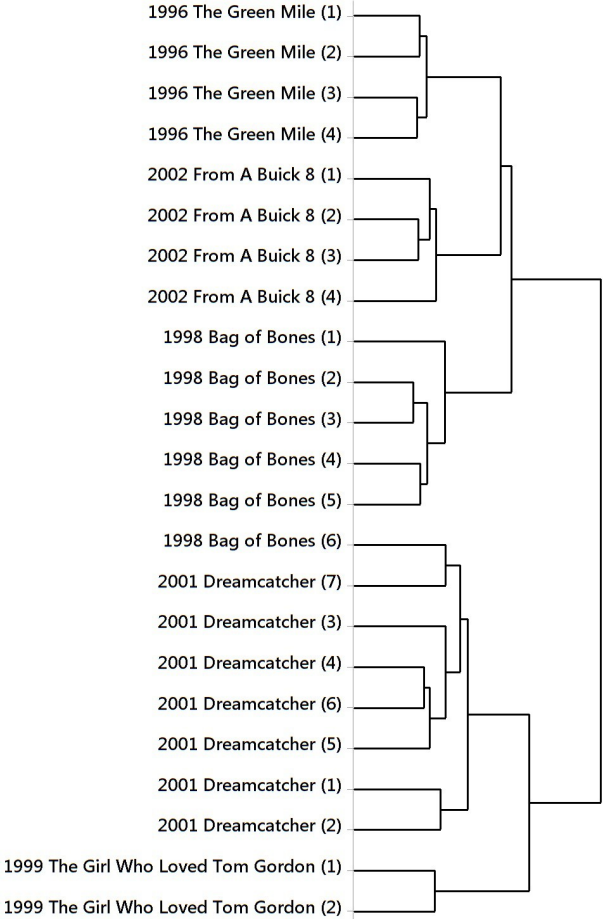


Fig. 4. Handwriting, Word Processing, Oxycontin, and the Style of Stephen King

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