

“We All Float Down Here:” The Fluid Bodies and Watery Heterotopias of Stephen King’s *IT*

Thanks to its film adaptation’s meteoric popularity, Stephen King’s *IT* has re-entered the popular cultural imaginary. At its heart, the 1981 novel is a coming-of-age story about an outcast band of children who must defeat the sewer-dwelling Eldritch abomination wreaking havoc on the small, flood-prone Maine town of Derry after it becomes clear that the adults of the city can’t (or won’t). It is an intensely political work, exploring, over the course of its 1000+ pages, social issues like racism, homophobia, anti-semitism, child abuse, and, most critically, the bystander effect and what happens when a society allows these issues to go unchecked. If American Gothic is concerned with the screams beneath the floorboards of America, it is clear that King is interested in the sewage that roils beneath its streets and sometimes comes bubbling up into its gutters...

Water, both pure and deeply contaminated, constitutes one of the novel’s most present motifs with the imagery of water, rain, storms, and sewage spider-webbed throughout the novel like the so many tributaries through Derry itself. From the Derry sewer system to Beverly’s bathroom to the barrens (a patch of woods on the riverside that The Loser’s Club use as a private oasis to get away from town bullies and their parents’ abuse and neglect), many of the novel’s most crucial scenes occur in, or near, water, and in a work so concerned with bodies in flux – both Pennywise the shapeshifter’s but, more importantly for this presentation, the preadolescent bodies of the members of the Loser’s Club – this is all too fitting.

Using Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, this article will examine the ways in which the watery settings of Stephen King’s *IT* reflect the fluidity of its preadolescent characters’ bodies and emotional interiorities, and act as both spaces of claustrophobic danger and sexual anxiety (the sewers, the bathroom) *and* oases (the barrens) where otherwise disallowable behavior and expressions of sexual and gender fluidity become permissible. The presentation will examine King’s original novel most closely, but also consider the ways these spaces are represented in the novel’s two filmic adaptations (1990 and 2017, respectively).