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FROM VULNERABILITY TO ETHICAL AGENCY: DANNY TORRANCE, THE SHINING AND THE RESISTANCE TO PREDATORY EVIL IN STEPHEN KING'S DOCTOR SLEEP

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Abstract

This paper explores the character of Danny Torrance in Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* (2013) as one that focuses, metaphorically speaking, on the human ability to fight evil without perpetuating it. The argument turns on a distinction the novel develops with unusual rigour: between supernatural capacity and ethical agency. It is not Danny's ability to shine that makes him important, as the novel's villains have their own version of the power or something even more potent and use it to harvest children for food. He is unique in that he has gone through a series of transformations: traumatic memory to containment technique, shame to accountability, perceptual gift to protective obligation and personal survival to the mentorship of another gifted child. The first part is a terminological confusion that is clarified by stating that *Doctor Sleep* is a supernatural horror and in Todorov's terms, a marvellous and not magical realism as per Chanady, Faris and Spindler's definition, as the supernatural never becomes naturalised and never stops terrifying. The following sections explore Danny's alcoholism and the novel's rejection of heroism, the turnaround represented by Abra Stone, the True Knot as a concept of evil based on the devouring of extraordinary potential and the comparative ethics of power in four characters. As in the reading offered here, hope is not the triumph over evil but a refusal of predation on the part of the survivor.



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Introduction

Doctor Sleep is a sequel to a novel about a kid who couldn't save himself. It is thus a formal problem in the middle, as it is the experience of helplessness that is the defining experience of the character, which must now be written as an adult but not cured, not exploited. King refuses to take either of the two options and thus he has solved the problem. The 2013 Danny Torrance isn't healed or broken. He's a middle aged alcoholic with a peculiar perceptual ability, a lot of shame and a working way to store the dead in boxes.

Although there is a growing body of critical literature on King, his later work is relatively under-theorised, with the exception of his Gothic communities (Magistrale, 1988), his naturalist determinism (Strengell, 2005) and his relation to Gothic tradition (Sears, 2011). This paper will use Doctor Sleep as a text that argues – it does not simply narrate – a position on the relation between power and responsibility. My thesis is that Danny is a symbolic focus of man's ability to resist predatory evil and that his ability to do so is based on his own moral imperfection: If he had never been complicit he could have been a model of resistance for no one.

There are two preliminary tasks that need to be done. The first is generic and terminological since the novel's supernatural apparatus is discussed regularly and inaccurately. The second is to determine what type of faculty the shining is.

The following is a guide to help you understand the genre of this story. Genre Coordinates: This is not Magical Realism.



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It is not necessarily supernatural events that make a text magical realist. It's a conflation that's common and it's hiding what King is doing.

Todorov (1975) found the fantastic in the reader's struggle between a natural and a supernatural explanation and differentiated it from the uncanny (which is accepted naturally) and the marvellous (which is accepted supernaturally). In this classification, *Doctor Sleep* is definitely marvellous. No hesitation is noticeable for any length of time. The novel's supernatural ontology is firmly proclaimed early on and then reiterated throughout the novel without being called into question. Jackson (1981) took the analysis one step further politically and saw the fantastic as a literature of subversion, which expresses what a culture has silenced – a perspective that is much more illuminating of the *True Knot*'s parasitism on children than any magical realist reading would be.

The magical realist criteria are more stringent yet. The resolution of the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural, with the author being reticent, is the key, Chanady (1985) wrote. Faris (2004) also insists that the non-realistic magical element be a part of a highly realistic world where the magic is accepted and not the reader's categories that are unsettled. Spindler (1993) presented a typology (metaphysical, anthropological and ontological), none of which can contain a text in which the supernatural is threatening to all who encounter it.

Doctor Sleep doesn't pass these tests at the level of narrative affect. King's supernatural is always forthright. Signalled and feared and hidden and fought. Danny has been spending decades creating psychic containment for things that he can't naturalise; Abra's parents see their baby girl's powers as a problem. King is the author who strengthens the boundaries between codes and then stages an attack upon them where magical realism breaks down the barriers between codes.



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The essays collected by Zamora and Faris (1995) demonstrate the extent to which the evolution of magical realism is tied to specific postcolonial and Latin American histories; and the term's importation into American Gothic horror with the only criterion being that impossible things happen, renders the term analytically empty.

The comparison is nevertheless a valid one, as it separates out what is unique about King. The difference between magical realism and horror is that the former makes the extraordinary seem normal, while the latter makes the normal seem pathological. Both traditions present the reader with an element which is irreducible but they attribute to it conflicting emotional valences, conflicting social meanings. In *Doctor Sleep*, it's the extraordinary that dooms a kid to being eaten.

The Shining: Faculty, Not Magic

Danny's powers include telepathy, precognition, remote perception, unintentional communication with the dead and mind-to-mind communication, which doesn't require proximity. King's ever-presenting of these as perceptual and not operative is important. Magic, most literary traditions, is technique: a practitioner, an apprenticeship, a formula, an intention to produce an effect in the world. This grammar is not used in the shining. It has no spells. There is no way to study it. It comes uninvited in childhood and its owners live their lives in a way that they manage it instead of using it. The difference implies some ethical implications for the novel. The faculty that is received and not acquired, cannot be the basis of moral credit. Danny didn't earn his shining and can't control when it happens but what he can control is what he does with it when it provides him with information he doesn't want. King thus constructs a moral edifice where the supernatural is morally neutral, a fact, not a good.



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This is exactly what is shown in the teaching of the child Danny by Dick Hallorann. What Hallorann shows is not a way to be powerful but a way to survive: how to make mental lockboxes to which the Overlook's dead can be locked. The woman in Room 217 is held down instead of beaten. Hallorann's pedagogy is defensive and it's the only pedagogy that is available for a faculty that is not switchable.

A theory of shame and trauma in the refusal of heroic form.

The brutality of this episode is directed at the reader's sympathy and it's the first episode in *Doctor Sleep* that solidifies Danny's adulthood. After spending the night drinking in a stranger's apartment, Danny wakes up, takes some money from the woman's purse and registers — but doesn't act on — that her little son is awake and hungry on the floor. He leaves. The scene is not told as if it were an aberration. It is described as the end of a line of sight.

Traumatic memory is not integrated but is belated and repetitive (Caruth, 1996) and the shame of surviving is one of the most enduring products of trauma (Herman, 1992). Both descriptions apply to Danny but King's unique twist is to make the connection between the traumatic legacy and the addiction itself direct: alcohol is what Jack Torrance used to dull what he could not face and it's what his son uses to dull a perceptual faculty that will not stop transmitting. Danny drinks in order not to shine. The inheritance is chemical, psychological and supernatural at once and the novel does not differentiate between the strands. The connection is apparent in King's own book on his alcoholism and the connection of *The Shining* to his alcoholism (2000) but this does not diminish the fiction.



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When Danny does get better, it is the least gothic of recoveries, institutional: a small New Hampshire town, work he can do, a sponsor, meetings, the daily report of amends. It's important that Deenie's apartment is never resolved. It is carried. What the novel does is not absolution but unpayable debts turned into perpetual obligations — just as Danny's hospice work does. He is able to use the shining to make it easier for the dying to pass on and thus he is known as Doctor Sleep. The faculty that once brought him trouble, now brings him solace and that is the time when people need it the most.

This is why it's not a superhero novel. Danny is not invulnerable, doesn't have a commanding mastery and doesn't have a pure origin. He is the worst of him and he has kept a record of it and that's why he has the authority.

Abra Stone and the Reversal of Mentorship is a narrative about the newfound strength of a young man and his family.

Abra is the structural pivot of the novel, which is the point where the story pivots and changes direction. She has a far more powerful shine than Danny's and is being hunted for the same reason as Danny. King makes her entrance into his life a turnaround: the helpless kid that Hallorann once needed becomes the helpless adult that another kid needs.

The relationship is established by a certain and very practical instrument: the blackboard on which they write to one another from afar, a mental space in which they can communicate without revealing themselves entirely. The first thing that Danny passes on to Abra is the same thing that Hallorann taught him: make the boxes, put the things that can't be fought in the boxes and keep the lids closed. The transmission is intentionally not original. King's fiction deals in survival knowledge, which is transmitted from one terrified individual to another, without being altered in any way.



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However, the second thing he passes on is his own history and this is where the reversal takes on an ethical dimension. Hallorann had the ability to teach Danny containment as he was part of the faculty. Danny has something that Hallorann doesn't: he has twenty years of experience in mismanaging it. Her benefit from him is related to his failures. The novel states this outright in the final movement, when Danny tells her that she must be careful with her power, for "If you use it wrong, you'll do what my father did. The novel says this as such in the last movement, when Danny tells her that she must be careful with her power, "If you use it wrong, you'll do what my father did.

The blood relation the novel eventually reveals between them, via Jack Torrance, is no frilly embellishment. Turns mentorship into inheritance, it says what goes down a family line is not destined to be. Abra learns the temper from the Torrance line and the shine but what she learns through Danny is what it can do.

The True Knot: Evil as Extraction

The True Knot are not typical monsters and King makes sure to deny them any monstrosity at the level of appearance. They are driving recreational vehicles, they look like retirees, they are not a sight to behold at rest stops. They live long lives, on the basis of the use of steam, the psychic essence emitted by gifted children; and they have learned that pain purifies the product. The Iowa field boy is tortured in a way that is made all the more horrific by its restraint: it is done without appetite, by people talking about logistics.

The symbolic economy here is unmistakable and it repays attention. Evil in Doctor Sleep is not chaos, it's not temptation, it's not metaphysical negation. It is an industry which extracts something from the ground. The True Knot live by finding human beings with extraordinary potential, removing them from the safety net, turning their pain into a product and passing on.



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They store in canisters in case of lean years. They have a problem with supply and a business model. According to Bruhm (2002), the contemporary Gothic is a form of obsession which always revolves around the traumatised subject as its main character; King's innovation is to conceive of a form of evil that needs trauma as its food, that can't digest anything else.

The Knot's vulnerability is akin to that. They are killed by measles, which they catch from a child they eat, a common human disease, spread by the act of eating. The evil that resides in the human is exposed to what the human has.

Rose the Hat is the structural opposite of Danny and it's a perfect match. She is a formidable shining, has considerable intelligence and is truly loyal to her people. What she doesn't have is the ability to acknowledge a claim outside of her group. Her care is real and its boundary is absolute. She is not a study in wickedness; she is a study in a moral horizon drawn tightly enough to make atrocity administrative.

Running power, power consumption

The novel sets four offices in a row on one question and this is the main point of the novel.

Rose has a lot of power and she uses it to keep her community alive, by eating people from outside. Her morals are true but of the tribe. The True Knot as a body are less powerful as individuals and operate as a group, allowing each member to feel their involvement as a normal job, an institutional evil that resonates with the procedural shortcomings of King's previous work. Abra is the most powerful of the characters in the novel and the true suspense is that she may decide to wield her power like Rose does; her rage is proportional and is also the most dangerous in the book. Of the four principals, Danny has the least power and the most experience of what happens when it is misused.



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Good then, is not the answer of the novel because it is stronger. Danny's pivotal moment at the location of the Overlook isn't about his superior strength but about him letting out what he's been holding back his whole life: the traumatic residue itself, used against Rose. He wins if he opens the boxes. The picture is clear: his survival tactics are his weapons and the price he pays is to re-open the door to what he barely survived the first time. It's not like they're mastering anything.

But what the ending does with Abra is also important. She is not immune from the temptation and the novel doesn't suggest that her triumph has cleansed her. The final movement is pedagogical rather than triumphal: an adult who nearly became something terrible, teaching a child who might still, that the shining does not tell you what to do with it.

The character of Danny is a Figure of Human Hope.

If it's going to mean anything, the hope for humanity has to be qualified when it comes to Danny. He is not claiming on behalf of the novel to have any cosmic significance. He rescues one kid, the True Knot are a local infestation, the world is otherwise unchanged. Reading that makes him the only one to defend humanity is an exaggeration of a very humble plot.

What can be said, however, is that Danny is a symbolic distillation of the abilities upon which resistance to predatory evil relies and that the novel is a very conscious collection of such abilities. He has memory, in a text about a species of evil, which is based on forgetfulness and on the isolation of the young. His suffering is not an act of revenge but one that has been studied. He has a perceptual faculty which tells him when something is bad and no institutional duty to do anything about it — his duties are all voluntary. He has, vitally, been on the other side: a man who left a kid in an apartment is no stranger to the Knot's fundamental move, the use of a vulnerable person as a resource.



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The last is the main thesis of the paper. Because Danny is aware, both practically and personally, what it would feel like to be the True Knot. Hope in Doctor Sleep isn't the faith that evil will be vanquished. It's the proven fact that a predation-influenced individual can refuse to transmit predation.

Conclusion

Doctor Sleep is a movie that makes a distinction that its genre typically doesn't make. In this novel, supernatural ability is completely devoid of moral content: Rose possesses it, the Knot possess it, Abra possesses it in spades and it gives us no information about any of them. It is the attitude of the will to which the faculty is given that is the important thing and the history that has shaped that will.

Danny Torrance is important because he has a past of damage and failure and he doesn't deny it, he doesn't discharge it. The transformations the novel traces — memory into containment, shame into accountability, perception into protection, survival into mentorship — are not achievements of power. Those are the things he did with a faculty he didn't ask for and had been doing far worse for 20 years. Reading him as a figure of hope means reading hope as a practice rather than a prophecy: the continuing human capacity, demonstrated in one imperfect man, to face what consumes the vulnerable without joining it.

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