

The Hero's Journey Through the Perils of Miracle Cures: A Critical Study of Stephen King's *Revival*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to delineate the hero Jamie Morton's involvement with the negative snowballing of the miracle cures initiated by Charles Jacobs in Stephen King's horror novel *Revival*. The negative snowball effect is a process of continuous acceleration that brings about changes in size, importance and magnitude leading to detrimental effects that negatively impact the situation. In the novel, Charles Jacobs is a pastor who is fascinated and obsessed with a mysterious power source he calls 'secret electricity'. He offers miracle cures and manipulates people suffering from debilitating illnesses into getting zapped by the electricity, driven by self-centred motives to help improvise his devices and techniques. He performs the cure on Jamie too and heals him from his addiction to heroin. Jamie and the other healed persons suffer long-lasting aftereffects that lead only to death. He also forces Jamie to assist him in his final experiment using lightning to learn the fates of his dead wife Patsy and son Morrie through the revival of the dead Mary Fay. Though, through the revival, Jacobs gains insight into what lies in store after death, his actions snowball into an irrepressible monster that ultimately demands his life, freeing Jamie from his obligations to him and the world from the unimaginable terrors of the secret electricity.

Keywords: Snowball effect, miracle cures, secret electricity, revival, afterlife, lightning

Revival is a 2014 horror novel by the American writer of horror, crime, suspense, thriller, fantasy and science fiction Stephen King. It revolves around the life of the six-year-old Jamie Morton and his encounters with the pastor Charles Daniel Jacobs who moves to the Jamie's town Harlow as the newly appointed Methodist pastor and befriends him. The pastor and his wife Patsy conduct the youth fellowship meetings every Thursday and he entertains the attendees with his scientific experiments that give forth a Christian message. Jacobs is an electricity aficionado and is bent on tapping and using the unconventional form of electricity, he addresses as "secret electricity". He loses faith in God and suffers a falling-out with the community when he gives a sermon denouncing God in church after the gruesome deaths of his wife and son Morrie in a road accident. He gets fired and leaves town to make a living out of his knowledge of the effects of his secret electricity on human beings.

Jamie's brother Conrad Morton endures a skiing accident which ruptures his vocal cords. The Mortons face a severe financial crisis and there is a lot of noise and unrest in the family when they are forced to find a way to fund Conrad's treatment. Unable to stand these, Jamie seeks the help of Jacobs who enthusiastically volunteers to treat Conrad. Conrad is reluctant and sceptical about the pastor's attempts and assumes his treatment to be nothing but more prayers. But to his surprise, he sees him bringing a fat cloth belt with a cord attached to a slide switch. Jacobs claims it to be the ENS or the Electrical Nerve Stimulator that he has been working on for a year. It runs on batteries also built by him. Thus, Jamie's brother becomes the first human victim to walk unwittingly into the portals of treatment using the life-altering secret electricity and his treatment is Jamie's first encounter with the unconventional source of power.

"The electrical nerve stimulator provides transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation or TENS which is a therapy that makes use of low voltage electrical current to provide pain relief. A TENS unit is made of a device powered by batteries that delivers electrical impulses through electrodes placed on the surface of the skin. The electrodes are usually positioned at or near nerves where the pain is located or at trigger points to alleviate pain." (TENS). The therapy is used to treat both acute and chronic pain and it works either by the electricity triggering the stimulation of the neurons that block the transmission of pain signals thereby altering the feeling of pain or by

raising the level of endorphins, blocking the perception of pain. “Endorphins are hormones produced in the pituitary gland attached to the base of the brain that activate the body’s opiate receptors acting as analgesics” (Cuncic). While the conventional electricity used for the TENS does not promise a complete cure from the disease, Jacobs’s secret electricity displays a cure and a reversal from sick to the normal. This is first noticed in Conrad’s case, when the passage of the secret electricity revives his damaged vocal cords and restores his ability to talk which in turn restores peace and rejoicing in the Mortons’ house.

Con didn’t hold out his hands, although his fingers continued to move up and down, as if he were playing an invisible piano. His upper lip lifted a few times in an involuntary snarl, and his eyes went through spasms of fluttering. Once, still in that grating, gravelly voice, he said, ‘I ... can ... *talk* again!’ (King 43).

When questioned about his miraculous healing of Conrad’s condition, the pastor dismisses it as a placebo effect, which is “an improvement of symptoms using an inactive treatment happening through psychological factors like expectations or classical conditioning resulting in the cure” (Seladi-Schulman). But Jamie has a hunch that the pastor is as surprised as others regarding the potency of his invention. “I might have told her my own intuition: Reverend Jacobs had been as surprised as we were. He hadn’t expected it to work.” (King 48). Though Jacobs’s experiment on Conrad is perceived and appreciated as an immensely generous gesture, it is his first success in yielding a favourable result from the use of the secret electricity on a person and it prompts the inquisitive scientist residing inside Jacobs to keep his experimentation going. It sets the ball rolling and it gathers momentum with time and soon becomes dangerous.

The snowball effect is a process of continuous acceleration that brings about changes in size, importance and magnitude. As the situation progresses from the initial state to the final state, the significance of the events and its consequences keeps growing larger, more serious and more powerful. The term is derived from the visualization of a snowball rolling down a hill getting bigger and bigger as it keeps gathering snow, gaining mass, surface area and momentum. It becomes faster and more powerful as it moves onward. The snowball effect is either positive or negative. The positive snowball effect produces favourable and constructive results while the negative snowball effect produces detrimental results. Jacobs in *Revival*, after witnessing the loss of his wife and son, loses his job as a consequence of rendering a blasphemous sermon. He makes use of the untapped secret electricity to make a living. What begins as a seemingly harmless and benign trick with the inexplicable power resource, with time, negatively snowballs into a peril for his and others’ existence.

The novel shifts to when Jamie turns thirty-six years and lives a miserable life as a heroin addict. He is overcome by his addictions and loses his job as a guitarist. He meets Jacobs after many years in a fair entertaining the audience with his secret electricity. This is Jamie’s second encounter with Jacobs’s involvement with the electricity. His act is called ‘Portraits in Lightning’, where he takes photos of people and then makes use of his electricity causing the portrait to appear on a plate after a burst of light flashes. Jacobs finds a volunteer named Cathy Morse to be photographed. He blindfolds her and hits her with the secret electricity. Her magnified portrait appears on the plate transformed from an ordinary Oklahoma girl to a French courtesan which awes and delights the audience. And before the effect is lost, he gifts her the portrait.

Then it was just Cathy Morse, but that was astounding enough Cathy Morse standing twenty feet high in the sort of expensive gown she would never own in real life.... the lipstick of the girl in the chair was candy pink, that of the giant Cathy behind her was bright red. (King 133).

After Cathy’s contact with the secret electricity, she begins to act abnormally. Cathy carries the picture given by Charles Jacobs everywhere and gets teased for it. She claims to look exactly like the person in the picture and after a few days loses her obsession for the picture. Instead of getting back to normal, Cathy’s condition worsens and she barges into the J. David Jewellery and goes towards the display case where the most expensive jewels are laid, grabs a hammer from her shopping bag and shatters the glass top of the case unmindful of the braying alarm and takes out a pair of diamond earrings. She suffers injuries and troubles with the police. She is unable to recollect her deeds and is sent for psychological evaluation and is later released into the custody of her parents. On the closing day of the Tulsa State Fair, Jacobs and Jamie are met by an extremely angry man who is understood to be Cathy Morse’s father. He punches Jacobs for having destroyed his daughter. Much later in the novel, an obituary

informs the world of Cathy Morse's suicide by jumping off of the Cyrus Avery Memorial Bridge. Jacobs's secret electricity plunders her sanity and life.

The haze begins to clear for Jamie who now identifies and realises that there are ill-effects resulting from the use of secret electricity on humans. Cathy Morse is one of Jacob's first few victims. She is randomly picked for the portrait by Charles Jacobs who himself has no idea that such a predicament would befall her. Jamie observes that Jacobs shows no remorse for having performed the trick on her. He is eager to make a note of the changes in behaviour but takes no effort to stop her before the damage is done. He does not even take a hiatus from using his secret electricity before doing a thorough research on the consequences of his source of power. 'The Portraits in Lightning' business funds his experiments. Following Cathy Morse, Jacobs finds an easy victim in the protagonist Jamie Morton too, in spite of his awareness of the possibility of unwelcome consequences.

When Jamie meets Jacobs in the fair Jamie's he is in a debilitated state because of his heroin abuse. Jacobs, rescues him and takes him to his recreational vehicle and attempts to nurse him back to health. Jamie keeps craving for heroin and Jacobs asks him if he would like to be cured of his addiction through his treatment with secret electricity which would shorten the painful drug withdrawal process. Jamie is not very happy with the idea of his frontal lobe being blasted with the secret electricity. But the only thing that seems convincing is the fact that his addiction, if left untreated, would lead him to either penitentiary or death. Jamie never fully agrees to the treatment but feels like there is no other choice left for him that promises a brighter future.

Jacobs takes Jamie to his electrical workshop in Western Tulsa and gets the devices ready for the treatment. Unlike ever before, he is extremely confident about curing Jamie's heroin addiction and allows Jamie final snorts of the heroin before zapping him. "He produced the brown bottle, considered it, then handed it to me. 'Since we can hope this will be your last, why don't you do the honours?'" (King 149). He then brings out a pair of battered headphones with mesh covering the ear pads and connects it to a device that resembles an amplifier. Having successfully established the connection he presses a switch which orders a restructuring of Jamie's brainwaves. Jacobs tests Jamie and observes that he does not have an appetite for heroin anymore. In addition to the disappearance of the addiction, he is also freed from the menacing arthritis. Jacobs's curiosity regarding the effects and side-effects of his treatment sends a wave of realization to Jamie. It hits him that he and the previous victims have been used to test the efficacy of the treatment using secret electricity.

'You're self-teaching, aren't you? All your customers are actually guinea pigs. They just don't know it. *I was a guinea pig.*'

'Are you better now, or not?'

'Yes.' Except for the occasional early-morning stab-a-thon, that was. (King 163).

Jamie's cure is not without consequences. After being treated with electricity he keeps repeating the words "something happened" almost as if he is on a loop. In the middle of the night, he is found jabbing his upper arm with a fork imitating his days of drug abuse. He finds his actions to be involuntary and out of control as if he is controlled by someone or something else.

Jamie's successful cure, kindles a fire in Jacobs. It sets the snowball into motion. Though Conrad's successful cure occurs chronologically before Jamie's, Charles Jacobs gains confidence in his efforts only after being able to achieve similar results for a second time. It helps him transform from the regular showman at the fair to Pastor C. Danny Jacobs, a miracle worker, reviving people from their illnesses. Though it serves as a method to earn quick money through "love offerings", Jacobs's prime objective is to observe the effects and aftereffects of the electricity on a variety of people suffering from a wide range of diseases. He craftily uses religion to mask his true intentions and to keep the people from questioning his methods. He even dares to invent a make-believe narrative to get his audience to accept the sanctity of the small metal ring which is actually needed to zap the victim. Many people fall a prey to his convincing speech and his display of miracles. He cures many of their ailments like arthritis, cataract, heart defect, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, stomach ulcer, migraine, diabetes and so on not with the intention of providing them relief. He just mercilessly uses them as lab rats. The power and momentum gained by the snowball is soon tainted by its negative effects when those who were healed by the

secret electricity suffer side-effects. Not all of them are grave initially but the treatment gradually leads them to their deaths by suicide and destruction of their loved ones.

When Hugh Yates shares his experiences with Jacobs and his secret electricity with Jamie Morton, it occurs to him that Jacobs must be stopped before further damage is done. Hugh Yates is a musician who loses his hearing ability due to Ménière's disease, "a disorder of the inner ear causing tinnitus, vertigo and nausea ("Meniere's Disease - Symptoms and Causes"). He agrees to be treated with the secret electricity because of the intolerable, constant ringing in his ears and to be able to continue in his career as a musician. Jacobs uses his electricity to restore his hearing but Yates experiences many aftereffects. He endures numerous blackouts with no complete loss of consciousness and finds himself doing inexplicable actions like standing facing the wall and so on. Though some of these become less pronounced with time, there is a more serious side-effect which he calls the 'prismatics' which does not fade away like the others. The bout of prismatics frequently occurs and bothers him. Hugh Yates explains prismatics as follows:

'The world filled with reds, blues, and greens at the edges of the things. The colors would shift back and forth. It was like looking through a prism, but one that magnify things at the same time it was shattering into pieces... And during the thirty or forty seconds it was happening, it was as if I could almost look through the world, and there was another world right behind it. *A realer world.*' (King 198)

In addition to the uncanny aftereffects, Jamie and Yates are disturbed by visions and dreams. Most of their visions are similar and they involve ants that terrorize and haunt them.

Jamie seeks the help of Brianna Donlin, the daughter of his co-worker, to help him trace Jacobs who disappears after curing him. Brianna is well-versed with computers and she discovers articles on the people healed by Jacobs which eventually leads Jamie and Yates to him. They immediately set out on a hunt for Pastor Daniel Jacobs to stop him from healing more people and destroying their peace and normalcy. Yates gets a sudden prismatic attack followed by vomiting and then the vision appears when he and Jamie visit a fair in search of Jacobs

'Ants', he whispered. 'Huge ants, the kind that must only live in tropical forests. Brown ones and black ones and red ones. They were looking at him with dead eyes and that poison they use, formic acid was dripping from their mouths'. He drew a long, ragged breath. 'If I ever see anything like that again, I'll kill myself.' (King 216)

The vision continues and when he turns to Jamie, he sees him as one of the giant ants with poison dripping out of his mouth. In Jamie's dream he is able to see his dead family members with whom he goes back home to celebrate his birthday. There is a mould-covered birthday cake on the table and from inside it, breaking the frosting a huge ant comes out. This is followed by more ants coming out similarly. He also sees Jacobs's dead wife and son who sing 'something happened to you' instead of the regular 'Happy Birthday' song. Jamie then wakes up screaming. These visions and dreams recur, and they shake and unsettle him.

But the snowball that begins rolling with the restoration of Jamie never slows down. It keeps accelerating and gaining power. Having used his secret electricity on many, Jacobs has exhibits mastery over it. The evolution of the devices used to zap people and the effectiveness of the treatments clearly indicate his growing authority and control over the resource. Treating Conrad requires a huge belt with cords connected to a slide switch. In Jamie's case he just needs a pair of headphones with a wire mesh. Hugh Yates's restoration needs only two rings with a gold mesh. This is followed by the masses of people being cured with just a gold band. Similarly, his healing journey starts with curing Conrad's ruptured vocal chords and his last patient Astrid Soderberg is made free from lung cancer. The escalating significance of the cures is directly proportional to the growing knowledge and clout of Jacobs. The power and faith in his use of the energy resource encourages Jacobs to keep going. He, fuelled by curiosity fails to know when to stop. "Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will." says James Stephens, the Irish novelist. Curiosity is the desire to learn or know more about something or someone. After the deaths of his wife Patsy and beloved son Morrie he dedicates his life to nothing but projects with secret electricity. His obsession with secret electricity costs him his life and the lives of the ones he uses to experiment. "Sometimes – especially when he talked about the curative powers of electricity – he got a look in his eyes that didn't seem sane." (King 142). He wraps up his healing experiments only when he gathers enough data of the effects of the electricity on the human body to move on to his final experiment.

The final experiment is the one where he tries to play God, interfering with death. Death is an irreversible part of the human lifecycle. It is considered humanly impossible to predict the time of death or bring the dead person back to life. What lies after death is indecipherable and remains a mystery till today. Myths from around the world claim that a powerful and almighty entity is responsible for the creation and destruction of lives on earth. Jacobs's final experiment is his attempt to fathom the afterlife and know the fates of his wife and son. Charles Jacobs forces Jamie Morton to assist him in the experiment in exchange for curing his ex-girlfriend, Astrid Soderberg. And this time the experiment is extremely risky and endangering as it involves the harnessing of lightning and deals with the elements beyond death. A single flash of lightning can range between three hundred million volts to about a billion volts. ("Lightning Facts and Information"). Jacobs uses a thin metal headband upon the clinically dead Mary Fay to harvest and channel the surge of electrical energy from lightning. This revives Fay in a way that it allows the clinically dead woman to communicate with Jacobs regarding the afterlife and the fates of Patsy and Morrie.

The experiment works exactly how Jacobs wants it to but what they learn from her breaks him completely. Jacobs and Jamie understand that there is no heaven or hell after death. Instead, the dead reach to a place called 'The Null' and are forced to endlessly serve the giant antlike creatures. "*Gone to serve the Great Ones, in the Null. No death, no light, no rest.*" (King 353). The most powerful of the ants is the 'Mother' who has a claw made of human faces which is an implication that human beings are fed to her. The Mother inhabits the body of Fay and stretches out its claw with Patsy and Morrie's faces to reach Jacobs. Jamie braves the odds and manages to shoot the grotesque creature coming for Jacobs and shuts the door of death. Jacobs, on the other hand, suffers a stroke as a result of the overwhelming nature of the revelations and he falls down dead. Only death puts an end to Jacobs's recklessness and unwarranted experiments with the potent yet unsafe secret electricity.

The experiments of Charles Jacobs in the novel *Revival* have always had their roots in deception and manipulation. Jacobs proves to be the best manipulator and succeeds in tricking a large section of the population to trust his practices. His experiments using the unconventional electricity are driven by self-centred motives. His inquisitiveness to learn the fates of Patsy and Morrie blind him from analysing the consequences of the revival of Mary Fay. He is ready to throw anyone under the bus to gain insight into the afterlife. His actions start to snowball into an irrepressible monster that ultimately demands his life and negatively impacts those that were miraculously healed by him. The healed ones, excluding a few like Jamie Morton, after recovery, attack and murder their partners and kill themselves. Even Astrid Soderberg, the last one to be healed, kills her friend Jenny Knowlen and then commits suicide. Though the secret electricity revives people and improves their quality of life temporarily, it sabotages more than just the restored person. The "miracle cures" prove to be more harmful than helpful and it reduces the healing using secret electricity to nothing but the detrimental quotient of the snowball effect.

The final experiment, despite the terrible consequences, proves to be of use to Jamie Morton. His insight into the undesirable afterlife enables him to be grateful for the time he has on earth. He vows to live the rest of his life to the fullest and not take anything for granted. Through his reluctant involvement in the Mary Fay's experiment, he puts an end to Charles Jacobs and his wicked games with his secret electricity. And Jacobs's death marks a permanent severance of the ties between them and it is also symbolic of the elimination of the threat to the normalcy of the world. Even though he is unable to undo himself completely from the side-effects of the secret electricity on himself, his freedom from Jacobs itself offers a relief beyond compare.

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