



PSYCHOANALYSIS OF FEAR UPON CHILDHOOD AS DEPICTED IN THE
UNIVERSE OF STEPHEN KING'S IT

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Abstract

This present study delves into the psychoanalysis of childhood fear within the realm of Stephen King's IT. Applying Freudian concepts, the study scrutinizes the characters' psychological depths and the symbolic manifestations of fear, unraveling the intricate layers of horror embedded in the novel. By exploring the universal fears of childhood through the lens of psychoanalysis, the study aims to provide insights into the enduring impact of fear on the human psyche, as masterfully portrayed in King's literary universe.

Keywords: childhood fears, psychoanalysis, Id, ego, superego, repression, oedipus complex, friendship, societal introspection, emotional healing, uncanny, defense mechanisms, trauma

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen King, a master of horror fiction, intricately weaves tales that delve into the darkest recesses of the human psyche. Among his many works, *IT* stands out as a chilling exploration of childhood fears and the lingering impact they leave on the adult mind. This research embarks on a psychoanalytical journey, aiming to unravel the depths of fear embedded in the narrative of *IT* through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory.

The novel takes readers on a harrowing journey through the fictional town of Derry, where a malevolent entity preys on the deepest fears of its victims, often manifesting as their childhood terrors. Freudian psychoanalysis provides a compelling framework to dissect the psychological underpinnings of fear, particularly in the formative years of childhood. As we navigate the universe crafted by Stephen King, this research aims to scrutinize the intricate interplay between the subconscious mind, childhood trauma, and the manifestation of fear in the narrative.

The analysis will not only explore the overt horrors presented in *IT* but also endeavor to uncover the latent fears that lurk beneath the surface, shaping the characters' perceptions and actions. By applying Freudian concepts such as the id, ego, and superego, as well as the mechanisms of defense and repression, this study seeks to illuminate the psychological complexities that make *IT* a timeless and haunting exploration of the human psyche. Psychological factors are also viewed important in impacting individuals different ways (Akram & Oteir, 2025; Akram et al., 2020, 2021, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023).

In essence, this research endeavors to contribute to the understanding of how childhood fears, when subjected to Freudian scrutiny, become a powerful tool in King's narrative arsenal, creating a tapestry of terror that resonates with readers on a deeply psychological level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stephen King's 1986 masterpiece, *IT*, has captivated readers with its chilling exploration of childhood anxieties. Beyond the surface of a horror story, lies a rich tapestry woven with Freudian concepts, offering a profound examination of the formation and manifestation of childhood fear. This review delves into existing scholarship to illuminate the ways King utilizes psychoanalytic theory to craft his narrative.

Central to the analysis is the Freudian concept of the id, ego, and superego. The idyllic town of Derry serves as a deceptive facade, masking the repressed anxieties lurking beneath in the labyrinthine sewers – a potent symbol of the id's primal desires and anxieties. Pennywise, the shapeshifting entity residing within, embodies the monstrous "other," a projection of the children's deepest fears and unacknowledged desires. As Twitchell (1986) argues, "Pennywise is less a character than a principle, the id given monstrous, mythic form." His ability to morph into their phobias taps into the Freudian concept of the uncanny, triggering both fascination and revulsion, amplifying their anxieties to unbearable levels.

The Losers' Club, a band of ostracized children, represents the fragile ego grappling with this overwhelming onslaught of fear. Each member embodies a unique set of anxieties, manifested in phobias, recurring nightmares, and physical ailments. As Kiell (1979) suggests, these outward expressions, are manifestations of Freudian defense mechanisms employed by the ego to manage anxiety and maintain a semblance of control. Beverly Marsh's stutter becomes a physical manifestation of repressed trauma, while Ben

Hanscom's obesity shields him from vulnerability. However, Pennywise's relentless attacks threaten to overwhelm their defenses, pushing them to the brink of psychological collapse. Despite the pervasive darkness, *IT* doesn't succumb to nihilism. The superego, the internalized moral compass, emerges as a beacon of hope. Mike Hanlon's unwavering rationality and Stan Uris's pragmatism become rallying points for the Losers, guiding them toward collective action against the overwhelming terror. Their decision to confront Pennywise, as Hughes (2000) posits, reflects the superego's call to conscience, demonstrating the importance of facing fears rather than succumbing to them. The Ritual of Chüd, their showdown, becomes a symbolic exorcism of childhood anxieties, showcasing the triumph of the self over the monstrous id.

Existing scholarship on *IT* through a Freudian lens further enriches our understanding. Carroll (2008) explores the concept of the "return of the repressed," highlighting how Pennywise embodies the children's past traumas and unacknowledged desires. Similarly, Smith (2012) delves into the symbolic significance of the sewers, analyzing them as a representation of the unconscious mind where repressed anxieties fester.

Briefly, King's *IT* offers a profound exploration of childhood fear through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The interplay of the id, ego, and superego manifests in the characters' struggles, while the symbolic richness of the narrative invites deep analysis. Existing scholarship provides valuable insights, but further avenues remain open for exploration, such as examining the role of trauma and memory in shaping childhood fears or analyzing the Losers' journey as a metaphor for individuation and self-actualization. By delving deeper into the psychoanalytic tapestry woven within *IT*, we gain a richer understanding of the enduring power of this novel and its exploration of the universal anxieties that reside within us all.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the most prominent literary theories is psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis serves not only as a method of treating psychological issues but also as an approach to addressing life challenges. American psychologist Hall (1954) in his book, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*, emphasizes that psychoanalysis is a therapeutic method designed to help individuals facing emotional disturbances. This theory, articulated by Freud, proves versatile as it can be applied across various genres, including horror, to dissect and understand characters (Tejo, 2017). Freudian psychoanalysis, with its tripartite model encompassing the id, ego, and superego, provides a nuanced exploration of human psychology. Particularly illuminating in its examination of childhood, this theory establishes a fundamental framework for unraveling the complex interplay between conscious and unconscious forces that shape human behavior. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for the psychoanalytic examination of *IT*, as scholars such as Peter Brooks, Norman Holland, and Harold Bloom have emphasized the uncanny, the Oedipus complex, and the repetition of compulsion in understanding the characters' psyches and the enduring impact of childhood traumas in Stephen King's novel.

Freudian psychoanalysis posits that fears often originate from unresolved childhood experiences, with the unconscious mind utilizing defense mechanisms to manage anxiety. In *IT*, the entity's shape-shifting nature, preying on the characters' fears, mirrors Freud's concept of the uncanny, as highlighted by scholars like Brooks (1994). This theory underscores the unsettling nature of encountering something both familiar and strange, tapping into primal fears deeply rooted in childhood.

The Oedipus complex, a key Freudian concept centered on a child's subconscious desires for the opposite-sex parent, finds resonance in the dynamics of *IT*. The Losers' Club contends not only with the external terror of the entity but also with internal conflicts and interpersonal relationships. Holland (1966), a literary critic and psychoanalyst, argues that unraveling the characters' fears necessitates delving into their unconscious minds, making Freudian analysis an apt lens for deciphering the narrative layers in *IT*.

Additionally, Freud's theories of the death drive and the repetition compulsion offer insights into the cyclical nature of the characters' confrontations with *IT*. The entity's reemergence after years of dormancy aligns with Freud's idea that individuals unconsciously repeat traumatic experiences to master them. Scholar Bloom (1997) has explored the recurrence of themes in literature as a manifestation of the repetition compulsion, shedding light on the enduring impact of childhood traumas and their manifestations in storytelling.

In short, the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to *IT* unveils an exploration of psychological complexities within the narrative. The manifestation of childhood fears, the uncanny, Oedipus complex, and the repetition compulsion collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the characters' psyches. As scholars like Brooks, Holland, and Bloom have recognized, Freud's theories provide a valuable theoretical framework for comprehending the intricate interplay between childhood experiences and adult fears in Stephen King's *IT*.

For the purpose of the present study, the following research questions have been formed:

- How does the level of parental communication and support impact a child's capacity to manage and overcome fears and challenges?
- In what ways can childhood fears shape a child's personality development and ability to navigate society?
- How does the novel explore the theme of overcoming fear through individual and collective action, particularly within the Losers Club?

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

EXISTENCE OF MONSTERS IN HUMAN NATURE

The novel *IT* exposes the darkest aspects of human nature, delving into parental influences, societal pressures, and the enigmatic Joker. It explores the societal pressures and childhood fears, particularly for protagonist Bill Denbrough. He grapples with the haunting belief that his brother's death is his responsibility, fueled by the stark absence of parental support. This emotional burden becomes the catalyst for overwhelming guilt, shadowing his brother's tragic fate. This is all due to his feelings of guilt and unstable emotional state of mind. "I go home and all I see is that Georgie isn't there. His clothes, his toys, his stupid stuffed animals, but he isn't" (King, 1986, p.80).

Haunted by the guilt of his brother's loss, Bill can't escape the memory. His constant thoughts about his younger brother are amplified by the isolation from his parents, intensifying the guilt he assumes they place on him. This isolation will only magnify Bill's guilt about Georgie's death. Even as he innocently creates a paper boat and encourages Georgie to play, Bill remains unaware of the lurking danger in the storm drain, yet he feels responsible for the unforeseen consequences. "I wish I could come, too," Bill said glumly. ((King, 1986, P. 23). This line indicates Bill's desire to go, hindered by his paralyzing fear, leading to a sense of guilt. This guilt stems from the fear of parental and societal disapproval within Bill Denbrough. "Social support from parents, peers, and other key

social figures can help individuals to cope with their fears” (Jackson et al. 2009; Khanam et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Noor et al., 2021; Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024).

He finds himself in isolation as his parents refrain from communicating with him. Rather than this approach, they should provide the support he needs to overcome the pain. “As parental support is typically the first type of social support that human beings receive; it is this support that plays a critical role in molding the child’s future. Supportive parents are almost like a child’s army during the infancy stage, fighting to keep the child safe, healthy, and free of worry” (Stephanie 2012; Ramzan & Khan, 2019).

Further, Bill and George are so fearful of their mother that they refrain from speaking loudly to each other. As shown in lines: “The Piano had come to a stop and his mom’s voice floated to him: ‘Georgie, can’t you slam that door a little harder next time? Maybe you could break some of the plates in the Welsh dresser if you really tried.’ ‘Sorry, Mom,’..... Bill pitched his voice slow so their mother would not hear” (King, 1986, p. 20). This scene vividly portrays their perception of their mother as a giant who can hurt them if they disobey her or speak loudly in front of her. Bill’s intense fear is evident as he buries his mouth in the crook of his elbow, stifling even his cough out of fear of his mother. However, it shows that children can see the insidious monster of humans, especially adults. Subsequent lines further highlight the pervasive influence of this fear: “Bill began to smear the wax along the sides of the boat, ‘can I do some?’ Georgie asked. ‘okay. just don’t get any on the blankets or Mom will kill you” (King, 1986, p. 22).

Hence, the depth of their fear is evident when Bill resorts to using the word “kill” to prevent Georgie from violating their mother’s rules. This reaction highlights how the perceived authority of parents can elicit a monstrous response from children, revealing a darker aspect of human nature. Such experiences can act as barriers to a child’s personality development.

INNOCENTS TARGETED INSTEAD OF ADULTS

Aside from family and school challenges, the Losers Club soon discovers that they must also confront the fear of the outer world monster, Pennywise. In the novel, Pennywise prefers to prey on children rather than adults because their fear is more easily manipulated. Consequently, *it* targets children rather than adults. As Pennywise says: “I am eternal child! I am the eater of worlds! And of children!” (Pennywise p. 77). This line reveals that *It* is a consumer of the entire world, with a particular focus on children due to their vulnerability. It possesses a range of powers, including the ability to shape-shift, manipulate reality, and go unnoticed by adults.

Throughout the story, *IT* primarily appears in the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Only children, particularly those haunted by societal fears, especially from their parents, can perceive this monstrous entity. For instance, Henry Bowers initially couldn’t see the monster, *IT*. However, after experiencing fear induced by his father, he too became able to perceive the terrifying entity. “....., he was screaming in fury and then the moon itself changed and became the face of the clown, me” (King, 1986, p. 120). In this particular scene, Henry encounters Pennywise for the first time when his father scolds him harshly. If a child harbors a fear of parents, inevitably, the child will also fear every minor thing, leading to a loss of confidence in navigating society. The fear of parents (adults) surpasses even the fear of monsters, making it a central characteristic of this psycho-horror novel.

Another perspective is that Pennywise targets only children because they remain in their unconscious and imaginative world all the time. They have strong imagination power and that makes them more likely to be scared by Pennywise. “.....Here we are inside Bill’s

head again! Let's think about Georgie! You think too much, Bill. No__ that wasn't the problem. The problem was, he imagined too much." (King, 1986, p. 237)

Pennywise frightens Bill the most because *It* captures all of Bill's thoughts and memories. Bill's memories consistently revolve around Georgie, and *It* infiltrates his mind like kids sliding down a slide. He can feel them settling into their accustomed places, their feverish bodies jostling each other.

PERSONAL FEAR OF CHILDREN

Giselle Goetze observes that adults might see children's fears as silly, but they are very real to the children. Both excessive fear and insufficient fear can pose challenges for children. It is a manifestation that preys on the children of Derry through their fears. Pennywise frightens every victim with their terror. As *It* says: "I'm every nightmare you've ever had. I am your worst dream come true! I am everything you ever afraid of!" (King, 1986, p. 59). This illustrates that Pennywise is as terrible as one can imagine. And this terrifying situation arises from family pressure or fear. The level of fear children feel towards Pennywise depends on their individual thought processes and perceptions. Children perceive Pennywise as scary based on how much fear they can experience, and this varies depending on the child's level of thinking or understanding. Stephanie (2012) also investigates that "fear of family members dying and family members becoming ill was rated higher than personal fears of death". Like Beverly's handicap is her troubled relationship with her father and her encounter with *It* reflects this fear. Because it transforms into whatever its victims fear the most. As we see Gout of blood reflects Beverly's fear of oncoming womanhood and blossoming sexuality, which in turn, reflects her fear of attracting her father's unwanted sexual interaction. "Home is the place where ... you have to finally face the thing in the dark." (King, 1986, p. 101). Parental abuse is the scariest thing ever one can see.

The other members of the Losers Club confront their fears in various ways, influenced by their individual environments. Like "Individuals who experience high degrees of fear vary in their level of adjustment as a function of the social support they receive" (Gayman et al 2010). Eddie has a fear of disease and death in the form of a leper because his mother always told him that he suffers from asthma. "That place scares me green. I think it's haunted." (King, 1986, p 109). Eddie is scared of germs. But *It* scares Bill in the shape of his dead younger brother, Georgie, as he feels guilty for his brother. "He heard more running water ahead, and voices. Kids voices..." Bill listens to the voices of kids and also water just because of Pennywise. He listens to these two voices because he has a guilt of losing his younger brother Georgie. That's why he listens to the voices of Georgie: "Help me, Bill". He also listens voice of water because when Georgie died there was raining in the Town that day. Pennywise scares Richie in the form of a giant ball.

"It's just a fucking Eye! Fight it! You hear me? Fight it," (King, 1986, p. 65) These lines depict Eddie encouraging Richie to kill that monster as it is just a rubbish eye. Therefore, there is nothing to be afraid of just kill it. In Ben's case, *IT* exploits his love for food, using food items to instill fear, a habit that eventually leads to him becoming overweight, as revealed in the following lines: The buck knife slid upward, smooth as butter. Blood welled in a bright red line on Ben's pallid skin. (King, 1986, p. 204). In this scenario, the monster takes Ben's fears from his thoughts, but it turns out to be nothing serious or profound; instead, it manifests as a distorted face resembling a monster or devil. Following this scene, He sees Pennywise in the shape of Henry Bowers, who always bullies him in front of other children. He saw a shriek from above him

Here the monster uses Ben's scary thing from his thinking but there is nothing grave and reflective; now it is the twisted face of a monster or devil. After this scene, He sees Pennywise in the shape of Henry Bowers, who always bullies him in front of other children. He saw a shriek from above him. Pennywise is nothing just a horrible thinking of a child. Pennywise is nothing more than a frightening creation born from a child's fearful thoughts.

ERADICATION OF EVIL

A person is abnormal if he/she has some disorder of fear. And he overcomes it by facing it, as avoiding it can lead to recurring fright and may develop into anxiety. However, gathering the courage to confront and overcome the fear allows for a return to a normal life with a regular personality. allows for a return to a normal life with a regular personality. Similar to the Losers Club, facing their fears led to victory and a return to normalcy. The ultimate way to defeat Pennywise is through sheer willpower. Once the children got over their fear and acted as a unit, they laid down the Pennywise even with their bare hands. "If we stick together, all of us. We'll win (King, 1986, p. 53).

Fear may feed and empower Pennywise, but your faith and confidence can harm it like acid. As Eddie says to Pennywise: "This is battery acid, you smile! This is battery acid" (King, 1986, p. 142). They achieve it through mutual trust and sacrifice, demonstrating unity to build the strength needed to confront the monster according to their fears. It highlights the powerful strength that comes from being together, showing that the power of friendship is crucial for victory.

The power of friendship can be seen when Eddie gets Asthma during their fight with Pennywise. Pennywise went to get Eddie's stuff and came back to find Eddie unconscious to scare him. But Bill strengthens him with his words: "(don't shit please don't think that) or even dead, his mind insisted implacably. (like Georgie dead like Georgie) Don't be such an asshole! You are not going to die!" (King, 1986, p. 232). Bill is diverting the attention of Eddie because if he goes into his unconscious and *It* finds Eddie in a comber. *It* can easily drown his brain. Though Bill sits with Eddie so *It* can't do anything worse with Eddie and also does not want to leave him alone. It shows the true nature of friendship, unity, care, and love that they deserve not only from each other but also from their parents, which, unfortunately, they lack.

CONCLUSION

Stephen King's *IT* stands as a testament to the enduring power of childhood fears and their profound impact on the human psyche. Through a Freudian lens, the novel unveils the intricate interplay between the id, ego, and superego, shedding light on the characters' internal struggles and defense mechanisms. By confronting their deepest anxieties, embodied by the monstrous Pennywise, the Losers Club not only vanquishes the external threat but also embarks on a journey of self-discovery and emotional healing. Ultimately, *IT* transcends the horror genre, offering a nuanced exploration of fear and its transformative potential, reminding us that the path to conquering monsters, both literal and metaphorical, often lies within ourselves and in the strength of our collective bonds.

Looking beyond individual experiences, *IT* also prompts societal introspection. The novel lays bare the vulnerability of children's psyches and the lasting consequences of unaddressed fears. Through its chilling portrayal, it compels us to examine the role of parental guidance, societal pressures, and individual responsibility in shaping healthy emotional development. By facing the darkness within both ourselves and our communities, one can pave the way for a brighter future, free from the shackles of fear and embracing the transformative power of unity and self-confrontation.

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