

ANALYSING THE CHARACTERS GUILTY CONSCIENCE THROUGH  
SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN *THE GLASS HOTEL* BY EMILY St. JOHN  
MANDEL

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**Abstract**

*The Glass Hotel* is a financial thriller novel by Canadian writer Emily St. John Mandel. In *The Glass Hotel*, Guilt is represented through supernatural elements. Guilt is a sense of regret, and sometimes guilt embraces fear of losing status, wealth, pride, sometimes even sense and life. The characters in the novel hallucinate that they are seeing the dead people out of guilt. The ghost is seen through the characters by guilt or they make real appearances. The ghost terrorizes the person just by wandering around the characters and shows that there are many ways to haunt. Appearance of dead people to characters create psychological stress and they undergo culpability. The characters in the novel live with guilt and an insecure life, their compassion towards money in the end makes their life miserable. In this novel, characters choose money over love, truth, dignity, trust. The paper examines and attempts to answer the questions, how guilt is expressed by supernatural elements, and Is there a real presence of ghosts in *The Glass Hotel*, and whether redemption is possible for the characters who commit the crime.

**Keywords:** Crime, Ghost, Guilt, Hallucinate, Ponzi Scheme, Redemption from guilt

*The Glass Hotel* is a Canadian novel written by Emily St. John Mandel in 2020. *The Glass Hotel* is translated into twenty languages and the book was selected by Barack Obama as one of his favourite books from 2020. It is an international bestseller. John Mandel modelled Bernie Madoff as a con-artist named Jonathan Alkaitais. The crime is similar but the story she

narrates is non identical. Bernie Madoff is a fraudster who ran the largest ponzi scheme in history, worth about 64.8 billion dollars and has inspired the author to write the novel.

The Glass Hotel revolves around troubled half-siblings Paul, Vincent and the fraudster Jonathan Alkaitais. The story starts after the disturbing graffiti, “ Why don’t you swallow the broken glasses?” (32) written in the hotel. The graffiti is written for Jonathan Alkaitais. The novel shows the life of Jonathan before and after he gets caught for his crimes and it shows how personal guilt will haunt him.

After the huge success of her novel, *Station Eleven*, the book received good reviews by critics. The novel is also known as theatre fiction. It was published in 2014 and won the Arthur C. Clarke award. The characters Leon Prevent and Miranda appear in *The Glass Hotel* and there is no direct connection between them. The book 's inspiration is Bernie Madoff's life. *The Glass Hotel* novel can be related to the book ‘*The Wizard of Lies: Bernie Madoff and the Death of Trust*’ by Diana B. Henriques. In the book, Bernie Madoff's real story is depicted. He himself explained how he started the ponzi scheme and how he ran the largest ponzi scheme in history worth \$ 65 billion.

The New York Times praised Emily St. John Mandel as ‘The New York Times Bestselling Author’. The Times mentioned *The Glass Hotel* as ‘Elegant, haunting... a unique rumination on guilt, grief and regret. The Washington Post recommended the novel as ‘The perfect novel... Freshly mysterious’. The themes in the novel are guilt and supernatural elements. The author handles the themes in a quite interesting way. The novel does not explore any horrifying elements or terrorizing materials to haunt the characters. The guilt ridden persons hallucinate and create their world surrounded by ghosts.

The Glass Hotel's main concentration is on money but the book is not just a financial thriller. It handles human emotions and shows the way they expressed it. Jonathan Alkaitis is the owner of a glass hotel who ran a ponzi scheme. He cheated multiple people upon investing in his ponzi scheme. Mandel introduced Paul as a student studying finance without any interest in it and he is a drug addict. And Vincent is a bartender, Paul's half sister and Jonathan's trophy wife.

The ghost appearance in history is used to denote the improper burial, injustices that happen to the character, or to avenge the dead. Presence of ghosts is an unpleasant experience that happens to the characters. Mandel uses ghosts as a tool to show the guilt of the person. In an interview conducted by BookPage, the characters in the novel are stated as ‘Everybody in

[this novel] is haunted in some way by memory or by actual ghosts'. Ghost appearance through guilt is seen in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Brutus' guilty conscience raises evil spirits, Caesar's ghost. Shakespeare addresses the guilt through this line 'Speak to me what thou art. Ghost. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.' (Act 4, Scene 3). The evil spirit mentioned here is Brutus himself.

The characters in *The Glass Hotel* undergo pressure due to their sin and its aftermath. Paul had a disturbed childhood. His father left them for Vincent's mother, using this he always accuses her. Paul's interest of study is music but his mother forced him to study finance. He is not satisfied with studies and his life and so he goes to a club and consumes drugs and he also initiates Charlie, his new friend to consume a drug which ends up in Charlie's death. Though he escaped to Vancouver in 1999, he often hallucinates Charlie's ghost and Paul feels sorry for what he did to him and he fears his worst yet he survived Charlie's ghost. In this fiction, Paul is the person who always carries guilt. After the death of Charlie, he joined Vincent for work in Hotel Caiette and there also he wrote a disturbing graffiti, 'why don't you swallow the broken glasses?' (32) for money and left the hotel after Walter warned him. In 2008, Paul had a successful music career and named it BAM. He uses the videos taken by Vincent without her knowledge that leaves her in shock and Paul in guilt. In the end, when he sees Vincent's ghost he seeks her forgiveness and accuses himself of being a thief.

Jonathan Alkaitis' life is more complicated than Paul's life. He runs a ponzi scheme. Jonathan's life looks fake like his ponzi scheme, Vincent is a trophy wife for him. He involves not only common people, even the ones he considers as friends like Olivia Collins, to ponzi schemes. Ella Kappersky is the one who Alkaitis fears to face because she knew the truth before the world did. The concept of Alkaitis is that he will make a huge profit with less money. He gives false hope over nothing and people believe it and fantasise their life with that money. A financial student and blogger quoted 'Everyone wants something for nothing, you just give them nothing for something' for Bernie Madoff. It is closely related to Jonathan Alkaitis' life.

Alkaitis knows that he is ruining people's lives still he continues to do so. He mentions that "we all know what we do." (164). He was sentenced to 170 years in prison. Alkaitis feels the comfort of truth in the prison and it does not last long as he starts to have the illusion of being in counter life where he escaped to another country and has a happy life. Chruchwell is a person next to his cell who acknowledges psychological stress. Though he

resists it to him he repeatedly hallucinates his dead brother Lucas. Later, Alkaitis has a fear of losing his mind and doubts whether he will be able to differentiate between real life and counter life. Alkaitis make a mess in people's life by grasping their money, in some cases it is their life. The victims of Alkaitis like Yvette Bertolli died of heart attack following the news of Alkaitis theft, Faisal ended his life by committing suicide. He is visited by the ghost of their victims and infuriated as he is not visited by his dead wife Suzanne or Lucas. In his case, it is clear that truancy of his beloved ghosts shows haunting happens due to guilt not grief.

Vincent is a character of compassion, she had a troubled childhood as her mother died of drowning at the age of 13. Her school days do not go well as she lasts in the memories whether her mother died willingly or it's just an accident. In 2005, she discontinued her school and led an independent life. Her life takes a turn after Jonathan Alkaitis enters the bar where she works as a bartender. As her independent life does not have the pleasure of money, she accepts being Alkaitis trophy wife and blindly enters into a relationship with him. Thus she steps into the kingdom of money. The problems in their relationship are they are not legally married, Vincent is younger than Alkaitis daughter, the kingdom of money is not as fruitful as she thinks. The pleasure she gained is materialistic and it is mentioned by Caroline Tew article "What kept her in the kingdom was the previously unimaginable condition of not having to think about money, because that's what money gives you: the freedom to stop thinking about money"

When Vincent knows about Alkaitis' ponzi scheme, she leaves him and regrets her actions for being Alkaitis' trophy wife. Vincent has the habit of taking video clips from her childhood after her mother's death and she was somehow emotionally connected with it. Paul uses her videos for his albums which leaves her in anger as well as sad. The incident that ensued brings her to light and she was not able to trust another person like she used to do once. She became independent again and employed as a cook in Neptune Cumberland ship and died while taking videoclips of storms. In the storm, as a ghost she met Paul and forgave him for using her clips. Finally, she visions her mother seated in the boat and she finds the answer for her question that her mother's life ended in an accident. Vincent in the end turns into a ghost and attains peace.

Madoff states that 'In a world full of lies, the most dangerous ones are those we tell ourselves'. Alkaitis' arrest scene is so close to Bernie Madoff. They do not resist their crime when the FBI arrives and like Madoff, Alkaitis also mentions that he acted alone. When an

interviewer questioned him, he answered that ‘They were just so greedy, these people, the returns they expected...’ he turned his guilt into anger and in one way or another he tried to get peace and comfort. He lies to himself and tries to get it but the truth always shutters and makes him surrounded by guilt and ghosts.

The characters in the novel are so different from one another. Paul is seen as an unstable character who is a drug addict and irresponsible brother. On the other hand, Jonathan Alkaitis ran a ponzi scheme. He framed the business and fake documents and manipulated people to invest money in it and added that it will produce a great profit. Comparatively Alkaitis' crime is more cruel than Paul, but he does not care about it or feels guilt before his arrest. In the prison he started to feel guilty. Though the characters did different crimes, they both ended up killing people. Their intention is not to kill them but their actions did it.

Stephen King's quote is related to the article, “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.” The characters in the novel have done horrible things by making wrong choices. Paul's idea of consuming drugs results in his friend's death. Alkaitis, on the other hand, ruins people's lives which results in self guilt. He duped the characters who died of his ponzi scheme. Vincent's decision to have a luxurious life without working made her a trophy wife to an old man. In this every character makes an evil decision knowing that is not right. Even though the real ghost appears in *The Glass Hotel*, what haunts the characters most is their evil decision and its effects.

Through the discussion of guilt and supernatural elements (Ghost), this paper has examined the effect of the themes in the main character of the novel *The Glass Hotel*. The guilt of the characters are addressed by the supernatural elements. The real ghost impact is lesser than the impact made by the ghost arises from the character's guilt. As it said that the crime fixes its rate. Alkaitis crime can not be redeemed because here the crime is done willingly. In Paul's case, he is stricken by guilt and still a drug addict yet he reached his heights. Vincent attained peace as she did not ruin other lives or the reason for someone's death. The scope of *The Glass Hotel* is not only for the people to be aware of fraudsters and also warns the persons who commits the crime to be aware of its consequences.

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