

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE SHINING (1980)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Kubrick's next project was yet another adaptation of a novel, but his time (unlike his previous film, *Barry Lyndon*, which was a financial failure) he decided he needed a more popular and recent book. Having considered many possibilities, he fixed on *The Shining* (1977) by Stephen King, who, in the end, did not like the film adaptation because it played down the supernatural element in his novel. Kubrick would later explain his choice, saying 'one of the things that horror stories can do is to show us the archetypes of the unconscious; we can see the dark side without having to confront it directly.' The film certainly reveals the sinister side of the main character (failed writer Jack Torrance), played magnificently by Jack Nicholson (fresh from a similar role in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*). The equally important selection of a child actor for the role of Danny took many months but resulted in a fine performance. The film did moderately well at the box office but gathered no significant critical awards. Like most of the Kubrick's films, however, subsequent reappraisal has enhanced its reputation. The film exists in multiple versions; the one described below is that of 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS Jack takes a job as winter caretaker at a resort in the mountains. Soon he moves in with Wendy, his wife, and Danny, their young son, who has the power of 'the shining.' This means Danny can foresee events and see hidden traces of the past in the present. After they move into the isolated hotel, strange things begin to happen, including visions of the victims of a murder by an earlier caretaker. Jack's personality problems are compounded by this legacy of murder and the eerie isolation of the setting. Slowly, he goes mad, indulging in delusions and lashing out in bursts of anger. His psychosis culminates in his attempt to kill his wife and son. Only Danny's clever trick saves him and his mother from the insane Jack, who dies from hypothermia.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Jack Jack Torrance is a failing writer.
Wendy Wendy is his wife.
Danny Danny ('Doc') is their six-year-old son.
Dick Dick (Richard) Hallorann is the chef at the hotel.

STORY

Hotel Overlook Jack drives to Overlook, a sprawling resort hotel in an isolated mountainous landscape. It is mid-winter, with few guests, and Jack has arrived for an interview to be the caretaker during the off-season.

Family Shift back home, to mother Wendy and young son Danny at the breakfast table. Wendy is looking forward to moving to the hotel for the winter, but Danny is not keen. He has few friends, but, speaking through his imaginative friend Tony, he says he doesn't want to go to the hotel for the winter.

Interview Back to the interview, the hotel manager outlines the job, which mainly consists of 'keeping the elements' out. The only difficult part, he says, is the isolation, but Jack is looking for peace and quiet in order to work on his writing. The manager feels obliged to also tell him about a previous caretaker who suffered a mental breakdown only a few years back, killing himself and his family. Jack dismisses this, too.

River of blood Jack phones his wife back home and says he's got the job. Little Danny begs his imaginative friend Toni to tell him why he doesn't want to go to the hotel, but Toni refuses. Suddenly, we see a river of blood gush down a hotel corridor, frightening two little girls. It appears to be Danny's imagination.

Cannibalism Jack drives Wendy and Danny to the hotel for his first day on the job. When Wendy wonders where the Donner party incident took place, Jack tells Danny the story about the Donner party, a group of 19th-century settlers who got stuck in the snow and 'resorted to cannibalism to stay alive.' Wendy isn't sure Jack should tell Danny such gruesome stories, but Danny says it's ok because he saw it on television.

Hotel tour While the hotel manager takes Jack and Wendy on a tour of the hotel, Danny again sees the two little girls from his imagination. Now, we know they are the daughters murdered by their father, a previous caretaker. The manager mentions that the hotel was built over a Native American burial ground and was attacked while it was being built.

The shining Meanwhile, the head chef (Dick) makes telepathic contact with Danny and explains that their psychic power is called 'the shining.' Danny asks if there's something bad at the hotel, and Dick suggests that its past history 'has left a trace', something that only people 'who shine' can see. When Danny asks what's in room 237, Dick says nothing but forbids him to look.

Tell-tale signs A month later, Jack has writer's block and shows signs of stress. He has a moment of 'shining' when he looks at a model of the hotel grounds and sees Wendy and Danny walking in a maze, which they are in fact doing at that moment. Then, the hotel becomes snow-bound, the telephone lines go down and Jack's mental condition worsens.

Visions Riding his toy bicycle around the hotel, Danny has another vision of the girls and their bloodied bodies from the axe attack. He asks his father to reassure him that he would never hurt him and his mother. Jack has a terrifying dream in which he kills Danny and Wendy (repeating the earlier murders in the hotel). Danny finds the door to room 237 open, and later appears with bruises on his neck. When Danny won't explain what happened, Wendy accuses Jack of attacking their son. Jack enters the Gold Room and protests to an imaginary (or ghostly) bartender that he didn't touch his son. Wendy accused him, he says, because he did once hit him, by accident.

More visions Wendy finds Jack and, through her tears, says that a crazy woman tried to strangle Danny in room 237. When Jack investigates, he sees a naked woman who turns into a dead woman and frightens him. Jack comforts Wendy by lying and saying there was no one in the room. On holiday in Florida, Dick is terrified by what he sees happening at the hotel (through his power of 'shining'). Concerned, he tries to call the hotel but the lines are still down.

Meeting a murderer Jack's fear and frustration erupt in irrational bursts of anger. He goes back to the Gold Room, filled with guests from the 1920s and meets a waiter named Grady, who Jack believes is the caretaker who became an axe-murderer. Grady responds by telling Jack that Danny has a 'great talent' and is in contact with Dick ('a nigger cook'). He advises him that Danny and his wife should be 'corrected.'

Confrontation Jack disconnects the radio set by which Wendy communicates with the police station. Dick flies back to Colorado and drives toward the hotel. Stuck in the snow, he abandons his car and continues in a snowcat. Armed with a baseball bat, Wendy searches for Jack and sees that his 'manuscript' is simply a repetition of 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' When a psychotic Jack confronts her, she suggests that Danny should be sent away for his protection. Jack mocks and insults her. Terrified, Wendy hits him with the bat and knocks him senseless.

Trapped Wendy locks him in a room and attempts to escape on the snowcat outside, but Jack has cut its wires. Grady speaks to Jack through the locked door and points out that he hasn't 'dealt' with the situation. When Jack promises to 'take of his wife,' Grady lets him out.

Axeman Danny repeats the word 'redrum' ('murder' spelt backward) and writes it on the door in lipstick. Wendy wakes in terror and hides in the bathroom with Danny. Jack chops down the door with an axe. She pushes Danny out through the narrow bathroom window, but she is too big to get out. Jack chops down the bathroom door, but Wendy wounds him with a knife and he withdraws.

Escape When Dick arrives at the hotel on a snowcat, he is killed by Jack, who then looks for Danny. Danny hides in the maze and escapes from the pursuing Jack by turning into a side tunnel without leaving any footprints. He finds his mother and they escape in Dick's snowcat, leaving the injured Jack to die in the cold.

Past as present The final shot shows a photograph mounted on a hotel wall, in which Jack stands with a group of partygoers in 1921.

THEMES

Isolation The only thing that analyses of *The Shining* agree on is that isolation is a key theme. The film opens with scenes of a rugged, rocky landscape. The car that Jack is driving looks like a tiny speck below the towering mountains. And the Overlook hotel, when we see it alone on a barren slope, is a hulking institution, more prison than tourist resort. Next, after this physical isolation, we see another kind, between people. Wendy and Danny are eating breakfast by themselves, and the boy mentions that he doesn't have many friends. They are alone.

Then we move back to the hotel, where Jack is being interviewed by the manager, who highlights the problem of isolation during the long winter. 'Cabin fever', he says, can drive some people around the bend. Jack is confident that he will thrive in the 'five months of peace,' but he is proved wrong. As the story unfolds, he and his family become even more cut off from the world. Telephone lines go down in a snow storm, and Jack disables their radio contact with the police station. There are just the three of them. Their physical isolation is compounded by the increasing emotional distance between them. Eventually, each one retreats inside his/her mind. Jack becomes psychotic, unable to connect with anyone, except his delusions and the past. Wendy, left on her own and infected by the atmosphere, begins to show signs of delusion. Danny is trapped in his imaginative world. However, and paradoxically, it is Danny's power of telepathy that enables him to make contact beyond the nuclear family. Although Dick does not survive, he is partly responsible for Danny's escape with his mother. The telepathic power they share is the only thing that saves them from Jack, a man unable to communicate outside his demonic mind.

Memory The causes of Jack's psychosis are multiple, but most of them involve different forms of memory or history. First, we have the fact that the hotel was built over a Native American graveyard and became a battleground. Another piece of history is the 'tragedy' connected to a caretaker named Grady, who murdered his family and killed himself in the 1970s. Thus, within the first seven minutes of the film, we know that the location of the hotel is suffused with death and violence. More layers of memory are laid down when Jack meets Grady's ghost and, later, when he enters a party in the 1920s and is eventually captured in a photograph dated 1921. At one point, Grady tells Jack that he (Jack) has always been the caretaker. Memory also plays a strong role in Jack's relationship with his son. When Danny has a bruise on his throat, Wendy accuses Jack of hitting him because he did hit him once, years before. The family seems unable to escape the past, which is no more than memory. In addition to events, words are also repeated: 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull lad'; Danny chants 'redrum' over and over. Repetition has the power of suggestion. It is a form of history that creates memory. Jack is told he is a murderer; he hears about murderous events in the past; he knows he hit his son. If we repeat something long enough, it becomes true.

Family On one level, this is a story of family breakdown, made all the more dramatic because, at first, they appear to be so happy. Smiling Jack, an aspiring writer, lands a new job in a 'beautiful place.' Mother and son at home have an obvious rapport. Father, mother and son, however, form an emotional triangle with sharp points. The first tensions appear when cheerful Wendy brings Jack his breakfast in bed. Nice cuddly scene, except it's almost noon and Jack sounds defensive about his writing. Later, mother and son go for a walk in the maze, while father remains behind and grows more frustrated with his inability to write. Slowly, the cracks in the surface of family harmony widen through mistrust, resentment and fear. Jack becomes defensive about his failure as the provider and turns his anger on Wendy, who grows ever more protective of her son and afraid of her husband. Their conflict reaches a climax in the scene when Wendy uses a baseball bat to defend herself and ends up knocking Jack unconscious. Throughout these later scenes, Danny is largely a passive observer to the angry separation between his parents. He is terrified but, until the end, can do little. The family breakdown is illustrated in physical terms also when Jack hacks through the door with an axe. It's difficult to understand how this could happen to such a nice family, but we might remember that famous pop song 'You Always Hurt the One You Love.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jack Jack is a middle-aged, middle-class man who fancies himself as a writer but has to take on a job as a hotel caretaker. His pride is easily wounded, he is filled with self-pity and controlled by delusions, all of which contribute to his fierce anger. Although he is affectionate to his son, his mental fragility makes him vulnerable to the power of murderous suggestions. His false positivity masks a deep anxiety. A man who types the same sentence over and over again is a man who cannot escape failure.

Failure The key to Jack's character is his sense of failure, which eats away at him and turns self-hatred into anger toward others. This self-pity and resentment reach a tipping point when Jack finds Wendy looking at his manuscript and knows that she knows he has written absolutely nothing (except the repetition of a single sentence). When his failure as a writer is exposed, he becomes enraged and screams at her, as she backs away from him while holding a baseball bat. His sense of failure is compounded when Wendy suggests that Danny should be taken to a doctor, implying that Jack is a failure as a father as well as a writer. Listening to her, he launches into a rant about his responsibility to the hotel. 'Has it ever occurred to you what would happen to my future if I failed to live up to my responsibilities?' he says. This is his last scrap of self-respect—to avoid failure as a hotel caretaker—and he thinks Wendy is about to take it away from him. If they returned to their house in Boulder, he would be further humiliated by having to work at menial jobs. Jack's psychosis is complex in its causes, but a central reason is surely deep sense of personal failure.

False confidence Another aspect of his character, which is more subtle and difficult to capture, is his false confidence, which is a compensation for his sense of failure. This artificiality is illustrated in many scenes, but the first one with the hotel manager is clear enough. As we watch and listen to this conversation, perhaps with a bit of hindsight, we notice that Jack's cheerfulness is somewhat forced. Nothing, it seems, is a problem for him. For example, when the manager brings up the severe isolation, he simply smiles it away, too quickly, without really considering what it means. Similarly, the story of the Grady murders is laughed off with a grin that looks fake, an attempt to cover up what he's really feeling. Unable to confront reality, he takes refuge in forced positivity.

Delusional Part of Jack's psychosis is his delusional tendency, which can be seen as another kind of cover-up. This quality is illustrated in a brief moment one morning, when Wendy brings him his breakfast tray. It is nearly noon, but he is still asleep. It's a large spread, with eggs cooked just as he likes them. It's a nice day and Wendy suggests a walk, but Jack shakes his head. 'I suppose I ought to try and do some writing first,' he says with his slightly crazed smile. 'Any ideas yet?' she asks warmly. He nods and says, 'Lots of ideas.' Later, we discover that his only idea has been to repeat one sentence, over and over again, in a sign not only of writer's block but mental breakdown. But Jack lives off fantasies. He is delusional.

Angry All of these problems stoke the fires of Jack's frustration, which erupts in fiery blasts of anger. A good example occurs early in the story, a few days after the family have settled into their routine at the hotel. We see Jack from behind as he punches away at the keys of his typewriter, apparently deep into a productive phase of writing (only later to learn that he is reproducing that same sentence). He sits at a desk in the hotel reception area, looking like a tiny figure inside a cavernous cathedral. 'Get a lot written today?' Wendy asks sweetly, but he glares at her and boils over into anger. Speaking in a tone of self-importance, he accuses her of ruining his work, pulls the paper out of the machine and tears it in two. His anger is completely at odds with her question, an early signal of his deteriorating mental state.

Tender A description of Jack would be incomplete without mentioning his moments of tenderness, especially toward Danny. In one scene, Danny has just had a vision of the bloody twin sisters and seeks out his father for comfort. Jack is sitting alone, in the near-dark, haggard, depressed and listless. When Danny asks if he can get his fire engine, Jack asks him to come to him. Danny hesitates, sensing something isn't right, but walks up to his father. Without a word, Jack puts him on his knee, embraces and kisses him on the head. Fondling his hair, Jack asks, 'How's it going, doc? Having a good time?' This is Jack showing genuine love for his little son, a side of him that makes his later actions all the more horrific.

Danny Danny is the six-year-old son of Wendy and Jack. He is shy, imaginative and clever, all of which are consistent with his special telepathic power known as 'the shining'. Danny listens well and understands things that most kids his age would not. However, because he has foresight and 'sees' things left behind by the past, he is sometimes confused. And afraid.

Imaginative The most significant element of Danny's character is his imagination. As is often the case with a character, Danny's first appearance is revealing. He is eating a piece of bread at the breakfast table with his mother. In between bites, he asks his mother if she 'really wants to go and live in that hotel for the winter.' Danny isn't convinced and his mother asks what Toni thinks. Danny then moves his index finger and says, 'I don't want to go,' in Toni's squeaky voice. When she wants to

know why, Danny manipulates his finger again and says, 'I just don't.' Here, we see that Danny is inventive and clever. Lots of little kids have pretend friends, but not all will be able to speak in that friend's voice like a ventriloquist and mimic a dummy with a finger. Besides, as we later realise, Danny's doubts expressed through Toni turn out to be sound.

Confused The power of imagination that enables Danny to invent Toni is also the source of his 'shining,' a telepathic rapport with others and an ability to foresee the future. Sometimes, however, this power causes confusion in the young boy. We see this clearly in the conversation he has with Dick, the head chef at the hotel. Dick sits him down with a bowl of ice cream, away from his parents, and explains the 'shining' to him. Little Danny listens hard, furrows his brow and asks, 'Is there something bad here?' Dick uses the analogy of burnt toast to explain how he and Danny might see 'traces left behind' while others might not. Danny tries to process all this information, including the suggestion that some bad things happened in the hotel in the past. At the close of this slow and subtle scene, Danny asks about room 237. Having listened to the explanations of his power, he is still confused, and a little afraid.

Smart The fact that Danny can even have this conversation illustrates his high intelligence. Throughout the film, he is perceptive, and not only because he has 'the shining.' A good example of his cleverness comes at the very end, when it is most needed. Having slipped out of a window, he is pursued through the snow and into the hedge maze by his axe-wielding father. As possible death comes closer, he escapes by turning off the main track without leaving footprints, thus misleading Jack. Danny retreats a few steps and escapes down a side path. But by carefully fitting his feet into the deep prints already made in the snow, jumping and covering any trace of his new direction, he leaves no new tracks. Simple, but smart.

Wendy Wendy is a loyal wife to Jack and devoted mother to Danny. Yet there is something in her character that suggests she's been abused, if not physically then emotionally by the domineering husband. She rarely challenges Jack, content to meekly bend to his wishes. We sense that there is fear inside her even before she gets to the nightmare that awaits her at the hotel.

Supportive Wendy is a supportive spouse, encouraging Jack in gentle ways to overcome his inner demons and make a success of himself. The best illustration of this loyalty is the scene when she brings him a special breakfast, wheeled in on a trolley. Jack is still in bed at 11:30, but she says nothing except that she's prepared the eggs sunny side up, just like he likes them. Knowing that he is lethargic and down in the dumps, she glows with positive energy, hoping it might rub off on him. She suggests they go on a walk, but he says that he should try to do 'some writing.' 'Any ideas yet?' she asks, cheerfully. When she hears his downbeat answer, she says, 'Well, something will come. It's just a matter of settling back into the habit of writing.' Her enthusiasm would be infectious if not for the darker forces at work within her husband.

Protective Her support for her husband is matched, if not equalled, by her protection of her son. She displays this maternal impulse several times, but never more forcefully than in a scene after she hears Jack describe his murderous nightmare. Then Danny enters the scene and, fearing for him, she orders him to go to his room. When Danny keeps coming toward them, she runs forward and sees the bruises on his neck. She asks what happened, but he doesn't answer, so she hugs him. She is kneeling down and embracing Danny, while staring at her obviously psychotic husband. Then she picks him up and starts to retreat, cradling him like a baby. No shot could be more powerful of her as the protective mother.

Terrified Slowly, Wendy comes to realise that Jack is dangerous. After listening to his nightmare, watching his unhinged actions and seeing the madman-like repetition of a single sentence on his so-called manuscript, she has to accept that he is a threat to her life and that of her son. Everything comes to a head when he confronts her in the reception area. She backs away from him as she grips a baseball bat and listens to his psychotic ranting. Soon, she is walking backwards up the staircase and swinging the bat at him, as if he were a fly. 'Get away from me,' she cries and lands a blow on his hand and then on his head, sending him rolling back down the stairs. Then she drags him into a large pantry and locks it. For almost the past ten minutes, she has been petrified. Things get worse, but this scene reveals the onset of her terror.



(Jack)



(Wendy)



(Danny)