



The Architecture of Madness: Domestic Entrapment and the Imprisoned Psyche in Stephen King's *The Shining* and *Misery*

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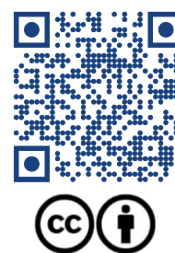
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Abstract— Stephen King, often relegated to the category of popular horror, uses the genre to explore profound psychological terrors, particularly those rooted in the domestic sphere. In *The Shining* (1977) and *Misery* (1987), King masterfully transforms the traditional sanctuary of the home into a claustrophobic prison, using this physical entrapment to explore the disintegration of the protagonist's psyche. This paper traces how Annie Wilkes's house in *Misery* and the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* operate as Gothic domestic prisons, deforming caregiving and family roles, and how the protagonists' psyches respond to, resist, or finally succumb to these pressures. The House becomes prison, and the psyche becomes the battleground. The architecture, isolation, control, and obsession combine to trap protagonists. The house or the hotel is never neutral: it becomes a character, a force, and a prison. Through the Overlook Hotel and Annie Wilkes's secluded home, King examines how isolation, external monstrous forces, and internal trauma conspire to dismantle identity, autonomy, and sanity, rendering the familiar home a site of ultimate horror.



Keywords— Domestic Entrapment, Control, Gothic, Home, Isolation, Psychological Prison.

Introduction

Home has been a foundational archetype in Western literature and culture, symbolizing safety and identity. Stephen King subverts this archetype with brutal efficiency, weaponizing domestic spaces to enact psychological torture upon his protagonists. Gaston Bachelard observes in *The Poetics of Space* that the house “shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6). Yet, as Gothic and postmodern writers demonstrate, this same structure may function as a prison that mirrors the anxieties of its inhabitants (Botting, 1996). Stephen King exploits this duality.

King's novels offer a complex, multi-layered body of work that provides invaluable insight into American culture, the art of storytelling, and the darkest and brightest corners of the human condition. Gothic fiction often uses the home or

castle as a site of confinement with ghostly pasts, family curses, and locked rooms. King draws on that tradition but modernizes it. In the concept of Gothic domesticity, spaces that are supposedly private, internal, familial become sites of cruelty, fear, and confinement. This is central to many of his novels. *Misery* and *The Shining* are especially powerful in their representation of this domestic entrapment. King's horror often returns to a paradox: home should be safe, nurturing, familiar; yet in his work home can become the locus of horror. The caregiver becomes the monster (*Misery*), the institution (hotel) becomes infected by history (*The Shining*), mental illness, addiction, and trauma.

Concepts such as coercive control, from abuse studies, help illuminate how power works in *Misery*: Annie's control over everything; painkillers, narrative, food, movement is a textbook example. In *The Shining*, the

hotel's influence works more diffusely, but still exerts pressure, uses manipulation, encourages Jack's worst impulses. Prolonged stress, isolation, fear, loss of control produce cognitive distortions, hallucinations, and breakdowns. These are vividly present in both novels.

In both, *Misery* and *The Shining*, the central horror is not an external monster invading from the outside, but the terrifying transformation of the protagonist's immediate environment into an inescapable gothic prison. Stephen King transforms domestic spaces into cages—houses or hotels that imprison bodies and souls. These physical settings reflect and intensify psychological entrapment. Through immobilization, isolation, and the inversion of caregiving roles, King externalizes the internal fears of his protagonists. The protagonists are trapped both physically and mentally: their environments are structured to restrict, to isolate, to surveil, and to exacerbate pre-existing fears and weaknesses. Paul Sheldon in *Misery* is imprisoned within Annie Wilkes's cottage not just by broken bones but by the suffocating rituals of control; Jack, Wendy, and Danny in *The Shining* find themselves trapped in the Overlook Hotel, a setting that both reflects and amplifies their psychological fractures. The spare bedroom where Paul is confined functions as a site of both physical captivity and psychological torture, reflecting what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term the "madwoman in the attic" motif in domestic Gothic fiction (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979).

This entrapment serves as a catalyst for a deep exploration of the protagonists' fractured psyches—Jack Torrance's battle with addiction, failure, and inherited madness, and Paul Sheldon's struggle with creative control, addiction, and utter powerlessness. The house, in both novels, becomes a character in itself: an active, malevolent agent in their psychological undoing.

The Overlook Hotel: The Gothic Prison of Inherited Madness

The Shining (1977) is one of the most popular and enduring horror stories of all time. It was inspired by King's stay at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. A sequel, titled *Doctor Sleep*, was published in 2013 and adapted into a film in 2019.

The novel follows Jack Torrance, an aspiring writer and a recovering alcoholic, who becomes the winter caretaker of the isolated Overlook Hotel with his wife Wendy and young son Danny. The vast, empty hotel gradually transforms into a psychological and supernatural prison, amplifying Jack's instability and turning the domestic space into a site of terror and entrapment. The Overlook is remote, cut off especially in winter. It is far more than a mere setting; it is a vast sentient prison designed to

intensify and exploit the vulnerabilities of its caretaker, Jack Torrance. The hotel itself is labyrinthine: large, full of corridors, rooms, staff ghosts, and history. The size and ghostly history overwhelm the family's sense of home. King establishes the hotel's isolating and confining nature from the outset. The Torrance family is snowed in, with the massive drifts physically imprisoning them: "The Overlook was almost buried in snow now, its dark roof and white-capped towers seeming to grow out of the earth itself" (*The Shining*, 1977, p. 215). The sheer size of the hotel, with its endless rooms and corridors, does not offer freedom but rather a labyrinth from which there is no escape, mirroring the labyrinth of Jack's deteriorating mind.

Jack enters Overlook with an ambition: to write, and to redeem himself. But those ambitions become shackles once the hotel takes over. The quote "The hotel was driving him crazy, and he knew it" (*The Shining*, 1977) reflects self-awareness yet inability to exit. The exchange with Danny that he wants Danny to stay there forever shows Jack internalizing the hotel's pull. He becomes both host and hostage. The idea of "home forever" becomes the idea of permanent entrapment. Danny's psyche is also under siege. His psychic ability ("the shining") makes him acutely aware of the hotel's presence. What seems like paranoid vision is real. The house-hotel does not merely shape external events—it reaches into minds.

Tony Magistrale in *The Moral Voyages of Stephen King* argues: "King's houses are never simply backdrops for the action; they are psychic arenas, physical manifestations of the wounds and weaknesses of the characters who inhabit them" (Magistrale, 1989, p. 54). The Overlook functions as a prison for Jack's psyche by preying on his deepest insecurities: his failure as a writer, his history of alcoholism and violence, and his terror of repeating the abuse he suffered from his own father. The hotel is a mirror of Jack's inner hell.

"The hotel was awake. Not just alive, but awake." (King, *The Shining*, p. 289). This quote not only personifies the Overlook but also portrays it as an active antagonist. The hotel does not create new madness but resurrects and amplifies the old. It imprisons Jack with his past. This is evident in the visions of former bartender Lloyd, who serves him phantom drinks, tempting the recovering alcoholic. Jack himself senses it: "This inhuman place makes human monsters" (*The Shining*, p. 150). This shows his awareness, however fleeting, of the hotel's corrupting influence. The hotel taunts Jack with what he desires most (a drink, success, a release from responsibility) to better control him. As critic Tony Magistrale notes, "The Overlook's strategy is to convince

Jack that his only path to liberation and creative power lies in the destruction of his family” (Magistrale, *Hollywood's Stephen King*, 2003, p. 45). His “duty” to the hotel becomes a delusion of purpose that justifies his violent impulses, making him a willing prisoner. The hotel's manager, Ullman, explicitly states the terms of their isolation: “You will be completely cut off from the outside world... from about November through April” (King, *The Shining*, p. 60). This frames the entrapment from the very beginning. The wasps nest is a potent metaphor for the dormant horror within the domestic space: “A great gray wasps’ nest, like a diseased and monstrous placenta, hung over the table in the center of the room” (King, *The Shining*, p. 382). Jack Torrance’s personal demons—alcoholism, guilt over past failures, anger—are amplified by the hotel. The Overlook seems to feed on his weaknesses, amplifying his rage and isolation. There are moments of internal voice (hearing voices, hallucinations) that show how the hotel penetrates mind-space. Danny, with his “shining,” also picks up residual ghosts, psychic residue. The hotel becomes a mental prison: dreams, visions, voices, confusion between what’s “real” and what’s reflection of internal fear.

Jack’s famous line, “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just going to bash your brains in,” spoken to Wendy through the door he is axing (King, *The Shining*, p. 384), is the ultimate symbol of domestic entrapment turned violent. The door of the home, meant to keep danger out, is now the barrier through which the danger within threatens to burst. The home has become a lethal trap, and the patriarch its primary weapon. Jack's failure is marked by the hotel's victory: “He was the hotel, and the hotel was him” (King, *The Shining*, p. 412). This shows the complete erasure of his identity.

Annie Wilkes’s Home: The Prison of Fanaticism and Control

Misery is a prime example, serving as a horrifying allegory for the creative process, fan culture, and the struggle for artistic control. In *Misery* (1987), novelist Paul Sheldon, after completing a manuscript for a new book, suffers a car accident during a snowstorm. He is rescued by Annie Wilkes, a former nurse who identifies herself as his “number one fan.” Instead of taking him to a hospital, Annie confines him to her isolated rural home, her spare bedroom, where she nurses his injuries but simultaneously holds him captive. Her obsession with Paul’s fictional heroine, Misery Chastain, compels her to force him into writing a new novel that resurrects the character. Immobilized by his broken legs and trapped by Annie’s erratic, violent control, Paul experiences the domestic space not as a refuge but as a suffocating prison where his

creativity is both weaponized and constrained for survival. The novel illustrates what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the “domestic prison” trope of Gothic fiction, where the home becomes a space of female power and male helplessness (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979).

If the Overlook is a sprawling gothic prison, Annie Wilkes’s home is a minimalist, intimate chamber of horrors. The entrapment here is not supernatural but terrifyingly real. Paul’s prison is a single room: “The room was... his world. His cell.” (*Misery*, 1987, p. 57). The domestic setting is perverted utterly; the bed is a site of agony, the door a symbol of his impotence, and the everyday objects—a typewriter, a stack of paper, a glass of water—become tools of either torture or fleeting hope.

Annie’s home is a prison designed to completely dominate Paul’s psyche and creative will. His physical helplessness, his shattered legs, his dependence on her for food, medication, and basic hygiene is a metaphor for his psychological imprisonment. Annie, his “number one fan,” does not just want to own him; she wants to own his creative output, forcing him to resurrect the character he killed off, Misery Chastain. This is a profound violation of the self. As scholar Heidi Strengell observes, “Annie represents the ultimate perversion of the reader-text relationship... She embodies the threat of the fan who consumes the artist literally and figuratively” (Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King*, 2005, p. 172).

Paul must constantly perform gratitude and subservience to survive, all while plotting his escape. The house becomes a panopticon; Annie’s sudden appearances in the doorway frame her as a monstrous warden. His identity as a successful, autonomous author is systematically erased and replaced with that of a helpless addict, hooked on the painkillers she withholds and a puppet. The domestic space is the stage for this brutal power struggle, where a typewriter and a manuscript become the weapons. Paul's defiance is tied to his writing: “The book was the only weapon left in his arsenal... He would write it for himself. For survival.” (King, *Misery*, p. 189). Paul’s entrapment is summed up in his realization: “She was his gaoler, and she might also be his executioner.” (King, *Misery*, p. 101). Annie Wilkes smashes Paul Sheldon’s ankles with a sledgehammer to prevent him from fleeing. This act is not merely physical violence—it is a calculated assertion of control. By destroying his mobility, she transforms the domestic space into an inescapable prison and reduces him to total dependency.

Comparative Analysis: The Common Threads of Entrapment

Often, the true horror is not the external monster but the human capacity for violence, cruelty, and madness. Annie

Wilkes and Jack Torrance are terrifying precisely because their humanity is warped, not absent. Michael R. Collings in *The Many Facets of Stephen King* writes: "In both *The Shining* and *Misery*, the protagonist is pitted against an environment that seeks to consume and redefine him. The central conflict is a battle for the soul, fought on the battlefield of a corrupted domestic space" (Collings, 1986, p. 88). While the mechanisms differ, the prisons of the Overlook and Annie's home share core functions in dismantling the protagonist's psyche.

Both settings are geographically remote, cutting the protagonists off from any hope of external rescue. This isolation turns the focus inward, forcing a confrontation with their own demons and their captors. In *Misery* the setting is remote, isolated, with no phone or outside contact in many moments. This isolation enhances Paul's sense of being cut off. The house does not allow escape paths.

The Overlook and Annie Wilkes serve as dark mirrors to the protagonists' flaws. The Overlook reflects and encourages Jack's inner violence and addiction. Annie embodies the terrifying end result of Paul's own creation—a consumer who consumes the creator. They are trapped not just in a place, but with a version of their own worst selves.

Addiction appears to be a Tool of Entrapment. Paul thinks of the Novril as "Annie's magic powder... the stuff that made the pain go away" (King, *Misery*, p. 75), highlighting his chemical dependency on his captor. Jack, receives a "drink" from Lloyd, "The drink was gone. He felt the warmth in his belly... the old comfort" (King, *The Shining*, p. 257). Both quotes show the captors providing a substance that creates a false sense of comfort and reinforces dependency. Both narratives use addiction as a means of control. The Overlook offers Jack the illusion of alcohol, playing on his addiction to fuel his rage. Annie uses Paul's addiction to Novril to keep him docile and dependent, literally drugging him into submission.

There is a struggle for Creative/Autonomous self. Ultimately, both novels are about the defense of the self. Jack fails, his creative potential and identity wholly consumed by the hotel's evil. Paul, however, uses his creativity as a weapon, fighting to write his own story—both literally and figuratively—to survive and reclaim his autonomy from his captor.

Paul's physical immobilization – his broken legs and dependence on Annie makes the house a prison. Mentally, Paul vacillates between hope, strategy, fear, resentment, and self-awareness. His plea "let me out of this or kill me" (*Misery*, 1987) indicates that escape is not just physical departure but a release from psychological torture

too. Enclotted in domestic trappings (food, routines, kind gestures), yet unrelenting control, he is pushed toward extremes. Even when Paul escapes physically, trauma lingers. After his rescue, he still suffers nightmares, fear, guilt: evidence that domestic entrapment leaves psychic residue.

CONCLUSION

In *Misery* and *The Shining*, Stephen King deconstructs the myth of the safe domestic space, revealing its potential to become a nightmare of psychological imprisonment. They transform domestic interiors into psychological battlegrounds where familiarity curdles into confinement. These novels show that confinement can be both external (walls, injuries, supernatural forces) and internal (obsession, guilt, fear). King forces readers to reckon with the idea that domestic safety is fragile, that guardian roles can invert, that isolation and control are far more dangerous than monsters in the dark. The Overlook Hotel and Annie Wilkes's home are not passive settings but active antagonists, meticulously designed to break their inhabitants. Through these domestic prisons, King explores profound themes of addiction, madness, creative ownership, and the fragility of the autonomous self. The true horror in these novels is not the axe-wielding father or the hobbling sledgehammer, but the terrifyingly familiar space—the home—transformed into a stage for utter psychological annihilation. The protagonist's battle is not merely to escape a physical location, but to escape with their mind intact. Ultimately, both works expose a profound anxiety at the heart of domesticity. Home is no longer refuge but a crucible—one that seals its doors, tightens its corridors, and patiently drags its inhabitants toward madness.

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