

## THE CRAZY OBSESSION OF ANNIE WILKES IN THE MOVIE *MISERY*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to investigate the role of the character Annie Wilkes, played by Kathy Bates through a psychoanalytic perspective. On the movie, Wilkes is a number one fan of the writer Paul Sheldon, played by James Caan, character who faces a car accident and wakes up in Wilkes' house. She, being a nurse, takes care of him at first, however, quite soon, uses torture when he tries to escape from the house. We notice a case of kidnapping, which shows to the audience a mental problem carried by Wilkes. A study of psychoanalysis disorder, mental illness within a Freudian's perspective will be conducted in this research as well as personality theories by Karen Horney so that the reader understands the protagonist's actions and reactions through her obsession in keeping a person she admires in home imprisonment. A research of gender studies and its' theories along the movie will also compose this work, mainly connected to psychoanalysis, which, according to Freud, the "feminine" in woman is not something simply "given and natural". In this way we intend to analyze the character's way of being, her behavior as a woman thought by society.

**Keywords:** *Misery*; Psychoanalysis; Literary Criticism

## A LOUCA OBSESSÃO DE ANNIE WILKES NO FILME MISERY: UM OLHAR PSICANALÍTICO.

**RESUMO:** Este estudo pretende investigar o papel da personagem Annie Wilkes, interpretada por Kathy Bates através de uma perspectiva psicanalítica. No filme, Wilkes é fã número um do escritor Paul Sheldon, interpretado por James Caan, personagem que enfrenta um acidente de carro e acorda na casa de Wilkes. Ela, sendo uma enfermeira, cuida dele no início, no entanto, muito em breve, usa a tortura quando ele tenta escapar da casa. Observamos um caso de sequestro, que mostra ao público um problema mental enfrentado por Wilkes. Um estudo do transtorno da psicanálise, doença mental dentro da perspectiva freudiana será conduzido nesta pesquisa, bem como teorias de personalidade por Karen Horney para que o leitor entenda as ações e reações do protagonista através de sua obsessão em manter uma pessoa que ela admira em prisão domiciliar. Uma pesquisa de estudos de gênero e suas teorias ao longo do filme também compõem este trabalho, principalmente ligado à psicanálise, que, segundo Freud, o "feminino" na mulher não é algo simplesmente "dado e natural". Dessa forma, pretendemos analisar o modo de ser do personagem, seu comportamento como mulher pensada pela sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** *Misery*; Psicanálise; Crítica Literária.

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*Misery* (Reiner, 1990) is a movie directed by Rob Reiner, released in 1990 and has in the cast the protagonists Kathy Bates as Annie Wilkes and James Caan as Paul Sheldon. It is a version of the book with the same title written by Stephen King. The story revolves around a famous writer who suffers a car accident in a snowy road in the mountains and is saved by his number one fan that takes him to her house and says she will take good care of him. The protagonist seems to be nice and generous at the beginning of the movie, however, along the film, she shows a different personality of herself, which makes her idol try to save his own life, putting it in danger due to the nurse's intelligence and craziness. This work aims to connect Annie Wilke's personality and actions to the psychoanalytic theories presented mainly by Freud as well as an association with gender studies theories regarding masculinity/femininity behavior observed in the protagonist in relation to society's considerations or stereotyping.

Annie Wilkes lives alone in a country-side house in the mountains. Being a lonely person, she has a passion: reading Paul Sheldon's books. After the accident, Paul wakes up, he is in a bedroom in Annie's house and she tells him "I am your number one fan. There's nothing to worry about. You are going to be just fine..." (*Misery*; Reiner, 1990). According to Leistedt and Linkowski

The traditional "Hollywood psychopath", generally found before 2000, is likely to exhibit some or all of the following traits, which make the ideal villains/superhuman": (i) high intelligence and a preference for intellectual stimulation [...]; (ii) a somewhat vain, stylish, almost "cat-like" demeanor; (iii) prestige or a successful career or position; (iv) a calm, calculating and always - in- control attitude; and (v) unrealistic, exceptional skill at killing people, especially with blades or household objects [...] (2013, p. 172).

Some of Annie Wilkes's personalities in *Misery* can be found in the previous lines, such as Annie being intelligent, since she calculates the steps in order to have Paul as a prisoner. She is a nurse, fact that makes her a qualified professional, even though she killed people and was arrested in the past as we will notice along this work. She is in control of the whole situation where she does not allow Paul to leave the house, using Paul's disabilities as her strength.

Annie Wilkes is a mid- American- middle class woman. She wears a necklace with a cross which gives the idea of her being a religious person in the presence of society, a woman who wants to be respected. The grotesque can be noticed in Annie's behavior along the movie. Her hysteria and loss of control in certain scenes of the movie such as the moments she raises the bed where Paul is laid down as well as the moment that she mocks her pig inside of her house brings the burlesque on the scene. According to Mallan

The female body as grotesque spectacle is a mark of excess: too much make-up, outrageous clothes, loud laughter, and behaviour which flaunts the limits of physicality, sobriety and sexuality. By transgressing the norms of femininity, the female grotesque refuses the limits imposed on her body and embraces the ambivalent possibilities such transgressions offer (2000, p.1).

The role Annie Wilkes plays in the movie can be connected to Freud's idea of "castration-complex". At the beginning of the movie "Annie becomes a [...] phallic mother who threatens to castrate Paul" (141). An example of this idea is the moment when Paul gets to leave the room and finds a phone which does not work, he, before long, achieves that she has castrated it. Another moment when it happens is when she finds out Paul had left the bedroom twice. She breaks his both foot with a hammer, making his pain even worse, not only as a punishment for trying to escape, but also as a "castration" idea of not having a part of his body working well in order to achieve mainly escaping. Another concept connect to Freud's theory is the fact that Paul returns to the stage of infant orally when Annie feeds or gives him his pills, making him get it with his mouth from Annie's fingers. A parental and marital relationship can be noticed in this scenario. Not only Annie feeds Paul, but also shaves him, medicates him and makes him feel comfortable in bed. She does the house chores as well.

Following up on the idea of phallic stage presented by Freud, it is relevant to mention the objects Annie uses in order to threaten Paul, objects which resemble a male member, such as the sharp knife, the hammer, the gun, the syringe, the riffle and the cross. The use of those objects by Annie Wilkes suggest power and what is known as "Penis envy" by Freud, which is the envy girls feel on the boys because they have a penis. They usually blame the mother for not having it, implying that women is inferior to men, thus, the use of those objects by the protagonist can be considered as a self-defense in a way that she proves to the male character that she is dominant. The fact that she does not have a penis does not mean she is not in control of the situation, since she is able to replace the genital organ by the phallic objects.

Annie's need for affection is assertive in the movie. Paul, in a certain way, fills Annie's loneliness, since she goes to his room now and then, looking for company, idolizing his writings. Annie says that her husband left her a long time ago; therefore, she has lived alone since then, being independent in life. Karen Horney, a neurosis theorist, mentions

The neurotic need for power, for control over others, for a façade of omnipotence. We all seek strength, but the neurotic may be desperate for it. This is dominance for its own sake, often accompanied by contempt for the weak and a strong belief in one's own rational powers (BOEREE, 2005, p. 4).

Annie is quite obsessed with Paul Sheldon's new *Misery* writings. She loses her mind though when she finds out that the character Misery dies. She raises Paul's bed in an aggressive way. She wants Paul to burn his writings which would become his new book, however, he hesitates. Annie starts therefore throwing kerosene in the bed. Not having any other option, Paul burns his writings eventually and starts writing a new book. We notice in this setting not only how neurotic the protagonist is but also her power as a woman over the male character. She gets irritated when Paul asks her to buy a specific type of paper that does not smudge. Annie, in a cynic manner, shouts "[...] if you want I can bring back the whole store for you [...] I do everything to make you happy. I feed you, I clean you, I dress you [...]" (Misery; Reiner, 1990). Appreciation is expected by her for everything she has done for Paul while he is wounded in bed.

Annie Wilkes, indeed, forces Paul to write differently, to give a new direction to Misery's story. As a matter of fact, what Annie Wilkes really wants is to be the heroin of the story, being the one to replace Sheldon as the creator of ideas, however, having him as the writer due to his writing skills. This behavior shows not only her way of imposing what she wants, being in control, but also her means of glorifying herself as the one who gave a new direction to Misery in the story, having her ego filled with pleasure.

In *Misery*, torture is seen as a way of showing the power of woman over the man, being the first active over the passive role of the male character. After Annie hammers Paul's feet, she says "God, I love you" (Misery; Reiner, 1990). The protagonist's excitement due to Paul's pain shows her sadism, her pleasure in seeing others suffering. When Paul was able to leave the room he found pieces of newspapers in which Annie appears as having committed crimes such as murdering a classmate "Classmates shocked after freak mishap" (Misery; Reiner, 1990). She was also nominated the Head Maternity Nurse at Elridge of the County Memorial Hospital, where babies died and "The cause of infants' death at Elridge County Memorial Hospital has not been determined" (Misery; Reiner, 1990). It is likely that she perpetrated sadistic crimes with the babies to feel pleasure. She was eventually arrested. Another memory Annie keeps in her clipping book is the news that her father Carl Wilkes "was found dead this afternoon after apparently suffering fatal injuries caused by his falling down a stairway at his home. Mr. Wilkes was found dead by his daughter, Annie, 11 [...]" (Misery; Reiner, 1990). Due to the facts noticed up until now, it is inferred that Annie murdered her own father. Hence, it is notable that Annie Wilkes, since her childhood, has had mental disorders associated with

hurting people and consequently, feeling pleasure doing that, fact that can be noticed at the scrapbook she keeps where she has all the pieces of news in which she appears since then. The viewers may think that Annie Wilkes is responsible for Paul's accident on the snowy road, for it is not known why she showed up at the place at the exactly moment the accident occurred, not to mention that in the car was her idol. Through Annie's history shown on the newspapers, it is likely that she caused the accident in order to kidnap Paul. All those issues may have been caused by some problems that Annie faced in childhood, such as sexual or physical abuse. Even though there are not clues about that matter in the movie, it is something that makes sense through the context of her life up to now.

It is notable to the viewer some of Annie Wilkes' behaviors along the movie. One of them is having a pig as a pet. She treats it as if it was part of her family, including having it inside of the house. She plays with it; she caresses the animal and mocks it. Pigs are not animals that ordinarily people have as pets, since they are figured to be dirty and wild. The impressive fact is that pictures of pigs are shows in the newspapers that Paul finds in the house, meaning that she has been obsessed with pigs for a long time ago. In one of the movie scenes, when she is leaving the room after talking to Paul, she sends Paul kisses good-bye in a childish way. It is notable that Annie sometimes acts like a child that needs attention. Paul grabs the kisses thrown by Annie in a gesture with his hands, showing a facial expression as if he was really not believing that peculiar setting. This scenario shows how independent Annie Wilkes is. She does not need a relationship, the presence of another human being to get by, fact proved by her lonely life in the middle of nowhere. The neurotic needs, according to Boeree are "The neurotic need for self-sufficiency and independence. We should also cultivate some autonomy, but some people feel that they should never need anybody. They tend to refuse help and are often reluctant to commit to a relationship" (2005, p. 5), wherefore, the protagonist's need for a human contact in a daily basis is almost worthless. Having Paul Sheldon abducted does not count as a need for a relationship, yet as an obsessive feeling of trying to imprison her idol and control his life, primarily in relation to the writing of his new book, which puts Annie in charge of how the story goes.

According to Stets & Burke "Societal members decide what being male or female means (e.g, dominant or passive, brave or emotional)" (2000, p.1), consequently, society institutes how a man or a woman should behave. We can introduce the idea of "gender stereotypes which are shared views of personality traits often tied to one's gender such as

instrumentally in men and expressiveness in woman” (qtd. in Stets and Burke, 1) in order to present Annie Wilkes as a woman who at certain times act as a man if the man/woman role expected by the society is considered. The protagonist has a dominant behavior in the movie, having objects which are most used by man as a hammer in order to threaten Paul Sheldon or a riffle for the same purpose. One of the moments that this scenario is expressly noticed is when Annie, abruptly, is holding the riffle and, relentless, shoots at the sheriff in her house when he finds out that Paul is in the basement. From a societal perspective, this is something thought and seen in a male action, whether in real life or in movies. According to Ashmore, Del Boca and Wohlers “A person with a more masculine identity should act more masculine, that is, engage in behaviors whose meanings are more masculine such as behaving in a more dominant, competitive, and autonomous manner” (qtd. in Stets and Burke 2). Annie Wilkes may not identify herself as a man through some of her actions, however, some of them are seen by the viewers as a clear male role. Additionally to the example presented before, we can mention the movie segment when Annie goes to the village store and there is a car which almost hit hers, she swore “You cock of dooty” (Misery; Reiner, 1990). Another scene of the movie that shows her masculine side is when she hammers Paul’s feet, having the hammer as a male instrument of work, not to mention one of the final scenes where there is a body fight between Annie and Paul. In this scenario, Annie, as a woman, tries to fight equally, using her strength, trying to win the fight. Paul falls over her, suggesting a sexual position when the man is in charge, and also when he, aggressively, puts his writings in Annie’s mouth telling her to eat it, which can be suggested as oral sex, one of the only moments in the movie he is able to perform the active man role, being in charge of the situation. He was finally able to kill her, showing that “men” ends up taking over the situation eventually.

Annie Wilkes can be seen as having a mixture of a masculine-feminine gender. According to Stets and Burke “Observed differences in temperament between men and women were not a function of their biological differences. Rather, they resulted from differences in socialization and the cultural expectations held for each sex” (2000, p. 3). Annie Wilkes may act as a man in certain parts of the movie; however, she also acts a woman when taking care of the house, cooking and taking care of Paul, when she is seen as having a mother/wife role. According to Roy “While male victims in horror films may shudder and scream as well, it has been a long standing dictum of the genre that women make the best victims” (2015, p. 81), nonetheless, in *Misery*, the opposite is observed. Paul Sheldon is the victim and Annie Wilkes is the evil, therefore, in this scenario, we cannot say the female is the best victim, but the male

character, since he is playing the passive role, suffering, feeling pain, being difficult for him to move in order to try to escape.

The protagonist, starting the final part of the movie, takes out a gun of her pocket and tells Paul “I have a gun, sometimes I think about using it” (Misery; Reiner, 1990). At this point, Annie knows that she wouldn’t be able to keep Paul hidden long anymore, thus she prefers killing him than losing him. She also says “I put two bullets in my gun. One for me, and one for you” (Misery; Reiner, 1990), in such way that Paul can expect not only his death, but hers as well. We notice then that Annie Wilkes apart from being sadistic, feeling pleasure for other people’s pains, being uncontrollably aggressive, does not care about herself, hence, if she dies, it is not really a big change in her life, since Paul Sheldon would be dead as well, not having a purpose of life anymore, due to the fact that she lives in function of Paul’s life. If Paul dies, Annie will not be able to read misery’s books anymore and the new Paul Sheldon’ writings eventually, living a miserable life with no purpose.

In conclusion, Annie Wilkes can be considered a psychopath, maniac and sadistic woman. Her history shows that the pleasure of hurting other people is part of her life since childhood, moreover, it is indirectly shown that she murdered her father, when in college murdered a classmate and as an adult murdered babies in a hospital. Intelligence and domination work together in Annie’s mind, a need of satisfying her desires, either acting in an active role controlling Paul Sheldon’s life or being an independent woman able to live by herself in a house in the middle of nowhere. Through Psychoanalysis, some theories presented by Freud and Karen Horney were used in connection to the protagonist’s actions in order to understand her behavior. Some of gender studies’ theories were also components of this research which brought an analysis regarding the “masculine” woman in Annie Wilkes acting in an active role while her victim acts in a passive role. Power for Annie Wilkes is a survival task. She was arrested in the past for the crimes she committed; however, her crazy obsession for Paul Sheldon’s books, mainly Misery, allows her to find a meaning in life until the moment that she realizes that she had been the one who walked the path of Misery’s character and put an end to Sheldon’s book herself. She used Sheldon’s writing skills to make Misery hers. Paul Sheldon was able to put an end to Wilkes’ purpose by burning the finished book in front of her, filling her mouth with burnt pages. He decided to write a novel about what he had been through in Annie’s hands, however, he would not publish it, but keep it for himself. He was lucky to get out of this capture alive; however, he keeps seeing Annie wherever he goes, such as the

scene in the restaurant where he sees her with a knife approaching him. Annie Wilkes is part of Sheldon's life and the fact that he wanted to write a book about this obsessed story is a proof that the evil left unforgettable and incurable marks in his life, being this book a memory that for some reason he does not want to forget.

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