

Reviving the repressed – jennifer egan's the keep

[Business](#)



Jennifer Egan's redefines the gothic genre with her modern novel *The Keep*. This book tells the story of Danny King, an aging hipster who lives in New York City without a real family or career.

In high school, he was a popular star athlete who seemingly had it all. At one family picnic, seeking to impress his troublemaking cousin Rafe, he pushes his adopted cousin Howie into an underground pool. Howie is found semiconscious in the cave three days later. Troubled Howie's drug use, gun-buying and attempt to rob a 7-Eleven land him in reform school. Since the moment that Danny traumatized Howie, guilt has chewed away at him.

Danny becomes increasingly paranoid and disconnected from both people and places that he could otherwise have been able to call home. On the contrary, Howard reinvents himself and becomes a very successful man with a fortune and family. Twenty years after he escapes from the caves, Howard invites Danny to Europe to help him renovate a medieval castle into a resort. Danny accepts his offer without completely knowing why. The past experiences and current emotions of these characters haunt them.

As Danny walks towards the castle for the first time, his suppressed culpability begins to emerge and fester again inside of him. Throughout his time at Howard's castle, regret threatens Danny's sanity. Howard's wife, Ann, and his best friend, Mick, reunited at the castle, can no longer hide from their secret affair. They experience remorse and conflict similar to Danny's, because they too have betrayed Howard. Finally, when the enigmatic, terrifying baroness still living at the castle locks the entire renovation crew underground, everybody panics, and Howard relives the trauma of being

trapped underground in his youth. Although he had escaped the fear that psychologically imprisoned him when he was left alone in the caves, it resurfaces again.

When Howard sobs and pleads for Danny to rescue them, a new weight of remorse crushes Danny. Like Howard, Danny and Mick have been mentally imprisoned, but for a different reason - they are unable to overcome the regret of their actions. When Danny and Mick save everybody, they achieve redemption for their past actions. However, Mick then shoots Danny, because Danny threatens Mick's importance in Howard's life. Mick, put in jail, mentally escapes his circumstances by narrating this story. Egan invokes culpability, forbidden desire and imprisonment in order to resurrect repressed memories and allow the characters to heal.

As Danny walks toward the castle for the first time, his mind flashes back to a memory of him and Howie as children. They would frequently play a game that they had invented called " Terminal Zeus", which required both boys to make up monsters to pretend-kill and weapons with which to pretend-kill them. Danny also remembers his family gossiping about Howie, calling him " trouble". Danny used to get a " weird feeling" about this. However, he " liked hearing those things about Howie because it reminded him of who he was" (9) - a star soccer player who was dating one of the hottest cheerleaders in the school.

Danny defines himself in opposition to Howie's failure, which demonstrates his insecurity. His lack of self-confidence leads to a split in his personality when he attends at a family picnic with Howie and his cousin Rafe. Rafe

proposes to Danny that they should lead Howie into an underground tunnel, push him into the pool, and then leave him there. For teenage Danny, “there [is] no bigger thrill in the world than being Rafe’s partner in crime” (12), so the boys lead Howie into the pitch-black cave and arrive at the pool. As Danny puts his hand on Howie’s back to shove him in, he realizes “right then that Howie [is] a person with a brain and a heart, all the stuff [he has]” (15), but he does it anyway. Danny experiences a crucial division in personality here.

Ultimately, his superficial side that wants to impress Rafe triumphs over his sensitive, genuine side that loved playing with Howie. Danny gives up on the responsibility to do the right thing. After the incident, Danny tries to forget what he has done, but regret continuously gnaws at him in the back of his mind. Danny mentally imprisons himself, because he betrays his own true morals. Throughout Danny’s time at the castle, he thinks that Howard has invited him there in order to exact his revenge. This demonstrates Egan’s use of guilt in order to arouse the memories that the characters try to bury within themselves.

Danny and Howard are binaries who complement each other, because they are both traumatized by the same event. They oppose each other, because guilty Danny loses the ability to think creatively after the “Terminal Zeus” games with Howie stop. In contrast, innocent Howie escapes the reality of his terrifying situation by using his imagination, and he becomes a man with vision and ambition. Danny becomes so obsessed with technological connection that “the need [feels] primal” (6), whereas Howard forbids cell phones at the castle, because he wants people to be “tourists of their own
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imaginations” (48). Danny’s life regresses into one of indecision and anxiety, whereas Howard becomes an accomplished bond trader with a wife and children. Danny lives a life of unrest and alienation, whereas Howard finds peace and belonging.

This is ironic, because Danny was the popular athlete who had a “ girlfriend [named] Shannon Shank” and “ won [in soccer] a lot” (9). On the other hand, Howie was the awkward boy who “[didn’t] have many friends” (8). The change from Howie’s name to “ Howard” also symbolizes his transformation. As Danny’s mind returns to the present moment, he feels “ pissed off because he [doesn’t] like remembering things” (9). This also reflects his inability to face the truth.

Keeping his memories hidden in his subconscious is easier than facing reality. The prose style of the book, written in a stream-of-consciousness form, is prominent in this passage. This is shown in phrases such as “ weird feeling” and “ pissed off”. This style helps to relate the reader even more to the regret that Danny suffers. In the same way as Danny, Ann and Mick have betrayed Howard.

They fail not only him, but themselves, and are therefore thrust into affliction. Danny traumatizes Howard before his self-reinvention, whereas Mick and Ann hurt him after his success. As Howard’s cousin, best friend and wife, these three characters should have stayed the most loyal to him. Like Danny, Ann and Mick accompany Howard to renovate the castle. Danny thinks of Mick as Howard’s best friend and “ number two” in command.

The morning after Danny sleeps with the baroness, he makes his way down the spiral staircase of the keep. The keep is the tower in the center of the castle grounds, the ultimate “stronghold” (26) and heart of the estate. Danny overhears Mick and Ann talking outside and notes the “misery” in Mick’s face. Interestingly, Danny can hear less of Mick’s words than Ann’s. The way that Mick’s words are lost parallels the portrayal of his sense of judgment.

This also causes readers to feel a sense of mystery, because they do not fully understand the situation. Ann tells Mick firmly that he has “got to get this under control”, but Mick wants to know if Ann “still think[s] about it” (115). These snippets that Danny hears suggest that the two were romantically involved. When Ann suggests that they should “just tell [Howard]”, Mick panics starts pacing, insisting that he would rather “cut [his] throat” (116). Mick says that he would rather die than tell Howard, for fear of being rejected, and then, when Howard seems more impressed with Danny than Mick, Mick shoots Danny. This makes Mick’s comment an interesting foreshadowing of Danny’s death, which then causes Mick to experience an emotional and mental kind of death from which he can only resurrect himself by writing Danny’s story.

Anne then curses, saying that confessing to Howard the “last thing [she wants] to do” (117), but that Mick gives her no choice. She begins to cry. Their reuniting at the castle rekindles Mick’s attraction to Anne. However, Anne wants to suppress the memories of the forbidden relationship that they shared six years ago. When Anne suggests that they face up to their deeds, Mick panics, wishing fervently to keep the affair hidden from Howard. This

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scene reflects Egan's use of unspoken desires in order to stir memories that disturb the characters.

Anne and Mick are binaries who oppose each other in their wants. Anne wants to discontinue the romance and admit what has happened to Howard, whereas Mick wants Anne to reconsider their relationship but never tell Howard. Anne wants to leave behind the remorse of her romance with Mick and face up to reality. On the contrary, Mick cannot bear the culpability that he will suffer if Howard discovers the truth. Ann and Mick complement each other in that they were both involved in this relationship and are haunted by guilt. Because Mick avoids the repercussions of his wrongdoing, like Danny, he is psychologically imprisoned in a denial of reality.

After Mick shoots Danny, he becomes physically imprisoned in a jail, and the only way that he can escape his mental imprisonment is by narrating this story. Ann's culpability mentally imprisons her, although she is more willing to face it than Mick. The presence of the keep in the setting of this scene symbolizes imprisonment as well. Howard experiences a fear of reality and a physical and mental imprisonment that are similar to Mick's. Towards the end of the novel, the entire crew enthusiastically descends into the tunnels that Danny had discovered, and they stumble into a torture chamber. However, hysteria arises when they are purposefully locked underground by the baroness.

When Howard realizes what has happened, he relives the trauma that he suffered when Danny pushed him into the pool. Howard's eyes pop open, "wide and blind. He [claws] at the air and then, in a terrible guttural voice, he

[screams] Danny's name, dragging it out so it [fills] the torture space with one long howl" (206). The animalistic language used in this passage suggests the fundamental, primal terror that consumes Howard. Howard loses all sense of reason and calm; only his instincts remain, and they take him back to that traumatic incident. The setting of the torture chamber symbolizes the physical and emotional imprisonment that disturbs Ann, Mick, Danny and Howard.

Howard had escaped the reality of being trapped underground by using his imagination. However, this situation confronts him again, twenty years later. Howard panics and falls on the ground, blubbering and screaming for Danny to save him. Danny suffers a wave of remorse so great that " every time Howard scream[s] out his name seem[s] to push Danny's skull one step closer to exploding" (207). This culminating moment forces Danny to finally face the reality of what he did. The first time that Danny traumatized Howie, he was not there to witness the effect that it had on Howie.

This contrasts with the redemption that Danny had fantasized about twenty years ago, because it has now become reality. In this climaxing moment, all of the mentally-trapped characters – Danny, Ann and Mick, and Howard – are physically imprisoned together. In this way, they experience a type of physical belonging in their affliction, instead of the isolation that had come with their mental imprisonment. This scene provides catharsis particularly for Danny and Mick. " He and Mick [haul] Howard up [the stairs] between them" (213), which physically symbolizes their achievement of redemption.

However, Mick shoots Danny once the men rescue everybody from the tunnel. Significantly, Danny falls into a pool. This recalls both the moment that Danny traumatized Howie and the redemption that Danny achieves for his action at the very end of his life. Because of Mick's crime, Mick is mentally and physically imprisoned once more in a jail, just after he escapes these underground tunnels in which the afflicted characters had achieved mental escape and from where they had achieved physical escape. Mick "liked Danny", as "he reminded [him] of [himself]", but Mick felt that he "was getting erased...like for all those years [he'd] been holding [Danny's] place" (220).

In order to mentally escape what he has done, Mick writes this story while he is in jail. The underground scene and Mick's narration exemplify Egan's use of imprisonment in order to unearth the characters' oppressed memories and place them on the road to healing. Through these oppressed memories, Egan explores the question of reality. Danny tries to ignore the reality of his wrongdoing, fantasizing instead that he has confessed his deed and therefore earned redemption. Throughout his life, Danny constantly communicates through technology with people who are not there, but in reality, he is not truly connected to anybody.

In addition, just like Danny, the reader is unsure whether the ominous presence of the castle is due to Danny's paranoia or Howard's planned revenge. The guilt that Mick grapples with because of his affair with Ann's wife causes him to leave in tension and fear of Howard discovering the truth. Finally, when Mick shoots Danny, he is put into a prison from where the only way he can escape is through his mind. In these ways, Egan reconceives the <https://assignbuster.com/reviving-the-repressed-jennifer-egans-the-keep/>

gothic in order to explore moral conflict and show how the characters' actions haunt them, thereby tarnishing their abilities to think and live freely. However, Egan also shows the characters escaping their unwanted memories and circumstances. As a teenager, Howie escapes the underground caves by using his imagination.

He then reinvents himself into a man of accomplishment and innovation. Danny and Mick escape their physical imprisonment by creatively finding the way out of the tunnels and saving the lives of the entire crew. They psychologically free themselves because they achieve redemption - Danny for the trauma that he caused Howard, and Mick for the affair that he had with Howard's wife. Finally, after Mick kills Danny, he narrates this story from jail in order to mentally face his crime. Egan evokes the gothic themes of guilt and imprisonment in order to uncover unclaimed memories and allow the characters to obtain catharsis.