

"Word Processor of the Gods"

Q 1: Significance of the Title of "Word Processor of the Gods".

"Word Processor of the Gods" is a short story by American writer Stephen King, first published in the January **1983** issue of *Playboy* magazine under the title "**The Word Processor**". The title, however, was changed in King's 1985 collection "*Skeleton Crew*" to "Word Processor of the Gods". The title signals the way protagonist Richard manipulated things in his life using the word processor; took lives and also brought people back to life appears to be the work of gods. These actions can only be associated with gods and supernatural beings, not with ordinary human. That's why the processor is not any ordinary processor but rather, a "***Magic dream machine***", "***The word processor of Gods***" itself.

The theme at hand is not exclusive to Stephen King, since the idea or inspiration behind the story was probably taken from several stories of same plotlines from 1940s and 60s. A 1960 episode of *The Twilight Zone*, "*A World of His Own*", also features a dictation machine that can bring things into existence. The topic was again abundantly celebrated by writers of 1990s and early 2000s fiction.

The eponymous word processor, is introduced at the very beginning of the story when Richard, a failing writer receives a word processor from his diseased nephew Jonathan. It is made apparent from the start that Richard doesn't share a very healthy relationship with his whining wife and insolent teenage son. On contrary, Jonathan is an exceptionally talented fifteen year old genius who designed this word processor especially for his Uncle as a birthday present. As the story progresses, Richard learns that it's not an ordinary processor, because whatever he writes using that thing it comes to life immediately. Through thoughts of Richard it is told that he used to have longing for his Sister-in-law Belinda. Having a god like power at hand, the rotten state of his family leads him to make a choice that does not only involve getting rid of his family but also brings back Jon and his mother as his wife and son back to life.

The title rounds up the dilemma of man and in particularly Richard's decision very well. 'Word Processor', a man made gadget, solely associated with man is juxtaposed with 'gods'. It sands for desire of man to rewrite his own destiny, to be the writer of his future, to take control of his life in his own hands, to be the master of his own fate and to do the job that is not supposed to be done and in fact should not be done by a man. It signals how man, having power like gods surely would be selfish and little to less considerate about the lives of others just like Richard. He, in a way, killed his son and wife just for his own pleasure, in the wake of his revenge and selfishness, to fulfill his own life long desire to marry Belinda and to have a son as brilliant as Jonathan.

Jonathan appears to be the one to be blamed even more than Richard. The choices made by Richard appears to be pretty natural. He's more of a mediocre man, who is rather used by Jonathan to bring him back to life since he might have seen affection in Richard's heart for him and his mother. Richard is generic character and anyone who's gotten his hands on such a device would make same rash and selfish decisions as he made. However, Jonathan is the one who is extraordinary and exceptional child. A tech geek who used technology to his advantage, got rid of an abusive father, probably by plotting his death by writing that into word processor. The way he insisted on the word processor to be given to Richard alone signals that he might have anticipated or rather designed his

own death, just to be brought back again afterwards by Richard. After coming back to life, Jon's carefree reaction and equivocal comment on the machine that, ***"I'll cannibalize anything worth cannibalizing out of that thing tomorrow"***, also suggests that it might be meant to take lives. The open ending of the story leaves room for countless interpretation but the fact remains that power of gods in the hands of man produce nothing but evil.

Q 2: Character of Richard and why he refers his wife and son as 'strangers'.

Richard Hagstrom is portrayed as both, the **protagonist and antagonist** of the story. First, he is presented as a victim **'a nice guy'** and then after getting a magical word processor, as an evil person who **desires to replace his wife and son with his nephew and sister-in-law**. He is a **struggling writer** who tries his best to meet the both ends. But life seems to be so cruel to him having **a nagging wife, Lina and a self-centred son, Seth**. His life turns upside down when he receives a mysterious word processor from his nephew (who was recently killed in a car accident caused by his drunken father Roger, Richard's brother). Richard hides the processor in his study from his shrewish wife and bratty, disrespectful teenage son.

Neither Richard nor his family shows any affection for each other. His son's cold behaviour is more evident when he and his friend, Mr. Nordhoff, are trying to move the processor to his study. He calls his son for help but he doesn't even bother to reply his father's call for help. ***"Seth, who was tooling odd, atonal chords out of his Fender guitar downstairs --- Seth just went on wrapping chords out of the Fender"***. He feels so **ashamed and guilty** in front of his friend and neighbour but he just shrugged. It is as if, he is trying to say that it is a general behaviour of youth today and one cannot do anything about it. Here, Stephen King presents the character of Richard as a victim who does not receive any respect from his son or affection of his wife. When he and his friend are busy in sorting out the word processor and Nordhoff asks him for a glass of water, he has to fetch it himself and his wife doesn't bother to give him a glass of water.

"His wife didn't move from the kitchen table, where she was reading a bodice-ripper paperback and eating a Twinkie".

He feels the same embracement again which he felt when his friend, Bernie Epstein, asked him out of sympathy and curiosity, ***"What's a nice guy like you doing with a family like that?"*** Everyone considers him as a nice person who unfortunately is tied with these heartless people. King presented him as, ***"He was a nice guy. And yet somehow this was what he had come out with --- an overweight, sullen wife who felt cheated out of the good things in life, who felt that she had backed the losing horse."***

The condition of Richard and his family was not always this pathetic. Once they were young and filled with great expectations, but their aspirations for the future were quashed when, the one thing they were all relying on, Richard's writing career was side-tracked at the outset by a poorly-received first novel. The couple had placed too much importance on this, unable to accept the possibility that life might require hard work and not offer the anticipated riches that lie in the hearts of most youths. Disappointed by this failure they soon grew apart, and Lina holds what she believes to be a failed marriage against Richard's inability to achieve the riches of best authors. Richard is not a failed

writer, able to bring in about five grand a year on stories and articles; he has simply not written a bestseller.

King portrayed him as a **recessive character** and **fully controlled by his wife**. He has built a small shed-like building for study and it seems the only place where no one can disturb him, ***“this was a place he thought of as his own – a place where he could shut out the stranger he had married and the stranger she had given birth to”***. Lina of course didn’t approve of him having his own place, but ***“it was one of the few little victories he had managed over her”***. The writer mentions it as ‘a few little victories’ which shows that his wife is the dominant figure and she has the ruling authority over everything.

No doubt he had dreamed about writing wonderful, lucrative novels but could not do so but he never lose hope, ***“but he had never quite let go of his dream.”*** He wrote **short stories** and the **occasional article**. King has presented him as an **ungrateful character**, who is not satisfied with his own family and envies his nephew Jonathan and his mother, Belinda. He talks about Jon with more affection than about his own son. ***“I know he was good with gadgets, and he won the State Science Fair when he was in the sixth grade --- we were all very proud of him.”***

Here, writer also presents a striking contrast between Richard and his brother, Roger. There exists an **irony of fate**. As Richard is a nice and soft person but he gets an unaffectionate, ungrateful family but on the other hand, Roger who had been portrayed as a bad character full of negativity seems to get a nice and affectionate family.

“And Richard also thought how strange it was – his brother, who had been an utter shit since the age of six, had gotten a fine woman and a fine bright son. He himself, who had always tried to be gentle and good, had married Lina, who had developed into a silent, piggy woman, and had gotten Seth by her.”

He also wonders, ***“how that had happened and how much of it had been his own fault, a natural result of his own quiet weakness.”***

His life totally changes when he **inherits** a word processor from his nephew as a birthday present for him. His **love for Jon** is also evident here, when he tries to turn off the processor on which words ***“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! JON.”*** appear like green ghosts, but he could not do so.

He always dreamed about **owning a word processor** for years but Lina opposed it and then he talks about it to Jon who assures him that he will make one for him and indeed he do so. After playing with the word processor a bit, he figures out that he can change reality by typing or deleting sentences with the machine. He also learns that, like the wish-granting genie’s lamp of legend, the word processor will only afford him a handful of ***“wishes”*** before it stops working, presumably permanently.

He realized its magical powers when he writes “ **MY WIFE’S PHOTOGRAPH HANGS ON THE WEST WALL OF MY STUDY**” and then punched the **DELETE** button. Along with the words, the portrait of Lina also vanishes and there is no sign of picture being on the wall. After working some time, the machine produces a roaring voice and smoke but he had no idea what to do.

“He was an English teacher and sometime writer, not a technician, and he had a long history of not understanding how things worked --- His life had been a history of understanding operations rather than principles.”

Richard termed it as ‘**Magic dream machine**’ and gives it the name of ‘**Word processor of the gods**’. The evil side of Richard comes to play when he listens his son and his friends talk about him, ***“Where’s your old man, Seth? --- Goofing off in his study, like usual, I guess”*** and it hurt him a lot that he thinks about taking **revenge** by writing **“MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM”**. His finger hovered over the **DELETE** button but then a sudden thought ran across his mind and he realized that what he is going to do is wrong.

“What are you doing? His mind screamed at him. Can you be serious? Do you intend to murder your own son?”

But after hearing his sons view about him that, ***“He is a goddam dimwit”*** he changes his mind that, ***“I’m not going to murder him. I’m going to ... to DELETE him.”*** And the next moment there is no sign of Seth being his son or living in the house. ***“Seth wasn’t here, Seth had never been here. Seth had been DELETED.” “I have no son”*** this a melodramatic phrase, he had only read it in bad novels but never thought so it would become true for him, ***“but here it was true. Now it was true. Oh yes”***. It shows that he doesn’t regret his decision of **DELETING** his own son from the world but rather he is happy and excited. Here, writer gives an **irony of character** in the personality of Richard as he is portrayed as a nice person this whole time but when he finds an opportunity to get rid of his son, he Delete him without a second thought. It shows that he always had an **evil incarnation** in him but had no way or chance to express it and now life gave him a chance so he grabs it.

King shows, Richard ***felt a surge of almost frantic guilt*** when he thought about Lina and what is she going to say about it. ***But he hadn’t murdered Seth. I DELETED him.”*** But he noticed her as being happier and fatter than when they had a son, holding a ‘**frozen corpse**’ of a huge turkey and it is like ***“the body of a bizarre suicide”***. It is as if she is holding the corpse of her own son whose existence is being frozen somewhere in the world by his own father. He holds it like a ‘**block of wood**’ and he feels waves of ‘**cheerless cold**’ and placed it in Amana freezer which is like a ‘**cold white coffin**’ and inside it is ‘**preserved corpses**’ of birds. Here Seth is being replaced by Amana freezer and his death or disappearance is being presented with the help of death imagery.

Lina’s bizarre, strange nature is further evident when Richard asks her about having no child, ***“Lina are you ever sorry we never had children?” she looked at him as if he had gone utterly crazy. “What in the name of God would I want a rug-monkey for?”***

The **coldness of evil and death** is clear when he felt a smile surface on his own lips – ***“a smile as thin and white and cold as the Amana freezer that had replaced Seth on this new track.”*** His personality is now explicitly exposed and that he is a dark sided person deep down.

Now he has only two choices, either to bring back Seth or to continue what he was doing. And then he typed: **I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE**. But a message of **OVERLOAD, OVERLOAD** appears on the screen. Then he is also afraid of living alone so when the processor is about to explode,

he typed: I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN. Then he hit the EXECUTE button twice. And then the machine explodes. Then at last, he hears a voice, 'Dad', he saw Jon standing there and was happy about this change in his life, as he has acquired what he wants. It is as if he tried to exercise the powers of a God, by bringing back dead alive.

Richard has clearly done nothing to make a life for himself. He was wanted to marry his sister-in-law Belinda but was too spineless to propose and his wife is fully aware of this. He is married to someone with no emotional involvement and his wife she is unhappy and nagging, even compulsively eating to fill a void created by a husband who still pines for an earlier love and produced a son who will likely contribute little to this world. In essence, Richard is **replacing two selfish people** who refuse to serve society in any capacity, and replaces them with two caring, intelligent and creative people whose lives ended too early, and who were victims to Belinda's marriage to Richard's mean-spirited older brother Roger. Unlike the *Darkside* version, Hero Richard has the sense to understand why he never married Belinda to begin with. Richard did once date Belinda, but forever threatened and bullied by his older brother he gave up the chase out of cowardice and notions of self-preservation. Richard admits this flaw, his cowardice, and recognition of one's flaw is the first step in making amends.

King pays lip-service to the troubling morality of using "wishes" to erase and replace people you don't like, but the story maintains overall a fairy-tale feel that discourages overthinking it. If King wanted to amp up the moral ambiguity and make this more of a horror story than a revenge-of-the-underdog tale, he might have made Richard's wife and son more sympathetic—as it is, they're depicted as purely awful people, like Cinderella's wicked stepmother or Harry Potter's cruel uncle. Although we feel a faint moral concern as Richard rides into the sunset with his happy new family at the end, mostly we're just relieved that the good guy won for once.