

CAPTAIN AHAB AND JACK TORRANCE IN THEIR DARKNESS AND MADNESS

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ABSTRACT: The study examines Captain Ahab – Herman Melville’s iconic figure from the novel *Moby-Dick* in comparison with Jack Torrance, who is the central male character in Stephen King’s *The Shining*. The analogy is motivated by the tragic nature and the madness of the two characters, which is related to their antagonism. The aim is to establish any references between the two characters with the idea to trace the characteristics of dark romanticism such as the progression of madness and human fallibility in the development of Jack Torrance. Several aspects of parallelization are proposed – the characters’ tragic features, the essence of their madness, and their function as fatherly figures. The analysis demonstrates some common features between Ahab and Torrance. Both of them can be associated with Shakespearean tragic heroes, even though the tragedy of Jack is not heroic, but domestic. Their stories take place in isolation from society, in a microworld, where they take a leading position, which can be interpreted as a representation of the negative father – the father that fails to protect his family. Although both of them are obsessive, the roots of their obsession are different. Captain Ahab’s monomania is driven by his thirst for revenge, while at the core of Jack’s madness is his alcohol addiction and his failure.

KEYWORDS: Captain Ahab, Jack Torrance, Stephen King, Herman Melville, madness, monomania

Every constant reader of Stephen King’s prose is aware of the fact that his works often reveal allusions to other authors. The novel *The Outsider* (2018), for example, contains plenty of references to Edgar Allan Poe. King himself has always expressed openly his respect and reverence for the literary figures who shaped him as a writer and even devoted his novel *Revival* (2014) to a group of authors he called “the people who built my house” (King, 2014b). The list of these reputable builders and architects includes Bram Stoker, Shirley Jackson, William Faulkner, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, etc. In a recent publication on the works of Stephen King, Michael Blouin and Tony Magistrale emphasize the need of considering the literary legacy when analyzing the writer’s oeuvre (Magistrale and Blouin, 2021, p. 7). They examine the novelist as an heir of a “set of preoccupations from America’s literary past” and emphasize the importance of establishing his specific place on the landscape of American literature because the peculiarity of his fiction and its generic blurring could be explained through America’s literary heritage (Ibid., p. 11).

Undoubtedly, King can be named the legal heir of more than one literary tradition – from the early Puritans (Ingebretsen), through gothicism and naturalism (Stragnell) to Faulkner’s modernism (Mary Jane Dickerson). However, although his works have often been studied by analogy with other authors, his relation to the representatives of the period of American romanticism seems to be particularly strong. Some of the most recently established parallels of the novelist associate him with Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville (Magistrale and Blouin). Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Stephen King’s *It* share a key aspect, namely the question of what can be found at the core “of American History—the glorified (and destitute) individual, or the restorative (and oppressive) community” (Magistrale and Blouin, 2021, p. 23). The opposition of the individual to society is essential to both romanticism and King’s prose. Derry, for example, a recurrent fictional place in King’s works, which is representative of small town America, is an epitome of evil. The people living there are cold and hostile to strangers, which can be understood as a criticism of the American society. Not rarely the character (the individual) is set against the background of the town (community) in a gothic-romantic opposition.

The present work continues the trend of analogizing King’s fiction with American romanticism, and more precisely with what has come to be known as *dark romanticism*, and sets as its task the examination of the iconic character of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) in comparison with the central male figure in King’s novel *The Shining* (1977) – Jack Torrance. Such an analogy is motivated by the madness of the two characters, which is directly related to their antagonism. The main aspects of parallelization are their closeness to tragic heroes, their isolation and estrangement from society, their interpretation as negative fathers and above all their madness, as both characters are obsessive and their obsession leads them to their tragic end. As it has already been mentioned, the association of Stephen King with the tradition of American dark romanticism is not new or sensational. The novelist is often compared to authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe primarily due

to the creepy aspects of his work and their focus on evil and the fallibility of human nature. According to some researchers like Christoph Gruenberg, dark romanticism is something like a “pessimistic version” of the idealism of American transcendentalism, which became popular in the 19th century (Gruenberg, 2016, p. 148). Unlike the transcendentalists, the dark romantics, including Melville, were more interested in the shadowy aspect of the human psyche and people’s tendency to succumb to sin, a possible echo of the Calvinist norms of the Puritan domination of earlier years. Upon creating *Moby-Dick*, Melville himself shared with Nathaniel Hawthorne in a letter that he had written “a wicked book” (Melville, 1851).

One of the main characteristics of dark romantic characters is their slow progression into madness under the influence of various factors and the psychological effect of guilt. A typical example of such exploration of the progression into the downward spiral of madness can be observed in Poe’s renowned poem *The Raven* (1845), and guilt is the prime focus in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). The development of the character of Jack Torrance in *The Shining* is also related to the effects of guilt and the advance of madness. When in 1980 director Stanley Kubrick adapted the *The Shining* for the big screen, King was extremely dissatisfied with the production and for years did not reconcile himself to this movie. One of the reasons for his disapproval was precisely the representation of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), who plays insane from the beginning (King, 2014a). Just like the dark romantics, King seems to be preoccupied exactly with the descent into madness and its causes, the inner demons of the character that push him to destruction. In this sense, Jack can be associated to other dark romantic characters.

According to some specialists (Kahane and Doane), the dark obsession of the individual, caused by various factors, is highly typical of many American novels. Such literary examples lead to the observation that “American romance-fiction projected onto a nocturnal dream-scape extreme states of mind in unresolvable conflict, obsessed with the ubiquitous and timeless motives of desire, fear, and guilt” (Kahane and Doane, 1981, p. 138). Despite belonging to different literary periods, both Captain Ahab and Jack Torrance can be considered classic examples of those demon-ridden heroes of American literature. However, while Captain Ahab is a mysteriously charismatic leader obsessed with the idea of killing the white whale, Jack Torrance is just an ordinary man in his failure and desperation to save himself. The characters are constructed in a radically different narrative way.

The literary image of Captain Ahab is developed gradually. First, through the exchanged stories and impressions of other sailors who both admire and dread the formidable sea leader. He is even referred to as “their supreme lord and dictator” (Melville, 2002, p. 101). The godlike features of the figure of Ahab are enhanced by the fact that it is initially shrouded in mystery. His first appearance on the deck in Chapter 28 is rendered through the eyes of Ishmael: “He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness” (Ibid., p. 102). Such a description is indicative of the captain’s resilience to the storms in life, his persistence to survive and defeat the enemy. Despite the gloomy touch of this image such as his “grim aspect,” (Ibid., p. 103) his “singular posture,” (Ibid.) the “infinity of firmest fortitude,” and the “unsurrenderable wilfulness” of his glance (Ibid.), in the next chapter Ishmael can also identify “some considering touch of humanity” (Ibid., p. 105) in him. This suggestion of a subtle form of humanity speaks of his suppressed identity and hints that behind the cold mask, marred by his fixation on killing the white whale, there exists a vulnerable human being. However, Ahab is determined to break the law of God and the Christian principles in order to satisfy his thirst for revenge. He is so obsessed with the idea of “an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge,” (Ibid., p. 155) that he is presented as “[g]nawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea” (Ibid.).

Ahab’s insane thirst for revenge, combined with some narrative techniques in the construction of the character, such as monologue and soliloquy, evoke associations with Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. Kerry McSweeney defines Ahab as “simply a bricolage of Shakespearean odds and ends, pieces of Milton’s Satan, and bits of Byron’s dark heroes” (McSweeney, 1986, p. 64). Like most Shakespearean tragic heroes, Ahab’s failure is caused by some devastating passion, namely his thirst for revenge. Revenge is also at the core of Shakespeare’s tragedy *Richard III*. Furthermore, following McSweeney’s definition, the captain seems to combine even more dark aspects of British literature. Despite the obvious parallels with Shakespeare, one essential difference with his tragic heroes is that the captain “makes a

strange and awesome figure, but not in the main, one arousing tragic pity and fear” (Berthoff, 1972, p. 110).

Jack Torrance, who is the central male character in Stephen King’s *The Shining*, can also be compared to a tragic hero. He fails in every sphere of life – as a teacher, as a husband, and as a father and he is left with the only opportunity to prove that he is at least a good caretaker of the Overlook hotel, where he takes his family to spend the winter in isolation. His ruined life, his ineptness to deal with vice, and his tragic ending also suggest certain associations with Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. Jack’s tragedy, however, is what Mustazza calls “domestic tragedy” or “tragedy of the common man” (Mustazza, 1992, p. 74). Unlike Ahab, characters like Jack, as Mustazza puts it referring to Louis Creed in *Pet Sematary*, tend to evoke both pity and fear, as they seem to represent “all of us” (Ibid., p. 81). The possible self-identification of the reader with the fallen hero could lead to empathy although such characters usually lack the glamour and all the outstanding qualities of the typical Shakespearean tragic hero.

Another parallel between Ahab and Jack can be drawn on the basis of their madness. If Torrance’s insanity is only suggested, the captain is officially diagnosed with *monomania* – an extreme obsession with a single thing. The captain’s condition is revealed in great detail. Chapter 41 discusses thoroughly what caused it, how it manifests itself, its periods of lull, and his great suffering because of it. Melville’s effort to reveal the disorder and explain the background of its nature indicates its importance in the novel. In fact, monomania was popular in the 19th century and it can be identified in different literary characters. One of the most remarkable examples is Rodion Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), whose motives to commit a crime are explained with his monomania to kill and rob without considering any further aims or profit. Rodya’s monomania is presented as a fit of temporary madness and serves as a kind of mitigating circumstance. Apparently, Melville was also intrigued by monomania (Smith, 2007, p. in119). He considers the fact that in cases of monomania the damage is partial and the rest of the mind remains unaffected. This explains the duality observed in Ahab – he is mad without losing his sharpness of mind, which brings him closer to the typical romantic hero. The romantic concept of the genius can also be recognized in Ahab (Ibid., p. 127) and he is definitely presented as supreme among the other characters in the novel. He is a tragic hero precisely because his “intellect became the instrument or tool of the madness, and continued to be merely the instrument or tool of the monomania” (Ibid., p. 123). In this sense his madness escapes from the benevolent romantic concept and is more likely to be associated with a demonic possession, which his insanity is at times attributed to (Ibid., p. 118). Ahab’s hatred, thirst for revenge, and dark thoughts destroy him almost completely as a human being. In the end of Chapter 44, he is called a “tormented spirit,” “a vacated thing,” “a formless somnambulistic being,” (Ibid., p. 168) etc. This almost ghostly presentation of the captain suggests the idea that he has become a shadow of his hatred, a threat to himself. His tormented soul has entirely depersonalized him.

If captain Ahab’s madness is revealed in well argued terms, the condition of Jack Torrance in *The Shining* remains vague. Despite the clear suggestions that the character loses his mind under the influence of the ghosts in the Overlook hotel, no specific diagnosis or any psychological explanation is provided in the narrative. Jack Torrance seems to go insane primarily because of his inability to cope with his life’s failures and alcohol addiction. In the course of the novel, he is gradually transformed from protagonist into antagonist under the influence of the evil forces in the hotel, frequently referred to as its “management.” As he has failed in every aspect of his life, the ghosts in the hotel can be interpreted as a manifestation of his personal fears and failures. He is eager to please the management, in order to prove to himself that he can handle at least one thing – to be a good caretaker. Although his condition is not formally declared as monomania, his fixation on pleasing the management can be related to it. Jack is so absorbed by the hotel’s past that he forgets about anything else around him, including his wife and son.

Despite some obvious parallels between the two character’s insanity, such as their possible demonic possession, King’s approach to Jack’s madness is different. The narrative technique that is used in *The Shining* is rendering the chapters through the perspective of different characters, the so-called *variable focalization* in Ball’s terms. Such a strategy provides the reader with omniscience regarding the diegetic world of the characters. Peering into Jack’s mind one can observe his growing hatred for his family, his frustration at the lack of any fulfillment, and his desire to prove to himself that he can be successful in at least one thing. He begins to see and hear non-existent images and then tries to deny what he has experienced. Such is the case with his encounter with a ghostly presence in Room 217 in

Chapter 30, which he later firmly denies. When he checks the room in which his son supposedly saw a ghost and sees for himself that it is haunted, he lies to Wendy and Danny “Nothing there”, adding as if to convince himself “Not a thing” (King, 1992, p. 184). Jack’s common sense seems to be in a fierce battle with his experiences.

One of the reasons for Jack’s degradation is his alcohol addiction. This problem is constantly recurring in King’s oeuvre as the author himself was addicted to alcohol and drugs in his earlier years. He even confessed that *The Shining* was “the most blatant representation of how his innermost demons were surfacing in his writing at the time” (Kahoud and Knafo, 2018, p. 95). Experiencing the writer’s deepest fears, such as uncontrollable anger towards his loved ones, inability to create literature, alcoholic collapse through the fictional characters of his prose prevented him from experiencing them in reality (Ibid., p. 99). Upon arriving at the hotel, Jack claims that he has overcome his alcoholism, but slowly his drinking habits return, even though there is no alcohol in the hotel. The spirits of the hotel are indicative of *spirit* in the sense of alcohol and they absorb Jack’s mind and thinking just like alcohol does. It can be concluded that despite certain resemblances in the condition of Ahab and Torrance, the roots of their madness are radically different.

Another problem identifiable in both characters is that of the father. Captain Ahab’s father died before he was born and Jack was abused by his own one, just like he abuses his son. Tony Magistrale defines *The Shining* as a “scathing critique of patriarchal abuses,” (Magistrale, 2010, p. 101) because the fathers in the novel maltreat and traumatize their children. When asked if the ghosts at the Overlook are real or just a figment of Jack’s imagination, King replies that “Jack Torrance himself is a haunted house. He’s haunted by his father” (Underwood & Miller, 1989, p. 105). King’s literary preoccupation with the inadequacy of the father also reflects his personal attitude to the problem, as his own father left his life in the writer’s early years. The severe emotional trauma young Steve suffered can be recognized in many of his works. The place of the fathers in his fiction is frequently either empty or taken by an inadequate figure. In 2013, King published *Doctor Sleep* – the long-awaited sequel to the *The Shining*, which presents the grownup version of Danny Torrance, who has become just like his father Jack – an alcoholic without a steady job.

Herman Melville was also affected by the absence of his father, who died suddenly when the author was thirteen years old. The problem of the father is identifiable at many levels in Melville’s works. According to Regis Durand, all of Melville’s novels are built around the absence of real fathers, an absence that can be appreciated as the driving force of the narrative (Durand, 1981, p. 49). The idea of the father in the novel has given rise to different psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations. Susan Ellis Swanson, for example, points out that the intensity of the hatred with which Ahab pursues the whale could be explained with his failure to accept or repress what that animal has started to represent for him, namely the name of the father, in the Lacanian sense (Swanson, 1991, p. 42). As a monstrous “phallic symbol of denial” that prevents Ahab from returning to his mother’s warm womb, the whale can be seen as Ahab’s father, in a Lacanian sense, as a “visual barrier between him and his mother (nature)” (Ibid., p. 43).

Both Captain Ahab and Jack Torrance can be interpreted as negative fatherly figures. They represent fear and threat instead of support and protection. They are victims of their weaknesses and insanity and their failure to overcome their inner demons leads them to their tragic end. Jack is the alcoholic father of Danny Torrance, who is trying to kill his son under the influence of the hotel’s ghosts. Captain Ahab is metaphorically the father to his crew dooming “his children” to his own obsession. Ahab’s lunacy affects the destiny of his people. They blindly follow his orders and become the victims of his mania. Both stories are stories about isolation. The Torrances are isolated in a remote hotel for the winter and Ahab is at sea only with the crew of his ship. Both dark narratives take place away from civilization and isolation unleashes inner demons lodged in the innermost corners of the soul. They crawl out to devour and destroy the characters. In their individual diegetic microworlds Captain Ahab and Jack Torrance become mad kings who are responsible for someone else’s destiny. Although each of them has a positive aspect, their dark side seems to be more powerful, which leads to their tragic ending.

It can be concluded that the development of Jack Torrance is somehow reminiscent of a 19th century dark romantic character, especially in his slow progression into madness and his fallibility. There are certain parallels between the characters of Captain Ahab and Jack Torrance. They both have their good part and their dark side but in both cases the dark side is what they succumb to, which ultimately

leads to their downfall. They can be compared to Shakespearean tragic heroes, but if Ahab is a heroic and charismatic leader, Torrance represents the tragedy of the common person. He is just a normal guy who is ruined by vice and failure. Another common feature between the characters is their madness. Ahab is monomaniac obsessed with killing the white whale. Jack loses his mind under the influence of the hotel's ghosts, which are the metaphorical representation of his personal problems. His obsession with the hotel's management can be associated with Ahab's monomania, but the roots of each character's fixation are different. The captain is blinded by his desire for revenge because of losing his leg to the whale, while Torrance goes mad primarily because of his alcoholic addiction and personal failures. Captain Ahab and Jack Torrance can be interpreted as epitome of the negative father. Ahab sacrifices his children to the altar of revenge and Jack represents a critique of the male individual's inadequacy. They are slowly headed to their inevitable downfall, each in his own tragedy – Ahab failing to kill Moby-Dick, and Jack failing to please the management. They are destroyed because of their darkness and madness.

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