



20-2 April - June 2026

Published on 14, April - June 2026

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Captivity, Care, and Narrative Power: Reading Annie Wilkes as a Subversion of the Ideal Reader

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Abstract

This article considers Annie Wilkes in *Misery* as a conscious subversion of the ideal reader using the framework of reader-response theory. In depicting Annie as a reader whose interpretative expectations exceed enthusiasm and become coercive and controlling, King permits an examination of the fragile connection between reader desire and author autonomy in literature. Instead of the responsive and meaning-seeking reader of reader-response approaches, Annie represents an over-the-top version of readerly entitlement that requires strict adherence to her interpretive framework. Her routines of nursing, caretaking and domestic order hide mechanisms of captivity that limit Paul Sheldon's physical freedom and his creative choices. Paul's forced rewriting of sections of "Misery" symbolises a power struggle, with Paul losing creative control; as a result, the narrative is governed by the reader's (Annie's) desires. Through this dynamic, King foregrounds interpretive power as domination when the reader attempts to police meaning or redirect the narrative's outcome. By locating Annie as a combination of caregiver and captor, the novel troubles the idealised concept of the reader as partner in the meaning-making processes. This study suggests that *Misery* presents the reader with the limitations of readerly influence and opens the possibility of reader-response expectations being hardened into a controlling force that endangers creative independence.

Keywords: Captivity, Reader-response, Narrative authority, Power dynamics, Creative autonomy

I. Introduction

Stephen King holds a unique position in contemporary American fiction, particularly in the realm of psychological horror. His narratives tend to investigate the thin lines between imagination, creativity, and fear. *Misery*, published in 1987, is one of his most concentrated examinations of the relationship between a writer and the forces that shape his work. The novel tells the story of Paul Sheldon, a successful author, who is held captive by Annie Wilkes after a car accident. What started as a rescue soon turns into an extended period of physical confinement and psychological manipulation. Within this setting, King offers a compelling study of authorship, reader expectation and pressures placed on the creative production. Annie Wilkes serves not only as an antagonist, but a symbolic reader whose reactions to Paul's work guide and control the narrative that takes place. Her reactions to his novels are not just a matter of personal taste. They symbolise a specific type of reader who thinks that the text is in her interpretation only. In this sense, Annie becomes an extreme character who helps reveal central assumptions embedded in reader-response theory. This tradition, in theory, engages the reader in the active process of constructing meaning. It also imagines a relationship between reader and text that is dynamic and often collaborative.

In *Misery*, this idealised model is broken. Annie's association with the novels of Paul becomes far from engagement and goes into domination. Her control over Paul's body is similar to the control that she asserts over the story he tells. She refuses to tolerate interpretations that challenge her expectations and insists upon a version of the story that satisfies her sense of continuity and emotional investment. Through this dynamic, King creates a distorted but revealing portrait of the reader who demands complete control of the meaning and outcome of a text.

This paper considers how Annie Wilkes subverts the concept of reader-response theory, the supportive and co-creative reader. It starts with a short overview of the theoretical framework and then offers an analysis of Annie as an interpretive figure. It then considers how captivity and care become instruments of narrative power. Finally, it ponders how *Misery* makes it difficult to make certain assumptions about the relationship between writers and readers.

II. Reader-Response Theory: Key Principles and Critical Assumptions

Reader-response theory developed as a corrective to previous approaches, which located meaning in the text or the author. Thinkers such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland distracted focus from the object and from the distance of meaning, and instead turned attention to the activity of the reader and the process by and through which meaning is produced. This shift plays nicely with the concerns raised in *Misery*, where the act of reading becomes a fraught and often threatening exercise of power.

Iser, in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, believes that texts have "gaps" (22) or "blanks" (9) that invite the reader's participation and that meaning is formed through a process of "concretisation" (21) in which the reader fills in these gaps. The reader is not merely a passive receiver, as Iser suggests; he or she is an engaged, active interpreter that brings to the literary work his or her own experiences, imagination and expectation of how the story should be interpreted. This view of the reader introduces the idea of the "implied reader" (27), which is a person that the author anticipates will react to their work in some way, and who the author has designed the work to affect. The implied reader, therefore, is guided through textual cues, but is integral in completing the meaning of the work.

Stanley Fish comes to a more dynamic view. According to him, interpretation leads to "interpretive

communities" to which readers belong, because they determine the strategies that texts are understood in (Fish 14). Meaning becomes a product of common habits and assumptions and is no longer seen as an objective property of the text. Fish's focus on the social and procedural nature of reading strengthens the idea that understanding literature is a social act.

Holland's approach to the reader is a psychological type of approach. He implies that readers impose their identities, desires and patterns of thought onto the text. Interpretation is an expression of the self and of personal history. Although Holland emphasises less on collaboration and more on individual psychology, he believes that reading is a process of active and creative process.

Taken together, these perspectives create the reader as a partner in meaning-making. They work with the text, making interpretations, assuming an engaged, responsible and constructive reader. The role of the reader is valued and encouraged, and the relationship between reader and text seems cooperative and even enriching.

Yet these models contain unspoken assumptions that *Misery* throws into confusion. They often imagine a reader who is willing to negotiate with the text and who approaches literary experience with an openness. They do not do justice to the reader, who does not allow for interpretive flexibility or accept one permissible meaning. Annie Wilkes represents this tension. Her reading practices suggest what takes place when the reader's agency is not cooperative but possessive. Instead of filling out gaps, she is closing gaps. Instead of negotiating meaning, she imposes meaning. The optimism inherent to reader-response theory stands in stark contrast to the coercive interpretive approach to reading, which Anne assumes, and that reveals the shortcomings of theories which assume goodwill and reciprocity. Through Annie, King brings into focus this uncomfortable possibility that the reader's power, celebrated by these theorists, can also distort or take over the creative process.

III. Annie Wilkes as Reader: Devotion, Possession, and Interpretive Authority

The critical tensions defined in reader-response theory are amplified when contrasted with the figure of Annie Wilkes, whose reading approach subverts the model of cooperative interpretation held by theorists such as Iser and Fish. In *Misery*, Annie initially emerges as Paul Sheldon's helpful rescuer, but her character description as his "number-one fan" (King 6) declares in no time that her attachment is deeper and more disruptive. Her devo-

tion is not the passionate involvement that is imagined in most theoretical discussions about readership. Instead, it is in the form of possession that Paul's novels only exist to please the emotional order that she gives them. King utilises this terrible kind of devotion to examine how reading can sometimes transcend from admiration to appropriation, destabilising the belief that readers move naturally to having a dialogue with the text.

Annie's emotional investment is immediately revealed by her reaction to Paul's manuscript. When she learns that Misery Chastain has died, she feels not disappointment but a visceral sense of betrayal. She declares, "She can't be dead...Misery Chastain CANNOT BE DEAD." (King 38). This statement has an assertion of interpretive sovereignty. Her refusal to "allow" the death of Misery makes her not an interpreter negotiating meaning but a gatekeeper, policing what is allowed in the text. The emotional world that she builds around the novels does not allow any room for narrative growth or closure. She expects Paul to keep the fictional universe exactly as she has taken it into her head; this shows a rigid idea of narrative purity, and it does not meet the act of any change outside of her expectations.

Such strict expectations draw out the limits of the implied reader according to the description of Wolfgang Iser. Iser explains the implied reader is guided by the text and yet still open to the gaps which encourage interpretive activity. He writes that "Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves" (Iser 169). Annie's approach is the direct opposite of this model. She does not create and sustain bridges between the text and her imagination, but imposes a single interpretation path. Instead of looking at gaps as invitations, she looks at them as threats. Her readings flatten the narrative into a determined structure that allows no other emotional patterns than what is familiar. She closes the interpretive space that Iser considers to be central to the reading process.

Her insistence on the continuity of narrative is made most visible when she forces Paul to rewrite his novel to her strict instructions. Annie is not someone who influences Paul's writing, but dictates it. One instance has her accuse him of changing plot elements in ways she accepts: "No, you don't. I didn't say anything about not *liking* it, I said it wasn't *right*. It's a cheat. You'll have to change it." (King 117). Her language makes the story into a moral order that Paul has violated. The charge "cheating" implies that she thinks that the

writer is bound to the reader's preferred vision of the story, and deviation from that is a breach of contract. This entitlement goes far beyond the interpretive framework desired by the reader response theorists, who stress the role of cooperation rather than coercion.

Stanley Fish's discussion of interpretive communities helps to shed even more light on Annie's isolation as a reader. Fish argues that "The phrase "those who share interpretive strategies" suggests that individuals stand apart from the communities to which they now and then belong." (Fish 14). Annie, however, reads in complete isolation. Her interpretations are not determined by a common set of conventions but by private emotional requirements. Without the community's moderating influence, her reading habits develop into a peculiar system where her opinions are the only ones that matter. Her isolated position enables her entitlement to escalate unabated, as well as elucidating a situation her communal model can commit to accommodating.

Norman Holland's focus on psychological projection assists in adding another dimension, but in the end, it does not account for the magnitude of Annie's control. Holland comments that readers' personal experiences are shaped by their identity. While Annie's readings do reflect her emotional instability and desire for order, they become a tool for domination of their own. Her identity is not simply determining her interpretation; it overrides the author's capacity for creative autonomy. King thus describes a type which creates, not personal insight, but authoritarian control.

Annie Wilkes is an example of reader-response theory at the extreme. Her actions reveal the extent to which the agency given to readers, when pushed to an absolute extreme, can bring down the collaborative relationship between the reader and text. Instead of constructing meaning in her interaction, her engagement limits meaning. Through Annie, *Misery* shows that the active reader's role, when separated from the negotiation and respect for text integrity, can make it a force for undermining the very creativity that reader-response theory aims to celebrate.

IV. Care as Captivity: How "Nurturing" Becomes a Mechanism of Control

The progression from the interpretive domination of Annie to her physical control over Paul is gradual, which provides the opportunity for this part to be carried over naturally from the preceding discussion of her reading practices. The same possessiveness that imagines her approach to narrative is

also how she administers care. What starts as an act of rescue turns into the basis of a regime of control. King signals this at the beginning when Annie tells Paul, "You owe me your life, Paul. I hope you'll remember that. I hope you'll keep that in mind" (King 20). The words of reassurance are comforting, but the promise of safety soon cracks its conditional status. In her hands, care is not a neutral gesture but a tool for binding Paul to her authority and eliminating any possibility of negotiation between them.

Annie's routines of nursing and feeding show how her caregiving leads to dependency as opposed to healing. She controls the timing and dosage of his medication. This insistence puts personal domination in place of medical judgment. What she does offer is not treatment but control in a cloak of compassion. Overcareful regulation of painkillers is what keeps Paul weak, but not so weak that he is worthless for the work she demands. King proposes this contradiction with clarity, as she shows Paul's realisation that Annie's "care" is inseparable from captivity. The meals she delivers, the water she carries and the pills she administers are all the workers that remind him of her will for his survival. The domestic space she creates enhances this dynamic. Paul's world is reduced to the little bedroom where she kept him like a pet she had rescued from the highway. The room has the appearance of a shelter but serves as a prison. The locked door, lack of mobility and the unpredictable presence of Annie turn an otherwise regular space into a space of constant supervision. The sickroom represents the logic of her care: he is there because he is sick, but he is still sick because she needs him to be contained. The more that she cares for him, the more that the boundaries around him get tightened.

This physical confinement is similar to the story confinement she imposes. Annie's control of Paul's body helps prepare the ground for her control of his creativity. When she brings him a typewriter and announces that he is going to write another *Misery* novel, she presents it as therapeutic. She tells him, "You'll mend faster when you're working, I'll bet!" (King 71). The statement makes recovery coincide with obedience. By introducing writing as a form of healing, she camouflages her coercion as encouragement. The sickroom becomes a place in which the production of the story is watched as closely as Paul's bodily condition. Annie's patterns of caregiving consequently set the boundaries within which Paul must imagine, compose and revise.

The parallel that can be drawn between bodily control and narrative control reveals an important

gap in reader-response theory. While theorists such as Iser describe reading as a collaborative process, they do not account for the reader whose involvement becomes authoritarian. Annie's approach suggests that what occurs when the reader's expectations conflict with both the autonomy of texts and authorial intention. This is likewise demonstrated in her insistence that Paul correct what she calls the "mistakes" in his manuscript. To him she tells, "It's a cheat. You'll have to change it" (King 117). Her language is suggestive, not of interpretation, but policing. Whereas the creative process becomes an obligation to satisfy her emotional order instead of the expression. This inversion of roles is in harmony with issues that have been raised in the discussion of narrative authority. If the author usually guides the meaning of a text, in the case of *Misery*, it is an imaginary world in which this guidance collapses under the demands of the reader.

The imbalance obtained with Annie's caregiving complicates idealised versions of the author-reader relationship. Care becomes a form of possession. Healing turns into surveillance. Encouragement turns into compulsion. These patterns reveal the weakness of authorship when the wishes of the reader turn into demands. Through the sickroom and Annie's nurturing routines, King presents a setup in which creative autonomy is gradually absorbed by a reader who thinks that he/she knows best. In this way, bodily confinement and narrative confinement are shown to be inseparable, and how power can come to change hands once and for all if the reader refuses to stay within the theoretical boundaries that are assumed in theory. In doing so, *Misery* extends the critique of reader-response models in preventing reader-response models from depending on a form of control that endangers liberty in both its physical and creative aspects.

V. Forced Authorship: Paul Sheldon's Creativity Under Reader Domination

The relationship between Annie and Paul maximises in the point at which Paul is pressured to write *Misery's Return*, a project that reveals the total breakdown of his author's will. His private art is a dictating performance for a reader that denies any narrative beyond herself. Paul acknowledges this, admitting, "Annie Wilkes was the perfect audience, a woman who loved stories without having the slightest interest in the mechanics of making them" (King 71). His writing becomes an act of survival, an enactment of an extreme type of readerly domination.

Annie's demands impose structure on Paul's crea-

tive autonomy, and this structure is based entirely on Annie's expectations. This shows the critical part that "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them (Fish 327). Paul's own intentions are likewise dismissed but criminalised as the reader-response theory is twisted from a model of collaborative meaning-making into one of meaning-commanding.

Paul himself, in his minor narrative rebellions, is an attempt to hold back pieces of agency. Yet these are met with violent scrutiny, on which Annie believes writers must not cheat. She places his creativity in the context of a moral contract that is only defined by her, forcing him to write authentically in the precise shape that she demands.

This tension literally realises theoretical debates on authorship. Roland Barthes, an argumentator who argues, "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" (Barthes 6). *Misery* reveals the horrifying state of this shift, in which the reader's ascendancy has imprisoned the author instead of freeing the text.

Ultimately, King debunks the optimism of the reader-response theory. *Misery* raises the spectre of the active reader becoming destructive, if left to run rampant over authorship, which changes authorship from an act of imagination into a constricted performance.

VI. Subversion of the Ideal Reader: Theoretical and Literary Implications

Annie Wilkes is not only an extreme reader, but she builds anarchy with the cooperative interpretive model proposed by such theorists as Iser and Fish. Rabinowitz, in *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, discusses the seemingly trivial point that, for readers, effective reading requires the reader's willingness to work with the text, to follow clues or cues given by the text and to engage in a negotiated process of constructing meaning. Annie deviates from these conditions completely. She makes the narrative replicate her own expectations; she makes readerly participation by her readers a domination of the reader. Her behaviour is also inconsistent with the principle outlined in Culler's *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, which emphasises the need for interpretation to keep away from whether the text supports or does not support the meanings imposed on it. Annie disregards such limits, using reading as a tool to control the story and its author.

Her rigidity directly challenges the concept of a cooperative reading process of Wolfgang Iser. Iser

states, "knowledge is offered or invoked by the text in such a way that it can undergo a guided transformation in and through the reader's mind" (216-217). Annie rejects textual guidance, reading from the perspective of verifying her pre-existing expectations and removes the openness that is key to Iser's theory.

Furthermore, the fact that she reads alone, without any checks on her reading, exposes a weakness in Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities, which he says makes interpretation accountable. Annie is outside the boundaries of any community, which means that her readerly agency is free to turn into domination.

Through the figure of Annie, King resists the celebratory nature of reader response theory and advises that readerly power can overwhelm the creative process completely. She illustrates an extreme possibility theory ignores: a reader who wants not to collaborate, but to control.

VII. Conclusion

Annie Wilkes forces a re-evaluation of the relations between readers, writers and texts. Her character reveals the weakness of theoretical assumptions that praise reader agency without thinking about the ethics that must surround it in order for reader agency to be meaningful. King's joining of the physical and creative confinement shows how the reader's expectations can become tools of confinement if they are allowed to run unchallenged.

While in literary theory the reader is often empowered, *Misery* points out that this empowerment needs limitations. The novel highlights the fragility of authorship and demonstrates to the reader that the idea that meaning primarily belongs to the reader is difficult. It serves as a reminder that the relationship is based on an unstable relationship between respect and agency rather than successful dominance.

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