

THE QUARRY

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Do Not Enter: Isolation, Murder, and a Slasher's 'Happy Place'

Vera continues down the stairs to the cellar. The door is ajar. She walks in. The room is empty except for the figure of a woman sitting in a chair.

'Mrs. Bates.'

She gently touches the woman's shoulder and the chair slowly turns to reveal the corpse of Norma Bates: pruned skin, hollow eye sockets, and skeletal smile. Vera screams. Violins shriek as Norman rushes in, dressed in his mother's robe, brandishing a knife, and wearing an insanely happy grin to rival that of his decaying mother.

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Tina walks out into the dark alley, following the guttural growls calling her name. A trashcan lid rolls ominously into her path. Then there is laughter. Slow, deep, sinister chuckles fill the scene before the screech of metal on metal announces the arrival of Freddy. His quavering chuckles grow louder as he relishes Tina's mounting terror.

'Please God,' she whispers.

Freddy grins and holds up his right hand. He wears a knifed glove.

'THIS,' he growls, 'is God'ⁱ

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Wendy bundles Danny up in her arms as the first axe thud hits the front door. With no other route of escape, she rushes into the bathroom. The axe thuds continue and Jack's face appears in the hall.

'Wendy, I'm home.' He breaks down the door and slowly stalks through the bedroom.

'Come out, come out wherever you are.'

Playfully, he knocks on the bathroom door.

'Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in. Not by the hair on your chinny-chin-chin. Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!'ⁱⁱ

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What is it about these villains that make them so scary? It could be the brutal way they kill their victims, or how excited they look during the violence. Perhaps it's the isolated environments making horrible deaths all the more imminent, or that each killer is a mentally misshapen psycho we can't fathom. Any one of these is reason enough to become petrified in your seat, but all of them working together; that's what makes an iconic slasher.

Norman Bates, Freddy Krueger, and Jack Torrance are amongst the most celebrated killers in slasher history, producing some of the scariest scenes of the genre. Despite being very different on the surface, each of them fits the classic slasher profile in two ways. Firstly, they're all psychologically damaged figures: Norman suffers

from an intense guilt complex coupled with a wealth of mother issues, Freddy was a reclusive child-murderer before the townspeople killed him, and Jack was an abusive alcoholic who despised his wife and son. Secondly, they each inhabit an environment pocketed away from the rest of the world and it's in this isolation that they're happiest.

Isolation is a recurrent theme in slasher movies where victims often meet grizzly ends by trekking into the wilderness (*The Blair Witch Project* [1991], *Wolf Creek* [2005]) or staying home alone (*Scream* [1996], *When a Stranger Calls* [1979]). But while we prevalently see how a lonely cabin in the woods or house on a hill affects unwitting heroes, little is shown about how it affects the villains.

Since villains are the characters that ultimately make the slasher movie experience, by carving their way into our nightmares, I plan to explore the slasher's relationship with isolation, looking at the characters of Norman, Freddy, and Jack to determine just how much it assists in shaping cinematically iconic killers.

'This place happens to be my only world'ⁱⁱⁱ: Norman Bates

Donald Spoto, in his book on Alfred Hitchcock, comments that *Psycho* (1960) 'is one of the few financially successful films which can defensibly be called an art film, it remains a quintessential shocker'^{iv}. Considered to be Hitchcock's greatest masterpiece, as it raised the slasher from the slums of common horror, *Psycho*'s iconic status can probably best be personified in the charming, albeit socially awkward character of Norman Bates. The 'psycho' of the film's title, Norman is one of the most complex killers in cinematic history. Jim McDevitt and Eric San Juan, in their book on Hitchcock villains, place him within the same league as Hannibal Lecter (*Silence of the Lambs* [1991]), John Doe (*Se7en* [1995]) and TV's Dexter Morgan (*Dexter* [2006]). As a killer, he 'mixes charisma with crazy, giving us a character we just can't turn away from.'^v However, unlike socially charismatic slashers of today, his fascinating complexity comes from a disturbing relationship with isolation.

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Marion smiles politely and eats the sandwich Norman has brought her. She shifts in her seat as the conversation becomes too personal. Norman continues chatting.

‘I think we’re all in our private traps. Clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never move an inch.’

‘Sometimes we deliberately step into those traps,’ Marion answers politely.

‘I was born in mine, I don’t mind it anymore.’^{vi}

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Norman’s seclusion began at the age of five when his father died. His mother raised him in solitude in the house behind the motel. Norman boasts he ‘had a very happy childhood’ and the psychiatrist, at the end of the film, comments that ‘for years the two of them lived as though there was no one else in the world’.^{vii} However, this happiness was shattered when his mother met another man. Already psychologically disturbed after his father’s death, the arrival of an outside social force was a rude awakening for Norman. As we know, the story does not end well.

By the time we meet Norman in *Psycho*, ten years after he has killed his mother and her lover out of pathological jealousy, his relationship with isolation has become very complicated. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, in an article in *Screen Education*, notes that he represents Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’ with ‘repression manifesting itself in the concept of the monstrous Other.’^{viii} For Norman, the ‘Other’ is the fragmentation of his mind into two characters: that of himself and that of ‘Mother’, which occurs as a result of his matricidal guilt. The motel, located fifteen miles from the nearest town, becomes a site of trauma and escape for him. It’s the scene of his crime, but it’s also the only place that can accommodate his mental fragility. The motel’s isolation makes it the one place where he can exist happily as both personalities, Norman and ‘Mother’, in an attempt to resurrect the happiness of his childhood. And when outside characters threaten that illusion, he (or rather ‘Mother’) kills them.

However, while the motel helps to soothe Norman’s fractured mind by allowing him to live as two people, it’s also the only place where Norman himself can actually exist. According to the psychiatrist, Norman ‘only half-existed to begin with’ and it’s when he is removed from the motel that the ‘Mother’ half takes over, ‘probably for all time.’^{ix} In the end, it’s Norman’s dependence on isolation that makes him the terrifying psycho of *Psycho* because he can only exist within it. Whenever reality

comes too close, 'Mother' takes over as a violent means of exterminating the threat and prolonging Norman's seclusion. Understanding this, it's no wonder he looks so happy when 'Mother' takes control.

'I'm your boyfriend now Nancy'^x: Freddy Krueger

Film critic, Stephen Jay Schneider, in his book, *1001 Films You Must See Before You Die*, describes *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) as a 'critical and commercial success that managed to creatively combine horror and humour, slasher movie conventions, gory special effects, and subtle social commentary', as well as 'let loose a new monster in America's pop cultural consciousness: that wise-cracking, fedora-wearing teen killer, Freddy Krueger.'^{xi} Freddy is a celebrated slasher for a number of reasons: his creative means of killing, which range from stabbing victims to sucking them into mattresses, his terrifying features including burned face and homemade knifed-glove, and the fact that he's the indestructible killer that keeps coming back. But what primarily makes him the terrifying figure he is, is the fact that he exists in a state of the utmost solitude: the subconscious.

If Bates represents Freud's 'return of the repressed', then Krueger is a nightmarish visualisation of the 'dream-work': the way in which suppressed, taboo desires of the id are distorted by the dreamer's unconscious in an attempt to fulfil them. Charles Spiteri, in an article in *Senses of Cinema*, describes Freddy as 'being shaped from the stuff of dreams, he's able to change his body and the dreams of his victims to lure and kill'^{xii} and it's this freedom within such isolation that makes him so frightening.

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Tina runs through the garden. As she rushes past a tree, Freddy jumps out from behind it.

'Tina!'

She turns in a snap of obedience. Freddy grins widely, lifts up his left hand and tauntingly wiggles his fingers.

'Watch this.'

With a single swipe of his knifed glove, he cuts off two fingers. Green blood spurts from the stumps. His eyes bulge with excitement, his grin widens, and he starts to laugh.^{xiii}

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Freddy exists as a vengeful ghost in the dreams of his victims. While little information is given in the movie as to how he manages to supernaturally infiltrate his victims' subconscious, there are a lot of clues as to what kind of relationship he has with isolation. As a conscious character invading the dreams of teenagers, Freddy is absolute boss. He possesses the power to shape the content of his victims' dreams, turning it fatally against them as Spiteri points out. His overt relish in the freedom of his isolation, as is illustrated by his various acts of taunting self-harm (amongst other things), takes on a new layer of creepy when we consider that he was a reclusive child-murderer in life. For Freddy, the isolation of dreams doesn't just let him painlessly cut off fingers or slice himself open, it allows him to physically fulfil his macabre desires without the inhibitions of social justice. Dreams are a realm of absolute freedom for him: a world where he can do exactly what he wants when he wants and there is no one who can stop him.

Even at the film's end, Freddy's tyrannical reign in the dream world is what leaves audiences with a lingering sense of terror as it seems that Nancy has defeated him and returned things to normal, only to be driven away in a possessed car and watch as Freddy drags her mother, screaming, through the transom of the front door. It's a final, chilling statement: we're in Freddy's world now.

'Five months of peace is just what I want'^{xiv}: Jack Torrance

While horror writer Stephen King famously denounced Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of his novel, many critics such as Roger Ebert praised his choice of changing the original ghost story into one 'about madness and the energies it sets loose in an isolated situation primed to magnify them.'^{xv} A different slasher movie to others released during the time (*Friday the 13th*, *Prom Night*), *The Shining* (1980) produced some of horror's most iconic scenes including the ghostly twin girls and, of course, Jack Nicholson's 'heere's Johnny' line. But what most sets Kubrick's film apart from

other horror movies is the ever-present idea that the supernatural elements we're seeing aren't really there. We're seeing 'ghosts' because the characters are, and the characters are seeing them because the hotel's isolation is driving them mad.

Despite critics' disputes as to whether *The Shining* is a horror or a thriller, the film's base plot follows that of the classic slasher movie: a family goes to a remote hotel where they are threatened by grizzly fates. However, unlike psychos born into isolation like Bates or supernaturally resurrected into it like Krueger, Jack Torrance is the guy who starts the film as unwitting victim, but then gradually turns into an axe-wielding maniac; all because he wanted a little peace and quiet.

Kubrick quickly asserts that isolation is the theme of the film. Jeff Smith, in an article in *Chicago Review*, comments that the opening scene with its 'sharp colours and outlines lend this land its own feeling of alienness.'^{xvi} Unlike Freddy and Norman, Jack is chasing isolation from the film's beginning. A recovering alcoholic and struggling writer, he takes the job as winter caretaker for the Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rockies, with the hope that a change of scenery will cure his writer's block and help him get away from past transgressions.

Over the course of the film, the Overlook's isolation quickly becomes a frightening visualisation of the phrase 'be careful what you wish for' as it starts working to unhinge Jack's mind. While he doesn't have the psychological fragilities of Bates or Krueger, he's an emotionally vulnerable character caught in the transitional stage between alcoholism and reformation. As old grievances continue to be unearthed between him and his wife, his emotional fragility increases until it finally breaks with the fatal words, 'I'd give my goddamn soul just for a glass of beer.'^{xvii} Here, the first 'ghost' appears in true Faustian fashion and Jack's transformation from inwardly frustrated man to outwardly homicidal maniac begins. Isolation becomes the alcohol he can't get enough of and the steps he takes to ensure he gets it become more drastic: he destroys the radio and the Snowcat's motor, pocketing the hotel further away from the outside world.

By the film's climax Jack is completely transformed and the face leering at Wendy through an axe-hole in the bathroom door is very different to the one that he began the movie with. His deathlike pallor and unresponsiveness is replaced with colour and animation: the picture of an addict about to get his fix. Horror ensues as we realise that this guy is so far gone, he'll kill his own family for some peace and quiet.

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The slasher movie may value isolation for its guarantees of gruesome deaths or the promise of finding a murdering psycho out in the middle of nowhere, but on closer inspection of some of cinema's iconic slashers, we can see that the lonely woodland cabin or remote hotel has just as much of an effect (if not more) on the villains than the victims.

It's the villains' relationships with isolation that makes them the terrifying figures they are. As a personality split in two by matricidal guilt, Norman can only exist within the seclusion of the Bates Motel. Freddy Krueger exercises absolute freedom in indulging his violent and murderous impulses beyond the reach of society as a vengeful ghost inhabiting the dreams of teenagers. And Jack Torrance went to the Overlook in search of peace and quiet; only to revert to his alcoholism with isolation becoming the booze he couldn't get enough of. Each character gets some enjoyment out of seclusion and it's this coupled with the actions they take to prolong that enjoyment (i.e. killing people) that makes them iconic cinematic killers.

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