

Sample Research Paper Essay 3 (with a Works Cited page at the end)

This essay was written for a film and literature course in Summer 2013.

King's Characters Versus Kubrick's Archetypes in *The Shining*

The Shining by Stephen King and its movie adaptation directed by Stanley Kubrick are two very different takes on the same story. The novel is King's story of a close family trying to put their troubled past behind them. They end up isolated in a hotel plagued by supernatural forces. The book reflects King's belief in the importance of well-drawn characters that the audience can relate to. The difficulties his characters go through are drawn from King's own struggles (Rogak 79). In the film, Stanley Kubrick chooses to forego most of the background characterization and portrays the family members as either misanthropic, naïve or traumatized. He relies instead on his skills as a filmmaker to engage viewers. The different approaches result in works that achieve different reactions from the audience.

Both the book and the film share the same basic plot structure. They both involve a family with a young son with some sort of psychic abilities- seeing visions and having a limited sense of what people are thinking. The father, Jack, is a former schoolteacher who used to drink and at one point broke his son's arm for throwing his papers on the floor. The story starts as he takes a job being the winter caretaker for the Overlook hotel, where the family will be snowed in for months. During their stay the son, Danny, has horrifying visions and some force in the hotel drives Jack to lose his mind and try to murder his family.

However, there are essential differences between the book and the film in character development. In the book King builds the character of Jack Torrance as a man who loves his

family, but has a bad temper and is a recovering alcoholic. He is someone for whom the audience can feel sympathy. He has a very close relationship with his son Danny- Danny “loved his mother but he was his father’s boy” (King 78). He cares about his family. Jack feels that if his wife Wendy ever took Danny and went away, “he would be dead from the day they left” (King 53). He freely offers to leave the hotel if Danny has health problems, before its influence fully takes control of him. Jack’s struggles with drinking are well-documented in the book- he knows that it is wrong but he is addicted. He does feel regret- after drinking “he would look at [his family] and the self-loathing would back up his throat in a bitter wave” (King 55). At one point, after breaking Danny’s arm while drunk and having another bad experience drinking, he took out a gun and “sat on the bed with it for nearly an hour, looking at it” (King 60) and contemplating suicide out of his shame. After he quits drinking Jack has a bout of bad temper beating up a student when he catches him slashing his tires. Perhaps some of his drinking and anger issues have their root in his childhood. Jack had a horribly abusive father who beat him, his siblings and his mother frequently. Later in the book when the hotel has driven Jack to violence he mirrors what his father said when beating up his mother: “I guess you’ll take your medicine now. Goddamn puppy” (King 330). Underneath the drinking and the temper he sincerely cares about his family and feels remorse for his mistakes and problems. Even as the hotel drives him crazy, he has second thoughts. When he is defeated while being almost possessed by the spirit of the hotel and knows he is going to die, he comes back to himself and tells Danny, “remember how much I love you” (King 632). King has said that the Jack character helped him to deal with some of the issues that were going on in his life during the period he wrote the Shining. When his children were born, King “had feelings of anger about my kids that I never expected”. He was also going through an alcohol problem of his own, and “even though

he didn't realize it at the time, he was also writing about his drinking and alcoholism" (Rogak 79).

On the other hand, the Jack character in Kubrick's film version shares virtually none of these redeeming qualities. He only expresses affection for Danny once, and he seems far away in his thoughts when he does. The hotel has already begun having an effect on his mind by that point. We never see evidence of his internal struggles with drinking. He does not make an attempt to resist the hotel's will. From the start he seems to dislike his wife, Wendy. In the first scene they have together, he seems to condescend to his family and be easily irritated with Wendy. To be fair, in the movie she does have a penchant for fairly inane chatter. In the film, pretty soon after they start at the hotel, when Wendy interrupts Jack's writing, he shows his loathing for her, getting angry and telling her to "get the fuck out of here". In Kubrick's words from an interview, Jack "comes to the hotel psychologically prepared to do its murderous bidding... He is married to a woman for whom he has only contempt. He hates his son" (Ciment). In the book, the hotel takes advantage of his temper problem, his addiction to alcohol, and his shame about these two issues. In the film, it is as if the hotel just causes him to lose his inhibitions and take how he really feels already to the extreme. Although Jack Nicholson's portrayal of Jack Torrance is iconic, he does not come off as a very good father or husband. He seems unstable from the start. He talks down to people and is insincere, barely keeping his true manic nature in check. When he does go into a murderous rage, it is like his real character is emerging for the first time. The choice of Nicholson was one of Stephen King's biggest gripes with the film. He felt that "the horror in the novel came from the fact that Jack Torrance is a nice guy, not someone who's just flown out of the cuckoo's nest" (Rogak 106).

The portrayal of Wendy Torrance similarly differs between the book and the film. In the book, readers see that she is a sensitive, thoughtful woman with a tough side when push comes to shove. Soon after Jack breaks Danny's arm, Wendy decides that "divorce was necessary" (King 73) and the only thing that stops her is that, by coincidence, the day she broaches the topic with Jack is the day an unrelated event causes him to give up drinking. She has insight into Danny's unusual talent of knowing what people are thinking. When a doctor tries to explain it away as something normal, she finds his explanation "tasted more like margarine than butter" (King 217). She still has lots of doubts about Jack, but she is giving the relationship her best shot. Admittedly, it turns out that choosing to be isolated with her child and a man who is prone to violence is not the wisest choice, but she gives it a try for the love of her husband and to spare her son the pain of his parents' divorce.

In the movie Wendy is meek, always follows along with her husband and tries to ignore any doubts she might have, covering it with mundane small talk. She denies the evil, supernatural nature of the hotel for as long as she can. She ignores the fact that her husband feels disdain for her. In the film version of Danny's doctor examination, Wendy downplays the breaking of Danny's arm as "purely an accident... on this particular occasion my husband just used too much strength". She accepts the doctor's rationalist explanation of Danny's imaginary friend and his passing out and having visions. She seems to have no worries about her husband until Danny shows up with strangulation marks around his neck in the hotel. Shelley Duvall plays her as nervous and a bit irritating. Kubrick admits that "the novel pictures her as a much more self-reliant and attractive woman" (Ciment).

In the book, Danny is a very sympathetic character. He is a young boy who experiences the feelings and thoughts of other people, often things beyond his understanding. He

understands the basic concept of divorce and senses when his parents think about it. He also knows about his father's drinking, which he refers to as the "BAD THING". He seems to quickly bounce back from the psychological trauma of his father drinking and breaking his arm. By the time they head to the hotel the memory of that trauma "was already faded, but the memory of the DIVORCE thoughts was clear and terrifying" (King 39). He is very intelligent and loves his parents very much, despite his father's faults. He knows the Overlook hotel is evil and "wanted desperately to get away" but "he knew this was his daddy's last chance... to get over losing his job. To love Mommy/ Wendy" (King 290). He refuses to complain out of concern for his parents. He is in many ways a normal kindergartener, despite the unusual aspects of his life- he likes Disney characters and makes amusing mistakes while learning to read.

In the movie the Danny character seems not to be coping as well with the trauma he has faced (which is not revealed to us in as much detail). He almost never smiles. A large portion of his dialogue is him talking as his "imaginary friend" Tony. His Tony voice is croaky and he moves his finger as if Tony is talking through it. In the book Tony appears to Danny in visions, but the way he talks through Danny in the film is more unsettling. We generally have less access to Danny's internal monologue. He seems quiet, isolated, and, at various points in the film, deeply traumatized. His psychic "shining" ability is downplayed because Kubrick chooses to emphasize the psychological element of Jack's mental decline and reduce the supernatural element.

Stanley Kubrick is known for a cold view, a feeling of disconnectedness in his characters. It can be argued that in the movie he made immediately before *The Shining*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the most empathetic, authentically human character was a computer, HAL 9000. Clearly in *The Shining* he was less interested in the characters' background and making them

likeable than King was in the book. There are a number of other characters with distinct personalities in the book, but Kubrick pretty much writes them out. One character that played a central role in the book, rescuing Wendy and Danny, is instead anti-climactically killed in the movie. Other than that there aren't any other significant human characters in the film.

Instead, Kubrick tries to create an eerie, suspenseful atmosphere using the tools of cinema. The three main characters seem unhappy from the beginning, which immediately makes viewers feel ill at ease. The ghosts of the hotel are very restrained and speak in polite euphemisms. The ghost of the previous caretaker, Grady, who killed his daughters and wife, appears as a tuxedoed English waiter and talks to Jack about how he "corrected" his family. The bartender apparition, Lloyd, is perfectly mannered. Both are unblinking, expressionless and barely move anything but their mouths. The cameras follow the characters, especially Danny, around the long, narrow, maze-like corridors of the hotel. This physical structure adds to the tension when Danny is rolling around the halls on his trike and some surprising vision is revealed. The camerawork in the actual hedge-maze outside the hotel is identical to the corridor camerawork. Jack stays in the center of the motel while Danny and Wendy appear more in the corridors, as if they are attempting to escape from the maze and Jack is not. Perhaps the maze represents the madness of the hotel, and Jack's destiny (Nelson 207). There are a number of themes communicated visually. Doubles occur often in the film- the Grady twin daughters who appear in the halls and speak in unison, Grady's two identities, Charles and Delbert, and Jack's two identities- at the end of the movie an image of Jack at the Overlook is revealed in a picture dated 1921. Symmetry is also important- often bad things happen in symmetrical corridors, the twins are symmetrical, Jack and the bartender Lloyd mirror each other with red outfits. The

music is suspenseful and is generally placed before the display of some unsettling image or an outburst of violence.

The film is definitely visually and symbolically dense. In fact, people have found evidence to support a number of claims about what the film might really be representing. There was a whole movie made, *Room 237*, which presented a number of these theories. One particularly interesting theory claims that *The Shining* is Kubrick's confession of his involvement in faking the first moon landing. At one point Danny wears an Apollo 11 sweatshirt and stands up from a crouch while positioned on a rug with hexagons that resemble a launch pad, and it suggests a rocket launch. Later in the same scene he enters room 237, the only room in the film whose number is specified. In the novel this room was numbered 217. Apparently the average distance from the Earth to the moon is 237,000 miles. Tang, a beverage astronauts drink in space, also makes an appearance. The theorists claim that Kubrick's previous film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, was practice for faking the moon landing and Jack's monologue about the agreement he made with the management of the hotel represents Kubrick's feelings about the agreement he made with the U.S. government. There are several other theories with similar levels of subtle evidence in the film, which demonstrates the attention to detail in Kubrick's filmmaking.

Kubrick did not think much of King's writing. He called the novel "by no means a serious literary work" and said "its virtues lay almost entirely in the plot" rather than the writing (Ciment). King described Kubrick's film adaptation as "a Cadillac with no engine in it. You can't do anything with it except admire it as a sculpture" (Rogak 107). There is a lot to admire about Kubrick's work: the level of detail and the skill of the filmmaker create a strong atmosphere of dread and the use of psychologically potent imagery leaves it open to deep

analysis and interpretation. These features make the film unique and lasting. However, when it comes to getting the audience emotionally involved in a story I am inclined to agree with King. His novel forges a connection between the reader and the characters that the film version lacks. This connection is essential to creating a compelling story.

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