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“It’s Alive!”: How Stephen King Redefines the Haunted House

Katherine Thuma

Stephen King, the beloved horror writer famous for his imaginative characters and well-woven plots, does not disappoint with his suspenseful short story “The House on Maple Street”. As a mysterious metal alloy spreads within the walls of the Bradbury home, eventually turning the house into a rocket and saving the family from their abusive stepfather, distinct familial motifs thread through the plot. We as readers are allowed to believe the nature of the incident is extraterrestrial in nature. However, if we identify and reanalyze the preconceptions we form as we read the story, these familial themes offer a different explanation: this metallic salvation is an act directly performed by the house in its loyalty to the Bradburys and their biological father. King peppers details throughout the story to support this idea, not only giving the house on Maple Street sentience but breathing new life into the classic horror concept of the “haunted house.”

The creeping metal formation is no friend: this first and most obvious preconception readers hold is no fault of our own, as both King and the Bradbury children suggest that the alloy spreading through the walls is insidious. It is strange and alarming to the Bradburys, who discover the metal after returning home from a long summer visit to England. Their first impressions are of utmost mystery; they eye the metal as it shines “silky,” already distrustful that it is located on the third floor, near the study of grouchy Daddy Lew. King even writes how Laurie “feels a vague sense of disquiet” as Trent pokes at the metal for the first time (507).

When the children begin finding it in other rooms, the metal attains a level of sentience, as Laurie decides that it is “...growing in the house. It’s stealing the house...Whatever you call it, it acts like it’s alive” (516). As readers, we can easily imagine the house becoming shrouded in the cold, ominous, metal as it spreads parasitically through the walls-- an alarming idea to say the least. However, King shockingly refutes these assumptions with further details. Trent begins to explore the house on his own, and he comes into direct contact with exposed metal in the second-floor closet. When he

touched the metal, “it flushed a dusky rose color, and he heard a faint but powerful humming sound,” King writes (518); Trent also believes the metal could have been warm to the touch, which is a sharp contrast to our chilly preconception. In the attic, Trent notices cobweb-like metal structures: “They seemed to be creating some sort of limber brace work, and it looked as if it would be very strong, able to hold the house together through a lot of buffeting and hard knocks” (518). This is no small detail. Suddenly, the metal structure is not only serving a purpose but said purpose is decidedly beneficial to the house. Seeing the metal up close in this way offers space for it to depart from the role of antagonist. We should also not overlook how the metal is slowly taking the place of the pink, billowy insulation in the walls. Though this fact unnerved the children, if we consider that the metal might be benevolent, this interchange of materials could hint at a more symbiotic relationship between the house and its alloy skeleton. Viewing the metal framework as a replacement for insulation presents it with a concrete function—one of protection, not harm. Just as insulation is used to give a house body and warmth, the metal represents the house’s life and provides it with the ability to do good.

This leads us to a fundamental question: is the incident on Maple Street due to direct action from the house itself? King provides enough evidence to argue “yes,” but in order to understand this argument, we readers must address one final preconception—that the characters in this story are only those who are living and breathing. We considered that the metal provides the house with life. However, this may not simply be a symbiotic relationship, but a choice of the house itself—perhaps the house is growing metal on its own to fulfill its final purpose of rescuing the Bradburys. Stephen King hints at this by anthropomorphizing the house’s act of salvation. After the dinner party fiasco, Laurie demands to Trent that they must save their mother, to which Trent replies ““The house is going to do it for us...the house is going to do it all”” (524). It is not just the metal, but the house itself which turns into a rocket to leave Titusville with Daddy Lew in tow. In a story titled “The House on Maple Street,” could the house not be a viable character of its own? There is no doubt that Bill Bradbury, the children’s deceased biological father, also leaves a meaningful legacy on the family and the course of the narrative. This is even more clear if we consider that his impact prompted the house to take action in the first place.

Both Mr. Bradbury and the house--nontraditional characters as they may be--have imperative contributions to the story arc, and we will explore the relationship between the two through their physical and emotional interactions.

One of the most pivotal points in the story occurs when Trent discovers what seems to be a control room in the wine cellar. This puts the entire mystery into perspective, both explaining the purpose of the growing metal and hinting at the culmination of the action. Early on, King informs readers that this basement is the only untouched fragment of Mr. Bradbury's life in the family home, making it especially meaningful to the children. King asserts that the wine cellar in particular embodies that, writing "Lew came in here even less than he went into the workshop" (519). This is abundantly important, as this cellar seems to be the heart of the metal's growth and certainly bears the most important function. Not only is the wine cellar strongly tied to Mr. Bradbury, but it is a prime example of the happy times before his death and Lew's entrance into the family. Mr. and Mrs. Bradbury would often drink a glass or two of this wine, or "plonk," as Bill Bradbury had called it, and that "this word had always made their mother giggle" (518-519). King juxtaposes this by writing that "their mother's only reply was soft, helpless sobbing" after Lew berated her at the disastrous faculty party (521).

It is critical, and also obvious, to notice the different energies which these two men carry, both toward Catherine Bradbury and the family as a whole. King similarly defines Lew's character toward the beginning of the story, when Laurie comments that he would never notice drilling near the family photos because "he doesn't even look at them, let alone behind them" (510). This is just one example of Daddy Lew being a non-involved and uncaring stepfather. If we look closely, we can even see moments where these father figures demonstrate different attitudes toward the house. We know that Bill Bradbury was passionate about his basement workshop, showing that he was surely involved in the maintenance and improvement of the house while he lived there. In contrast, King writes that Lew smoked his pipe indoors and could be heard "stamping about, muttering, opening drawers, slamming them shut again," highlighting the general disrespect he holds toward the place in which he lives (506). Bill Bradbury, who not only brought love and laughter to his wife and children but to the house itself, has gone. Lew Evans, who brings fear, unease, tears, and

sickness to the family, disrupts the energy of the house. If this house is a character who acts on its own, choosing to grow into a rocket and evict Lew, it is surely due to its loyalty toward the Bradburys and their deceased father. The heart of the rescue operation, the control room, grows out of the part of the house with the strongest ties to the legacy of Bill Bradbury—the plonk and laughter-filled wine cellar.

In “The House on Maple Street,” Stephen King suggests that the house absorbs energy and emotions from the people who live in it, so much so that it gains sentience and becomes the master of its own story. He invites readers to leave their preconceptions literally and figuratively at the door, even hinting at it in the text: “Although he was the oldest of the Bradbury kids, he was still young enough...to believe completely in his own perceptions and intuitions,” King writes about Trent (520). This passage tells readers that we all—even King’s own characters—operate under assumptions, and though this is not a bad thing, it is never the whole truth. We learn to interpret the Bradbury family dynamic in a new way—one which includes the house as a family member. By introducing this idea, King redefines the archetypal horror concept of a “haunted house” by giving the building itself a soul. In a time of eccentric and ostentatious 80’s horror, this bold but touching commentary on the relationship between the supernatural and the human world is refreshing. We can learn to reevaluate the preconceptions we develop in other forms of horror media. Like the house, heroes sculpted with love are easy to find if we take the time to look.