

# *Identification of Springheel Jack in “Strawberry Spring”*

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**Abstract:** “Strawberry Spring” is a famous short story by Stephen King tinged with the color of Gothic horror. It tells the story of a serial killing committed by Springheel Jack which happened on foggy nights in strawberry spring. There is no direct description of the way the narrator looks or dresses but some clues can be obtained through deliberate reasoning. This article focuses on the deduction of the killer based upon textual analysis of the story in which the descriptions of the environment, dialogues, actions, and psychological states related to the narrator will be paid close attention to. It constitutes the most intriguing point of this novel that the murderer masked by fog had never been disclosed by the narrator and readers try to track down the criminal as a detective. Through a close reading, an unexpected conclusion can be drawn that the narrator himself is the serial killer.

## **1. Introduction**

The story of “Strawberry Spring” began with an unnamed narrator reading two words “Springheel Jack” in a newspaper, which led him to recollect the events of his days in the college of New Sharon, where serial killings were committed by Springheel Jack on foggy nights. The first murder happened on March 16, 1968, when a “lying” spring like an “Indian summer” arrived. A girl named Gale Cerman was killed that night. Then several more students (Ann Bray, Adelle Parkins, Marsha Curran, etc.) were murdered during the strawberry spring. The police arrested suspects for the crime with seemingly convincing evidence but none of them was the real killer. Then rumors about the victims and the progress of these cases were spread among students in the college. The investigation was made more difficult by the fearful panic of police officers, security guards, and students. Worse still, the case of serial killing ended with no reliable and legitimate suspects found. Eight years later, strawberry spring arrived again, and so did Springheel Jack, who killed a girl at New Sharon College on a foggy night. The narrator reported this murder by reading the next morning’s newspaper. When his wife asked his whereabouts on the night of the murder, the narrator could remember nothing except that he was on his way home from work. The story ended with the narrator’s wife crying because she thought he was with another woman the night of the last murder. And the narrator thought so too.

Despite the lack of a direct description of the killer, relevant clues can be obtained from the descriptions of the environment, dialogues, actions, and the psychological states of the protagonist. The following part of this article will explain how the narrator is deduced as the murderer from the

aforementioned aspects.

## 2. Clues to the identity of the murderer

### 2.1. Clues from the description of the environment

The description of the environment provides a crucial clue. All the murders happened on cold and silent nights in strawberry spring mingled with the smell of the sea when the weather was rainy and foggy followed by heavy snow. There are two points related to the environment we need to pay attention to.

First, a night covered with thick fog provides a favorable external condition for the killer. The narrator described the foggy night of the first murder as follows. "...instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, muffled world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters"[1]. On a misty night, the face of the killer and his undertaking of the murder could be totally masked under the heavy fog. And the victim could not ask for help because it was so silent and horrible that there were no people around. The strawberry spring was a period after a particularly long and harsh winter. It was the special weather condition of fog that provides favorable conditions for crime. Because of the gruesome serial killing the strawberry spring was tinged with mystery and terror[3]. The dark, ghastly, and terrifying environment typically embodies the style of Gothic horror.

Second, the personality trait of the narrator was viewed as eccentric, isolated, and abnormal. This could be inferred from his attitude toward the foggy nights and his unusual behaviors. At the beginning of the story, the narrator seemed to be infatuated with the dark atmosphere. When his mother worried for his safety and asked him to come home, the narrator did not answer his mother directly but said that "I was enchanted. Enchanted by that dark and mist-blown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago"[1]. On the night of the second murder, the narrator stated that "For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can remember"[1]. Please pay attention to the words "enchanted" and "one of the most beautiful" in the two sentences. This implies his positive attitude towards even his love for the nights in strawberry spring. In the face of a dark and terrifying night when a series of murders happened, the narrator was not frightened at all. Instead, he was "enchanted" by the "beautiful night" and he enjoyed "walking alone till midnight" on the campus covered with dark and thick fog. According to the description, his walking was not hurrying to the dormitory but full of calm and relaxation. He had a close-up view of everything on the way. He observed the passengers and described their footsteps; he observed the snow and described the process of snowmelt; he was sensitive to the smell of the ocean and depicted the wet and misty smell. His light-hearted behaviors and his good mood were discordant with the dark and eerie surroundings. From this point, it can be implied that the narrator could be the killer, walking alone and looking for his prey meticulously.

### 2.2. Clues from the description of dialogues

In addition to the environmental description, the dialogues made by the narrator with the police and his roommate also suggest the real murder. The dialogue between the narrator and the police was made when the police were scrutinizing suspects at the campus. It is presented as follows.

"Do you carry a knife?" the policeman asked cunningly.

"Is it about Gale Cerman?" I asked, after I told him that the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's-foot key chain.

"What makes you ask?" He pounced.

I was five minutes late to class. [1]

This dialogue can be analyzed under the theory of Grice's Conversational Implicature to detect the narrator's implicature. According to Herbert Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), all participants are expected to observe a general principle to make the conversational contribution as required at the stage at which it occurs [2]. The four maxims of CP are the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When any of the maxims are blatantly violated, the conversational implicature arises [2]. In the first turn of the dialogue, the narrator violated the maxim of relation and the maxim of quantity. First, his response had nothing to do with the question raised by the policeman. He did so because he avoided the question intentionally. What he thought first when hearing the word "knife" was the victim Gale Cerman. This indicated that he connected the knife with the victim immediately and he was concerned very much about the progress of the case. Second, the narrator made his response more informative than was required. The policeman just wanted to know whether he carried a knife or not but he provided additional information about the most lethal thing of himself, a rabbit's-foot key chain. He did so because he was eager to prove that he had no sharpened tools to commit a crime, thus innocent. Later the policeman might detect something strange and began to ask the second question. However, the narrator even made no response this time for the reason that he would be late for class. This was an intentional evasion again. It should be noticed that the narrator used the word "cunningly" to modify the policeman's act of asking and the word "pounced" to replace the policeman's act of asking a question. This implies that he regarded the policeman as an aggressive adversary who was going to explore his secrets. In this dialogue, there is ostensibly no evident flaw in the narrator's answer but his inward worries about being found can be detected. The following dialogue was made by the narrator and his fellow student after the police realized that they arrested the wrong man.

"He got another one," someone said to me, his face pallid with excitement,

"They had to let him go."

"Who go?"

"Amalara!" someone else said gleefully. "He was sitting in jail when it happened."

"When what happened?" I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

"The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they're hunting all over for it."

"For what?"

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. "Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him." [1]

The narrator was too concerned about the case to miss any details related to it. His questions and worries were beyond abnormal curiosity. From this context, it can be deduced that the narrator was a person of exquisite mind. He tried to show that he had little knowledge about the victim or the suspect, intending to create an illusion that he had nothing to do with the case. The more he tried to hide, the more he was exposed.

### 2.3. Clues from the description of actions and psychological states

The description of the narrator's actions and psychological state also provide good evidence for the inference that the narrator is the murderer. The first example is as follows. When the narrator was asked to show his ID card to the police, he showed the one without the fangs and he thought himself clever to so do. He knew the victim was killed by sharp objects so he avoided showing anything sharp even his teeth. The purposeful and intentional hiding of the side with fangs and the self-satisfaction of his decision indicates that he was provoking the police as if everything was

under his control.

Despite self-confidence, he was anxious and restless to some degree after all he was the murderer who committed the serial killing. This could be inferred from his psychological states and actions. On the second night after the first murder, the narrator “had been busting his brains on a Milton essay since seven”[1]. At nine o’clock, his roommate told him about the capture of the suspect and left the room to spread the news down the hall. When he heard from his roommate that the victim’s boyfriend was arrested as the suspect. He “felt relieved and disappointed” [1]. These contradictory feelings indicate that on the one hand, he was reassured he was safe at that time. On the other hand, he scorned the police’s inefficiency. Then he “reread the Milton essay, but couldn’t figure out what he had been trying to say, tore it up and started again” [1]. He had been reading the Milton essay for at least two hours but couldn’t figure out any idea. He felt restless and “tore it up”. One possible reason is that his attention was not on the essay at all but on the case of Gale Cerman. A similar scenario played out again after his roommate told him about the story of Indian summer and strawberry spring. “For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started in, part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge” [1]. The narrator explicitly admitted that he was immersed in what happened on such a dark night that he had little thought for anything else. At the end of the story, he also admitted blatantly that he was afraid to open his trunk. The reason is easy to be inferred that the corpse was hidden in the trunk.

Another important detail is the narrator’s accurate memory of time and his meticulous observation of others. He remembered the junior John Dancy began screaming into the fog on his way back to the dormitory at ten minutes after eleven; he remembered that he began to read the Milton essay at seven o’clock and that his roommate burst into the room around nine o’clock; he remembered the couple discovered necking in the landscape bushes had been grilled unmercifully for three hours in the New Sharon police station; he noted his roommate’s act of closing the door is “quietly” (“My room-mate came in and shut the door quietly behind him” [1]; he detected the changes in the roommate’s facial expressions (“He smiled benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack on the window ledge...and then the smile faded a little” [1]. The accurate description of time and careful observations of other people indicate his excessive concern about every single detail relevant to the case. He was not just interested in serial killing because the particularly careful observation was beyond normal people’s interest. It is because he was the murderer that he was extremely sensitive to everyone and everything and every subtle change happening around him.

### 3. Conclusions

As mentioned before, the key success and the most intriguing part of this novel is that it leaves the task of seeking the murderer to its readers with some clues in lines. From the perspective of narratology, the narrator told the story from the first perspective and frequently used the techniques of prolepsis and analepsis, which increases the difficulty in spotting the killer. However, the deduction can be made through the descriptions of the environment, dialogues, actions, and the psychological states related to the narrator. The description of the dark, empty, and silent campus on a foggy night presents a perfect external condition for murder. The narrator’s obsession with strawberry spring nights shows his eccentricity, creating an uncomfortably creepy feeling. The dialogues the narrator made with the police, his roommate, and his fellow student imply his excessive concern about the case, and to some degree, his worries about the personal situation. The descriptions of his actions and psychological state, together with his accurate memory of the time reveal his restlessness and anxiety. At last, he even explicitly offers an evident clue that he hid the

corpse in the trunk. The author Stephen King has a brilliant writing technique. Despite the strong color of horror, the readers cannot stop reading because all the plots are engaging, driving the reader to look for the killer as a detective.

## References

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