

The Hero Versus Darklight: A Test of Mettle in Stephen King's Later

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Abstract

Heroes and villains are diametrically opposed characters, representing the moral duality of good and evil. Both are homogenous in terms of power but remain opposites through antithetical actions and intentions. The mettle of the hero and the villain is tested when they confront and challenge each other. Jamie Conklin, the protagonist of Stephen King's novel *Later*, must face his fears and destroy his inner demons to annihilate a supernatural force known as the Darklight that haunts him repeatedly. Darklight is an otherworldly and malevolent entity, a mixture of darkness and dazzling light that resides within the body of deceased serial bomber Kenneth Therriault. Armed with the Ritual of Chüd, a spiritual practice performed to gain clarity, Jamie can confront the Darklight, connect with it, crush its willpower, and dominate it. Good triumphs over evil and Darklight is made to serve Jamie when needed. Towards the end of the novel, Jamie uses Darklight to destroy evil which is a fantastic display of good overcoming evil.

Keywords: Supernatural villain, revenant, battle of wills, good vs. evil, mastery

1. Introduction

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
 I am the master of my fate,
 I am the captain of my soul.
Invictus by William Ernest Henley

The hero, the protagonist of a story, whether fictional or not, is admired for good qualities, great deeds, brave deeds and feats. He or she is considered the ideal being or model. According to the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, "the hero is a man or woman who has been able to battle past his or her personal and local historical limitations... and is eloquent not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn." (Campbell 14).

2. Discussion:

The hero of Stephen King's crime and horror novel *Later* (2021) is Jamie Conklin, who possesses the uncanny ability to converse with the ghosts of the dead until they disappear forever. The ghosts answer truthfully when he questions them. He uses this ability to help his mother, Tia Conklin, a literary agent, finish the latest book by the late Regis Thomas. This unusual ability of Jamie also brings him trouble. He is forced to help his mother's friend Elizabeth Dutton, a police officer with the New York Police Department, to find the location of the last bomb planted by infamous bomber Kenneth Therriault before committing suicide. He is able to find Therriault, and upon interrogating him, Jamie learns that the bomb has been placed in the King Kullen supermarket in Eastport. This revelation helps the police department defuse the bomb and allows Dutton to regain her tarnished reputation and keep her job.

Jamie then tries to move on and stay out of trouble, but unlike ever before, Therriault continues to haunt him instead of disappearing. The very night he learns the location of the bomb, Therriault appeared across the street from where Jamie lives, and urges to look out the window. Jamie has more encounters with Therriault; some happen in the elevator on the way to his swimming practice, while others happen at his school. These affect his peace of mind, and he fears the dangers that may come his way. He is unable to ask for help due to the strange nature of the problem, and he does not want to trouble the financially stressed Tia Conklin. Luckily for Jamie, he can discuss his troubles with his former neighbour, Professor Martin Burkett, who can decipher the situation and shed some light on it. Jamie learns that one of the possibilities for the inexplicable haunting is that Therriault's remains are infested by an evil spirit.

Stephen King uses the oxymoron 'Darklight' to describe the element of terror using Therriault as its vessel. The combination of the dichotomous terms dark and light reflects the fear and anxiety that arise in Jamie's mind as he faces the sinister force. H. P. Lovecraft, an American horror and fantasy writer, said, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Ratcliffe). In Jamie's case, Darklight is grotesque, supernatural,

and inexplicable. It is neither a monster nor a ghost but a great source of dark and sinister energy with a blinding light. Jamie's observations in *Later* help understand the monstrosity of Darklight:

I began to think I could see *into* Therriault. Maybe it was a hallucination brought on by the vibration and the sense that the world was on the verge of exploding like a delicate wine glass, but I don't think so. It wasn't his guts I was looking at but a light. It was bright and dark at the same time. It was something from outside the world. It was horrible. (King 158).

"The German terms '*eigengrau*' and '*eigenlicht*' which stand for intrinsic grey and intrinsic light, respectively indicate the uniform dark grey perceived by the human eye in the absence of light." ("Eigengrau") This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "dark light", "visual noise", or "background adaptation". Metaphorically, the Darklight can be perceived as the uniform haze that envelops Jamie and mars his sanity. He is always jumpy and feels watched. Though he gets used to being haunted by Darklight, he cannot function to his fullest. He loses sleep, fails tests and performs poorly in sports.

Darklight also pranks the defenceless Jamie by convincing him that his mother has cancer because of her smoking cigarettes. This gets him worried and upset. However, when he questions Tia, he learns she is not sick and has successfully cleared her medical tests. The haunting and the apprehension in his mind continue until Jamie learns the technique to annihilate the malevolent force from his ex-neighbour, Professor Martin Burkett.

Jamie's combat against Darklight residing in Therriault's body is a supernatural war between good and evil. Good and evil are warring factions that keep challenging each other till one defeats or subdues another. Paul O. Ingram and Fredrick John Streng, in their work titled *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, bring to light the fact that people who practice Abrahamic religions perceive evil as the dualistic antithesis of good, where one desires the victory of good over evil. Amongst those who practice Buddhist principles, the concepts of virtue and vice are considered components of an antagonistic duality which the achievement of "*Śūnyatā* must overcome". In Buddhist philosophy, "*Śūnyatā* is the vacuity that forms the ultimate reality and it is understood not as a negation of existence but rather as the undifferentiated entity from which all distinctions and dualities come forth into existence" (Lotha). Through *Śūnyatā*, oneness is attained by annihilating the duality between good and evil.

The hero and the villain are antithetical characters and represent the moral duality of good and evil. The hero is eloquent of all that is truly good, while the villain is a master of all those that bear dire consequences. Both are homologous in terms of power but remain opposites because of their contrasting actions and intentions. The mettle of the hero and the villain is tested when they confront each other, and the victor's ensuing battle of survival between the forces is considered to have mastery over the defeated. There are many eschatological predictions where battles between good and evil take place. In Norse mythology, Ragnarok is the final battle between good and evil forces, which leads to the end of the earth, followed by the rise of a new world and order. Similarly, in the Bible, the battle of Armageddon is the final, decisive, catastrophic combat between good and evil before Judgement Day and the creation of New Heaven and New Earth after the victory of good over evil.

Jamie Conklin, who represents good, has an unintentional rendezvous with the evil Darklight. On a Saturday in October, Jamie decides to go to Grover Park to meet his friends and play touch football with them. Tia Conklin had been reading late the night before and had left a note for Jamie asking him to be home by two o'clock. With Tia, Jamie's only source of help, dozing and aloof, the Darklight approaches the vulnerable Jamie and attempts to break him. As he leaves for the park, Jamie's mind is racing with thoughts of Valeria Gomez, a girl from his school. Meeting Darklight is the last thing on his agenda. He comes down from his apartment and into the lobby. To his surprise, he sees Therriault at the end of the hallway, smiling at him. Since Jamie is thinking of Valeria instead of his infamous teammate, he is not cold or wavering when he notices Therriault. Instead, he knows the right moment to establish his dominion over the horrible creature has come and thoughtlessly charges towards it as if to pull it into an embrace. This helps him realise for the first time that Darklight fears him as much as he fears him.

Jamie's confidence is an outcome of paying attention to the teachings of Professor Martin Burkett. Burkett introduces the Ritual of Chüd to Jamie. The Tibetan word "chöd" literally stands for "cutting through" or "to sever". It is an advanced spiritual practice and discipline arising from the confluences of Bonpo, Mahasidda, and Nyingmapa traditions and is now practised throughout Tibetan Buddhism schools ("Chöd - New World Encyclopedia"). It cuts through hindrances and obscurations, referred to as 'demons' or 'gods'. Some examples of demons are ignorance, anger and the dualism of perceiving the self as inherently meaningful, contrary to the Buddhist doctrine of anatta (non-self). This is done in a powerful meditative ritual which includes "a stunning array of visualisations, song, music, and prayer, it engages every aspect of one's being and effects a powerful transformation of the interior landscape." (Harding).

The Ritual of Chüd, according to Burkett, is practised to achieve perfect nothingness and a state of serenity and spiritual clarity. It is a method employed in the war against demons, both demons of the mind and supernatural invaders from the outside. The ritual begins with the symbolic binding of the tongues of the demon and hero, a union highlighting their identities as competitors.

Once this union has been accomplished, you and the demon have a battle of wills. This would occur telepathically, I assume, since it would be hard to talk while engaged in a...mmm...mutual tongue bite. The first to withdraw loses all power over the winner. (King 147).

Burkett encourages Jamie to grab his foe and hold on to him till he can find it in him to destroy the demon. When Jamie reaches to embrace what is remaining of Therriault, the ghost is taken aback, and begins to tremble and vibrate like a guitar string, cringing back towards the door. Then Therriault screams, asking Jamie to let go of him. Nevertheless, Jamie pins him against the door and does not set him free even when he promises not to bother him anymore. The more Therriault bargains with Jamie to gain his freedom, the tighter Jamie holds onto him, as Burkett had warned him never to settle for lesser than what he needed when dealing with the demon.

Therriault keeps growing fainter and fainter while Darklight keeps dazzling. Jamie manages to tell Therriault that it would not be enough if he stops haunting him and that he plans on haunting Darklight and his vessel Therriault. Though Jamie feels just as trapped as Therriault, he tightens his grip upon the vile agent. If he lets him go, that would indicate the triumph of the dark forces. Therriault, unable to conquer Jamie's mind, finally agrees to his terms. The brave Jamie questions Therriault if he is afraid of him, and he admits that he is:

"Yes. You're not like the others. You *see*."

"Yes what?"

"*Yes I'm afraid of you!*"

Sweet!

I let him go. "Get out of here, whatever you are, and go to wherever you go. Just remember if I call you, *you come*." (King 161).

Darklight has no choice but to leave and promises to be at Jamie's beck and call. Jamie destroys the stronghold of Darklight and gets it to succumb to and serve him when needed. He has to do nothing but whistle for him, and he would have to respond and obey. Professor Martin Burkett warns him never to summon Darklight again as Jamie may not be able to get rid of him again, but Jamie proves otherwise.

Later, Jamie Conklin again gets into a predicament when Elizabeth Dutton kidnaps him to help her locate where the drugs are stored in the dealer Donald Marsden's house. He tries to trick her and escape from the place. While Dutton is distracted in her hunt for the drugs, he sprints towards the stairs to head outside. On realising Jamie's breakout, she runs after him. Jamie trips on the stairs and keeps crawling down while Dutton manages to grab his ankle. He feels utterly helpless as she shoots him down with her gun. In desperation, he remembers his secret, spiteful assistant, Darklight. He screams, "THERRIAULT, HELP ME! GET HER OFF ME!" (King 224) and waits patiently, watching the room fill with bright white light. Seeing this, Dutton slowly begins loosening her grip on Jamie and shrieks, unable to process all that is happening. Jamie uses this opportunity to get off the stairs. Standing in front of the mirror, Dutton sees the brilliant light coming out of it. Jamie also notices a hand coming out of the mirror, yanking her against the glass and cracking it. All the lights go out suddenly, and Liz starts laughing maniacally. She then moves too fast towards the stairs, loses balance, and falls. Jamie checks on her and learns that she is dead. However, Jamie's joy at the destruction of his troublemaker is short-lived as he becomes conscious of the revenant coming down the stairs to get him.

With Darklight shining through him, Therriault asks if the Ritual of Chüd can be conducted again. Jamie's instinct warns him against any involvement with Darklight, as he can be possessed by it while alive. Though tempted to try the ritual again and participate in the battle of wills, he points at the door and commands Darklight to go, and it has no choice but to obey him and leave. This is possible because of his mastery of Darklight, achieved during the previous confrontation. Before it could fade away, ultimately, it says, "Oh whistle and I'll come to you, my lad." (King 228). A hero is an ordinary person who strengthens himself or herself to stand firm, stay the course and brave the odds despite the paralysing hindrances. The tougher the battle, the louder the applause. The hero rises to the occasion and takes charge to vanquish or reconcile with the opposition.

3. Conclusion:

Jamie Conklin, in *Later*, proves to be a hero when he confronts a supernatural foe, surpasses him and nearly loses his life to subdue him. He is not paralysed by fear or troubled thoughts about failure. A villain is the one who paves the way for the birth and seasoning of a hero. Darklight, through Therriault, in the novel plays a supernatural villain who challenges the reluctant Jamie. It

brings out the best in him and helps him prove his competence. Armed with vital instructions from Professor Burkett, Jamie overcomes monstrous foes and annuls Darklight's motives in the extraordinary conflict between good and evil. Jamie and Darklight confront through the Ritual of Chöd, after shedding their egos. Jamie, the representative of good, succeeds in a battle of wills against the evil Darklight, whereby there is a paradigm shift in their relationship. Jamie becomes his master and Darklight is forced to serve him as needed. Stephen King's hero Jamie proves his mettle at the end of the novel as he relentlessly uses Darklight, which has been once his source of danger and intimidation, to save himself from Dutton. Not only does he control Darklight to help him destroy evil, but he can also send it back to wherever it has come from. When Jamie uses the inherently wicked Darklight to vanquish the evil personified by Elizabeth Dutton, good triumphs over evil. When Darklight is instructed to labour for the good and promote the causes of the good, his evil nature is extinguished. The duality of good and evil is made irrelevant as Jamie works to restore his life and return to normal, empowered by the awareness of the supernatural helper he could invite to get him out of deep waters.

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