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New Dimensions of FEAR: Conceptual and Intermedial Analysis

Nowy wymiar STRACHU: Analiza konceptualna i intermedialna

Abstract

The paper presents a new intermedial perspective on the multidimensional concept of fear in the literary works of modern American writer Stephen King. The intricate and contradictory nature of fear stands at the core of a popular literary genre – horror fiction. The multifaceted nature of the horror genre attests to its inherent complexity, particularly in its exploration of fear. The article addresses the following key functions of horror fiction: 1) to specify the associations arising from the experience of fear, 2) to offer a structured methodological background for examining the given emotion, and 3) to provide a fertile ground for social introspection. It has been justified that the reflective nature of literary texts makes them a representative repository for elucidating specific concepts or social sentiments, hence the growing number of literary pieces reflective of one of the primary human emotions – fear. This correlates with modern social, economic, and technological challenges that have reshaped

the past few decades. The conducted research has indicated that shifts and modifications in the perception of fear have found their reflection in horror fiction. The lexicosemantic analysis of the lexemes used by S. King to indicate fear enabled delineating the core and periphery of the concept FEAR. By applying the intermedial perspective and text interpretation techniques, we established the crucial roles of visual and auditory sensory systems in representing the discussed concept by the author and its further perception by the readers. The main conclusion of the paper enables viewing the concept FEAR as a complex semiotic and linguistic artifact, a primary emotion, and a multifaceted psycholinguistic phenomenon. Thus, the concept FEAR resembles an intricate semiotic system that integrates different verbal and non-verbal means. In the paper, fear is understood as a neural and physical reaction in response to internal and external sources of danger, as well as the embodiment of reverence, bewilderment, and despair grounded in different sensorimotor systems. Being a complex psycholinguistic phenomenon of multimodal nature, fear is dynamically represented in literary prose by various intermediality tools that have been evolving in response to social, political, and economic changes in the modern world.

Key words: *fear, concept, Stephen King, intermediality, literary analysis.*

Abstrakt

W tym artykule przedstawiono nowe, intermedialne spojrzenie na wielowymiarowe pojęcie strachu w twórczości literackiej współczesnego pisarza amerykańskiego Stephena Kinga. Skomplikowana i sprzeczna natura strachu leży u podstaw popularnego gatunku literackiego – horroru. Wieloaspektowy charakter gatunku horroru świadczy o jego wrodzonej złożoności, szczególnie jeśli chodzi o eksplorację strachu. W artykule omówiono następujące kluczowe funkcje horroru: 1) wyraźne określenie skojarzeń wynikających z doświadczenia strachu, 2) zapewnienie usystematyzowanego tła metodologicznego do badania danej emocji oraz 3) zapewnienie podatnego gruntu dla introspekcji społecznej. Uzasadniono, że refleksyjny charakter tekstów literackich czyni je reprezentatywnym repozytorium objaśniania konkretnych pojęć czy odczuć społecznych, stąd rosnąca liczba utworów literackich odzwierciedlających jedną z podstawowych ludzkich emocji – strach. Koreluje to ze współczesnymi wyzwaniami społecznymi, gospodarczymi i technologicznymi, które miały istotny wpływ na kształt ostatnich kilku dekad. Przeprowadzone badania wykazały, że zmiany i modyfikacje w postrzeganiu strachu znalazły swoje odzwierciedlenie w literaturze grozy. Analiza lub leksykalna i semantyczna leksemów stosowanych przez S. Kinga do określenia strachu pozwoliła na wytyczenie rdzenia i peryferii pojęcia STRACH. Stosując perspektywę intermedialną i techniki interpretacji tekstu, ustaliliśmy kluczową

rolę wizualnych i słuchowych systemów sensorycznych w reprezentacji omawianego pojęcia przez autora i jego dalszym odbiorze przez czytelników. Główny wniosek artykułu pozwala spojrzeć na pojęcie STRACH jako złożony artefakt semiotyczny i językowy, emocję pierwotną i wieloaspektowe zjawisko psycholingwistyczne. Zatem koncepcja STRACH przypomina skomplikowany system semiotyczny, który integruje różne środki werbalne i niewerbalne. W artykule strach rozumiany jest jako reakcja nerwowa i fizyczna będąca odpowiedzią na wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne źródła zagrożenia, a także ucieleśnienie szacunku, oszołomienia i rozpaczy ugruntowanych w różnych układach sensomotorycznych. Strach, będący złożonym zjawiskiem psycholingwistycznym o charakterze multimodalnym, jest dynamicznie reprezentowany w prozie literackiej za pomocą różnych narzędzi intermedialnych, które ewoluują w odpowiedzi na zmiany społeczne, polityczne i ekonomiczne współczesnego świata.
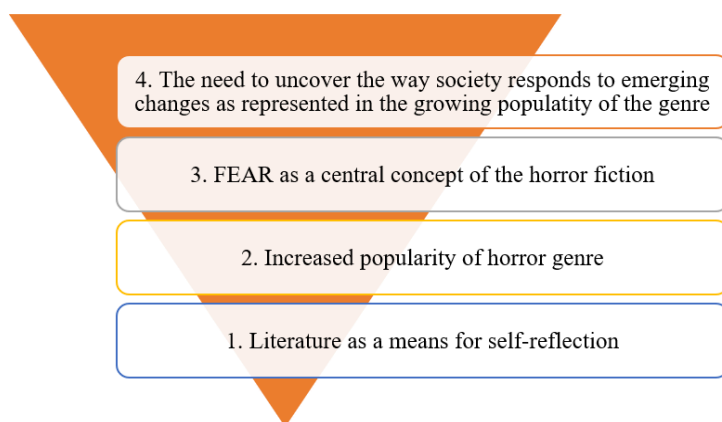
Słowa kluczowe: *strach, koncepcja, Stephen King, intermedialność, analiza literacka.*

Fear, an eternal companion and rival of humanity, has long been the focus of attention of philosophers, psychologists, and writers. In the contemporary era marked by the extensive use of multimodal and multimedia devices, our understanding of fear has been re-defined, mirroring various civilizational challenges and requisites within the domain of humanities and social sciences. The elusive nature of fear, its inherent ability to both protect and paralyze the human mind, has prompted multiple interpretations and explorations throughout history from the existential prism of Soren Kierkegaard to the psychological insights of Sigmund Freud and the literary analyses of Stephen King. (Kierkegaard, 1923; Freud, 1919) In modern science, the newly emerged intermedial perspective (Vorobyova, 2010) represents a promising direction for scrutinizing the complex nature of fear. In this article, we offer an inquiry into the multifaceted nature of fear, drawing upon the philosophical, psychological, and literary approaches to underline its complexities on the material of literary works of one of the world's best-selling and prolific authors – Stephen King. By applying complex intermedial techniques to the analysis of literary texts, we will offer a systemic model of fear as a multidimensional semiotic and linguistic artifact, a primary emotion, and a multifaceted psycholinguistic phenomenon.

Literature is a powerful tool for self-reflection. Much like historical accounts and records, literary texts unveil predominant sentiments within society. To disregard the appearance or growing popularity of a specific literary genre would mean annul a critical social dimension. The 20th century witnessed

an upsurge in the number of literary texts of the horror genre. The multifaceted nature of the horror genre attests to its inherent complexity, particularly in its exploration of fear. Within this framework, horror fiction fulfills a few critical functions. First, it documents the associations arising from the experience of fear. Second, it offers a structured platform for examining the given emotion. Lastly, horror fiction provides a fertile ground for social introspection. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness between literature and the exploration of evolving dimensions of fundamental human emotions.

As a fundamental human emotion, FEAR has been scrutinized in multiple domains of scientific inquiry. From the neurophysiological standpoint, fear is a powerful survival mechanism. Once activated, emotions coordinate systems of perception, attention, reasoning, learning, recollection, goal-setting, motor functions, and decision-making. (Grogans et al., 2023; Tyng et al., 2017) A considerable body of neurobiological research has focused on uncovering the intricate mechanisms behind emotion. (Mobbs et al., 2015; Kerahrodi & Michal, 2020)

4. The need to uncover the way society responds to emerging changes as represented in the growing populality of the genre

3. FEAR as a central concept of the horror fiction

2. Increased popularity of horror genre

1. Literature as a means for self-reflection

Figure 1. *Literature and Emergence of New Dimensions of FEAR as a Fundamental Human Emotion*

However, the neurobiological nature of fear is one of the many domains within the framework of which it can be explored. The complexity of the discussed emotion has placed it on the radar of diverse disciplines. Linguistics is one of the leading branches of scientific inquiry that seeks to elucidate the complex nature of fear. Emotions represent a critical aspect of human cognition, as they facilitate the processing of information about the environment. (Larue et al., 2018)

Understanding the representation of fear in a literary text is best achieved through its analysis as a concept. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, a concept is a "product of the imagination that can be conveyed to others only by means of language, gesture, drawing, or some other imperfect means

of communication". (Jackendoff, 1989, p. 69) The provided definition emphasizes the complexity of domains for defining and researching different concepts.

As highlighted above, the reflective nature of literary texts makes them a representative repository for elucidating specific concepts or social sentiments. The growing number of literary pieces elucidating one of the primary human emotions – fear – correlates with the social, economic, and technological changes that have reshaped the past few decades. Such shifts and modifications have found their reflection in horror fiction. While H. P. Lovecraft defined the primary function of the discussed genre as explorative of the so-called cosmic/supernatural horror. (Lovecraft, 1927) T. Harris uses horror fiction as a means to address the complexity of the human psyche. The fruits of Lovecraft's works spanned the years of the Industrial Revolution and preceded the rapid progress in science and technology. Similarly, Harris's exploration of behavioral deviations correlated with the growing interest in the field of psychology in the 1980-90s. A drastically different but ultimately fear-stricken perspective on social order is highlighted in *Seven Terrors* by Selvedin Avdić (2010). Set in the scene of the Bosnian war, the novel serves as a reflection on the issues of culture and intertwines Bosnia's unique past into a gripping narrative of psychological horror.

Within the expansive spectrum of the genre, Stephen King emerges as a notable figure. The author's literary corpus spans various subgenres including psychological thrillers, apocalyptic narratives, criminal mysteries, and other variations of horror fiction. According to Buday (2016), King has managed to create a crafted literary multiverse of genres that merge psychological, philosophical, ethical, moral, and socio-political themes. As described in King's documentary reflection *Danse Macabre*:

> …the horror genre has often been able to find national phobic pressure points… and **express fears which exist across a wide spectrum of people**. Such fears, which are often political, economic, and psychological rather than supernatural, give the best work of horror a pleasing allegorical feel... (King, 1981)

The author underscores that political, economic, and psychological contexts best define social experiences. While a substantial portion of the author's literary corpus focuses on supernatural and apocalyptic phenomena, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence and significance of realistic narrative patterns in King's works. In *The Mist*, the author hints at the political intervention that could have induced atmospheric contamination. The author implicitly addresses political and socioeconomic crises shaping the decade. The brief descriptions of the armored fighting vehicles circulating in and out of the source of the air pollution might be interpreted as a reflection of the US involvement in military disputes.

Set in the 1970s, *The Mist* also reflects social tensions characteristic of the time, with the fear of social collapse defining the flow of the narrative.

The discussed literary work delineates the perils stemming from unrestrained authority, as certain characters try to assert dominance and impose their ideologies upon others. Such a plot trajectory resonates with the broader socio-political dynamics characterized by the juxtaposition of human rights advocacy against entrenched political power during the 1970s. (Moyn, 2014) Moreover, the recurrent motif of mass violence assumes a critical role in depicting social fears in King's works. This thematic threat has been evident in *The Mist, Rage,* and *Mr. Mercedes*. Hence, the author employs his literary corpus as a medium to foster public discourse surrounding salient social issues.

Having established literature as a means for reflecting human experience, we suggest implementing conceptual and intermedial analyses to define the emerging facets of the concept central to horror fiction. In particular, we set out to explore the conceptual dimensions of fear as portrayed by Stephen King, whose works represent a compilation of a diverse and decades-long literary exploration of the subject. Additionally, we intertwine intermedial analysis to unveil the comprehensive spectrum of fear encapsulated within King's narratives.

The conceptual analysis of fear will entail a lexico-semantic examination of the concept, analysis of its semantically direct and contextual verbalizers, and content analysis of two seminal novels, namely *The Mist* and *The Outsider*. The works were selected specifically due to their chronological and stylistic differences. *The Mist* marks the dawn of Stephen King's career (1980) and represents the typical apocalyptical and psychological dimensions of horror fiction. In parallel, *The Outsider* is a 2018 psychological horror novel that combines elements of a traditional crime thriller and supernatural horror fiction. The analysis of these two novels will be crucial in elucidating the changes, or lack of such, in the representation of FEAR as a central concept of horror fiction.

The lexico-semantic analysis of FEAR is critical for delineating the core and periphery of the concept. The former structural element is represented by the direct verbalizer, i.e., noun *fear*, which defines the awareness of actual danger/ the feeling of being scared (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, n. d.). The componential analysis has facilitated the identification of the following semantic components of the concept:

[FEELING]

[DANGER]

[EMOTION]

[CONCERN]

[THOUGHT]

[STATE]

[ANTICIPATION]

[REVERENCE]

[POSSIBILITY]

Having analyzed the representation of FEAR in *The Mist*, we have identified several recurring patterns. Considering the semantically direct verbalizers, adjectives comprise the broadest group, with *scared* being the most frequently used lexeme (scared eyes; to be scared; to get scared). The noun *horror*, the adverb *nervously*, and the verb *to tremble* denote the most extensively used verbalizers in the corresponding groups. In terms of contextual representation of FEAR, it denotes either the **physical manifestation of the emotion** or **the manipulative tools used to evoke the feeling of uncertainty and mental disturbance**. The presented findings are consistent with the above-mentioned semantic component of the concept, i.e., [FEELING], [CONCERN], and [EMOTION].

The author also applies several conceptual metaphors to enhance the expressiveness of the concept. These are *the hard cement of reality* [STATE]/ [DANGER] and *the mist of disquiet* [ANTICIPATION]/ [POSSIBILITY]. In the former metaphor, the reality is understood as a set of aggravating circumstances, whereas the latter depicts the gradual accumulation of worry and anxiety. Yet another metaphor, *the bright and metallic face of terror*, accentuates the striking appearance of the trigger of fear.

Likewise, in *The Outsider*, verbalizers of FEAR are introduced strategically. In the novel, [DANGER] becomes the central semantic component. The adjectives comprise the broadest group of semantically direct verbalizers, with *afraid* being the most frequently used lexeme. Considering the contextually dependent verbalizers, the author introduces metaphors, exclamatory sentences, descriptions of blood/ pending demise, and verbal phrases to define the discussed concept. In the metaphor *coppery taste of panic*, the noun *panic* can be substituted with lexeme *blood*, as the attribute coppery indicates a strong metallic flavor commonly associated with blood. The author utilizes the lexeme death to visualize the notion of demise and lingering lethal danger. As can be observed in the above-provided examples, lexemes with explicitly negative connotations prevail in the immediate contextual environment of FEAR.

Besides, the lexico-semantic and content analysis of FEAR in *The Mist* and *The Outsider* underscores the prominent role of visual and auditory systems in describing the sensory deviations in the behavior of the characters subjected to experiencing fear. Such a tendency is best analyzed through the prism of intermedial studies. According to Vorobyova (2010) and Arvidson et al. (2022), intermediality serves as a mechanism for conveying a message through distinct semiotic codes. In the analyzed literary texts, the two primary semiotic codes are visual and auditory.

In *The Mist* and *The Outsider*, the audial representation of FEAR is dominant. Diverse lexemes are used to define voice tones, pitches, and volumes,

alongside other vocal characteristics. The nouns *roar, shriek,* and *scream* define the most intense vocal characteristics, whereas *sigh* and *moan* denote a less intense vocal range. The enumerated nouns are accompanied by attributive adjectives such as *ululating, long, trembling,* and *guttural*, which add specific connotations to the respective nouns. The phrase *ululating howl* acquires denotation of shrill, wordless lamentation, or wail. Likewise, the adjective *trembling* intensifies the core meaning of the noun sigh. Hence, adjectives (both attributive and predicative) are crucial for intensifying the audial intermediality of FEAR.

Another facet of intermediality of FEAR in the novel *The Mist* pertains to the visual system. The author focuses the reader's attention on two aspects, namely facial and eye expressions, thus offering a glimpse into the evolution of the character's emotional state:

- … her face seemed to bulge somehow, as if she were swelling. (King, 2007, p. 30);

- It was Ollie, his round face dead pale, except for the dark circles around his eyes – eyes that were still shiny from his tears. (King, 2007, p. 40);

- His face was as harsh as a rock with horror and fury. (King, 2007, p. 66);

- Now his face was not just cloudy; it was thundery. (King, 2007, p. 79).

The author utilizes several adjectives, i.e. *purple, round, dead, pale, bewildered, harsh, trained, white, cloudy, thundery, strained, blank,* and *stolid*, to visualize the characters' emotions. Alongside an elaborate depiction of facial expressions, King visualizes emotions conveyed through the characters' eyes. The author describes the characters' eyes as *big, frightened, cloudy, semi-vacant, dark-circled, tear-streaked, bloodshot, wide, haunted, woeful, shiny with tears, huge, sick, scared, blank, bleary, uncomprehending, widening, fearful, lusterless,* and *as big as dinner plates.*

The visual system lays at the core of the intermediality of FEAR in the novel *The Outsider*. Outsider's introductory description focuses on its human resemblance with distinct unearthly features, which determine its overall uncanny appearance:

- His hair was short and black and standing up. His face was lumpy, like Play-Doh. He had straws for eyes. (King, 2018, p. 199);

- 'And straws for eyes,' Grace said. 'They stuck out, like in a cartoon, and the black circles people have in their eyes were holes.' (King, 2018, p. 280).

Though the antagonist of the novel bears a superficial human resemblance, the references to its strange features prepare the reader to encounter the uncanny. Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*, is complex and revolves around the idea that certain experiences, objects, or situations induce

an unsettling sense of familiarity and strangeness. (Freud, 1919) This feeling often arises from repressed psychological elements, existential anxieties, and the blurred boundaries between the known and the unknown. According to Freud, encounters with doppelgängers, i.e., identical copies of oneself, evoke uncanny sensations. Seeing one's likeness in another person can be deeply unsettling because it challenges the uniqueness of the self. Similarly, Buday (2016) emphasizes that Stephen King adeptly engages with Lacanian post-structuralist psychoanalysis within the framework of horror fiction. The author skillfully incorporates a psychoanalytic approach to elucidate and, at the same time, question the genesis of the human psyche. Through characters of dubious nature (Outsider), King probingly explores alienation and disintegration of the human psyche experienced by individuals. This investigation serves as a central thematic underpinning in King's representation of FEAR.

In the novel, Outsider's physique, which has been previously described as humanlike, unexpectedly shifts to something hideous, *das Unheimliche*:

> Reddish wormlike things began to pour from the hole in the outsider's head, from its nose, from the cramped teardrop which was all that remained of its unsteady mouth… Its face split down the middle like a rotted gourd. There was no brain in the cavity thus revealed, only a writhing nest of those worms…
> (King, 2018, p. 523)

Such a visually evocative and repulsing juxtaposition of changing appearances sets the ground for emotional disturbance. The author focuses primarily on the modification of the creature's face. Initially described as slightly slanted and grotesque, Outsider's human resemblance subsides and unveils its genuine essence. The alteration starts with the changes in bone structure and then proceeds to the distortion of the eyes, forehead, lips, and teeth. The absence of human character traits challenges the reader's understanding of life and death, exacerbating a sense of cosmic horror. The latter, often referred to as Lovecraftian horror, defines the powerlessness of humanity in the face of malignant extraterrestrial forces.

The analysis underlines the extremely intricate nature of FEAR. The examination of linguistic means used in the novels *The Mist* and *The Outsider* illustrates the crucial role of visual and auditory sensory systems in representing the discussed concept. Graphically, the complex nature of FEAR is represented in Fig. 2.

As depicted in the above graph, the concept FEAR can be viewed as a complex semiotic and linguistic artifact, a primary emotion, and a multifaceted psycholinguistic phenomenon. From the former perspective, the concept FEAR resembles an intricate semiotic system that integrates different verbal and non-verbal means. As the primary emotion, FEAR can be understood as the reflex or defense activated in response to internal and external sources

of danger, as well as the embodiment of reverence, bewilderment, and despair. Finally, FEAR is a complex psycholinguistic phenomenon of a multimodal nature.
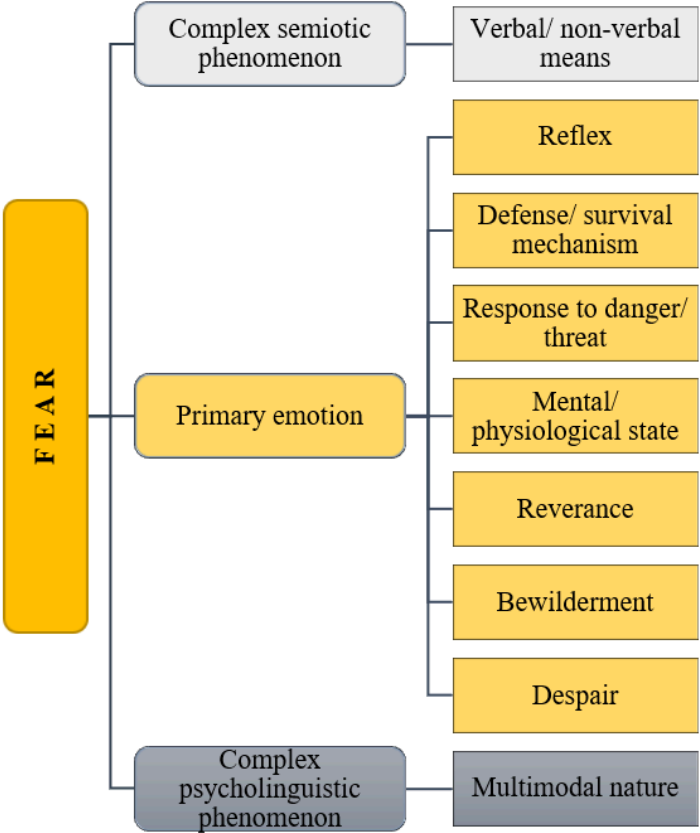

Figure 2. *FEAR: Concept Map*

In conclusion, the given analysis indicates that S. King represents the concept FEAR as a complex semiotic and linguistic artifact, a primary emotion, and a multifaceted psycholinguistic phenomenon. The application of the intermedial perspective and text interpretation techniques underscores the critical roles of visual and auditory sensory systems in representing the discussed concept. The research findings suggest that, in S. King's literary corpus, fear is defined primarily as a neural and physical reaction to internal and external sources of danger (as consistent with the identified semantic components [FEELING], [DANGER], [EMOTION], and [CONCERN]), as well as the embodiment of reverence, bewilderment, and despair grounded in different sensorimotor systems. Hence, the analysis of literary works as reflective of human experiences underscored that while new dimensions of fear are likely to surface in response to social, political, and economic changes, these new facets revolve around the fundamental understanding of fear as a primal human emotion.

Regardless of the emerging characteristics of stimuli that trigger fear, its enduring significance lies in its vital function in human survival.

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