

# POLITENESS AND STEREOTYPES IN A LITERARY TEXT: AN ANALYSIS OF STEPHEN KING'S "THE MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT"

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- **ABSTRACT:** The present paper is an analysis of politeness and stereotypes of two excerpts from the short story "The Man in the Black Suit" by the author Stephen King. It was analyzed paragraphs and key words that indicate politeness in several utterances between the main characters of the short story, and their stereotypes. An analysis of the construction of politeness and a dismembering of a false stereotype is strongly build up in the short story. The results and conclusion point how important it is to work with literary texts and the use of semantics and pragmatics concepts as tools combined to improve English classes.
- **KEYWORDS:** Politeness. Stereotypes. Literature. ELT. Classroom.

## Introduction

The main object of this paper is to analyze politeness and stereotypes in an excerpt of a literary text: the short story "The man in the Black Suit", from the author Stephen King. According to Rogak (2008), Stephen King is an author from many horror and sci-fi stories, has as inspirational authors Nathaniel Hawthorne, Howard Phillips Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, among others. Started writing at a very young age; had his work rejected by many editors, many of his stories have adaptations to movies and television series, such as: The Shining (a television mini series, on air in 1997), Carrie (a movie, on air in 1976 and had a remake in 2013), The Shawshank Redemption (movie, 1994), The Stand (a television mini series, on air in 1994), The Green Mile (movie, 1999), It (television mini series, on air in 1990), Under The Dome (television series still on air since 2013), among others, and today he is considered the master of the macabre representing strongly the gothic fiction genre.

In this paper I will analyze the construction of politeness and stereotypes of two characters, the boy, which carries the stereotype of a loving son, provincial church young boy, from a family also in this context of the Catholic Church and living on a farm in the United States of America. And the character of the Devil, which gives us a different element as this character doesn't act like it was supposed to concerning the original devil's stereotype, so we have a different stereotype being build in the story.

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Politeness, according to Yule (1996, p.60), “[...] can be defined as the means employed to show awareness to another person's face [...] when that other seems socially distant is often described in terms of respect or deference”. It is also possible to see politeness as finesse, a social etiquette or polite social behavior, as Yule implies.

For example, we could ask a favor with two different ways:

- a) Polite: “Hello! Would you mind talking more quietly? It is a bit loud.”
- b) Unpolite: “Hey, can you shut up? You are disturbing me!”

Concerning stereotype and its definition, according to Hurford, Heasley and Smith (2007, p.101), “[...] the STEREOTYPE of a predicate is a list of the TYPICAL characteristics or features of things to which the predicate may be applied”.

We could say that the stereotype of a dog would be something like that: Quadruped, domesticated, black, white, caramel, brown or a mix of these colors, adult specimens can vary their size according to their breed, furry or shorted fur, cold nose, tail wiggling, etc.

## Method

The short story “The Man in the Black Suit” tells the reader a very terrifying story in which a young boy, years later in his old age decides to write the horrible event which he survived when at age of nine. He starts telling his story and how sad he was with his brother's death due to a stung bee. Being from a very religious provincial family, he is aware of the concept of heaven and hell, of God and the Devil. The event occurs in a sunny afternoon when he goes fishing and meets with a very obscure and horrific figure in the woods, which is presented to the readers as the Devil.

This short story was first published in 2002, in the book *Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales*, an international bestseller by Stephen King.

In this short story it is possible to identify that the basic stereotype for the devil was not veracious to the figure that the Catholic Church have been imposing a few years after the death of Jesus Christ.

The reader is able to realize how different this dark figure presents itself, how well educated, polite and eloquent he is from the beginning of the conversation with the young boy. Towards the end of their meeting, the Devil reveals himself terrifying to the poor boy.

It is possible to find politeness and a difference in the regular Devil's stereotype in the story. The character doesn't seem at all with the most ordinary stereotype of what would be the Devil per se. In fact it shows an educated and fine man.

## Results and discussion

As results, I will present here different examples concerning politeness and stereotypes, as patterns found in the text regarding this two definitions. The most important linguistic evidences are underlined.

Politeness in this text can be identified by the selection of words made by both characters (a) the mysterious man in the black suit, and (b) the narrator, which is the man who encounters this Devil figure at the age of nine. For instance, the way the boy properly addresses to his father by using "sir".

We will also see examples of two different stereotypes, the boy, Gary, a caring young boy with his family. They represent the basic general farm family in the United States of America as they live out planting and fishing, have a dog and go to church every Sunday. And the stereotype of the Devil, which is presented very differently. We are able to see it in the arguments of the boy narrating the story and in Devil's utterances.

## Politeness

In Excerpt 1 we see an example of Positive Face. Through their positive polite conversation, and how well educated and eloquent this horrible figure presents himself towards the boy, Gary, as a method of seducing him to something bigger. The words and expressions underlined show exactly how this happens.

"Why, it's a fisherboy!" he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice.

Imagine that! Are we well met, fisherboy?

Hello, sir. "I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even." [...]

"I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps", he said [...]

"Sad news, fisherboy", he said. "I've come with sad news." (KING, 2002, p.46-49, underlined added).

In the Excerpt 2, we can see how Gary, an old man now, describes the voice and the eloquence of the Devil, as a salesman of a big-band show, an example of Face Protection. The underlined utterance "Are we well met?" from this Devil figure shows his eloquence and positive face, as well as face protection, which we understand it through the story, the this figure was trying to convince Gary that he was not threatening.

"You didn't answer my question, fisherboy", he said in his mellow voice. It was, now that I think of it, like the voice of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Granbow pipes. "Are we well met?" (KING, 2002, p.47, underlined added).

In Excerpt 3, we see what happened to Gary, his fear of this Devil figure made him wet himself, a face-threatening from the Devil towards the boy. At this point, Gary didn't want to show that he was afraid, in other words, his Negative face, that he was cowardly scared. We see that by the below sentence underlined:

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me [...] (KING, 2002, p.46, underlined added).

In Excerpt 4, we see the Devil with a certain dark humour towards Gary, and by "dark" I mean a sarcastic, ironic way of mocking young Gary. The Devil begins showing his Negative Face, which he can't control, we are able to see that he enjoys mocking poor Gary, using as a technique to weaken and diminish Gary. We can see by the underlined utterances:

"Oh, do I smell something?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard me, although I knew he had. "Do I smell something ...wet?"

"Oh, bad!" he cried. "Lovely-bad!" And then he chanted: "Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade!" He threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed wildly. (KING, 2002, p.48, underlined added).

In Excerpt 5, Gary narrates the way of how the Devil behaved himself when he saw that Gary wet himself. Gary describes that he had leaned his head with his nose stuck out and smelling his pants like someone who smells a flower. Gary also describes how he enjoyed sniffing him. This is part of the Devil's Negative Face, which he was trying to hide all the way long, until now when he realizes that Gary is so scared that he wets himself. Making the Devil feels praised about himself.

He leaned toward me with his nose stuck out, like someone who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing: as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that. (KING, 2002, p.48, underlined added).

In excerpt 6 and 7, shows the finesse and the etiquette of the Devil. He presents himself using nice clothes, leather shoes and a fine watch so he can costume himself and show an image of decency and someone trustworthy. Which all this, combined, form a Positive Face, and also, a Face Protection from the Devil figure, who tries to hide this true intentions. This example is clearly visualized in the underlined sentences:

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me--the man who had apparently walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine needle on him. (KING, 2002, p.46, underlined added).

We can see in excerpt 7 how the Devil had given the impression of a fine, decent, good figure, and not all those horrible things that Gary learned about him in Church. The Devil's Face Protection is noticed in the underlined sentence:

And he was smiling at me.

"He smiled--the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely"  
[...]

"I assure you it is", he said. "The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing--you were wiser than that, weren't you, Gary?--and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That's what happens, you know, to people who can't tolerate bee venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That's why Dan's face was so swollen and purple. That's why your father covered it with his shirt." (KING, 2002, p.49 e p.51), underlined added).

In Excerpt 8, we see that the Devil figure is not being able to control himself anymore towards Gary, he is now telling facts and giving Gary horrible news about this mother, in a very cruel way as we can see underlined. The way of how the Devil presents this news is without pity or sadness, in this example we see a use of Negative face-threatening, as we can see marked by the words of Gary, "a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity". The Devil doesn't insult Gary directly, is all indirectly explicit in the Devil's choose of words, like in those sentences below (also marked in the excerpt 8):

- a) I understand your grief, little fisherboy;
- b) doesn't hold water;
- c) You need to hear this, Gary;
- d) you need to hear this, my little fisherboy;
- e) It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness to your brother.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee."

"I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn't hold water, I'm afraid". He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. "A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don't exist? Your mother--"

"Good," He said. "You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness to your brother." You got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed." (KING, 2002, p.49 e p.51, underlined added).

In Excerpt 9, we notice more of Negative face-threatening from the Devil figure, we see that he is enjoying torturing psychologically with the idea that Gary's mother killed his brother, it is also a Positive Face, due to the fact that the Devil is trying to be friendly and nice to Gary in such a difficult moment:

He pursed his lips again, only this time he made a cruelly comic little tsk-tsk sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. "So although I don't like to speak ill of the dead, it's almost a case of poetic justice, isn't it?" After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. (KING, 2002, p.51, underlined added).

### Gary's Stereotype

Here, in Excerpt 10, we can see the example of a boy who is often at church and educated in a Catholic school, the principal words are underlined.

I didn't want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the Devil is the father of lies, but I did believe him just the same. (KING, 2002, p.51, underlined added).

Another example, Excerpt 11, the narrative shows the devotion, beliefs, the dedication to God and a Catholic religion from Gary's family.

He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. "Dedicated to Jesus" that ribbon said. (KING, 2002, p.57, underlined added).

Next (Excerpt 12), we see that Gary's mother turn her back to the church when Gary's brother, Dan, died of a bee sting. And how his father wanted her to comeback. Giving us an overall conclusion of Gary's stereotype.

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of a bee sting. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, had to have been, that no one ever died of being stung by a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her--at the church supper the previous winter, this was--that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hanks over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name) she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said. (KING, 2002, p.38, underlined added).

## Devil's Stereotype

In excerpt 13 we are able to see the Devil physical appearance described by Gary when he first meets with the man in the black suit. Gary describes what this Devil figure looks like physically, it is not the common Devil Stereotype<sup>2</sup>, because this figure presents himself as a fine decent elegant man, but below his clothes Gary can see that is not human, he is a horrible figure unnatural and supernatural:

I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey red of flames in a woodstove. I don't mean just the irises, because he had no irises, and no pupils, and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange--an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors. (KING, 2002, p.45-46, underlined added).

In this other example (Excerpt 14) we are able to see how well dressed this horrible figure presents himself, all part of a character constructed by the Devil, a Positive Face, to show himself as an elegant and good man, part also of a Face Protection, to hide his true terrifying identity. The sentences that better describe this are underlined.

I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me--the man who had apparently walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine.

There was not so much as a single pine needle on him. And he was smiling at me. His slick-soled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds dressing the steep bank, but they didn't nor did they leave tracks, I saw. (KING, 2002, p.46, underlined added).

In Excerpt 15, we have until this point a stereotype being built from the Devil figure: an elegant, well educated man (from excerpts before this), and Gary's Stereotype (a scared, catholic boy). From now on another stereotype emerges: the proof that this figure *was* the Devil and was hiding his true self behind suits, a fine watch, and eloquence, just so he could seduce the boy and maybe, achieving his main goal, eating the boy away. We see now elements that prove this: aroma baking up from the skin under the suit, smell of burned matches, a hand as pale as the hand of a store-window dummy, long fingers and yellow claws, talons, tiny rows of sharp teeth. The principal examples are underlined below.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit--the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store-window dummy.

I saw that each of those long fingers ended in not a fingernail but a long yellow claw.

The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes his brains were burning. [...]

I could only look at him--the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons. [...]

Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on my again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile. (KING, 2002, p.47-50, underlined added).

Here (Excerpt 16), we have a well educated man showing his true face, a Negative Face, of a hungry and evil Devil, we can see in Gary's narration and the horrible things that the Devil say to him, the elements that prove this are underlined.

"She made the most wonderfully awful noises", the man in the black suit said reflectively, "and she scratched her face quite badly, I'm afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog's eyes. She wept." He paused, then added: "She wept as she died, isn't that sweet? And here's the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead, after she's been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking with that little thread of a bee stinger still poking out of the side of her neck--so small, so small--do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side, and then on the other." [...]

"I'm just so hungry", he said, both petulant and teasing. "And you won't want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father's the sort of man who'll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you're the only one available, you're the one who'll have to serve. I'll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you'll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls always go to Heaven. So we'll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn't that nice?" (KING, 2002, p.51-52, underlined added).

Here (Excerpt 17), we see a demonstration of a Positive face-threatening, which Gary threatens the Positive Face of the Devil figure insulting him directly, causing damage to the Devil's positive face. The principal example is underlined.

"No, that's not true", I said, and now I did begin to cry. "She's old, she's thirty-five--if a bee sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago, and you're a lying bastard!" (KING, 2002, p.49, underlined added).

In the Excerpt 18, we have another proof of his true intentions, where the man in the black suit transforms himself in something even more terrifying and go after Gary to eat him.

“I’m starving”, he said abruptly. “I’m going to kill you and eat your guts, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?”

“His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark’s mouth hung open like a hinge.”

“Fisherboy!” he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fishing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees.

“You can’t get away, fisherboy!” he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. “It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill me up!” (KING, 2002, p.52-55, underlined added).

## Conclusion

It was possible to find a very large number of examples for each analysis, positive politeness, face protection, positive and negative faces, positive and negative face-threatening and three stereotypes (the man in the black suit, Gary’s and Devil’s). In the previous examples it was able to notice how these definitions are present in our day life and at a school class, from students and teachers, who must maintain a character through a class. The teacher does not present the same stereotype in a classroom and with family and friends. Students also. And positive faces are a goal in a classroom to keep classes formal. Also, students may present regularly Positive faces when finding themselves in a needy situation where they depend on the teacher.

Stephen King used those techniques of Politeness to stylize the stereotype of the Devil character, which acts that way with the objective of seducing the boy so he can, at the end, eat him. But towards the end this fake polite attitude starts to fail and he uses aggression and horror to weaken the boy, Gary, using even lies to scare the boy, telling him that his mother is dead and there is nothing he can do. Therefore the best way is to listen to him and let himself be eaten.

The stereotypes created here are: a) Gary’s stereotype, a young boy, who loves his family and lives with them in a small city of farmers and very religious people, with moral and church duties. So the boy is already presented in his Church Schooling with the concept of God and Devil, heaven and hell.

The other stereotype is: b) the Devil, which is not accordingly with what is commonly known as the Devil. Gary describes him as a horrendous figure, but using a fine watch, a nice black suit, leather shoes and his voice is a pleasing mellow voice. The words are carefully chosen by the Devil to start a conversation with Gary, but soon starts to mock and make fun of the boy, bullying him, as the boy starts to disagree with him and tries to escape, then, the Devil reveals himself, his true form.

## Pedagogical implications for ELT

Semantics and Pragmatics concepts are an important subject in our every day classes, we can use it in literary texts, such as this short story, as in grammar exercises, providing the students a different way to study English.

In an English class, as a teacher, we are able to see politeness among the students, especially when they want something from us, the teachers. They use words and expressions just like the Devil character in the short story to achieve something, as a second chance to take a test, for arriving late at class, among all types of situations in a every day class.

As teacher we also can not expect certain attitudes from students based on the stereotypes they may carry, perhaps a student has a stereotype of someone disrespectful when they, truly, just someone afraid to open up, or even someone having problems at home, or with others subjects. Also, the English teacher can use this concepts to develop critical reading competences in students, helping them explore their abilities and evolve in a second language acquisition.

In an English class it is very important to work with literary texts, English teachers among the decades have been known for not using literature in classes, only grammar, and the most boring exercises, with no context, which the students think it is very boring and also, not improving their English language acquisition.

To Hamdoun and Hussain (2009, p.4), “Language teachers have the responsibility to mediate changes in pedagogic practice so as to increase the effectiveness of language teaching.”

It must be an objective for the teacher to work with English Literature in class, and put an end to *this* stereotype of the common English teacher. And today, this is already happening.

According to Hismanoglu (2005, p.54), “The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays”.

Also according to Hismanoglu (2005, p.54), there are many reasons to use literary texts in an English classroom,

According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are some other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the classroom context.

Nowadays we have a major problem in our English classrooms, teachers do not use literary texts, most of the times they don't want to or/and they don't know how to do this. Students don't have any contact with literary texts in English classes what-so-ever.

According to Todorov (1939, p.10), literature per se is, already, in great danger: “[...] o perigo está no fato de que, por uma estranha inversão, o estudante não entra em contato com a literatura mediante a leitura dos textos literários propriamente ditos, mas com alguma forma de crítica, de teoria ou de história literária”.

Therefore, literature must be a tool in English classes, as well as semantics and pragmatics concepts, once combined, can create wonderful studies and exercises to help students acquire their knowledge in this second language and at the same time, providing creative and imagination skills in another fields other than only in English language.

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- **RESUMO:** *O presente trabalho é uma análise de dois trechos do conto norte-americano “The Man in the Black Suit”, do autor Stephen King, referente à polidez e estereótipos. O processo de análise ocorreu da seguinte forma: foram separados parágrafos e palavras-chave que indicavam polidez em inúmeros discursos diretos nos diálogos entre os personagens principais da história, e seus respectivos estereótipos. Uma análise foi realizada da construção da polidez e um desmembramento de um falso estereótipo construído dentro do conto. Os resultados e a conclusão apontam a importância que é trabalhar com textos literários e o uso da semântica e pragmática como ferramentas para proporcionar uma melhora nas aulas de Língua Inglesa.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Polidez. Estereótipos. Literatura. ELI. Salas de aula.

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