

# An Analogical Study of the Significance of The Paintings in Stephen King's *The Road Virus Heads North* and *Rose Madder*

**ADRIN SANCHIA JASON D**

Ph.D. Scholar (Full-Time), PG & Research Department of English  
Government Arts College, Tiruchirappalli  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

## Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to identify the role of the paintings and compare the impact of the paranormal interaction between the protagonists and the inhabitants of the possessed paintings in Stephen King's short story The Road Virus Heads North and the novel Rose Madder. A bloodthirsty cannibal haunts the water colour painting and seeks the life of Richard Kinnell in The Road Virus Heads North while Rose Madder, the lady in the painting in the eponymous novel helps liberate the victim Rosie Daniels from her overbearing and abusive husband Norman Daniels. Both Richard and Rosie find their lives significantly and irreversibly altered after their first rendezvous with the possessed paintings. The virus in Rose Madder is completely annihilated and Rosie gets to build a new family with Bill Steiner but the virus in The Road Virus Heads North remains unappeased and continues to head North as a destroyer even after serving a brutal death sentence to Richard Kinnell, the unwitting buyer of the haunted painting.*

**Keywords:** Paintings, watercolour, in destructability, murder, cannibal, domestic violence, liberation

"Colour is my daylong obsession, joy, and torment." -  
Claude Monet, a French painter.

*The Road Virus Heads North* and *Rose Madder* are the two of the most-remarkable literary creations of the "King of Horror", the American writer of horror, suspense, thriller, crime, and science fiction, Stephen King. *The Road Virus Heads North* is a short story which was a part of the 1999 anthology titled *999: New Stories of Horror and Suspense*. It was later republished in King's collection *Everything's Eventual* in 2002. *Rose Madder* is a novel of the horror and fantasy genres published in 1995.

*The Road Virus Heads North* is named after the name of the water colour painting which the handiwork of the artist in the story, Bobby Hastings. The frame contains a cannibal-looking man grinning to display his sharply filed fangs, riding his Pontiac Grand Am car, crossing Tobin Bridge. The protagonist Richard Kinnell who is admired for his successful career as a writer of horror stories, on his way back home to Derry, Maine from a PEN International Conference on "The Threat of Popularity" in Boston, stops at a yard sale run by Judy Diment on behalf of the

Hastings, hoping to find books to add to his collection. On finding none, he is quickly drawn towards an eerie painting named "The Road Virus Heads North". The painting impacts his life in an unforeseen, malevolent manner and brings upon the deaths of the ones who had seen and commented upon it, including Richard himself. The novel *Rose Madder* features the painting of a woman named Rose Madder in a beautiful rose madder-coloured gown. The painting attracts the protagonist Rosie Daniels, who buys it from a pawn shop in exchange for her engagement ring. She embarks on a series of adventures both within and outside the painting and after suffering few losses, is able to free herself from the clutches of her violent and abusive husband Norman Daniels. The author Stephen King in the introductory passage to the short story *The Road Virus Heads North* calls to attention the similarity of the paranormal interaction with the paintings in both the works and explicitly states that the virus in the *Rose Madder* is none but the merciless tyrant Norman.

Both Richard and Rosie are clueless about the paintings and the impact they would have on their lives.

They are charmed by the paintings and get lured into buying when they are the last thing that both of them need. They do not waste time speculating and their acquisition can be called impulsive, even whimsical. Richard volunteers to drive back home instead of getting on a flight hoping that the time on the road would help him get past the impasse he had reached in his latest literary produce. Unlike others who view the painting, he is not horrified at the cannibal brought to life by the calculated streaks of Bobby Hastings's watercolours. Judy Diment does not question his interest in the painting because of his firm footing in the genre of horror. "Her eyes drop to the picture. "I should have known you'd go right to that," she said simpering. "It's so *you*." (Everything's Eventual 291). But she, having observed the revulsion the painting has earned from potential buyers, lowers the price from seventy to forty-five and is willing to drop the price even lower if another day passes. "I'll be honest with you, I started it at seventy, but nobody likes it, so now it's marked down." (291).

Rosie Daniels had endured a lot of domestic violence and abuse in her fourteen years of marriage to Norman. Stephen King describes Norman as "a force of relentless terror and savageness, a man almost mythic in his monstrosity" ("Rose Madder"). He had even caused her to miscarry when he beat her brutally when she had been well into her fourth month of pregnancy. Noticing blood in her sheets after being punched in the nose for spilling tea, she realises that living with Norman will eventually lead her to her death. She dares to steal his debit card to buy herself a bus ticket and goes to a place where he would never be able to find her. Leaving the comfort of the familiar city behind itself is a demanding task for Rosie and she feels lost, disoriented and helpless in the new one. "In that instant she knew what it must feel like to cross a river into a foreign country, and then set fire to the bridge behind you, and stand on the riverbank, watching and breathing deeply as your only chance of retreat went up in smoke." (Rose Madder). She moves to a city in the Midwestern USA and begins a new life as a hotel housekeeper with the help of Peter Slowik and the owner of the local women's shelter Daughters and Sisters, Anna Stevenson. Her life takes a turn for the better when she

comes across Rob L efferts who, meets her at a pawn shop, gets impressed by her voice, offers her a job recording audio books. She decides to bury her past and goes to pawn her engagement ring. She learns that Norman deceived her by giving her a counterfeit diamond ring instead of the one with real value. Nevertheless, she exchanges her ring for the painting which fascinates her beyond description. She thinks that it would be perfect for her new apartment and takes it with her. A parallel can be drawn between the painting and her life because when the pieces of her life begin to slowly fall in place, the painting exhibits simultaneous changes and expansion. As she eases her way into finding a lover in the owner of the pawn shop Bill Steiner, it dawns upon her that she might be able to actually travel through the painting.

Richard, on the other hand, does not realise the supernatural changes in the painting till he decides to stop at his aunt Trudy's place to show her his new purchase and feed upon the latest scandals in the family. While holding it out for his aunt to get a better view he detects minor but definite changes in the painting. Something about the painting irks his aunt and strikes her with terror as soon as her eyes meet the cannibal and she asks him to discard the painting.

The colour fell out of her face in a sheet – he had never seen anything quite like it in his entire life... "I hate it. I suppose I can see what attracted you to it Richie, but what you play at, it does for real. Put it back in your trunk, like a good boy. And when you get to the Saco River, why don't you pullover into the breakdown lane and throw it in?" (295).

The changes noted by Richard cannot be dismissed off as the by-product of his fatigue or hallucination or his imaginative calibre as he is able to see what was previously hidden. The cannibal is "more knowing and nastier" (295) with a change in the degree of smile and a tattoo on the cannibal's left arm with the words "DEATH BEFORE" which was incomplete before seems to reveal itself entirely "DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR". His aunt's fear and unease are contagious and, on his way, back he stops to re-examine the picture. The cannibal is now looking at him with his smile is at its fullest, exposing his gums and the background of the painting has shifted to

Rosewood, a place which Richard had passed recently and he seemed to be heading North just like how Richard is. The eerie animation of the water colour painting easily unsettles him enough torid himself off the painting. He makes a mental note of the shattered glass frame and picture lying on the lane of pine needles, before heading home.

Rosie's painting serves as a portal allowing her entry into a unique world where she embarks on a perilous adventure, attains victory and is recognised as a hero. She meets the lady in the painting Rose Madder who expresses her inability to navigate the labyrinth to rescue her child and requests Rosie to accomplish the task for her. Rosie accepts the task and braves against the odds with the help of Dorcas who is also found to reside within the painting. Unlikely for a Stephen King novel, the author draws heavily upon Greek mythology to colour the challenges of the protagonist. Minotaur, the half-bull half-man, is the son born of the illicit relationship between the Cretan bull and Pasiphaë, the queen of Crete and the wife of King Minos. Poseidon, the god of the sea is angered by King Minos's failure to sacrifice the bull and curses Pasiphaë to fall into an amorous relationship with the bull. The Minotaur is contained within a labyrinth constructed by the Athenian craftsman Dedalus and demands to be fed humans to appease its hunger. This goes on till the Minotaur is slain by the hero These us who navigates the labyrinth with the guidance of the thread given by Ariadne. Rosie in the novel pays heed to the advice and warnings of Dorcas to navigate the labyrinth, gets across its guard, a blind, one-eyed bull Erinyes, retrieves Rose Madder's child and makes her way back to safety.

Both Richard and Rosie, after their initial confrontation with their paintings are unable end to their paranormal interaction with them, immediately, for very different reasons. Richard assumes that he is free from the malevolent possessed painting, after trashing it and is horrified to find it mounted on the entry wall to his house. He is speechless on seeing that the discarded painting has made its way back home with more changes. The frame now displays the car parked in the driveway that leads to the yard sale. He identifies Judy Diment who is not present entirely. And on the ironing board, he finds dead eyes

glowing in the moonlight. The car's back deck has the words "THE ROAD VIRUS" painted on it. This makes him edgy and uncomfortable and he starts to feel like a stranger in his own body. The message from the painting is deciphered only when he turns on the news and learns of the brutal murder of Judy Diment, the resident of Rosewood. "Mrs. Diment had been decapitated. Her head was on the ironing board." (304). Judy's neighbour mentions a car similar to that in the painting and fears the killer to have driven away in it. He almost gets crippled with terror when he sees the car in the painting moving again as it might mean harm to his aunt Trudy. Richard decodes the pattern the killer in the painting would follow and comprehends that all those who had witnessed the madness and savagery in the water colours would fall prey to the ruthless lust for blood of the cannibal.

The author reveals the disturbing history of Hastings's painting through the conversation between Richard and Judy at the yard sale which can be considered as a harrowing inauguration of the menacing episodes with the painting. The infamous painter of the "The Road Virus Heads North", Bobby Hastings is known to have been an abuser of cocaine. Something sinister keeps bothering Bobby who eventually hangs himself in the basement where he once used to paint. "Bobby was just twenty-three when he killed himself this spring. Can you believe that? He was the tortured-genius type, you know." (292). Judy Diment also discloses that he managed to destroy all of his artwork that includes close to eighty paintings in sketch books except the one Richard picks at the yard sale and dies with a note pinned to his shirt that reads "I can't stand what's happening to me."(293). Bobby's desperation to free himself from the pernicious force that inhabits his painting is made clear when Judy's predicament is revealed through the news. The absolute in destruct ability of "The Road Virus Heads North" can be inferred when the creator of the painting himself is unable to destroy it.

In *Rose Madder*, in addition to Rosie's rising hope and expectations for a better future, she is always wary about the possibility of Norman's return to wreak havoc again and disrupt the peace she has finally found. Eventually, his predatorial instincts and his training as a cop proves to be useful in discovering where Rosie lives.

He gets enraged, loses control and begins to destroy the ones who had helped Rosie when she first moved in and dares to even murder Anna Stevenson. Rosie meets Norman again while returning from a walk with Bill Steiner. Strengthened by the experiences and by the wisdom of Rose Madder, the lady within the painting she is no longer cowering in fear anticipating Norman's rampage.

"Men are beasts," Rose Madder said conversationally. "Some can be gentled and trained. Some cannot. But rogue beasts must be dealt with. And we must go about that task with hopeful hearts, for the next beast may always be different." (*Rose Madder*).

The painting offers an escape from reality from the very start of Rosie's adventures. In this new dimension, she is no longer a victim endlessly waiting to be saved but is a brave warrior willing to risk the frontline. The adventures within the painting keep her intrigued, lively and curious. It brings out the hero in her and helps her unlearn and relearn herself. She understands her strengths and recognises her resilience. She earns a fairy godmother in Rose Madder, the lady from the painting attired in a rose madder gown. Rose Madder returns Rosie's favour by granting the irreversible destruction of the monster Norman Daniels. All Rosie has to do is to trick Norman into the painting and hand over the reins to Rose Madder. Rose Madder kills Norman and ensures that Rosie is finally liberated from her overbearing husband and is free to create a family with Bill Steiner. "It was also wonderful to know what was coming next, and to feel sure it wasn't going to include something sudden and painful." (*Rose Madder*). Rose Madder becomes a preserver of good through the deliberate destruction of evil.

The final show down in *The Road Virus Heads North* occurs when Richard learns that the vicious cannibal from the painting has skipped aunt Trudy and is actually after him even though he had managed to burn it in the fireplace just like Hastings burnt his other paintings. "Some things are just good at survival... They keep coming back no matter how hard you try to get rid of them. they keep coming back like viruses." (309). He is in the shower when he hears a low rumbling noise and he understands that the cannibal has reached his place. He notices the immortal

painting hanging over his bed and it does not take long for the footsteps to reach his room. The painting now displayed the car in his driveway and the shadow of a man entering his hallway. Richard is paralysed with fear and falls to the floor and it stops him from trying to save himself. The final change in the painting observed by Richard before he closes his eyes is the idling Grand Am with the driver's-side door open and with the bucket seat full of blood. The implication of the doom awaiting Richard at the hands of the cannibal induces a feeling of trepidation and pity.

The painting in both stories serve as the primary driving force of the plot and their acquisition by the protagonists set the ball rolling. Both purchases of the paintings are impulsive and the protagonists are suddenly swayed into buying without much thought. Acquiring the possessed painting, unaware of the resident evil is the only blunder that puts Richard and those involved with him under the cannibal's scope of destruction. The irreversible interaction with the immortal painting "The Road Virus Heads North", the impersonal nature of victimisation and the rude rendezvous with death stand in sharp contrast to the positive outcomes of Rosie's vis-à-vis with the painting. Rosie's exchange of her engagement ring to secure the painting in turn exchanges her misery for freedom. Her life becomes stable, peaceful and happy as a result of Rose Madder's timely involvement in the attempt to eliminate her violent and abusive spouse Norman. The permanence of relief and sweetness of liberation gives her hope and encourages her to rebuild her life with Bill Steiner and their daughter. The paintings neither diminish in significance nor cease to influence the lives of the people involved even when the narration heads to a dénouement. The painting "The Road Virus Heads North" remains a destroyer and Rose Madder stays a preserver of life. After the savage murder of Richard, the deathless cannibal would definitely hunt for Richard's aunt and then wait for the next unsuspecting victim to take him home. Rose Madder's rage continues to live within Rosie even after she gets out of the painting and burns it. But Rose Madder gives her seeds to plant and the tree that grows from it helps Rosie contain her outbursts. Therefore, even after the painting is destroyed, the lady in the painting continues to work as

Rosie's preserver of placidity. The virus in *Rose Madder* is overcome with the help of the painting while the virus in *The Road Virus Heads North* is a vigorous resident within the water-coloured walls and continues to head North seeking victims to appease its insatiable hunger.

### References

1. Dyke, Stefania Van. "Claude Monet." *Denver Art Museum*, 17 Dec. 2019,
2. <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/20-quotes-claude-monet>, Accessed 11 Jan. 2023
3. King, Stephen. *Everything's Eventual*. Pocket Books, 2003.
4. King, Stephen. *Rose Madder*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2011.
5. King, Stephen. "Rose Madder", *Stephen King* <https://stephenking.com/works/novel/rose-madder.html>, Accessed 9 Jan 2023.
6. "Minotaur". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Oct. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Minotaur>. Accessed 9 January 2023.