



An Exploration of the Mad Scientist Archetype in Stephen King's *Revival*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to identify and analyse the characteristics of the mad scientist character archetype in Stephen King's horror novel Revival. It is an in-depth exploration of the unique aspects of the archetype which often includes unsettling traits like obsessive tendencies, questionable morals, hubristic nature, degrees of insanity, evil intentions, villainy, apathy, self-centred motivations and other quirks and eccentricities. The mad scientist in King's story is an ex-preacher Charles Jacobs, an electricity aficionado who meddles with a power source called "secret electricity". He conducts experiments on the uninformed public and talks his way to gain easy victims using his showmanship and experience as a preacher. He observes his human lab rats in order to improve the efficacy of his electricity gadgets. He is indifferent to the unwelcome aftereffects of his experiments and continues to wreak havoc and cause negative consequences including mass murders and suicides. He undauntedly attempts to play God in his final experiment, assuming powers to intervene in the process of death and get a glimpse of the afterlife, which is forbidden and metaphorically reserved to God-like beings. This endangers life on earth and requires the hero Jamie Morton's help to restore the balance of the working of the universe.

Keywords: Mad Scientist, archetype, afterlife, electricity, playing God, experiments, revival

Introduction

The "King of Horror" Stephen King's *Revival* is a dark horror novel inspired by the works of the Welsh writer Arthur Machen's horror novella *The Great God Pan* (1894) and the English writer Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818). The novel predominantly explores the consequences of the intertwining of the lives of an electric guitarist, Jamie Morton and his friend, an ex-preacher, Charles Jacobs. The twenty-three-year-old Jacobs meets Jamie in Harlow for the first time when he is six, and it does not take long for them to start bonding over projects involving electricity. Jacobs is an electricity aficionado and has access to the untapped source

of power he calls "secret electricity" which he later wields to have a preview of the afterlife.

Banished from his position as a preacher at the First Methodist Church in Harlow after a blasphemous sermon denouncing God, influenced by the grief of the untimely loss of his wife Patsy and little son Morrie, Jacobs becomes a fair showman and later as Pastor Danny Jacobs conducting electrical experiments on people at the expense of the victims' physical and mental health. Under the pretext of helping Jamie recover from his addiction to heroin, Jacobs hits him with secret electricity and this leads to Jamie's troubles with the aftereffects and the discovery of Jacobs's ill-intentions. Their shared



history forces Jamie to assist Jacobs on his final, lethal experiment to take a glance into the afterlife, which shatters the myth of the Biblical dichotomy of heaven and hell and provides a preview into endless suffering in a terrible landscape called “The Null” ruled by an ant-like cyclopean creature, The Mother.

Archetypes

The term “archetype” can be defined as the model, pattern, or universally recognizable idea that can be traced in works of literature and art (Lustig-Curran, Heather, and Angela Gentry). In literature, archetypes are the commonly recurring elements including images, symbols, motifs, themes, characters and plot structures that transcend time, geography and culture and are consistent enough to be considered universal. Character archetypes are the recognisable persons in a literary piece who are created with specific attributes to fulfil specific roles and aid in the process of development and understanding of its theme, meaning and purpose. Some common character archetypes include the hero, the villain, the creator, the rebel, the joker, the trickster, the guardian, etc.

The Mad Scientist Archetype

The mad scientist is a character archetype featuring individuals known for their extremely ambitious and dangerous scientific experiments. The uniqueness of their personalities often includes unsettling traits like obsessive tendencies, questionable morals and hygiene, clumsiness, hubristic nature, degrees of insanity, evil intentions, villainy, apathy, self-centred motivations, reclusive nature and other quirks and eccentricities (Abreu). While most of them are notorious antagonists and are inherently sinister with evil intentions and are referred to as “evil geniuses”, some with benign intentions become antagonists owing to the dangers that arise from their work or experiments. The mad scientists work on experiments that involve fictional technology. These experiments make use of elements or meddle with forces that are usually forbidden and result in bizarre disasters or abominations. Their undaunted attempts to play God, assuming powers of decision, intervention, or control of what is metaphorically reserved to the one who is placed on the pedestal as God precipitates negative consequences that require

the hero’s help to restore the balance of the working of the universe.

Charles Jacobs – The Mad Scientist in Stephen King’s Revival

Obsession with Electricity

“Electricity is one of God’s doorways to the infinite.” (King 29). Throughout King’s Revival, Charles Jacobs displays an undue fondness for both regular electricity and a power source he calls “secret electricity” that only he can manipulate. He is obsessed with electricity right from his days as a young preacher at Harlow. His fervour for electricity overshadows his devotion to his profession. To him, electricity is nothing short of a “miracle” and he is adamant about finding ways to incorporate aspects of it even in his preaching and religious mission. He crafts devices or teaching tools that use the principles of electricity and entertains the pre-teenage and teenage section of his congregation in the Methodist Youth Fellowship. He is specifically proud of one of his many creations called the “Peaceable Lake” which replicates the astounding narrative of Jesus walking on water with a battery-powered backpack on metal tracks. His wild obsession with electricity is evident when he strongly declares that electricity is “a gift from God that makes us feel godlike every time we flip a switch” (King 17). His interaction with electricity is certainly more than just “a hobby that drives his wife crazy” as it takes up his time, energy and mindscape and makes him feel alive, excited and empowered.

Secret Electricity - The Fictional Technology

Mad scientists are known for their extraordinary work involving fictional science and technology. In Revival, Charles Jacobs celebrates the access to the power source he calls “secret electricity”. He claims it to be a kind of power source that originates from the ultimate source of power that Ludvig Prinn in his fictional grimoire *De Vermis Mysteriis* calls “potestas magnum universum”. The secret electricity and other sources of power, including lightning that occurs due to electrical imbalances, are mere trickles sourced from the potestas magnum universum. His curiosity and interest in electricity emboldens him to venture into a region that no mortal dares to enter and remains there till death does him part.



Jacobs is piqued to explore more and master the manipulation of secret electricity after the success of his first experimental cure of Jamie's brother Conrad Morton. Conrad is unable to speak due to the hyperextension of the neck after a skiing accident. Jacobs uses a homemade Electrical Nerve Stimulator (ENS) gadget powered by secret electricity to shock Conrad and it almost immediately restores his ability to speak. Jamie and Jacobs are equally stunned at the efficacy of the treatment. "Reverend Jacobs had been as surprised as we were. He hadn't expected it to work." (48). Conrad's cure becomes the "ground zero" for Jacobs who advances from creating working models of Biblical narratives to experimenting with the effects of secret electricity on the human body.

Jacobs's transformation from a preacher to a showman at a fair in Tulsa, Oklahoma, enables the amalgamation of making a living, finding easy victims and experimenting with his power source. Leaving Harlow, he performs at the fair and his act is called "Portraits in Lightning". Through his performance, he exploits innocent victims who fall prey to his enthralling display of creating flashy portraits. Later in the novel, Jamie's addiction to drugs and Jacobs's addiction to experiments with secret electricity meld their motives into one and lead the ex-preacher to study the effects of secret electricity upon human lives.

Religion, Secret Electricity and Manipulation

"Electricity is the basis of all life." (192). After the outrageous sermon denying God, Jacobs is driven by his attachment towards secret electricity. The Bible is quickly replaced by the grimoire *De Vermis Mysteriis* and he, from his position as a minister in the First Methodist Church, Harlow, transforms into "Reverend C. Danny Jacobs, chief prelate in the First Church of Electricity." (196). He staunchly believes that "All diseases are electrical in nature." (191,192) and therefore, he would be able to treat any disease and alleviate its symptoms using secret electricity. He lures the unsuspecting victims with pseudo claims like "GOD HEALS LIKE LIGHTNING" (182) falsely interpreting the actual verse, "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." (NKJV, Matt. 24:27).

His "Revival" tents draw many sick and disabled hoping for relief when modern medicine offers none from their predicament. Jacobs cleverly uses his experience as a preacher to manipulate the people who are unaware of his ploys. He fabricates a story to earn the pity of his audience and then goes on to shoot them with secret electricity. For him to be able to zap the victim using a metal ring, he spins a story that it is supposed to represent his "marriage to the teachings of God" (209). He says that the deaths of his wife and son have led him to sin and temptation till God restores him through a ring which signifies the end of his secular marriage and the beginning of a sacred union with God. He places this miraculous ring on the sick, hits them with secret electricity and fixes their ailments. To make his act more credible, he purchases the organs and other parts of animals from the market and uses them to enhance his performance when he claims to remove tumours from the critically ill. His bogus narrative and demonstration are nothing but "a cynical jape at the religion he had rejected" (203) and "showbiz blasphemy" (211) that make "Santa and the Tooth Fairy look like gritty realism" (210). Though criticised by the sceptical as "FAITH'S FRAUD" (202), love offerings continue to pour in funding his experiments and feeding his curiosity.

Intentional Evil: Victims as Guinea Pigs

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions ... and lit with electric lights." (32). Though Charles Jacobs has woven an image for himself as a healer and miracle worker, there is always more to him than what meets the eye. His intentions are never pure. The lines between selfless healing and self-centred experimentation are always blurry. He appears only with the unquenchable thirst to further his knowledge of secret electricity instead of worrying about the consequences of his actions. Though his experiments with secret electricity on humans yield the desired results because of his skill and mastery, they are not entirely free from aftereffects. Charles Jacobs's wild obsession often denotes how thin the line between genius and insanity is and lays emphasis on the importance of tempering scientific ambition with ethical consideration to avoid malpractices and abuse of power.



Jacobs's confidence in the efficacy of his treatment with secret electricity is due to his repeated interaction with it. With every cure, he seems to be teaching himself and taking notes. "All your customers are actually guinea pigs." (163). Jamie's experiences with Jacobs prove Jacobs's unique blend of Good Samaritan and half-mad scientist. The thirty-six-year-old is a jobless, homeless and debilitated drug addict when he collapses in one of Jacobs's "Portraits in Lightning" shows. He is one step away from prison and two from death when Jacobs rescues him and treats him with secret electricity after enticing him with the promise of a complete cure without the painful drug withdrawal process. The application of the electricity to Jamie's frontal lobe brings forth the restructuring of brainwaves and he is instantly cured of his addiction. He never needs heroin again to keep him going. When offered a dose, he describes how he feels "like a man looking at a banana split minutes after polishing off a nine-course Thanksgiving dinner." (153).

Though fully cured, Jamie's experiences with the aftereffects of Jacobs's treatment make him feel like even death would have been a better option. "He could have killed me...many times, actually I wish he had." (153). After the treatment, he often feels like he has been put on a loop concerning his words and actions. He utters the words "Something happened" over and over again and involuntarily moves his body. He loses control of his actions and feels like being controlled by an inexplicable force. "I was out of my control.... Because I had been controlled." (158). He is also affected by the recurring nightmares that feature his dead family members celebrating his birthday against his wish when a giant ant breaks out of the cake.

Jamie Morton is not the only one who endures the unpleasant aftereffects of Jacobs's cure. Every single person zapped with secret electricity is forced to experience a combination of the symptoms, which only get worse with time and leaves them close to a vegetative state or causes them to commit suicide. Robert Rivard, who had been freed from his deteriorating muscular dystrophy by Jacobs, is semi-catatonic at the Gad's Ridge mental institute. Similarly, Patricia Farmingdale, cured of peripheral neuropathy compulsively pours salt into her eyes to

blind herself, Stefan Drew cured of a brain tumour experiences undying urges to binge-walk, Veronica Freemont has an interruption of vision causing traffic collisions, Emil Klein restored to health after a neck injury suffers a periodic urge to eat dirt from his backyard (Jason D. 199). Blake Gilmore is cured of lymphoma only to suffer Tourette's-like side effects which involve uncontrollably spewing profanity at the customers and later at his three children. This leads him to be fired from his job, and he also gets thrown out of his house. He moves into a motel to be found dead on the bathroom floor two weeks later, having glued shut his mouth and nostrils with an extra-strong adhesive. Cathy Morse jumps off of the Cyrus Avery Memorial Bridge in Oklahoma sixteen years after the "Portraits in Lightning" with Jacobs.

Charles Jacobs's apathy towards aftereffects and their impact on the quality of life of the victims is unmistakable when he is motivated to continue the experiments despite the recurring symptoms. He just brushes it under the rug saying, "That will pass... Because I've seen it before" (153) and casually dismisses saying all treatments come with risks. The indifference and negligence only attest to his selfish ambitions. It is also obvious that nothing, not even other lives, are as important to him as his experiments.

Self-Centred Motives

Charles Jacobs can be seen to create the perfect façade of a "healer" alleviating the symptoms of the ill while in reality his intentions are not that simple or genuine. His motives are self-centred as he is utilising his victims for "Studying. Looking for aftereffects" (196) only to better his methods and devices. His repeated experimentation helps him make progress with the design of his gadgets. They keep getting smaller, lighter and more effective with time and experience. For his first treatment with secret electricity on Conrad Morton, Jacobs uses "a fat cloth belt or the world's skinniest electric blanket" (41) to deliver the dose. He continues to improvise his models and in 1983 he treats Hugh Yates of his tinnitus and deafness using a contraption made of two golden rings with meshes connected to a battery. For his treatment of Jamie Morton in 1992, he uses a pair of "battered, taped-up headphones with crisscrosses



of metal mesh over the earpads” (149) with a small remote-control box. In the subsequent cures in his “Revival Tours” as Pastor Danny, he only requires a metal ring a little bigger than a wedding band to place it on the sick and shoot them with secret electricity.

The American author, podcaster and veteran John Willink Jr. says, “The more you practice, the better you get, the more freedom you have to create” (“Jocko Willink Quotes.”) To achieve mind-blowing effects on the audience in the tents, Jacobs requires a steady hand, flair at showmanship, flawlessness, consistent results and these demand extensive practice and preparation. Knowing that his interests lie only in the effect of secret electricity on human beings, he takes the liberty to conduct his tests directly upon human victims without any permission from authorities. Scientific testing on the human body requires one to abide by the regulations imposed by the respective authorities concerned with their welfare. It is also mandatory for the participant to be aware of the possible side effects. But in Jacobs’s case, no one but himself, Jamie and a few other healed members know about the involvement of an extraordinary power source in the treatment. His clever bogus religious narrative only reinforces the presence of God instead of shedding light on the scam. The victims do not even realise their exploitation by Jacobs and see him as their Pastor Danny, who made their lives less miserable and send him love offerings, which fund his experiments and fuel his obsession. It is only after a parade of aftereffects, murders and suicides of the healed people that a connection between them surfaces.

It is also indisputable that the ex-pastor does not want to risk experimenting on himself and personally endure the untoward aftereffects. He does not want to compromise his safety and health and takes extreme precautionary measures to avoid coming in contact with any form of secret electricity. When treating Hugh Yates, he makes Yates press the button and shoot himself with the dose of secret electricity. During Jamie’s treatment in a workshop in West Tulsa, he makes sure to use rubber gloves and tongs to prevent electrocuting himself, and in addition to that, he forces Jamie to wear a mouth guard. Similarly, in the “Revival” tent shows, Jacobs, who is well past his prime, is seen to have

difficulties when he drops to his knee, which could be due to rheumatism or arthritis. But he does not dare to fix himself with secret electricity because of his awareness of the aftereffects. On the contrary, he bears nothing but apathy and indifference to the negative impact of the treatment with secret electricity on the uninformed public. This testifies his egotistical and narcissistic commitment to his conscious motive-driven meddling with the power source.

Playing God - The Final Experiment

The electricity aficionado is unstoppable after the resounding success of his treatments. His access to the power source and his ability to wield it to arrive at the intended results fan the flame to surreptitiously orchestrate the final experiment. It is his most impactful, significant, audacious, perilous and outrageous experiment with secret electricity. He dares to play God and gain a glance into the afterlife that awaits all. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the afterlife as “the existence after death” (“Afterlife”). Human beings are barred from knowing what happens after death. Though there are many eschatological philosophies around afterlife, there is almost no reliable evidence to endorse those theories. Many religious and cultural beliefs across the world include the dichotomous construct of an afterlife that rewards the good with heaven and punishes the bad in hell. The concepts of heaven and hell are generally associated with an authoritative, omnipotent figure recognised and revered as “God” who is the ultimate commander of life, death and everything in-between.

In Revival, losing God along with his wife and son urges Charles Jacobs to promote himself to the pedestal and become one. In his final experiment, which is the revival of Mary Fay using secret electricity, the lines between human and God fade away as he revives the patient “Omega” Mary Fay from her death to know what lies beyond the door of death and learn the fates of his dead wife Patsy and son Morrie. The experiment utilises lightning and secret electricity to rouse Fay from her death. “‘No heartbeat’ ... ‘Yet she lives!’” (349). Through a vision via Fay, Jamie and Jacobs get to see the afterlife, which is a barren, cyclopean landscape that



looks like an anthill called “The Null” where the dead are to endlessly serve horrible, huge antlike creatures led by a creature called “The Mother”. ““Gone to serve the Great Ones, in the Null. No death, no light, no rest”” (353). The perilous, abhorrent and profane experiment takes an extremely dangerous turn when “The Mother” reaches out with her claws of melting human faces to drag the ones present with Fay into The Null. Luckily, Jamie shoots The Mother, regains control of the situation and shuts the portal to the afterlife.

Though Jacobs imperils himself and Jamie only to see his wife and son suffering in The Null, his experiment is successful and yields the expected results. His attempt to play God leads to the demystification of the afterlife through the final experiment. Attaining the knowledge of the afterlife, which had previously been inaccessible to human beings, proves Jacobs’s mastery in the manipulation of secret electricity. But Godlike powers and knowledge demand Godlike preparedness, but Jacobs is underprepared and suffers a stroke trying to process the revelation and dies. “Charlie’s gifts come with a pricetag” (324).

Conclusion

Charles Jacobs, who is identified as a mad scientist, is known for his extremely ambitious and dangerous scientific experiments that involve the fictional technology, the power source called the “secret electricity”. His wild obsession with secret electricity materialised by scams both secular and religious highlights his questionable morals. His villainy, apathy, indifference and self-centred motivations are clearly evident through his acts in “Portraits in Lightning” and “Revival Tents”. Though his intentions are not inherently malignant, wanting to destroy people, he becomes an antagonist owing to the dangers and aftereffects that arise from his experiments, taking a toll on the lives of the victims. The ones treated by Jacobs suffer debilitating consequences, and eventually murder their loved ones, commit suicides, and this defeats the purpose of their interaction with secret electricity. Jacobs’s undaunted attempts to play God in his final experiment, assuming powers to intervene death and

get a glimpse of the afterlife which is forbidden and metaphorically reserved to the one who is revered as God, precipitates negative consequences that require the hero Jamie’s help to restore the balance of the working of the universe.

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