



Incarceration and Freedom in Emma Donoghue's "Room"

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Abstract

The 21st century places a great emphasis on the liberation of individuals, particularly women, and children, from oppressive forces like patriarchy. Emma Donoghue's novel, *Room*, showcases the increasing difficulty of achieving freedom as the characters Jack and Ma are forced into ever-shrinking living spaces. This confinement highlights the value of fresh air and makes both the characters and readers more appreciative of its importance. The article titled "Confinement and Freedom in Emma Donoghue's *Room*" aims to analyze the impact of contrasting perspectives on the characters of Jack and his mother, who have different desires for freedom and confinement. Jack, the narrator of the story, sees the room as his world and values the safety it provides, while his mother longs to experience the freedom of the outside world. Despite their captivity, *Room* is not a horror story, but rather a celebration of the resilience and love between a parent and child. For Jack, the objects in *Room* are his companions, and he is completely unaware of the world outside. The novel highlights the changes that take place when Jack enters the outside world. If the story was told from the mother's perspective, it would likely be a darker and more complex tale, with a victim's narrative. The room is a living hell for the mother, but for Jack, it is a paradise. The mother grieves over her isolation from the outside world, while Jack celebrates it, reflecting modernist and postmodernist perspectives, respectively

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Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* explores the unbreakable bond between a mother and her child, showcasing maternal determination and heroism. The story's key theme is the powerful connection between a

parent and their offspring. The epigraph of the novel, taken from the poem "Lamentation of Danae" by the Greek poet Simonides, sheds light on the story's important aspect.

The poem "My Child" speaks of Danae, a woman trapped in a chest and set adrift at sea, speaking to her child, Perseus, who later becomes a hero by killing Medusa, the sea monster, and marrying Princess Andromeda. In the novel, Ma sees Jack as her little hero, and it is he who frees her from the small room where she had been imprisoned for seven years. Jack's heroic escape results in Old Nick being arrested.

The novel and its epigraph both address the complexities of the world. The epigraph, "My Child," introduces the central theme of Room, which suggests that positivity can emerge from negativity. Additionally, it introduces the traumas and blessings of Ma and Jack's captivity. Both Ma and Danae are concerned about their children, and they both struggle with difficulties. However, Perseus and Jack seem unaware of the dangers and complexities of their environment. Ma is fiercely devoted to protecting Jack and keeping him safe and healthy, while Jack demonstrates remarkable bravery in the face of adversity and can "shine" in the dark moments of his life.

In "Room," Donoghue uses Jack's perspective to create a narrative that reflects his developing consciousness. Jack's line, "When I was a little kid I thought like a little kid, but now I'm five I know everything," encapsulates the kind of retrospective narrativizing many humans, especially young children, engage in. Donoghue draws attention to the fact that Jack's descriptions of the world are filtered through his evolving understanding of it. This is reflected in a biblical passage included in Donoghue's "Library for Ma and Jack," which compares Jack's emerging consciousness to that of a child who becomes a man and puts away childish things. Jack's descriptions of his and Ma's new home reflect an emergent global consciousness that shapes the narrative trajectory of the story.

The novel can be interpreted as a coming-of-age story that follows Jack's journey of adjusting to a new world. Jack's relationship with the world is influenced by his evolving awareness of the world, which differs from Stephen Dedalus's in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." Unlike Dedalus, who ultimately reaches a tentative understanding with the world, Jack struggles with bewilderment and a sense of weariness towards it. The novel centers on Jack and Ma adapting to a completely foreign world that is vastly different from the confined space they have known for the first five years of Jack's life. The changes in the environment have a

direct impact on Jack's physical and emotional growth. The novel proposes that the story's spaces are lively because they are more than just a passive setting for human interaction.

As Jack becomes acclimated to life outside of Room, he is encouraged to distance himself from his close relationship with the objects around him. Nonetheless, this poses a difficulty for Jack as he grapples with the realization that many objects in the outside world share names with items he had known in Room. When a police officer offers him a blanket, Jack is reluctant to accept it because it differs from the one he and Ma had (184). The multitude of things in the world, like lollipops and t-shirts, and the existence of individuals with identical names, overwhelm him.

Throughout the novel, Jack places significant value on an object called the Tooth, which plays a pivotal role in his world, first inside Ma's body and later inside his own. Initially known as the Bad Tooth when it caused Ma pain in Room, it eventually transforms into a talisman for Jack and a reminder of his mother when he holds it in his mouth, effectively "incorporating his mother" into himself (Rubik, 2018: 230). Kathleen Costello-Sullivan notes that Jack perceives himself and the Tooth as being composed of his mother's "spit," and he views separation from her as an extinguishing force for both himself and the Tooth (2018: 100–1).

In the novel Room, Jack struggles to adjust to the world outside of the room he has been confined in with his mother, Ma. He is attached to the things that make up his world in Room, including Tooth, which he sees as a part of his mother. Jack anthropomorphizes Tooth and uses his imagination to bring it to life. Tooth plays a crucial role in communicating the traumatic conditions of Room to the police and in comforting Jack after Ma's suicide attempt. As Jack adjusts to the outside world, he learns to accept new things and eventually comes to terms with losing Tooth.

Throughout Room, Jack has a custom of bidding goodnight to the items in his world. Despite his gradual acceptance of new things, he retains a strong emotional connection to the objects from his captivity. When a collection of his belongings is transported from Room to their new residence, Jack is elated, whereas Ma is not as thrilled. Ultimately, they compromise by keeping Rug in Jack's wardrobe. At the conclusion of the novel, Jack and Ma revisit Room, and Jack bids farewell to each item, relinquishing his attachment to material possessions. The degree to which this is viewed as a positive development is open to interpretation by the reader.

Although Ma is with him, Jack is still worried about his missing tooth. Ma tries to console him by saying that things get lost all the time, but Jack is not comforted. He wonders if he had swallowed it and starts to develop a sentimental attachment to it. As Jack encounters new things in the world, he realizes how little he knows and how confusing it can be.

Jack and Ma must define who they are and reinvent themselves to survive. Ma had to change in order to Room, and now she has the opportunity to create a new identity. However, she decides to rely on Jack even though he reminds her of the traumatic experience of being trapped in the Room. Jack also wants to remain the same, asking Ma if she would still call him Jack if he were reincarnated

Despite everything that happened in Room, Jack inquires if they can revisit it. They are taken to the site by the police, and Jack is surprised by how different it looks from the outside. When they go inside, Jack no longer feels the same attachment to the room and bids it farewell. For Jack, Room has become nothing more than a bad dream. Donoghue uses Jack's innocent perspective to lighten the intense emotions of Ma's character, making him a compelling and unique character.

Donoghue has stated that her international success with Room has influenced the way she writes, with a focus on creating gripping plots that feature situations of intense confinement and a sense of urgency. She likes to explore how her characters react and connect in extreme and limited circumstances. In Room, the construction of the "prison" is a significant factor in the novel's ability to connect with readers globally. Donoghue's use of a five-year-old's perspective and language creates a unique style that allows the novel to resonate with readers in ways that other captivity narratives might not.

Matthew Hart's concept of extraterritoriality in contemporary fiction, which refers to spatial practices where individuals are disconnected from their geographical boundaries but still carry a sense of it, applies to Room. Room's narrative is set in a hyperlocal and restricted space, encompassing only the area where Jack and Ma are imprisoned. As a result, the novel can be described as extraterritorial in the sense that it is situated beyond the boundaries of any specific country. Nevertheless, there is no explicit connection to present-day state politics within the book. Despite its geographic limitations, Room's account of the carceral situation through a "zero style" prose has propelled it to worldwide acclaim, requiring a transnational comprehension.

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