

The Fall of the House of Jack: The Ruin of Man in Stephen King's *The Shining*

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Abstract

*The present article focuses on Stephen King's horror novel *The Shining* and tries to explore the degradation of the character of Jack Torrance. Although initially Jack is presented as a normal guy who is fighting his demons in order to keep his family and sanity intact, in the course of the novel, he loses many battles because of his flaws and weaknesses. The various aspects of his degradation – as a father, as a man, and as a writer - are the reason for his ruin as a human, which terminates logically with his death. This turns Jack into something like a tragic hero and the novel can be seen as crossing different boundaries – the boundary between good and bad, protagonist and antagonist, Gothic and postmodern, light literature and high literature.*

Key words

*Stephen King, *The Shining*, horror fiction, character degradation.*

The Shining is one of the bestsellers that established Stephen King's name in the world of horror fiction. It is a typical ghost story about a family of three that decides to spend the winter in an isolated hotel for financial reasons and to resolve a family crisis. Moving hedges, sounds beyond explanation, strange dreams, and eventually ghosts' appearances are just part of the horrors that furniture the fictional world of the novel. However, behind the ostensibly superficial story which at first sight does not seem to be taken too seriously, literary critics discover a variety of themes and social issues concerning the American society of that time.

The main focus of this article is Jack Torrance - the focal male figure in *The Shining* and the different aspects of his degradation. The novel finishes with the explosion of the hotel and Jack's death after a serious struggle between the evil ghosts inside him and his human parental instinct to save his son. However, before his physical death, the character walks downwards in more than one ways. He fails to be a good teacher, father, husband, and writer. Therefore, Tony Magistrale sees the book as "a scathing critique of patriarchal abuses" (Magistrale 2010: 101).

Before one starts discussing the metamorphosis of Jack's character it should be mentioned that one demon dogs him throughout the whole novel. Lurking in the shadows of the past and in the secret corners of the Overlook, it leads Jack into temptation and thus causes his ruin, both professional and private. This demon is a vice, a vice difficult to overcome, and almost impossible to live with – the vice of alcoholism, which is a central problem of contemporary

societies. When Jack comes to the hotel he claims that he has coped with the problem of heavy drinking and that he is clean. However, soon he resumes his drinking habits (having headaches, chewing Excedrin, abusing Wendy). Even though no alcohol can be found in the hotel, under the influence of the ghosts, Jack feels always drunk and eager to drink more. Thus, apart from the other numerous interpretations literary critics offer, the ghosts of the Overlook can be seen as a metaphor of heavy drinking. The illusion they create for Jack is so enticing that he is unable to resist it, and in his succumbing to the evil spirits one can recognize the succumbing of man to the spirit of alcohol. The ghosts of the Overlook devour Jack's life and sanity just like alcohol devours the addicted ones. Under the influence of the hotel Jack starts acting like an unreliable and unstable person, keeping secrets and lying to his family. He frequently puts the hotel before his own family. This image shatters the idea of the strong man as the head of the family and the leading power of society.

Alcohol addiction and Jack's inability to cope with it are at the core of the ruin of the character as they bring failure to all the spheres of his life. As the focus of the novel is primarily on the family, Jack's inadequacy is most striking in his relationship with his wife and son.

The development of the relationship of Jack and Wendy can be taken as an epitome of contemporary marriage. They love each other and struggle to keep their family. However, Jack's problems and weakness to overcome them, together with Wendy's inability to trust him, drive them apart from each other. At the end of the book, Jack, possessed by the Overlook, beats Wendy almost to death. Figuratively, this shows how bad habits can ruin a good marriage and leave people cripple and mutilated for life. It is also indicative of the role of violence in a marriage. The family in the novel is not seen as a stable unit of the society, but as an inept and vulnerable union, corrupted by doubt, vice and anger.

The next aspect of Jack's degradation is his failure as a father. The fathers in the novel (Jack, Jack's father, Wendy's father) can be seen as some kind of a determinant of their sons. "*The Shining* is as much about the sins of fathers as it is anything else; ... extreme versions of masculinity and fatherhood are called into question because they legitimize the potential abuse of privilege and power that comes with these roles." (Magistrale 2010: 100) Magistrale goes even further to interpret the hotel's ghost management as a representation of fatherhood and masculinity that has power over Jack. He concludes that "Fathers in this novel are pictured as selfish, misogynistic, alcoholic, and most important, prone to punitive acts of violence." (Magistrale 2010: 100) One exception should be mentioned here and this is the image of Dick Hallorann whose fatherly role in the text is rather different.

Because of alcoholism or not, Jack proves to be inadequate as a father. The instances of him abusing Danny, feeling angry at him with or without any specific reason, represent his parental role as a higher institution that is there to judge and punish the boy. He loves his child but proves powerless to protect him and be his friend. Probably the most dramatic father and son scene comes at the end of the book, in the final confrontation between the ghosts and Danny. After a long chase, Jack, obsessed by the evil spirits, finally finds Danny to kill him with a mallet.

However, when the child dares him, confessing that he knows that this monster is not his real father, Jack comes to himself and utters: “Doc,... Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you.” (King 1992: 303) This somehow partly purifies his fatherly image at the end of the novel because finally he manages to redeem, to sacrifice himself and save his son. His love for the boy conquers his ghosts – real and metaphorical.

In a nutshell, if Jack is a condensed image of the father in our society, then this figure can be described as someone that loves his child and is willing to sacrifice himself, but otherwise proves to be inadequate in his parental care. This is a male possessed by his own world and often driven by egotistical motives and vice. In his individual universe Jack is the central figure and the child is just a part of the furniture and sometimes a burden. This aspect of the male desire to be dominant is felt throughout the book. Jack feels that the hotel wants him and this gives him real pleasure because it makes him feel important. When he realizes that actually Danny is the one that they are after, Jack is infuriated as thus he loses his dominant position of somebody considerable. This idea of the male individual’s desire to be significant and important, to lead, and to compete with other males (even with his son) is another critique of the fatherly image.

Apart from alcoholism, masculinity and fatherhood, the character of Jack Torrance proves to be unsuccessful as a writer. The theme of the writer permeates the works of Stephen King. The problem of Torrance is that he is experiencing a writer’s block, as Casebeer suggests “... the alcoholic Torrance (a playwright this time) is the monster. King sees this particular writer as a failure because he stops writing – Torrance’s writing block leads to psychosis” (Casebeer 1996: 51). Jack allows the powers of the hotel to distract him from the play he intends to write. In an interview, Stephen King comments on Paul Sheldon – another writer protagonist of his: “When the real world becomes so bad that a writer gives up the ability to make fiction, he gives up his soul” (Magistrale, French 1992: 12). So Jack’s flaws are topped with his incapability as a writer.

Jack’s failures in all aspects of his life – as a teacher, father, husband, man, writer – somehow predetermine his destiny. The only option that remains to him is to prove that he is a good caretaker of the hotel, hence, his obsession with the management, which is seen by some analysts as an allusion to capitalist America.

Tony Magistrale sees the text as a critique on capitalism and class division in the Reagan historical period. “It is more accurate to say that the two forces—capitalism and supernatural evil—create a complementary nexus where the ghosts on board still represent the design and power of wealth and privilege” (Magistrale 2010: 95).

References to class-division can also be observed in the representation of the relationship that Jack has with Al Shockley – his friend and drinking buddy. Although they are very close mates and Al is the person whom Jack owes the job as a caretaker, Al’s dominance as the richer and more powerful friend is obvious, especially in the telephone conversation in Chapter 21 when Jack asks him for permission to write a book about the hotel. Al’s refusal and generally overlooking attitude make Jack feel on the verge of humiliation, completely dependent on his

rich friend's good will. This epitomizes a more global problem of class division. "Like the Torrance-Shockley relationship, America sustains the delusion of a democratic society, but the truth is that class anxieties are boiling just beneath the surface, just like the old boiler hidden in the Overlook's cavernous basement" (Magistrale 2010: 102).

Thus the private tragedy of Jack can be seen as caused by the flaws of the society. If metaphorically Jack Torrance represents the white male in the American society and the Overlook hotel represents the society itself, then King's message is clear: the degradation of man can be viewed not only as a result of his own weakness, but also as a failure of the society. The Overlook possesses Jack, turns him into a monster and eventually destroys him just like the society does with the individual. This metamorphosis of the good into evil is provoked not only by his personal weaknesses, but also by the surrounding world which is seen as something evil, breeding corruption and hatred. Thus evil is seen as inherent both in the individual and in the society. As Magistrale points, "works of horror become a kind of postmodernist celebration of self-destruction, and the inadequacies of conceptual and ideological absolutes" (Magistrale 1996: 7).

One of the main reasons why Stephen King did not approve of Stanley Kubrick's version of *The Shining* was that the character played by Jack Nicholson does not walk this path from good to bad character and the gradual degradation of a good man is spared as the focus of the work. Tony Magistrale quotes Stephen King saying: "The book is about Jack Torrance's gradual descent into madness through the malign influences of the Overlook... If the guy is nuts to begin with, then the entire tragedy of this downfall is wasted. For that reason, the film has no center and no heart" (King through Magistrale 2015: 189).

In an interview with Tony Magistrale King refers to Jack Torrance as "a dysfunctional personality" (Magistrale 1992: 18). Often compared to a Shakespearean tragic hero, he deliberately makes choices that lead to self-destruction. The idea that Jack Torrance's failure is caused not by the fact that he is inherently evil, but by his weakness to resist vice mirrors Shakespeare's great tragic heroes who became tragic because of some flaw or passion – jealousy (Othello), revenge (Hamlet), greed (Macbeth)... Leonard Mustazza talks about the transformation of the outlines of the tragedy as a literary form "in accordance with the outlooks, values, and tastes of the varying societies in which the genre has appeared." (Mustazza 1992: 74) In this respect, "...modern America, owing perhaps to its democratic leanings, has shown a preference for the form known as "domestic tragedy" or "tragedy of the common person". (Mustazza 1992: 74) Jack Torrance's tragedy is a tragedy of the individual, of the common person who has not many outstanding qualities to offer. On the contrary, he is just an ordinary man having his countless flaws, but driven by love for his family and a desire to be successful in life. Jack is generally a good man. He is a protagonist, not an antagonist, at least in the beginning. He is just too weak. Yet, does this lack of heroism and outstanding qualities mean that we might not feel fear and pity for the character?

On the contrary, one might argue that empathy is more at work when tragedy befalls an ordinary man who the public can easily self-identify with.

Finally, it can be claimed that Jack Torrance is a hero that crosses different boundaries – the boundary between good and evil, protagonist and antagonist, Gothic and postmodern, light literature and high literature. This puts Stephen King somewhere between traditional and postmodern horror. As Casebeer suggests, "... the traditional horror novel, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, excises or conquers the antagonist; the postmodern horror novel, ... , transforms the protagonist into the antagonist, or vice versa; and King's novels balance these processes" (Casebeer 1996: 47). That is why sometimes we are inclined to feel some kind of perverted sympathy for the monster, seeing that there is a devastated good man hiding behind its mask.

In his introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* Joe Sachs speculates that

the impact of tragedy is to leave us gazing at a human image with our habits of blaming and excusing blocked. We are not left saying 'he got what he deserved', but we can't say either that he was a helpless victim of a heartless or hideous universe. The poet has knocked all our moralism and sentimentality out of us. (Aristotle 2006: 16)

I would rather conclude that this explanation rings true about Jack Torrance. At the end of the novel he is destroyed together with the hotel that turns him into a monster. His house falls literally and figuratively. The Overlook finally manages to devour Jack physically, mentally and emotionally. However, the reader is left unable to rejoice because in the face of the defeated monster everybody can recognize themselves – a being deformed by personal and society's demons.

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