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## **Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* (2005) in the Transition from Book to Movie<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Challenging and profound, Nick Hornby's novel *A Long Way Down* (2005) is the story of four people failing to commit suicide. The protagonists are caught in an intricate web of relationships, disappointments and missed chances on their one-way journey to understand that "The cure for unhappiness is happiness" (Elizabeth McCracken). This paper aims at demonstrating that 2014 movie version directed by Pascal Chaumeil fails to capture the essence of the book and resorts to a number of radical changes which are only supposed to attract a larger audience, but do not necessarily send the same message as the novel.

**Keywords:** Contemporary novel, Intertextuality, Screen adaptation, Transformation.

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Hornby's novel *A Long Way Down* (2005) could be categorized as a dark comedy since it deals with topics such as depression, melancholy, loss of balance, failed relationships, but tackled with in a funny, sometimes satirical manner which his readers have already been accustomed with. Together with his other novels, *A Long Way Down* reveals the profoundness of contemporary problems without actually giving any real solution since these solutions would not address the whole society.

The title of the novel could be understood as a direct message from the author telling us that giving up on life seems easy without actually believing that. Nevertheless, the writer warns us that there is 'a long way down', that is, it is not so easy to embrace unhappiness and death instead of life and happiness. Additionally, the writer has chosen to write the title vertically so that he could show his readers the image of falling at a metaphorical level. The title is closely connected to the destiny of the characters so they are facing a dramatic decision: to commit or not to commit suicide?

The quotation at the beginning of the novel "[t]he cure for unhappiness is happiness. I don't care what anyone says" aims at presenting an optimistic message that life is full of surprises, and a simple gesture or change in life could bring happiness to people. The reference to Niagara Waterfall supports the idea that although life can be repetitive, a happy moment could come after a sad one.

Nick Hornby resorts to multiperspectivism in telling the story of his four characters: "Instead of depending on the traditional single narrator's version of the story, the reader now has access to multiple protagonists' stories. This undoubtedly adds to the ethical dimension of the story and provides more objectivity for the reader's judgments on the story's events and participants" (Vasiloiu, 2013, p. 202). The reader needs to understand all the viewpoints in the story and construct his/her own mental representation of the tellers' points, and engage with them as if in the real world. Because of the alternative turns at talk, the various sides of the story interact and converge to build up a holistic and objective picture of the entire story. The characters themselves constantly interact and establish a dialogical context when sharing their different stories. Paradoxically, intersubjectivity gives a sense of unity to the "multiple overlappings and interwinnings" (Crossley, 1996, p. 173).

The novel starts with Martin - one of the narrators asking a rhetorical question 'Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block?'. This rhetorical question

represents a way of explaining the readers the inner complications and the reasons which in a way have to purify (absolve) him for committing suicide. His monologue shows his contradiction with the action he is doing and the inner voice which is telling him that he does not want to do it. Later, his inner inquiry is interrupted by Maureen - the second narrator - who directly starts telling her own story.

Maureen makes her rather depressing monologue about how she had not accepted invitations to the New Year's Eve party for decades. On the contrary, she told her son Matty that she had accepted an invitation from her friends to join a party. From the continuing paragraph, readers could assume that she was a religious person who stopped going to church or confessions since she would repeat her lying habits again. She also confesses the second reason why she is not going to church anymore, that she is thinking about committing suicide.

The other narrator of the story is Jess, who is talking in an angry way both verbally and physically. She also seems very depressed with her current position because she is trying to find a boy named Chas who would do anything to avoid her. She confesses that she always finds a way to preserve her distance from her, like her sister Jen. In an indirect way, she feels guilty about her sister's sudden disappearance.

Three of the narrators find themselves on the top of the tower block and unlike in the case of Martin and Maureen's slow actions, Jess tries to jump off in a fast manner as if it represents her anger and her need to disappear. Even though all characters have the same thought, they tried to prevent her from jumping. Their fight is again disturbed by JJ - the last narrator - who is an American and a pizza deliverer.

The unexpected gathering on the block gives them the opportunity to display their different personalities who end up deciding to do the same thing, committing suicide. "Understanding the text in its intersubjective construction evidently requires consideration of the four narrating subjectivities not only as individualities with their personal drama, but simultaneously, in their co-existence within the group/community of 'potential suicides' that they form" (Vasiloiu, 2013, p. 206). As they continue talking, they try to explain their reasons for being there. As Martin is concerned, he has ruined both his personal and professional life by getting involved in a one night stand relationship with an underage girl. Maureen is obsessed with the idea that God punished her with a disabled son for the only failure in her life, which is being with a man who was not her husband. Jess explains her reason in a simple way: he has some family issues and she also failed in her romantic relationship with Chas. Thinking that their motives and reasons are more concrete than his, JJ feels the need to lie and

he says that he is dying because of a brain disorder. The truth was that he also failed in his career as a musician and his relationship with Lizzie, the girl he loved.

As a means of getting distracted and not thinking about ending their lives, all three of them want to help Jess to find Chas thinking that they could talk and solve their own problems, while the day continues and they visit clubs and parties to find Chas. At one party, JJ sees a man hiding on the roof terrace and realizes that this is Jess's boyfriend Chas. In spite of JJ's attempts to persuade Chas to confront Jess, he refuses to meet her accusing her of harassing him and pretending that she is too wild to be dealt with. Chas's attitude enrages Maureen who hits him against her moral and religious beliefs. The conversation between Chas and Jess is destined to fail because neither of them is sincere with the other, Chas just trying to get rid of Jess and she being too furious to be able to communicate with him.

New information about Martin's life is revealed during the time they spend in his apartment where they discover that he has an affair with Penny Chambers. Actually they were having dinner with another couple on New Year's Eve when Martin decided to leave them and go on the top of that tower block without any notice. In spite of their mutual history and of the fact that Martin seemed to have really cared for Penny, he is now unable to tell her the truth, so he prefers her to think that he is having an affair with someone else. On Penny's departure, Jess suggests that they should meet again on Valentine's Day striking a pact that they will not attempt to end their lives meanwhile.

The second part starts with their story becoming public since Chas has delivered the news of their common failed suicide attempts to the tabloid press. To the others' astonishment, Jess proved to be the Junior Minister for Education's daughter, a thing which partially explains her aggressive behavior and her desperate need to attract her father's attention, a father too busy dealing with the educational problems of all the students in the country and less concerned with the attitude problems of his own daughter. Chris Crichton prefers to blame Martin for Jess's behavior rather than assume responsibility for his own mistakes as a parent.

JJ, Maureen and Martin behave immaturely and irresponsibly once again when they take the decision to follow Jess's plan to present a distorted version of their story to the media just in order to earn some extra money. Consequently, they pretend that they have seen an angel looking like Matt Damon, a symbol of a desacralized world of which they are perfect representatives of people who have lost both their ideals and their faith. This experiment fails

because when they are interviewed their stories do not concord and they have long ago stopped caring about what other people think.

As the readers get to know the characters more and more, they can grasp the meaning of Maureen's extremely lonely life as her expectations are far from being very high: she would be glad to have a short holiday, maybe to get a job and a bit of a social life. Starting to understand his own selfishness, JJ comes up with the plan of spending some time away from everything so they go on a trip to Tenerife. Even if this trip has therapeutic effects for Maureen, it does not change the others; it only adds extra elements to their suffering and anguish: JJ has an affair with a girl called Kathy attracted to him by her memory of one of his concerts; Jess loses her patience, drinks, takes drugs and ends up being taken back to her hotel in a police car. Martin gets into a confrontation with JJ and checks out of the hotel going off on his own. All in all, this escapade gives them a new energy and when Valentine's Day will come and they go to the Topper's House they all know what was worse has passed. JJ recounts the fact that they are witnesses to a man's suicide on top of that building and at least as far as he is concerned, he will never forget that moment: 'and those two noises, the moan and the thud, I've heard every single day since, and I still don't know which is scarier'. Martin also realizes that the man jumping from the roof 'had two profound and apparently contradictory effects': they understood that they were not capable of killing themselves and the information made them suicidal again.

Once again, Jess is the one who tells them that psychologists consider that a suicidal person's crises period lasts ninety days. As a result, they should try and solve their problems throughout this period seen as a grace period during which they can regain control over their lives. Feeling hopeful and remorseful, Maureen would like to help Martin make up with his ex-wife Cindy. Jess and Maureen's visit to Cindy's house shows that Martin's ex-wife has managed to rebuilt her life and she is now engaged in a relationship with a blind man who in spite of his disability seems to have become a better father for her daughters than Martin ever was.

The therapy group Jess initiates at the end of the novel is supposed to have beneficial effects upon all four characters helping them at least to understand the reasons behind their failed relationships, if not try and reestablish new connections with the people they care about. The simple fact that their loved ones came to see them at Jess's suggestion proved that they cared enough to come and become a part of a possible solution for their problems: Lizzie, JJ's ex-girlfriend, and Ed, his former band partner, joined the meeting; Jess's parents

found the time to be there too; Martin's ex-wife, his daughters and his ex-girlfriend attended this therapy group and Matty accompanied by two people from the care home supported Maureen. Unfortunately, Jess is the first to have an argument with her parents, then JJ has a disagreement with Ed and Martin starts quarreling with Stephen, one of Matty's guardians, out of pure jealousy since Penny prefers talking to this unknown man rather than talking to him. The only person really feeling that things are changing for the better in her life is Maureen and because of this, she would like to help the others so she is telling Jess's mother that maybe Jen came back to recuperate Jen's earring, thus giving her hope that Jen may still be alive.

JJ chooses to go back to music and even if he starts singing on the street, the very fact that he can do what he likes most in the world brings him peace of mind. Simple things happened to Maureen as well, but she seems satisfied with her part-time job and the fact that she is able to join other people in a social activity such as being a part of a quiz team. On the other hand, Jess is content with the ideas of a philosophy remembering paganism according to which people have both a God of Life and a God of Death and they decide when somebody lives or dies. Last but not least, Martin discovers that showing generosity and helping the others could have positive implications upon your own life too, so this is the reason why he is trying to give reading lessons to an eight year old pupil at a comprehensive school in his neighborhood.

Similarly with the beginning of the novel, the 2014 movie version directed by Pascal Chaumeil starts with Martin's monologue and with the same abrupt reference to his desire to kill himself. The scene on the roof bears a clear resemblance with the same scene taking place in the novel even if detailed upon throughout many chapters describing each of the characters motivation for being on that roof. Nevertheless, the scene lacks consistency in the sense that the four actors playing the major characters exaggerate their performances to the extent of making it non-veridical.

The following scene displays a number of relevant differences in comparison with the subsequent scenes in the novel. Unlike in the book, characters in the movie go on their separate ways and they only end up together again because the rain starts and Martin picks them all up. Deliberately, the director has chosen to make the characters get involved into a conversation about the reasons for them to commit suicide when they are still in Martin's car so that he could include them into a specific category and make the viewers identify with them. Consequently, they provide one word descriptions for their motivation: Neutrality

(Martin); loneliness (Maureen); love (Jess); brain cancer (JJ). The drawback is that maybe these categorizations come too early in the movie before the audience has a chance to accurately understand their attitude and desperate acts.

Another major discrepancy between the novel and the movie is that in the movie midnight catches them at Jess's party whereas in the book they are on top the tower block after midnight. Because of this discrepancy the effect upon the readers is totally different from the effect upon the viewers. In the movie the viewers hear people counting the minutes until midnight and the focus is upon Martin who feels trapped near a drugged teenager to remind him of all the failures in his life.

In one interview, the director explains the way in which he wanted to preserve the emphasis on the 4 characters like in the novel, but because of the brevity of a movie in comparison with a book, he could not do it. Instead, he divided the movie into 4 parts in which the viewers learn something new about each character until the end of the movie.

The adaptation gradually moves towards a difficult climax since the director himself considered that Hornby's endings are perhaps 'too peaceful and slow' and the spectators would need progression and development of both the actions and the characters in order to satisfy their expectations. As a result, the movie relies upon the relationship between Jess and JJ becoming more than a simple friendship with the love ingredient being added to the whole transformation the movie undergoes.

The overall message of the novel seems to have been understood by Pascal Chaumeil even if deficitarily rendered: "It's just that there's no universal message about suicide because I don't think you can have one. The reason for someone to end their life is different for everybody. We spend time with four characters, who - just by meeting each other - find a little sparkle for them to try and see what's going to happen next. This meeting on a rooftop keeps them alive and as it keeps them alive they get into a real kind of friendship ... I'm not saying this is the perfect remedy against suicide, because I don't think it works for everyone. Anyway, it works for these characters."

All in all, Hornby's narrators are convincing without any sign of ambiguity or confusion generated by the multiple alternating perspectives whereas Chaumeil's materialization of the four characters becomes a failure because of the deliberate exaggerations in the description of the protagonists, the dramatic changes of the storyline and the poor performance of the actors.

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