



## The Monster Within: The Film Adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining*

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**A bennünk lakozó szörnyeteg: Stephen King *Ragyogás* című regényének filmadaptációja.**

**Absztrakt:** Számos vita övezi Stephen King *Ragyogás* című regényének 1980-as adaptációját, melyet Stanley Kubrick rendezett, legfőképp a rendező által eszközölt szembetűnő változtatások miatt. Cikkemben a változtatások mögötti okokat igyekszem feltárni, bemutatva a legfőbb különbségeket, amelyek közé tartozik a két mű hangvétele, témái, valamint a befejezésük. Elemzésemben nagy hangsúlyt kap a főszereplő ábrázolása, nemcsak azért, mert ez a legfeltűnőbb változtatás, hanem azért is, mert Jack Torrance karaktere a történet legemlékezetesebb eleme, különösen Kubrick filmjének esetében. Tanulmányomban a felsorolt szempontok segítségével azt az állítást támasztom alá, hogy a filmadaptáció új elemei, rétegei és értelmezései Kubrick a regénytől való tudatos elhatárolódásának köszönhetőek.

### Abstract

Several debates emerged from Stanley Kubrick's 1980 adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining*, mostly because of the notable changes that the director made in the film. This article aims to explore the possible reasons behind these changes by introducing the main differences, such as the tone, themes, and the endings. The analysis particularly focuses on the main character's representations, not only because it is the most significant difference, but also because the character of Jack Torrance is the most memorable element of the story, especially in the case of Kubrick's film. My study aims to demonstrate that Kubrick's divergent approach is what led to the story's new elements, layers and interpretation.

### Introduction

In 1977, the third horror novel of American writer Stephen King, *The Shining* was published. It has since become a cult classic in the contemporary horror genre, but its 1980 film adaptation directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Jack Nicholson has outgrown the novel's success, becoming not only a popular but an aesthetically praised classic as well. However, Stephen King has expressed his distaste for Kubrick's film, which was mostly based on his disagreement regarding the decisive changes that the director made to the film. The depiction of the three main characters – along with minor changes – differs so much from the source material that it is undoubtedly worth an extended research and analysis.

My intention is not to declare whether the novel or the book is better, not only because that would be unfounded and a subjective, personal opinion, but also because – regarding the concept of adaptations – it is irrelevant. My article aims to demonstrate that the striking differences between the film and the novel are caused by Stanley Kubrick's differing approach and interpretation of the original story.

"All reverence and no play makes a dull film" (Ghosh, 2019). Among others, Devarsi Ghosh discusses how different Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaptation of *The Shining* is

from Stephen King's original 1977 horror novel. To discuss the subject matter – and prove the validity of my hypothesis – I find it essential to define which adaptation mode Kubrick's film can be categorised into, explain what the creators' intentions with the story might have been, and why King despises Kubrick's version.

### **The Intentions of Both Creators**

While the plots of the novel and the film are similar, it is fascinating to see how contrasting the two versions are. On the one hand, this mainly stems from the creators' different approaches and creative visions, and on the other hand, from the mode of adaptation of Kubrick's film. According to Dudley Andrew, the modes of adaptation can be divided into three groups: "borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation" (Andrew, 1984, 98). Since Kubrick's mode of adaptation certainly does not belong to the second or the third group, it could be categorised into the first. In the case of borrowing, "the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text. [...] Here the main concern is the generality of the original, its potential for wide and varied appeal" (Andrew, 1984, 98). Kubrick borrowed most of the characters and main elements of King's original novel but created his own version of it.

Besides Kubrick's mode of adaptation, what the two versions mostly differ in are contrasting "creative departures" (Ghosh, 2019). In his 2000 memoir, *On Writing*, King admitted that he "had written *The Shining* without even realizing [...] that [he] was writing about [himself]" (King, 2000, 95). He intended to depict a former alcoholic husband and father grappling with unresolved childhood traumas, whose yearning for alcohol does not seem to cease despite his efforts. Therefore it comes as no surprise that his novel feels personal and creates a strongly emotional atmosphere, concentrating on the complex and layered dynamics between the members of the Torrance family and the characters' inner demons and concerns.

In comparison, Kubrick approached *The Shining* from an entirely different direction. The most remarkable difference is that the film mostly lacks any portrayal of the original story's emotional aspects. Instead, it focuses on Jack's descent into madness and the Overlook Hotel's dark history. An observation by Amy Nolan supports my claim by stating that the book "emphasizes the closeness of the Torrance family. [...] The reader is allowed inside the family, whereas in Kubrick's film, the viewer is kept at a distance, to bear witness to the tiny family's slide into oblivion" (Nolan, 2011, 183). Instead of elaborating on the tragedies of the Torrance family, Kubrick intended to expand the narrative and make a statement on the society and history of the country to which he also belongs. "*The Shining* is less about ghosts and demonic possession than it is about the murderous system of economic exploitation which has sustained this country since, like the Overlook hotel, it was built upon an Indian burial ground" (Cook, 1984, 2).

## The Optimistic or Pessimistic Nature of Both Versions

Allen also quoted a remark by Kubrick from an interview in *Sight and Sound*, which was published in 1961, one year before his sixth feature-length film, *Lolita*: “The perfect novel from which to make a movie is, I think, not the novel of action, but, on the contrary, the novel which is mainly concerned with the inner life of its characters” (Allen, 2015, 362). Since King’s novel mostly consists of the inner thoughts of its characters, this was “the perfect novel” for Kubrick to adapt. Stephen King’s famous remark from a *Rolling Stones* interview explains what exactly he misses from the adaptation: “The book is hot, and the movie is cold; the book ends in a fire, and the movie in ice” (Greene, 2014). “For Kubrick, the focus [...] throughout the film on snow and isolation functions metaphorically, reminding us just how ‘cold’ reality and relationships have become in the modern world.” (Titterington qtd in Manchel, 1995, 73) Based on Titterington’s observation, King might have accurately sensed Kubrick’s conscious directorial approach; to emphasise the story’s cold elements in order to symbolise alienation and estrangement in society. Several fascinating aspects emerge from King’s observation regarding the novel’s “hot” and the film’s cold nature; on the one hand, his remark adds to the discussion concerning the optimistic and pessimistic nature of the two versions, and on the other hand, it provides a starting point for examining the endings of both the novel and the film, which will be further elaborated later.

Regarding *The Shining*’s optimistic or pessimistic nature, Kubrick has a thought-provoking observation:

I think the unconscious appeal of a ghost story [...] lies in its promise of immortality. If you can be frightened by a ghost story, then you must accept the possibility that supernatural beings exist. If they do, then there is more than just oblivion waiting beyond the grave (Kubrick qtd in Ciment, 2003).

Since Jack’s deterioration into madness is partially caused by his inner demons and also stems from his encounters with the Overlook Hotel’s uncanny creatures, the existence of ghosts is not portrayed as positive or in any way optimistic in the novel. In Kubrick’s film, however, Jack is depicted as a madman from the very beginning, therefore the actions of the Overlook Hotel do not have such significance as they do in the novel. In the film, the existence of ghosts can be considered optimistic if it is interpreted as an indicator of the existence of an afterlife and not as the destructive cause of the collapse of the Torrance family. Therefore the novel’s and the film’s optimistic or pessimistic nature is a matter of subjective interpretation – to which the perception of the two, very distinctive endings adds further intriguing aspects.

## The Creator’s Approach to Jack’s Character

While the optimistic or pessimistic nature strongly characterises both versions, the main difference between the two is the depiction of the main character, Jack Torrance.

“The novel emphasizes the downfall of the father through alcoholism” (Nolan, 2011, 183). The reason why Jack is the most ideal victim of the malevolent Overlook Hotel is that – besides his struggle with addiction –, he has unresolved childhood trauma induced by his “violent alcoholic father” (King qtd in Hornbeck, 2016, 702). His willingness to correct the mistakes he made as a father and husband “makes him strongly susceptible to possession by the hotel because the haunted building preys upon traumatized individuals” (Hornbeck, 2016, 693).

Kubrick, however, created his version of *The Shining* in a way that it remains ambiguous throughout almost the entirety of the film whether Jack is originally mentally disturbed or the Overlook Hotel’s supernatural nature causes his descent into madness. Kubrick intentionally took a different direction in adapting the story; he twisted Jack’s character and gave it a different role. “Do the tensions between father, mother, and son create the ghosts, or do the ghosts serve as catalysts to make those tensions erupt” (Pauline Kael qtd in Hoile, 1984, 5)? Based on the novel, I assert that the deadly atmosphere that ultimately ends in the deterioration of the Torrance family is brought about by the demonic nature of the Overlook Hotel, with Jack as one of its victims.

With a particular comment of Kubrick regarding Jack’s character, it immediately becomes clear why the portrayal of Jack in the film differs to such an extent from its portrayal in the novel:

He is bitter about his failure as a writer. He is married to a woman for whom he has only contempt. He hates his son. In the hotel, at the mercy of its powerful evil, he is quickly ready to fulfill his dark role (Kubrick qtd in Ciment, 2003).

Since the Jack described by Kubrick is nothing like Stephen King’s Jack, who loves his family and would do anything for them, it is not surprising that the depiction of Jack’s character took such a disparate direction.

### **The Audience’s Perception of Jack**

“From the very first sequence, ‘The Interview,’ the ‘hidden depths’ beneath the hotel’s surface are already apparent.” (Nolan, 2011, 187) In the novel, the first chapter is told from Jack’s perspective. The readers find out about all his thoughts throughout the job interview at the Overlook Hotel, where he is faced with a rather obnoxious character, Mr Ullmann, the hotel manager. “*Officious little prick*” (King, 2007, 3) – Jack keeps repeating this to himself while he is discussing the details that the hotel’s caretaker position entails. During the conversation, he also admits to himself “that he probably could not have liked any man on that side of the desk” (King, 2007, 3).

It turns out that he has frustration towards dominant positions – which, as it later turns out is caused by his failure as a writer, a teacher, a husband, and a father. As I mentioned above, Jack’s story can be interpreted as the story of a former alcoholic whose desire to keep drinking does not seem to cease. However, he has been clean for five months when he is at the interview with Mr Ullmann. He tries very hard to keep it that way,

for the sake of their family. That is why Ullmann's provocative comment referring to his alcoholism makes him despise the hotel manager even more. Ullmann even questions whether Jack is fit for the position because of his past addiction: "if I had been given a free hand in this matter, I would not have taken you on" (King, 2007, 6). The hotel manager even refers to why Jack has lost his previous job as a teacher: "You've lost your temper" (King, 2007, 8). This short sentence burns into Jack's mind in such a way that it comes up multiple times throughout their stay at the Overlook.

In comparison, 'The Interview' scene of the film consists of Jack and Ullmann calmly chatting in Ullmann's office. The viewers are not provided with the overflowing of details about Jack's character like the readers are. On top of that, because of Jack Nicholson's gestures, Jack is depicted as a madman from the very beginning of Kubrick's film. The way King puts it in an interview with Andy Greene in *Rolling Stone*,

In the book, there's an actual arc where you see this guy, Jack Torrance, trying to be good and little by little he moves over to the place where he's crazy. And as far as I was concerned, when I saw the movie, Jack was crazy from the very first scene. (Greene, 2014)

It is important to note that King's inability to view Kubrick's adaptation as a separate work of art might stem from his personal connection to not only the story but specifically Jack's character. As it was mentioned earlier, he was struggling with alcoholism when writing *The Shining* and he did not even realise he was writing about himself for a long time. Since Kubrick intended to interpret Jack's character from a different perspective, "unlike the Jack of the novel, the film's protagonist is not a loving or kind husband. Whereas King stressed this positive aspect of Jack's personality, Kubrick eliminates it completely" (Manchel, 1995, 74).

### **A Newly Introduced Layer by Kubrick**

Kubrick approached Jack's character from a different aspect so that the story could shift its focus from the tragic collapse of the Torrance family. This aspect, however, was not even part of King's original novel. Kubrick might have found inspiration in the story to serve as a symbol for a rather universal theme. In the film, "During the interview with Stuart Ullmann, [...] Jack learns that the Overlook was built in 1907 on an Indian burial ground (the manager remarks offhanded, 'They even had to repel a few Indian attacks while building it')" (Nolan, 2011, 187-188). Ullmann's reference to the Overlook having been built on an Indian burial ground is not the only element of his film where hints at this theme appear. "Flo Lebowitz and Lynn Jeffress detail numerous examples of Native American motifs in the film, from the hotel's décor to Wendy's 'moccasin-like boots, beaded belt and braids.'" (Hornbeck, 2016, 694)

Kubrick intended to add further layers to the story regarding America's violent past, which is particularly interesting if I refer back to the title of my paper: *The Monster Within*. Regarding King's novel, the monster might refer to Jack's traumas, inner demons, struggles with anger management, addiction, and his role as a father and a husband.



Since King's Jack is possessed by the Overlook's ghosts, the monster can also refer to the supernatural forces of the hotel. However, Kubrick sheds light on another possible interpretation of what the monster might refer to by adding a new layer to the story. He saw the potential in the glamorous Overlook Hotel and how it might symbolise America's treatment of Indigenous Americans.

David Cook even emphasises the importance of the word "overlook": "we Americans as a people have chosen to 'overlook' so much of the violence which is the natural by-product of our economic system" (Cook, 1984, 4). According to him, "the true horror of *The Shining* is the horror of living in a society which is predicated upon murder and must constantly deny the fact to itself" (3). This is why Mr Ullmann's ignorant remark in the film, "They even had to repel a few Indian attacks while building it" is essential to comprehend Kubrick's intention with this new layer. The manager of the prestigious Overlook Hotel represents the general attitude of America towards Indigenous Americans.

### **Possible Interpretations of the Endings**

To strengthen my assertion regarding the remarkable differences between the novel and the film version of *The Shining*, I find it essential to discuss the endings of both, which further illustrate their optimistic or pessimistic nature that was discussed previously. In the novel, having failed to dump the boiler when he should have, the Overlook Hotel explodes – with Jack in it. Danny calls Hallorann from Florida with his shining, and when Hallorann arrives, he, Danny and Wendy can escape from the hotel in time. Since by that time Jack is fully possessed by the hotel's evil demons, they decide to leave him there. In Kubrick's version, on the contrary, Jack freezes to death in the hotel's maze outside. The film ends by zooming in on a picture hanging on the wall inside the hotel, which was taken at the Fourth of July party of 1921. As the viewers get closer and closer to the picture, it becomes visible that Jack is standing at the front, suggesting that Jack is stuck in a "never-ending 1921 Fourth of July party in one of America's most ritzy hotels" (Smith, 1997, 302). The main question concerning Kubrick's ending is "[why] [...] [Jack gets] left out in the cold" (Manchel, 1995, 68).

A possible solution to the film's ending suggested by Amy Nolan is that Jack's "inability to face and transform his past failures as a teacher and parent renders him vulnerable to the time loop trapped inside a perpetual 1920s party" (Nolan, 2011, 186). Even though the film's depiction of Jack struggling with his guilt is not as detailed as in the novel, from the film's abovementioned scene, when he has a nightmare where he kills Danny and Wendy, it becomes clear that he is unable to forgive himself for hurting his son in the past. That is why he may succumb to madness more easily. Since Danny is proof of his failure as a father, the hotel's suggestion to "correct" him seems quite reasonable.

Kubrick's solution, as he told in his interview with Michel Ciment is that "The ballroom photograph at the very end suggests the reincarnation of Jack." What is particularly interesting to me is that Kubrick also mentions that his version of *The Shining* has a rather optimistic tone since the existence of ghosts is an indicator of an afterlife. However, while "King's Jack Torrance dies in the Overlook Hotel as it burns to the ground, [...] the hotel and all its ghosts are destroyed, allowing the possibility of a clean slate" (Nolan, 2011, 183), Kubrick's Jack Torrance freezes to death in the midst of the hedge maze, which implies that his ghost might haunt the later guests of the Overlook. Another aspect of Kubrick's ending and the film's optimistic or pessimistic tone is the director's presumed intention with the Native American elements. If he intended to use the hotel as a symbol for America's violent history, Jack's reincarnation and the fact that the Overlook's ghosts are all trapped in the hotel paints a quite pessimistic picture of (human) nature's everlasting cruelty.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the texts, quotes and observations discussed above, my assertion remains: the tragic events taking place at the Overlook Hotel were induced by the building's malevolent creatures that took advantage of a traumatised and troubled father, husband, former teacher, aspiring writer, and caretaker. To this day,

Jack Torrance stands in front of us still, whenever we watch the film, for ever the same age, existing in a hotel in the late 1970s and in a photograph on screen of the Overlook Hotel July Fourth Ball of 1921 (Allen, 2015, 367).

As I mentioned in the introduction, King's distaste for Kubrick's film mainly stems from the notable changes that the director made in the adaptation. In order to comprehend what might the possible reasons behind his decision be, the abovementioned resources were essential. After thorough research, it became evident that parting ways with the source material should not be regarded as a wrong decision, as Devarsi Ghosh points out in his article: "All reverence and no play makes a dull film."

My hypothesis was that the differences between King's novel and Kubrick's film are caused by the director's divergent approach, interpretation and intention with the source material. Based on the primary and secondary sources included in the article, and claims of King and Kubrick, it is clear that the latter intended to approach the story of the Torrance family from another perspective so much that he even added a layer that is not even included in the novel. Throughout my research, I have learned to appreciate his endeavour instead of cursing him for not transforming Stephen King's story to the screen with the aim of fidelity.

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