

# Women, Role Failure, and the Nuclear Family in Stephen King's *The Shining*

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## ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** While Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) features a hotel haunted by ghosts, the main female character Wendy Torrance is more haunted by her fear of failing to fulfill her gender role within the structure of a traditional, white, American nuclear family. In this paper, I analyze how Wendy's fear of being an unsuccessful wife and mother illustrates structural problems within the nuclear family that can be detrimental to women. This familial model can produce persistent insecurity and anxiety for women. It also reinforces the delegation of power to the family's sole patriarchal authority figure: the husband. *The Shining* reveals how these issues become especially problematic in situations of abuse. However, it also highlights an opportunity for women to escape from both abuse and the fear of role failure: completely abandoning the structure of the nuclear family. Thus, *The Shining* illuminates inherent flaws within the nuclear family and suggests that women cannot find autonomy, freedom, or happiness within its confines.

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## Introduction

Stephen King's 1977 novel *The Shining* tells the story of the Torrance family: Jack, Wendy, and their son Danny. They find themselves trapped in the haunted Overlook Hotel after Jack takes a job there as the winter caretaker. The hotel is infested with ghosts who attack Danny and prey upon Jack's tendencies towards alcoholism and violence. However, the true horror of Wendy's experience at the Overlook arises from the constant, haunting burden of fulfilling her roles as wife and mother in the nuclear family. This fear is illustrated through the lasting psychological

impact of the emotional abuse Wendy endures at her mother's hands, in which her mother insinuates Wendy's inability to fulfill the roles of wife and mother in the nuclear family. Wendy's consequent desperation to prove she can fulfill these roles renders her vulnerable to abuse from her husband Jack, as she relies on him—the family patriarch—for confirmation that she is adequately satisfying her duties within their nuclear family. Through Wendy's struggles within this familial structure, *The Shining* ultimately argues that women can only free themselves from the stress and abuse their roles impose upon them by completely abandoning the structure of the nuclear family.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the nuclear family was a valorized institution in the United States. The traditional white, heterosexual nuclear family was seen as synonymous with economic prosperity and success. This “two-parent” familial form assigns men and women their roles in the family based on their gender: the husband provides for the family and takes on the role of a patriarchal authority figure tasked with “decision making” for the family, while the wife is “in charge of children and domestic management” (Greenbaum 55, 46). This division of gender roles was praised for creating “a functional socioeconomic unit, ready to participate” in the Cold War era “consumption frenzy” (Ribieras 41). Moreover, the nuclear family was seen as economically successful because its structure requires the father to earn “sufficient income to permit the mother to stay home” (Greenbaum 55). The roles of the nuclear family can place immense pressure on men to provide for their families, as is illustrated through Jack Torrance’s psychological breakdown at the Overlook Hotel; the pressures of his responsibility to his family breed resentment towards his wife and son that eventually manifests in violence. However, in the 1970s, women’s roles in the nuclear family received especial social emphasis because conservatives sought to “revalue the woman’s role within the home” and “preserve traditional womanhood” by preventing the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (Ribieras 38). Through Wendy, *The Shining* shows how the nuclear family model and the specific roles of women as housewives and mothers can place pressure on women to be constantly loving, supportive, and submissive—a pressure which can damage their self-esteem and render them unhealthy reliant on the judgments of other people to derive self-esteem and a sense of success. Wendy’s experiences illuminate the flaws inherent to the nuclear family structure, especially the stress of maintaining this “traditional womanhood” through the roles of wife and mother.

## 2. Wendy’s Mother and the Fear of Role Failure

Wendy’s fear of failing to fulfill feminine gender roles is embodied by her abusive mother, whose tactics

of abuse relate to nuclear gender roles. She abuses Wendy to cope with her own inability to fulfill her role as the nuclear wife. She kicks Wendy out of the house while Wendy is in college because she thinks Wendy is “responsible for [her] divorce” (King 65). However, the divorce, which Wendy’s father initiates, is later implied to be Wendy’s mother’s fault; her husband left her because she “hounded” him too much (King 359). Thus, the reason for their divorce is the wife overstepping the boundaries of her role by giving orders to the patriarch instead of being submissive to him. Wendy’s mother ultimately allows Wendy to return home because when Wendy “crawl[s] back begging forgiveness”, her mother “can go on making believe [the divorce] was [Wendy’s] fault” (King 65). As divorce was seen as going “[a]gainst [the] image” of “a well-balanced, two-parent, nuclear family”, Wendy’s mother’s denial enables her to avoid accepting responsibility for the failure of her nuclear family (Greenbaum 55). The fact that she allows Wendy to keep “crawling back” so she can continue to blame her daughter demonstrates the precarity of her denial and the baselessness of her claim; she relies on Wendy’s continued presence to convince herself that the divorce is Wendy’s fault instead of her own. This demonstrates how the stigma of divorce—the mark of the failed nuclear family—is so great that Wendy’s mother *must* avoid accepting responsibility and consequently engages in a consistent process of denial. Moreover, the fact that her denial manifests as verbal abuse towards Wendy prevents Wendy from considering her mother as a victim of the unrealistic expectations the nuclear family sets for women.

Wendy’s mother also insults her daughter by calling her a “home-wrecker”, further demonstrating how she uses her emotional abuse to blame Wendy for dissolving her nuclear family (King 74). Characterizing Wendy as a “home-wrecker” presents Wendy’s mother, in opposition, as a loyal wife who has been wronged by another woman. Moreover, by positioning Wendy in opposition to the “home”—the domain of the wife in the nuclear family—it presents Wendy as the transgressor of traditional gender roles rather than her mother. Thus, Wendy’s mother’s abuse displays the pressure

on women to fulfill traditional gender roles; Wendy's mother feels this pressure so intensely that she feels the need to deny her transgressions and displace responsibility for them onto her daughter. However, by presenting Wendy as a threat to the nuclear family, she intensifies the weight of this pressure on Wendy. Her emotional abuse and its resonance with Wendy thus become representations of Wendy's overwhelming fear of role failure.

For instance, Wendy's mother makes Wendy feel like "an inadequate mother" when Wendy takes her son Danny to her mother's house (King 67). Wendy's mother achieves this by "always rema[king] Danny's diapers, frown[ing] over his formula", and "spot[ting] the accusatory first signs of a rash on the baby's bottom or privates" (King 67). The fact that Wendy perceives these actions as an insult to her mothering abilities even though "[h]er mother never s[ays] anything overtly" to that effect shows how fragile her confidence is in her capabilities as a mother (King 67). The burden of fulfilling this role causes her to interpret everything as a sign of failure—for instance, seeing a diaper rash as "accusatory" or her mother's actions as an indication of her poor mothering skills rather than a tactic of abuse. Moreover, Wendy describes the feeling of inadequacy that her mother induces in her as a "price" that she "maybe always w[ill]" pay for seeking her mother's help (King 67). The fact that Wendy, years later, still feels this inadequacy—and believes that she will continue to feel it in the future—shows the lasting impact that a moment of failing to fulfill a gender role can have on a woman. The enduring effects of Wendy's mother's abuse reveal how uneasy the rigid roles of the nuclear family can make women feel about their ability to fulfill their role in their family; anything that can be perceived as a sign of role failure can become an everlasting mark of inadequacy in their minds.

### 3. Entrapment within Patriarchy

*The Shining* also shows how the nuclear family's gender roles reinforce patriarchal authority at women's expense. Wendy judges her worth based on how well she fulfills the gender roles in her nuclear family—an

evaluation that relies on her husband Jack's assessment of her skills as a wife and mother. Consequently, Wendy cannot derive her self-esteem internally, and Jack has the power to manipulate her self-worth, which makes her vulnerable to abuse from him.

Wendy's method of alleviating her doubts about her mothering abilities demonstrates how her self-esteem is tied to others' judgment of her role fulfillment. These "fears of inadequacy [are] erased" when Jack "lead[s] her into the bedroom" for sex (King 68). Thus, Wendy makes up for her failure as a mother through her success as a wife, which she achieves by sexually pleasing Jack—the patriarch whom it is her role to serve. Thus, she can only alleviate her fear of role failure and gain confidence when she pleases her husband. This forces her to rely on Jack to derive self-esteem.

Wendy's reliance on external affirmation to support her self-esteem produces insecurity and doubt, demonstrated by Wendy's self-criticism. This typically manifests in comparisons between her own emotions and behaviors and those of her mother. For instance, when Wendy criticizes Jack for accidentally dropping baby Danny while drunk, she "hear[s] so much of her mother talking to her departed father in her own voice that she [i]s sickened and afraid" (King 71). Wendy compares her own voice to that of her mother challenging her father's patriarchal power. Thus, her aversion to becoming like her mother arises from her fear of similarly failing in her role as the submissive wife. This fear even surpasses concerns about perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Her fear of role failure arises to punish her for protecting Danny from Jack because defending her son goes against her job in the nuclear family of submitting to her husband's authority. Consequently, she experiences an anxiety so intense, it causes her to doubt an action meant to protect her son from an abusive environment. Wendy's distress about becoming like her mother reveals the damage the nuclear family's gender roles can inflict on women; the constant pressure to meet these roles' expectations creates anxiety, doubt, and insecurity for women when any threat to role fulfillment arises.

Moreover, Wendy's tendency towards self-criticism causes her to accept responsibility for Jack's flaws. When Jack begins to develop a problem with alcoholism, Wendy blames herself for Jack's behavior and the dangers it poses to her family. Her self-doubt begins to spiral: "was she not holding her husband right? Why else would he take his joy out of the house?" (King 70-71). This demonstrates how Wendy's insecurities within the nuclear family benefit Jack, the patriarch, at her expense; her self-doubt causes her to absolve him of blame for his actions that harm the family—a blame which she then attributes to herself. As her success in fulfilling her role relies upon her husband's judgment, she interprets Jack's problems as evidence of her role failure.

Despite Wendy's prior knowledge of the dangers Jack poses to Danny—besides his alcoholism, Jack exhibits violent tendencies when he breaks Danny's arm and attacks one of his students—her self-doubt prevents her from taking action to protect Danny from Jack. For instance, when bruises appear on Danny's neck—which Danny claims were caused by an attack from a female ghost living in the hotel—Wendy's concern for Danny's safety competes with Jack's accusation that she unfairly blamed him for producing the bruises: "Had she *wanted* to think Jack was to blame? Was she that jealous? It was the way her mother would have thought, that was the really horrible thing" (King 359). Trapped in a hotel with no one other than herself, Jack, and Danny, it makes perfect sense that she would assume Jack caused Danny's bruises. As she knows she did not cause the bruises herself and is currently unaware of the presence and power of the Overlook's ghosts, Jack is the only other party present to whom she can attribute Danny's injury. Furthermore, because of Jack's history of violence, it is not unreasonable for Wendy to believe that he could have lost his temper again and hurt Danny. However, she is unable to consider these points because the idea of doubting Jack—of disputing his authority as her husband—immediately gives rise to a comparison to her mother. She sees accusing Jack of causing the bruises as "the way her mother would have thought" manifesting in her own

thought process rather than recognizing that, given her current knowledge, Jack is the most logical person to blame. She characterizes her mother negatively by referring to her as "jealous"—a word that reinforces Wendy's mother's animosity towards her husband and thus her misalignment from the ideal of the doting, submissive wife. Wendy's fear of being like her mother thus appears to be synonymous with her fear of role failure: she cannot even conceive of the possibility of Jack's abuse without failing in her role as the obedient wife. However, this fear renders her unable to protect herself and Danny from Jack's abuse. Thus, her anxiety about role failure not only enables her husband to get away with abuse, but also brings shame upon Wendy for considering the possibility of abusive behavior from him.

Jack also weaponizes Wendy's fear of role failure to manipulate her into submission. When she disobeys him—and thus defies his authority as the patriarch—he insinuates that she is failing to fulfill her role in the nuclear family. One tactic he uses is comparing Wendy to her mother when she stands up to him. For example, after Wendy accepts that Jack did not create the bruises on Danny's neck, she reasonably assumes that the woman who strangled Danny is a human squatting in the hotel. At this point, she is unaware of the supernatural presences within the Overlook. When Jack decides to look for this woman, Wendy—afraid of the dangerous person inside the hotel with them—orders him to stay:

*"Don't you dare leave us alone!"* she shrieked at him. Spittle flew from her lips with the force of her cry.

Jack said: "Wendy, that's a remarkable imitation of your mom."

She burst into tears then, unable to cover her face because Danny was on her lap. (King 368)

Wendy's request to not split up the family to best ensure their protection is reasonable, and her emotional response makes perfect sense given the frightening situation she is in: she believes she is trapped in a hotel with a stranger who just attacked her son. However, since she is disobeying Jack's wishes, Jack employs a comparison to her mother not only to upset

her, but also to claim that she is trying to usurp his patriarchal authority and therefore is failing in her role as the wife. His success—making Wendy “burst into tears”—illustrates how distressful role failure can be for women.

Furthermore, this example highlights how nuclear gender roles only permit women to evaluate themselves through their husbands’ perspectives. When Jack claims Wendy has failed in her role by comparing her to her mother, it deeply upsets Wendy because she believes that he is right—despite the contrary evidence that could affirm her success as a mother. In this scene, she puts Danny’s needs above her own; when she cries, she is “unable to cover her face because Danny [i]s on her lap”. By not removing Danny to serve her own emotional needs, she demonstrates her devotion to her son and thus fulfills her role as a mother. However, she is unable to recognize this achievement or derive self-esteem from it because Jack is scolding her for her supposed failure to fulfill her role in the family. Jack, being the authority figure and decision-maker of the family, holds a similar authority over determining Wendy’s ability to fulfill her duties to the family. Wendy’s caring behavior towards Danny is meaningless in improving her opinion of herself as a mother because Jack chooses to insult rather than praise her mothering abilities. As she can only assess her success or failure through Jack’s evaluation, she cannot empower herself through her own self-assessment to overcome his abusive insinuations.

Another way Jack insults Wendy’s abilities as a wife and mother when she defies his patriarchal authority is by calling her a “bitch” (King 545, 556, 587-588, 590). This word insults women by insinuating their insensitivity, a contrast to the “association of (white, middle-class, heterosexual) femininity with sensitivity” (Kleinman et al. 59). This “ideology behind women as sensitive and caring” reinforces the nuclear family structure, as it “justifies men’s absence from housework and child-care” by presenting women as better suited to that kind of work (Kleinman et al. 59). Thus, by calling Wendy a “bitch”, Jack claims that she is not

caring enough to fulfill her roles as wife and mother. Additionally, by using this word, he makes another comparison between Wendy and her mother; both he and Wendy describe Wendy’s mother as a “bitch” rather than an abuser (King 56, 206, 384). This presents Wendy’s mother as someone who merely transgresses her gender role, rather than someone who emotionally abuses her child. Consequently, this word renders Wendy unable to distinguish between her mother’s abusive behaviors—such as harassing her father—and her own reasonable deviation from the norm of the nuclear wife: telling Jack to stay to protect her family from an outside threat. As the role of the nuclear wife encompasses both being kind and being submissive, words like “bitch” that equate all role transgressions present women’s assertive actions as acts of cruelty, which encourages submission to patriarchal authority.

#### 4. Liberation from the Nuclear Family

Wendy can only free herself from the influences of her abusers—and thus the pain that nuclear gender roles inflict upon her—by completely abandoning the structure of the nuclear family. She achieves a brief victory over Jack’s dictatorship when she and Danny—mother and son, both roles that should be submissive to the patriarch—unite to challenge Jack’s authority. When Wendy confesses that she “keep[s] hearing voices in [her] head” and “feel[s] like [she is] going crazy”, Jack gaslights her by asking, “What voices?” (King 441). Gaslighting is a form of abuse in which one person “manipulat[es]” another “into questioning [their] own sanity” (“Gaslighting, N.2”). Jack has heard and interacted with the voices in the Overlook; he knows that they are present, but he denies it to perpetuate Wendy’s doubt in her perceptions. Thus, Jack uses his authority as the patriarch to assert a claim over determining reality. By making Wendy think she is hallucinating, he forces her to rely on him to know what is real. However, Wendy appeals to Danny, who confirms her perception by “nodd[ing] slowly” (King 441). Although Jack attempts to dismiss this as “duet hysterics”, his authority over determining reality is much weaker now that no one else in his family believes his claims (King 441). Wendy receiving confirmation in the validity of her perceptions



emboldens her to directly challenge Jack's assertion that "[a] short circuit" caused the unoperated elevator to move (King 443). Jack "shout[s]" at her to stop her, but she climbs into the elevator car and sees more objective evidence that her husband cannot be trusted: "drifting confetti", "[a] green party streamer", and "a black silk cat's eye mask" (King 443). She throws these out of the car for Jack and Danny to see, asking, "Does that look like a short circuit to you, Jack?" (King 443). Armed with objective evidence and confirmation, Wendy rejects her husband's ultimate authority to determine what reality is. By usurping the traditional power hierarchy of the nuclear family, Wendy becomes empowered to directly contradict her husband and stand up for herself. This illustrates how, within the confines of the feminine roles of the nuclear family, it is difficult for women to challenge their husband's assertions, even if they are objectively false. Only by dismantling patriarchal authority can Wendy assert her own opinions, perceptions, and experiences, as well as overcome gaslighting.

Despite this momentary victory, Jack's abusive reign over the Torrance family continues because Wendy still maintains hope that her family will become a successful nuclear family. Wendy defends herself and Danny from Jack with tactics that give Jack the opportunity to rejoin the family. For instance, she locks him in the Overlook's pantry because "[t]here's food in there" and "[i]t's warm", ensuring that Jack will survive "until help comes" to rescue them all from the Overlook (King 551). Furthermore, as she formulates this plan, she "think[s] he might be all right again" by the time they are rescued: "All of us might be all right. I think there's still a chance for that" (King 551). Wendy treats Jack's violent outburst as a temporary problem that can be resolved and forgiven, rather than an unchanging characteristic. Although she undermines Jack's authority to protect herself and Danny, her continued belief in his chance for redemption—and the chance for him to be a part of her "all right" family—demonstrates that she has not truly recognized his abusive nature. Wendy's inability to free herself from Jack's influence proves to be dangerous, as Jack ultimately escapes

from the pantry, armed with a roque mallet and intent on killing her and Danny. The continuation of Jack's abuse is enabled by Wendy's inability to liberate herself from her fear that her nuclear family will fall apart. The near-fatal consequences of this hope reveal how anxiety about role failure can restrict women's abilities to escape from dangerous patriarchal authority figures.

Wendy's "sudden numbing" realization "that [Jack] mean[s] to beat her to death with the mallet he h[o]ld[s] in his hands" after he escapes from the pantry finally gives Wendy the strength to defend herself without consideration for Jack's safety or redemption (King 587). When she has the opportunity to strike him, she "burie[s] [a] kitchen knife in his lower back up to the handle", a lethal stab that "kill[s]" Jack and would have ensured her and Danny's safety from Jack forever had the ghosts of the Overlook not intervened and resurrected him (King 589-590). Wendy's attempt to murder Jack demonstrates how she understands that he is a real and permanent threat to her and Danny's safety. Unlike her previous attempts to save herself and Danny from Jack, like locking him in the pantry, Wendy's attempt to kill Jack forever—with no opportunity for him to change, be forgiven, or rejoin the family—signifies an attempt to completely free herself and Danny from the structure of the nuclear family by dismantling its patriarchal power structure. In removing a crucial figure in the nuclear family, the patriarch, she destroys any possibility of her family matching the nuclear model. She has fully abandoned her hope of the Torrances becoming a successful nuclear family, and completely diverges from the role of the submissive wife; by killing Jack, she asserts power over him and demonstrates her willingness to completely end his reign over the family.

At the end of the novel, she, Danny, and Dick Hallorann—the cook at the Overlook, who comes back to the hotel to rescue Danny—escape from the Overlook on a snowmobile, leaving Jack inside the hotel to be killed forever by the exploding boiler. The Torrance family cannot fulfill the nuclear model in the absence of a patriarch; the act of abandoning Jack is thus simultaneously an abandonment of the nuclear family.

However, it seems as though Wendy is better off in a different family structure: raising Danny on her own as a single mother. Hallorann acknowledges that, although Wendy “had been dragged around to the dark side of the moon” through her experiences with Jack, she “c[a]me back able to put the pieces back together” (King 653). This not only offers hope by showing that Wendy has managed to recover from the trauma she has experienced, but it also attests to Wendy’s strength in being able to heal from Jack’s abuse. She is no longer the insecure wife and mother seeking validation from others. Instead, she finally achieves autonomy, as her own inner strength is enough to support her recovery. Moreover, a further deviation from the nuclear family’s role of the housewife provides another potential area of satisfaction in Wendy’s new life. As a single mother, she must work to support herself and Danny—and Hallorann describes her new job as “[s]omething [she] could get interested in” (King 655). This presents Wendy’s career as a source of satisfaction that she would be unable to experience as a stay-at-home housewife. After Wendy finally frees herself from the confining roles of the nuclear family, she can find her own inner strength and happiness, demonstrating the positive potential of role failure for women.

## 5. Conclusion

As Wendy demonstrates, the gender roles of the nuclear family create pressure for women and induce stress about role failure. However, when this role failure occurs and women completely abandon the nuclear family, they are freed from their anxiety and from the patriarchal oppression that their anxiety supports. *The Shining* challenges the notions of the superiority of the nuclear family and the importance of feminine gender roles that were widely circulating throughout its time. It shows how the nuclear family structure only serves to benefit one person—the patriarchal authority figure. Thus, Wendy’s experiences in *The Shining* suggest that it is necessary to consider other family structures that promote an equal balance of power and avoid demanding adherence to a rigid set of roles so that all family members can find freedom, autonomy, and satisfaction.

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