Replacing People and Reinforcing Family in
Stephen King’s ‘The Man in the Black Suit’

R. Mac Jones, Extended University at USC-Columbia

Abstract:
Stephen King’s ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ has garnered less critical attention than one might expect given its status as an O. Henry Award winner. The short story’s antagonist, a fairly familiar image of a dapper Devil, and stated intention as an homage to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ belie, though, its complex treatment of family. ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ can be argued as supporting a retreat into an idealized view of family, an innocent view, as a means of combating evil: a rare stance for one of King’s stories, and one best understood in relation to the story’s setting.

Keywords: Stephen King, family, The Man in the Black Suit
'The Man in the Black Suit' has reached an anniversary: two decades have passed since the first publication of Stephen King’s story, almost a century since the year in which the majority of the action of the short story is set. Yet the tale for which King won the O. Henry Award remains an inventive ‘homage’ to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ (King 2002: 68). King prefers, though, the backdrop of idyllic childhood innocence to a dark wood ventured into on what Goodman Brown knows is an ‘evil purpose’ (Hawthorne 2009: 112). Hawthorne’s satanic dilettante, turning a deaf ear to his wife’s pleas to stay, willfully seeks an evening’s excursion with the Devil only to find, to his horror, the majority of his chaste and pious, seventeenth-century Puritan town on similar outings and in long-standing league with the Devil (Hawthorne 2009: 112, 120). King elects one ‘afternoon in the summer of 1914’ as the site for his infernal encounter and a nine-year-old boy named Gary, with naught but fishing on his mind, as his protagonist (King 1994: 92). But the stories’ conclusions deal in common questions of faith. Brown’s meeting, real or ‘a wild dream of witch-meeting,’ leaves him ‘[a] stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate, man,’ psychologically crippled by suspicion of everyone he sees until his death (Hawthorne 2009: 123-124). Gary’s story, by contrast, allows for the reclamation of faith.

Gary’s first-person account of his meeting with ‘the Devil’ – as he comes to call ‘the man in the black suit’ – offers a subtle and probing meditation on the substance of familial bonds (King 1994: 95). The man in the black suit, if not a dream creature, threatens Gary with mortal peril. However, the true horror of the piece may lie in Gary’s willingness to entertain the man’s suggestion that family ties are not bound by love, or some other metaphysical knotting, but are primarily utilitarian and that family members can be subject to ghastly interchangeability. King has Gary reject the Devil’s argument, though, and, in doing so, eschews a traditional coming of age story by championing a retreat into childhood innocence, in the form of family, as the ultimate means to fend off the demonic.

Gary, a ‘man in his eighties’ when he commits to writing about the meeting in the woods, recalls ‘a different world’ in the days of his youth, marked by the absence of modern means of conveyance, connection, and communication: ‘a world without airplanes droning overhead,’ ‘almost without cars and trucks,’ without phones, without

Revenant 1.1 (2015)
the now ubiquitous ‘overhead power lines,’ and without ‘a single paved road in the whole town’ of Motton, the closest town to his family’s farm (King 1994: 92). Few businesses and ‘no more than a dozen houses’ could be found in ‘what you would call town’ (92).

Sparse population and industrialization were reflected in the way one realized and defined community; ‘[t]here were no neighborhoods,’ and Gary is ‘not even sure [they] knew the word [neighborhood], although [they] had a verb – “neighboring”’ – that described church functions and barn dances’ (King 1994: 92). Words for community, beyond ‘family,’ which are cast as ‘little pockets of stove warmth we called families’ during the winter and early spring months, do not readily come to Gary’s mind (King 1994: 92). Being a neighbor was an event rather than a role – the dance ends and the partners disappear. Instead, in a landscape where ‘farms stood far apart from each other,’ family becomes the one proximal source for support and identity (92).

Thus, stories of atrocities committed within the insularity of the family could be all the more menacing. The story of ‘the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before’ is the only example given, but the worry over a family member ‘get[ting] a headful of bad ideas’ and doing such a thing mentioned alongside such pedestrian worries as ‘get[ting] sick or break[ing] a leg’ implies the potential for uxoricide and filicide as a credible fear (King 1994: 92). When Gary describes ‘how people lived’ in 1914 as ‘apart,’ he introduces a natural paradox: isolation draws the family closer together (92). There are practical and existential risks in losing a family member or a family member losing him- or herself to something like ‘bad ideas.’

Against this backdrop a demon stalks whose interest, it will be argued, lies more in subversion than in murder. A bee lands on Gary’s nose, while he is fishing, alone, in Castle Stream. The boy freezes in terror – it was a bee sting that killed his older brother, after all. Then he hears a ‘single clap,’ the bee falls, as ‘dead as a doornail,’ and the man who clapped comes into view, a man in ‘a black three-piece suit’ who Gary ‘knew right away[…] was not human’ (King 1994: 94-95). Killing is on his mind, certainly, and Gary becomes aware of this early on: ‘I suddenly knew that I was going to die’ after spending a short while with the man (96).

However, it is telling that the man in the black suit does not take advantage of numerous instances during which he is close enough to the boy to grab hold of him; that
he does not seize Gary immediately after wailing about ‘starving’ and promising ‘to kill [Gary] and eat [his] guts’ (King 1994: 98). The Devil’s swiftness and dexterity on other occasions give the lie to his ineffectual attempts to catch Gary. This is a man who can kill a fish by pointing his finger at it (96). The man in the black suit seems keenly attuned to Gary’s personal fears, certainly, but also to the potential for horror inherent in life lived ‘apart’ from a density of population that might give rise to myriad associations, options, and avenues of retreat. The Devil the rhetorician, rather than the Devil the preternatural predator, turns a young boy’s feeble attempts at argumentation into an occasion to generate fear and despair, cutting more deeply with promises of detachment than any catalogue of tortures that the Devil might perform.

Gary’s mother has died, according to the Devil: he comes bearing the ‘[s]ad news,’ as he puts it (King 1994: 96). He tells Gary that ‘[i]t was the same thing that happened to your brother,’ she was stung by a bee (96). He details her final moments: she wept, her face swelled, her eyes bulged (98). The Devil even revels in the family dog, Candy Bill, ‘lick[ing] away her tears’ after she died (98).

‘No,’ Gary protests, ‘that’s not true,’ and, in truth, Gary is correct in his assertion, though he will not learn this until much later (King 1994: 96). What may be a hopeful, though vehement, denial is followed by an earnest but flawed attempt at reasoning to support his hopes. ‘She’s old, she’s thirty-five,’ Gary reminds the Devil, insisting that ‘if a bee sting could kill her[…] she would have died a long time ago’ (96).

The occasion of Gary’s argument marks a shift in the story. The boy’s attempt at logic is an illusory venture into “coming of age;” he does not simply run or try to fight or cry out denials, instead he responds to an adult as an equal: reasoning with the man in the black suit. His mother had, in fact, reminded him just before he left for his fishing trip ‘that grammar is for the world as well as for school’ when Gary ‘[p]romise[d] not to go no further’ than the stream (King 1994: 93). More subtle and controlled uses of language are markers, then, of growing up and becoming more adept at engaging with ‘the world.’ This shift into a more grownup way of speaking is also preceded by a change in his voice. When the man in the black suit first appears at the riverbank, Gary says ‘Hello, sir’ in a voice that ‘did not tremble’ and that he knows ‘didn’t sound like my voice’ but ‘older,’ more like, his brother, ‘Dan’s voice’ or his father’s voice (98). Grammar and vocal
resonance prove superficial markers of maturity, though. Gary’s argument is met by a Devil’s logic, one nonetheless more clearly rooted in practicality, as the man in the black suit points out that Gary’s ‘argument just doesn’t hold water:’ ‘[a] man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird’ but that does not ‘mean mockingbirds don’t exist’ (96). Gary’s ‘mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee’ until ‘less than an hour’ before the man in the black suit meets Gary in the woods (96).

What follows can be seen as the Devil adapting, recognizing in young Gary’s reliance on his own reasoning, rather than lessons learned from others, a moment of instability, limning at the edge of maturity. The Devil’s dialogue from this moment until Gary flees the riverbank capitalizes on extending the moment’s instability into torment, undermining Gary’s worldview, one predicated on what is available to him: family. The man in the black suit attempts to convince Gary that the principal quality of any relationship is expediency. He pivots from threats of pain and death to lessons concerning the fundamental improbity of the parent-child relationship, and Gary shies from attempting to confront his claims a second time with his own reasoning. Gary’s reticence, however, can be argued as his salvation.

The Devil pointedly tells Gary that his mother ‘killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger,’ as she ‘passed that fatal weakness on to your brother:’ the source of Dan’s inherited allergy to bee stings (King 1994: 98). The implication of the Devil’s claim is not only that Gary’s mother betrays the natural imperative to protect her children but that such a betrayal is fundamental, inborn. The Devil’s is a reasonable story, in this case, even if his conclusions about culpability are suspect. The narrative of the bee sting previously had been one of an outside agent, the bee, intruding upon the closed world of the family. Gary had even recently imbued the bee with preternatural attributes, as, to his mind, the bee that landed on his nose that day by the riverbank was ‘the very bee that had killed my brother,’ some kind of ‘special bee, a devil-bee[…] come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta’s two boys’ (94). To believe what the Devil proposes would be for Gary the loss of both his mother and the idea of his mother.

The man in the black suit then promises this corporeal loss of the mother to be followed by another existential loss, loss of the father that Gary has known, as the man in
the black suit claims that following the mother’s death the father will begin to sexually abuse Gary. The Devil warns Gary, in chillingly prosaic language, ‘[Y]ou won’t want to live without your precious mommy[…] [b]ecause your father’s the sort of man who’ll have to have some warm hole to stick it in[…] and if you’re the only one available, you’re the one who’ll have to serve’ (King 1994: 98). The man in the black suit wants to ‘save [Gary] from all that discomfort and unpleasantness’ by killing him and eating him that day by the stream (98).

Here, the characterization of the future abuses that Gary will suffer diverges from the atrocities committed by ‘the farmer over in Castle Rock’ who swore ‘in court that ghosts made him do it’ (King 1994: 92). The man in the black suit presents Gary’s father’s predicted actions not as the abjuration of a previously sound and loving relationship, not as the result of supernaturally conditioned ‘bad ideas,’ but as the natural, inevitable outcome of the current substance of Gary’s relationship with his father. While there is a proviso of sorts in that his father is ‘the sort of man,’ implying that there are other sorts of men, the Devil’s narrative still maintains that the man the Gary currently knows and understands is the same man that will sexually abuse him in the future.

How the Devil frames his prediction suggests King’s story as a meditation on the substance, even more so than the strength, of family ties. As the Devil presents it, the death of the mother is not the loss of a heretofore protector. It is not that the mother dies and, therefore, there will be no one to help Gary, no one to provide a barrier between the boy and an abusive father. There is no indication of abuse by the father either before or after Gary’s encounter with the man in the black suit. Instead, the Devil insists that the father will view Gary as a potential substitute for a functional role that the mother has played. And the Devil’s warning about the father echoes his comments about the mother: all is reduced to physical needs and weaknesses. More particularly, perhaps, the Devil insists that people are simply bodies that serve roles: ‘some warm hole’ or the conduit for a fatal genetic predisposition or the meal for a hungry demon.

Acceptance of the Devil’s statements as revelatory would create a horrific parody of coming of age, of putting off a naïve worldview. Here, movement beyond a reliance on love and a previously unquestioned belief in family as the sum of unique, personal relationships would necessitate a complete denial of any concept of relationships not
clearly utilitarian. The Devil barters on Gary’s burgeoning confidence in pragmatism: pragmatic primrose paths to the mouth of hell, to the maw of the man in the black suit.

Gary does tell the man in the black suit, ‘No,’ and calls ‘the Devil a lying bastard,’ in a moment that surprises even Gary, when he is confronted with the story of his mother’s death (King 1994: 96). However, that Gary confronts the Devil and survives is not as significant as his running from the Devil. If we see coming of age as essentially a movement from a supportive but facile, even incorrect, understanding of the world into a more complex one, reflective of the consideration of a host of previously unknown or misunderstood factors, Gary does not successfully come of age as a result of his meeting with the Devil. He escapes from the Devil’s grasp into his father’s embrace without reasoning through the move. Propelled by the same love that he brought with him to the riverside, he rushes to his father: ‘I had been walking, but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming Dad! Dad! Dad! at the top of my lungs’ (King 1994: 100). And this King champions; after this reunion the Devil is not seen again, not even really considered, until an aged Gary sets out to write his tale.

Gary does meet the Devil’s explanation of genetics with ‘No, it isn’t true,’ a far weaker disavowal than what he had offered upon hearing of his mother’s death, but the Devil’s predictions about his father’s actions produce no counterargument, not even a shouted ‘No.’ What it does yield is a boy running towards a father, who is also running towards his son, so fast that ‘when [they] came together it was a wonder the impact didn’t knocked [them] both senseless’ (King 1994: 100).

The abandon that marks Gary’s reunion with his father complicates the suggestion that the story ‘can be read as a fable about the loss of childhood’s innocence,’ and its categorization, in popular assessments, as a coming of age story (Stefoff 2010: 125). While Gary’s answering the Devil ‘in a voice that sounds older’ might be seen as a moment in which he ‘takes the first step into adult life,’ thus beginning the ‘loss’ of innocence, such a ‘loss” must be seen as fleeting (125). Innocence is regained instinctively, irrationally. Gary runs with such speed towards the man he had been told regards him only in terms of functionality that Gary strikes his ‘face on his [father’s] belt buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed,’ and he clings to his father and rubs his face against his father’s belly (King 1994: 100).
The father embraces the weight and force of his son’s fears. As Patrick McAleer notes, in ‘I Have the Whole World in My Hands … Now What?,’ King’s ‘children also do not always escape horror despite their typically innocent construction’ (1213). This holds true for Gary in ‘The Man in the Black Suit;’ the older Gary cannot say why the Devil came to him, whether the Devil saw him as ‘his errand or his luck’ (King 1994, 103). But this story reminds that the child’s ‘innocent construction’ is not a freestanding form, rather latticed onto an existing foundation, in this case, that of the family. The ability of the child to rely on innocence, to employ innocence, to face the horrors of the world, ordinary or supernatural, imagined or real, is predicated on relationships that reciprocally reinforce this innocence.

Seen as a study on the family, ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ ironically supports the arguments of Sara Martín Alegre’s critical appraisal of several of King’s novels written around the same time, The Shining, Firestarter, It, and Pet Sematary: ‘[t]he presence of the child in King’s novels must be understood in the context of his representation of the collapse of the American family’ (Alegre 2001: 105). In her study, ‘Nightmares of Childhood: The Child and the Monster in Four Novels by Stephen King,’ Alegre observes that ‘[h]appy and unhappy endings send King’s children in troubled directions[...] for the children of his fiction must be inevitably traumatized by the horrific experiences that King builds around them’ and argues that the author ‘has no answer at all as to how [the children] may overcome these horrors’ (Alegre 2001: 106). While ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ appears as the antithesis of these assertions, as it upholds and supports the family as a source of stability and recovery, recognition of the short story’s setting – at a remove from populated areas, in the summer of 1914 – might argue for the story as a vision of the past structure that will ‘collapse’ in later decades: King’s prelapsarian vision of the American family.

We see this collapse in miniature within the story itself. ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ employs the frame story of an eighty-year-old Gary committing to write about what happened in the woods in 1914, now that the specter of the man in the black suit has begun to be ‘ever clearer, ever closer’ as Gary’s ‘infirmities slowly creep up on’ him (King 1994: 92). Gary had not feared the implications of his encounter with the man in the black suit once he was back with his family nor in the decades that followed, ‘for
many years in between [he had] never even thought of it,’ until just before he decides to record his story in his diary (King 1994: 103).

This reemergence coincides with the loss of his family, this time to the progressive deterioration of the mind due to age and infirmity. He is losing connection and individuation when it comes to people in his life, just those losses the Devil had sought to bring about, because his memory is failing him: ‘[w]hat I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or them to me – those things are gone’ (King 1994: 92). Gary decides to write his story in a diary that he knows came to him from ‘one of my great-grandchildren,’ although he admits that he ‘can’t remember her name for sure, at least not right now, but I know it starts with an ‘S’’ (King 1994: 92). What he does remember are friends from childhood, ‘girls I kissed in the school cloakroom’ and ‘boys I chummed with,’ but no one of the present, no tangible other person which he might run to embrace, with abandon, when the Devil ‘whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger’ (King 1994: 103). Though Gary does not show an awareness of a causal relationship, how he articulates the deterioration of some memories and the elevation of others reinforces this new loss of family as what allows for the reappearance of the man in the black suit. Gary moves from one to the other in a single sentence: ‘who I might have seen[…], what I might have said to them or them to me – those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer’ (King 1994: 92).

A concomitant reason for Gary’s emerging dread, for the return of the man in the black suit, is his abandonment of unanalyzed faith in others, such as what he showed in running to his father. ‘[E]ighty years gone’ from the encounter in the woods, Gary comes to fear the man in the black suit again because Gary seeks to rationalize why he should not fear him: ‘I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil – that I have lived a good, kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil’ (King 1994: 103). Rather than shouting a rebuke and a denial, Gary relies on a merit-based soteriology, but ‘these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort’ (103). Instead, he has fallen back into a reliance on reason that almost had him caught by the Devil.
And the man in the black suit’s voice does not call ‘Gary’ in the dark of night, that infernal throat bellows ‘Big fish!’, reducing a unique soul to a body, to a catch, and – a party to that ultimate in functional relationships – to the prey for the predator (King 1994: 103). It is not the Devil’s will or designs that lead him to the fisherboy that day but his ‘hunger,’ a point to which the older Gary alludes at the end of the story: ‘all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger’ (103). The loss of family reappears just before the Devil, as does the failure of reason, as does the reduction of relationships to their most utilitarian. But the horror that the older Gary faces surpasses the younger Gary’s in severity owing to the effects of the loss of memory: even in his mind he cannot recall family to his aid.

As noted before, this article proceeds on the premise that Gary does, in fact, encounter the man in the black suit in the woods, though the father in the story suggests that Gary might have simply dreamed the meeting. Tom Hansen’s ‘Diabolical Dreaming in Stephen King's “The Man in the Black Suit”’ provides an interesting reading of the story based on the premise that ‘the man [Gary] meets is[…] a nightmare projection of Gary's own mind’ and one that has Gary’s ‘best interests at heart,’ in that it leads him to certain insights (Hansen 2004: 293) This reading still focuses, though, on the story as a coming of age story and one that distances Gary from his mother and draws him closer to his father, to becoming a man like his father. But Gary’s running to his mother is simply delayed, by the practical fact that his father had been on his way to fish with Gary when they met on the road.

Gary tells his father that he has to go to his mother, “to see her with my own eyes,” even though his father insists that she is fine (King 1994: 101). And when they return to the house, Gary sees his mother ‘standing at the counter, just as well and fine’ as when he had last seen her, and he finds comfort in things just as they were before (102). His mother asks ‘Gary, what is it? What’s the matter?’ (102). But Gary ‘didn’t answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses’ (102).

Patrick McAleer, in The Writing Family of Stephen King, approaches ‘The Man in the Black Suit’ as an ‘example of a story that does not necessarily seek to be anything more than just an enjoyable story’ (McAleer 2011: 27-28). This is certainly in keeping with commentary that King provided after the story when it was later collected in

Revenant 1.1 (2015)
*Everything's Eventual*: ‘I thought the finished product a rather humdrum folktale told in pedestrian language, certainly miles from the Hawthorne story’ (King 2002: 68). McAleer makes note of King’s self-criticisms and uses them to buttress his argument that the story is ‘just’ a story. However, in the same commentary, King’s final words would seem to diminish his own critical appraisal: ‘This story is proof that writers are often the worst judges of what they have written’ (King 2002: 68). In this same vein, Gary, who is writing his story in the hopes that ‘writing can give’ him ‘release’ from the man in the black suit, may not realize what he has written in the closing paragraphs of the story, that his attempts to reason through why he should not fear the Devil actually draw the Devil in (King 1994: 92).

List of References


McAleer, Patrick, ‘I Have the Whole World in My Hands … Now What?: Power,

*Revenant* 1.1 (2015)
