



Death, Nostalgia, and Relationships: Psychological Defenses against Existential Terror and the  
Appeal of *Stranger Things*

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Abstract

This paper explores the Netflix television series *Stranger Things* from an existential perspective positing the appeal of horror as derived from its ability to elicit fears of mortality, corporeality, and impermanence, while simultaneously presenting narrative and visual messages that buttress psychological defenses ameliorating those fears. Special attention is given to the intensification of the horror elements that occurred in season 4, most notably in the character of Vecna, who evokes the requisite emotions for the experience of art horror (fear and disgust) by his macabre appearance and the gruesome way he kills his victims. Vecna is not only horrifying but also captivating because his supernatural powers cast doubts on the physical laws imposing the inevitability of death. Further, two well documented psychological defenses against death anxiety: (1) the comfort of close relationships and (2) the psychological experience of nostalgia feature prominently in *Stranger Things*. The series' appeal is presented as a consequence of the skillful way it creates a powerful sense of engagement by provoking and assuaging viewers' existential fears.

**Keywords:** *Stranger Things*, existential psychology, death anxiety, nostalgia, Terror Management Theory, horror

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This paper presents an existential perspective that views horror as confronting people with typically suppressed concerns about mortality and the animalistic aspects the human condition, while also providing the opportunity to evaluate beliefs about existence that are potentially palliative towards those concerns. The Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-2022) will be examined through the lens of this existential perspective on horror. The grotesque creatures that populate the diegetic world of the series elicit concerns about mortality, corporeality, and impermanence. At the same time, the supernatural abilities of the characters prompt viewers to question their assumptions about the world and the nature of reality. In addition, two of the most prominent aspects of the show: (1) the importance of close relationships and (2) the prevalence of nostalgia are interpreted as more appealing to viewers because of their ability to quell the existential anxiety evoked by the horrifying elements of the series.

In some ways, it is hard to classify *Stranger Things* within genre boundaries. Richardson and Romero (2018) define the show as “character driven science fiction” (p. 97). Seale (2022) describes it as an homage to standards of 1980’s entertainment like “cold war thrillers, hacker movies, fantasy, and films like *The Goonies* or *Stand By Me* where a bunch of unsupervised kids try to save the day.” Yet, there are numerous reasons to situate *Stranger Things* in the realm of horror. The series draws heavily on imagery and themes from horror that would have been influential in its diegetic era of the 1980s. For example, Tallerico (2022) notes how the use of sensory deprivation tanks to tap into paranormal and extraordinary abilities is similar to the plot of *Altered States* (1980), the spookiness of a house where a family was murdered is reminiscent

of *Amityville Horror* (1975), and the dangers of an adolescent girl with telekinetic powers are indicative of *Carrie* (1976). The show's creators, Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer, acknowledge their admiration for and inspiration from horror masters of the past by prominently placing visual tributes in the settings, such as movie posters for John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) hanging in Mike Wheeler's (Finn Wolfhard) basement and for Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) in Will Byers' (Noah Schnapp) bedroom.

Some scenes seem to be offering intentional tribute to cinematic horror favorites. Take for example a scene from season four (Chapter Four: Dear Billy) where Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) and Robin Buckley (Maya Hawke) meet psychiatric inmate Victor Creel (Robert Englund). Several aspects of the scene serve as allusions to Jonathan Demme's 1991 movie adaptation of Thomas Harris' 1988 novel *The Silence of the Lambs*. The request to speak to an infamous killer alone that offends the ego of the supervising psychiatrist, the instructions of the guard not to pass or accept anything passed, and the narrow dark corridor with stone wall on one side and cells on the other are all reminiscent of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Further, the scene takes place in the diegetic setting of Pennhurst Asylum, the name of which is an allusion to an actual defunct state-run psychiatric hospital in Pennsylvania that now serves as the location for a popular haunted attraction (Tarabay, 2010).

Many observers agree that season 4 was the scariest yet, due primarily to the character of Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower). Vecna horrifies audiences by his macabre appearance, malevolent plan to eradicate humanity as a pestilent species, and the gruesome way he kills his victims by levitating them, telekinetically breaking their bodies into contorted figures, and then exploding blood out of their eyes until they fall to the ground as limp and lifeless shells. Vecna began life as Henry Creel, an antisocial kid in suburban Indiana with telekinetic powers, a

predilection for black widow spiders, and a disdain for humanity. Upon discovering that Henry is the source of the strange torments experienced by the family in their new home, his mother is planning to have him sent away to a psychiatric hospital. Henry kills his mother and sister and frames his father Victor for the murders but unintendedly falls under the care of Dr. Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine) who hopes to gain control over Henry's powers and put them to his own uses. When Brenner fails to be able to control Henry, he decided to start a program looking for other children with exceptional abilities and this is what leads to his discovery of a girl with even greater powers – series protagonist Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown). In Brenner's lab facility, Henry is known as One because he was the first of the children with exceptional abilities. One tricks Eleven into removing the binding chip that blocks him from using his powers. He then goes on a killing spree - murdering all the other children in the facility. Eleven uses her powers to send One into an alternate dimension (the upside down) where he is burned and disfigured and becomes Vecna. From there, he psychically stalks and murders vulnerable teenagers with each kill creating a new portal between the upside down and the human world, thereby facilitating his ultimate aim of unleashing a supernatural apocalyptic event.

As in previous seasons, the *Dungeons and Dragons* playing adolescent protagonists use the vocabulary of their favorite game to name and explain the eponymous supernatural events. In *Dungeons and Dragons*, Vecna is an undead wizard who uses people's secrets against them. However, the *Stranger Things* entity is not intended to be a literal portrayal of Vecna; this is just a conceptual metaphor the boys in the series use. Series creators Matt and Ross Duffer acknowledge Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) as the major influences on their creation of the season 4 villain (LeGardye, 2022). With his burnt flesh and exaggerated claw-like-hand, Vecna clearly takes visual inspiration from Freddy Kruger. Twomey (2018) highlights

the similarities of the series in general to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, pointing out that both have female protagonists named Nancy and feature adolescents tormented in alternate dimensions and murdered in suburban settings under the noses of mostly oblivious parents. In a knowing self-referential wink, Robert Englund, famous for his portrayals of Freddy Kruger, makes a cameo appearance in episode 4 (Chapter Four: Dear Billy) as Victor Creel.

Not only are the visual and narrative elements of *Stranger Things* inspired by horror classics of the past, but the characters also use references to those horror classics to explain the events happening in their own experiences. For example, in developing a plan to defeat Vecna, the protagonists explicitly mention the idea from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* that, just as Freddy has a boiler room, Vecna must have some type of lair where he could be vulnerable. In the same way that their experience with *Dungeons and Dragons* provides a helpful vocabulary and frame of reference, so too does their knowledge of horror tropes prove useful. *Stranger Things* carries on in the tradition of the *Scream* franchise where characters use their extensive knowledge of the “rules” of horror movies not only to provide meta-commentary on the real world genre but also to strategic advantage in their diegetic world. The prevalence of allusions to horror of the past not only cements categorization of *Stranger Things* in the genre but also makes it an ideal example for exploring an existential perspective that views nostalgia as a psychological comfort to the threats of mortality and impermanence raised by horror.

My objective in this paper is to outline a perspective on the horror of *Stranger Things* in general, and the character of Vecna specifically, that is grounded in existential psychology. Before outlining the specifics of this perspective, let me contextualize it with some background on established horror theories. Freud’s (1919) theory of horror focuses on the uncanny, or a better translation of the German word *unheimlich* might be unhomey, in which the strangeness

or bizarreness of the horror elements that violate the realm of normal experience are not totally foreign or alien, but seem in some way a return or re-experience of something that was once familiar. Schneider (1999) describes how Freud viewed the uncanny in horror as stemming from two classes of infantile phenomena: repressed fears and surmounted beliefs. Schneider further argued that repressed infantile fears are evoked by disguised symbolism via the visual elements of horror. For example, a severed limb or decapitation in horror film would evoke the uncanny because it would bring to mind the previously repressed infantile fears of castration anxiety. In addition, Schneider asserts that the narrative elements of horror serve as embodied metaphors representing surmounted infantile beliefs, such as the idea that dead things can return to life, the omnipotence of thought, and the existence of a double.

Many themes and images in *Stranger Things* are amenable to Freudian interpretations. For example, there is the obvious Oedipal imagery of Victor Creel cutting out his eyes after being wrongfully imprisoned for the murders of his family. Furthermore, both the wound-like organic slits serving as portals into the upside down, and the way Vecna's victims have their jaws and limbs snapped before their eyeballs explode can be interpreted as visual cues of castration anxiety. Additionally, the telekinetic powers of Eleven and the other human guinea pigs in Dr. Brenner's Hawkins Lab give narrative expression to surmounted beliefs about the omnipotence of thought.

Petridis (2021) argued that *Stranger Things* is a prime example of a common type of horror that Noël Carroll (1987) labels the complex discovery plot. This type of plot has four components. In the onset phase, the existence of the monster is revealed to the audience. In the discovery phase, some of the characters in the diegetic world become aware of the existence of the monster. In the confirmation phase, the initial believers try to convince other characters of

the reality of the monster or supernatural threat. In the confrontation phase, the protagonists attempt to eradicate the monster and restore normalcy and order. The way that the young heroes learn about who and what Vecna is and try to subvert his plans to destroy Hawkins and all humanity fits the discovery plot that Carroll describes as celebrating “the existence of things beyond the boundaries of common knowledge” (p. 57). However, the scientific hubris of Dr. Brenner and his human experimentation at Hawkins Laboratory also fits the other main type of horror plot identified by Carroll as the overreaching theme that offers a cautionary warning against trying to transgress the limits of human knowledge and capacity.

Carroll (1987) suggests that horror is a genre in which the audience’s emotional reaction is supposed to mirror those of the characters. It is not the presence of monsters that defines horror but rather the characters’ reactions of fear and disgust in response to the monsters. Therefore, the intent of horror media is to elicit the emotion of horror, which is an amalgam of fear and disgust. If fear is a key component of horror, then what is it that frightens us? Wood (1986) claims that horror serves the function of giving expression to those aspects of existence that society avoids. Similarly, Clive Barker describes the goal of horror as creating “confrontations with things that we forbid ourselves” (Wells, 2002, p.177). Following the tradition of Gorer, who in his famous 1955 essay *The Pornography of Death* argues that death had supplanted sex as the most societally suppressed aspect of the human condition. I suggest that it is fear of mortality that underlies horror. If the emotion of horror involves not just fear but disgust, then what is it that disgusts us? Carroll posits that monsters are horrifying because they are ideological threats due to their interstitial nature. Here, he is using the framework of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) who views disgust as something that occurs in response to things that are categorically transgressive, incomplete, or impure.

I propose a different view of horror as understood from a psychological perspective known as Terror Management Theory (TMT; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015). TMT is occasionally applied to the scholarship of horror, such as in the analysis of monstrous pregnancy and evil children in the film *Rosemary's Baby* (Sullivan et al., 2009) and the novel *The Fifth Child* (Sullivan and Greenberg, 2013), but it is still much less prevalent than psychoanalytic perspectives on horror. A TMT perspective is potentially valuable in the field of horror studies because it offers an alternative couched in the terminology of contemporary psychological science. As Sullivan and Greenberg (2013) put it, "TMT is an empirically validated theory that stands to enhance our understanding of common existential issues in literature and art, and themes of horror and tragedy in particular" (p. 51).

TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 2015) views the primary motive driving human psychology as the need to minimize potentially debilitating fears of death by investing in cultural belief systems that offer hopes for immortality and transcendence by elevating human activity to a more meaningful and enduring plane of existence than the mere physical fumbling of biological organisms in a material world. Through the lens of TMT, horror is evoked by images and themes that both frighten us, by reminding us of our mortality, and disgust us, by reminding us of our creaturliness and similarity to other animals. According to TMT (Goldenberg et al., 2019), gore, bodily excretions, and sexuality are all potentially disgusting and threatening to psychological equanimity because they challenge ideas of human uniqueness and hopes of transcending the physical body and imply that human activity is bound to the corporeal plane and therefore possibly no more meaningful or enduring than that of other organisms.

Both death and corporeality are prominent elements ubiquitous in most if not all horror. Existential anxiety about personal mortality is evoked in the minds of horror consumers through



the depictions of dead bodies, the actual onscreen deaths of victim, or the threat of death implied as characters are chased and menaced by potentially lethal entities or forces. Existential anxiety about the possibility that identity might not transcend the limits of the physical body becomes prominent in the minds of horror viewers in response to images of blood and gore. The TMT perspective proposed here differs from psychoanalytic perspectives in explaining why such images are unnerving to viewers. A psychoanalytic perspective might focus on the awakening of repressed castration anxiety (Schneider, 1999) and a cognitive/fascination perspective might focus on epistemic uncertainty raised by challenges in categorizing what is inside versus outside the body (Carroll, 1989). In contrast, TMT would suggest that watching a victim be eviscerated in a horror film or television series is unsettling to psychological equanimity because it reminds viewers of their own vulnerability to mortality and the possibility that their consciousness and identity might not transcend the limits of the body.

TMT shares with psychoanalysis the assumption that horror is unsettling to viewers because it forces a confrontation with material that is typically kept out of conscious attention. While TMT does not embrace the traditional Freudian notion of repression, it does share the psychodynamic emphasis on the power of unconscious motives. Reminders of death initiate efforts at thoughts suppression that temporarily push thoughts of mortality out of awareness but cause them to accumulate and become hyper-accessible on the periphery of consciousness. These pre-conscious thoughts of death then initiate psychological defenses that buffer people against death anxiety, such as striving for a sense of enduring legacy and clinging to the cherished tenets of belief systems that offer hopes for immortality (Arndt et al., 1997a). These defenses happen outside of awareness and have even been demonstrated to occur following subliminal threats,

such as the presentation of the word death on a computer screen for a fraction of a second (Arndt et al., 1997b).

The TMT approach differs from psychoanalytic perspectives in asserting that fear of death is the typically non-conscious threat that is elicited by consuming horror. This foundational premise of TMT might initially seem incompatible with psychoanalytic positions, given the often cited claim by Freud (1913/1953) that “in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (p. 305). However, Piven (2004) attempts to reconcile psychodynamic positions with the ideas of TMT. Piven asserts that, although “the unconscious which consists of impulses may not know negation or death”, it is possible for death to “be symbolized in dreams and transformed by way of wishes into manifest images of escape and immortality” (p. 221). He further posits that death “can be repressed content which emerges into consciousness as something uncanny” and that death concerns are evaded by “distortion of reality through defenses and fantasies, so that the organism is not psychologically crippled by overwhelming terror” (pp. 220-221). Piven claims that Freud’s writings about death are inconsistent and that at times Freud does seem to acknowledge the fear of death as an important psychological problem that must be managed through the use of psychological defenses (p. 219).

The TMT perspective on horror also has several points of intersection with the cognitive/fascination model advanced by Carroll. TMT shares Carroll’s assertion that the amalgam of fear and disgust are the requisite emotions that horror is intended to elicit in audiences, but adds a theoretical underpinning for the psychological connection between these two emotions. TMT posits that the fear of death underlies emotional reactions of disgust in response to things that are ideologically offensive because they remind people of their animal nature (Goldenberg, 2019). Hopes for literal immortality in the form of religious/spiritual beliefs

and symbolic immortality in the form of perceived enduring legacy can help people deal with death anxiety. However, reminders of our corporeal and animalistic nature potentially undermine those hopes by raising doubts about the possibility of any nonmaterial aspect of identity surviving the death of the body and calling into question whether human activity is any more meaningful or enduring than that of other animals. Horror represents a psychological double threat by simultaneously confronting viewer with both their mortality and their corporeality.

TMT also offers a mechanism for grounding both Carroll's discovery plot and overreaching plot as rooted in the psychological motive to mitigate death anxiety. The overreaching plot that presents the horrifying consequences of scientific hubris is compatible with the TMT perspective that much of humanity's unsavory behavior is driven by the overzealous quest for immortality. In her analysis of *Frankenstein* (perhaps the prototypical example of the overreaching plot), McMahon (2008) focuses on mortal terror as the driving force behind scientific efforts to gain mastery over the natural world and by extension over life and death.

The discovery plot captivates audiences by the cognitive need to make sense of supernatural or mysterious events that challenge perceptions of meaning and epistemic assumptions. TMT views the need to perceive the world as orderly, meaningful, and predictable as derived from the motivation to manage existential terror (Swanson and Landau, 2019). Applied to horror, TMT explains why the fascination with the supernatural and the need to make sense of the seemingly inexplicable is intensified in response to the existential concerns elicited by depictions of the monstrous. The supernatural elements of horror can often raise questions about the immutability of the natural laws that are presumed to impose the physical reality of death. The possibility of supernatural phenomenon can provide viewers with hopes of death

transcendence at the same time the visual imagery of death and the disgusting images of gore raise the threats of mortality and creaturlieness.

Season 4 of *Stranger Things* offers a useful text for examining the application of a TMT perspective on horror. First, Vecna and the other monstrous inhabitants of the upside down elicit horror by evoking images of death and corporeality. Second, the extraordinary abilities of Vecna, Eleven, and the other telekinetically gifted people in the series give visual confirmation to the possibility of overcoming the limits of the physical world and therefore symbolically conquering death. Third, the themes of nostalgia and interpersonal relationships that are so prominently depicted in the series can be interpreted as psychological defenses made more appealing to viewers because of the salience of existential threats.

### **The Horror of Vecna**

It is Vecna's disdain for the weakness and banality of the human condition that fuels his desire to destroy the world. As he tells Eleven in episode 7 (Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab)

You see, where others saw order, I saw a straitjacket; a cruel oppressive world dictated by made up rules. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, each life a faded lesser copy of the one before.

Wake up, eat, sleep, reproduce, and die. Everyone is just waiting, waiting for it all to be over; all while performing a silly terrible play. Day after day. I could not do that. I could not close off my mind and join in the madness.

Note the similarity of Vecna's dissatisfaction with the inauthenticity of society and the absurdity of human social conventions to the insights offered by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker

whose writings formed the theoretical foundation of TMT. Becker (1973) states that, “Everything man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness – agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same” (p. 27).

Consistent with the TMT perspective that the threat of mortality is the sine qua non of horror, death imagery permeates season 4 of *Stranger Things*. In episode 2 (Chapter Two: Vecna’s Curse) Fred Benson (Logan Riley Bruner) falls into an open grave and spiders pour out of the mouth of a corpse lying next to him. In episode 4 (Chapter Four: Dear Billy), when Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink) realizes that she is being stalked by Vecna and that his previous victims died 24 hours after their first visions, she says “I don’t know how long I have ... looks like I’m going to die tomorrow.” Later, in the same episode, Max tells Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin) “I’m fine, okay. I mean as fine as someone who is hurtling towards a gruesome death can be.” According to TMT, this is as fine as any of us can be because we all know we are heading towards the inevitable fate of death. As Becker put it, “Who wants to face up to the creature we are, clawing and grasping for breath in a universe beyond our ken?” (1973, p. 27).

In episode 5 (Chapter 5: The Nina Project), during the exploration of the Creel house, Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) asks “Why is this wizard obsessed with clocks?” Why indeed? A seemingly plausible answer is because mastery over time equals the conquest of death. Prior to becoming Vecna, one of Henry Creel’s earliest explorations of his powers involved telekinetically turning the hands back on a grandfather clock (symbolically reversing time is associated with avoiding death). Vecna torments his victims with auditory and visual

hallucinations of this same grandfather clock from his childhood home. The sound of the final chime and the stoppage or fracture of the clock signals the time for his victims' death.

TMT provides insight into Carroll's (1987) question of why people are horrified by on-screen entities they know do not really exist. The monsters depicted on screen may not be real but the existential truths they reveal about humans' embodied nature and vulnerability to death are genuine. Further, TMT offers a potential answer to Andrew Tudor's (1997) question of what is it about horror that people like. The increased prominence of death-related thoughts stemming from the violent and gory content of horror can intensify viewers' responses to the narrative messages, especially when those messages that resonate with and augment palliative aspects of audiences' cultural belief systems that offer protection from existential anxiety (Bassett, 2022). Examples of such palliative narrative messages can be seen in *Stranger Things*. The concerns about mortality and creatureliness provoked in the minds of viewers by the horror in the series also intensify the appeal of two other central elements of the show: (1) themes about the salvific power of close personal relationships and (2) nostalgia, as these are both documented psychological defense mechanisms that people use to minimize existential anxieties.

### **The Salvific Power of Close Relationships**

Becker (1973) describes a romantic solution to the problem of death anxiety, in which people attempt to achieve existential security by merging with another person. He argued that for those who adopt such a defensive strategy, "The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life. All spiritual and moral needs now become focused in one individual" (p. 160). Building on the work of Becker, TMT presents close personal relationships as an important part of the psychological buffer that protects people against death anxiety. Mikulincer et al. (2004) argue that close personal relationships can be a source of comfort in the face of

existential anxiety for multiple reasons. In the ancestral past survival depended on cooperation with others. Seeking out cooperative relationships with other people has historically been an adaptive response to actual life-threatening situations. Consequently, it makes evolutionary sense that being in the presence of a close relationship partner or merely the thought of that person can reduce anxiety. In addition, because of early dependence on caregivers, the attachment system motivates people to seek out proximity to caregivers when they feel threatened. There is a symbolic association between separation and death, and people generalize the same pattern of defenses from early childhood, in which seeking connection to parents was a comfort for fears about separation, to later adult behavior involving seeking out friends or romantic partners to deal with fears about mortality. Moreover, close relationships offer a means of enhancing self-esteem and of living up to cultural standards that place great importance on romantic love. Furthermore, sexual relationships offer a potential means of symbolic immortality by living one through the legacy of children (pp. 288-290). Support for the ability of close relationships to protect people from death anxiety comes from research findings showing that priming people to think about problems in their romantic relationships increased the frequency of death-related thoughts and that priming them to think about death increased their expressed love and commitment to their current romantic partner (Florian et al., 2002).

If relationships offer psychological protection from fears about death, then narratives featuring relationships should be more appealing to viewers when existential threats are raised by horrifying content. Friendships, romantic relationships, and the love and protection provided by parents or surrogate parents are prominently explored topics in *Stanger Things*. Mollet (2019) notes, “While many of their individual families are deficient, the tweens and teens of *Stanger Things* find fulfillment in their family of friends and adoptive parents.” Similarly, Petridis (2021)

asserts, “The theme of the narrative is the strong love of a mother and a group of friends who are willing to overcome metaphysical and realistic obstacles in order to find their beloved one” (p. 73).

Season 4 of *Stranger Things* is replete with narrative messages about the power of friendship, parental love, and romantic love to save people from natural and supernatural perils. For example, in episode 4 (Chapter Four: Dear Billy) it is not only the emotional pull of her favorite song, but also her memories of boyfriend Lucas and best friend Eleven that motivate Max to fight so hard to escape from Vecna and allow her to break his trance. In episode 7 (Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab) the showdown between Eleven and One is reminiscent of the temptation of the dark side of the force theme in the Star Wars movies. One asks Eleven to join him and she refuses. She is initially losing their telekinetic battle. She tries to use the strategy One had previously taught her of drawing on memories of pain and anger to strengthen her power. She remembers being bullied by the other kids at the Hawkins Lab and thinks about being separated from her mother but this strategy does not work. Note the similarity to the worldview from George Lucas’ *Star Wars* franchise in which hate and anger fuel the power of the dark side of the force. Just when it seems like One is about to kill Eleven, she finds herself thinking about the love of her mother and hears her mother telling her she loves her. It is the power of these thoughts of love that give her the strength to defeat One.

In the same episode, Eddie Munson (Joseph Quinn) is describing how it was Nancy who saved Steve’s life by immediately diving in the water after him when he was sucked down by a tentacle and drug through the Watergate into the upside down. Eddie says that Steve should try to get Nancy back because that was “as unambiguous an act of true love as these cynical eyes have ever seen.”



In the season finale (Chapter Nine: The Piggyback), Mike Wheeler who has always been reserved and withholding in his expressions of affection (signing letters dear Mike instead of love Mike) launches into a gushingly emotional speech and professes his love for Eleven, thereby empowering her to defeat Vecna in the climatic confrontation. In all of these examples, the narrative message assuages the horror of the series by augmenting audiences' terror management defenses via strengthened confidence in the symbolic power of love to conquer death.

### **Nostalgia in *Stranger Things***

Petridis (2021) states, "nostalgia has a central role" in the narrative of *Stranger Things*. Similarly, Butts (2018) claims, "The show welcomes nostalgia, fosters it even" (p. 237). Further, Richardson and Romero (2018) suggest a key ingredient in the popularity and critical acclaim of *Stranger Things* is how it "exploits nostalgia in order to engage and retain viewers" (p. 96). The series goes to great lengths to evoke nostalgia through props. According to Moynihan (2017), there was a \$220,000 budget for season 1 to purchase 80's artifacts on places like e-bay and fill the show with nostalgia Easter eggs. These efforts seem to work, as Butts (2018) put it, leaving us "missing our He-Man toys, RadioShack, Bo Derek, Ford Pintos, TAB soda, and Eggo waffles" (p. 240).

There are different opinions on what specific psychological and cultural forces underlie the appeal of the nostalgia in the series and the extent to which the series' nostalgic appeal should be interpreted as problematic. Whereas some view nostalgia as an indicator of discontent with salient socio-historic social justice movements and a desire for a return to a less inclusive political zeitgeist, others root nostalgia in more universal psychological processes tied to cognitive development, identity formation, and existential questions of meaning and permanence.

Hassler-Forest (2020) argues the cultural nostalgia reflects an insidious political motive to idealize the past and seek a return to a time before feminisms and civil rights when straight-white-male supremacy was the unquestioned and unchallenged status quo. He views the popular tendency of movies in the 1980's to romanticize the domestic spaces of small town suburbia and to villainize the urban and the institutions of big government as reflecting a distrust and dislike of progressive social change. From this perspective, current media trends that foster or capitalize on nostalgia for the 1980's without offering critiques of the political and social problems of the era are complicit in the support of conservative political longings for a return to a culture of straight-white-male dominance. Hassler-Forest acknowledges that *Stranger Things* "attempts to update the representation of identities and cultural values for its twenty-first-century audience" but goes on to indict it as being predominantly conservative-restorative nostalgia by "enshrining 1980's pop culture as an indisputable object of worship" and claims that the "minimal degree of superficial self-reflexivity is hardly enough to salvage the reactionary sensibilities" (p. 183). According to Hassler-Forest, *Stranger Things* is silently culpable in the larger currents of nostalgia as a politically conservative longing. The series misses an opportunity to interrogate the flaws of the 1980's by engaging critically with the problematic social issues of the decade, such as increasing racial disparities in poverty, racism in drug enforcement and sentencing policies, and fear and prejudice against the LBGTQ community in the context of the AIDS epidemic (p. 186).

Similarly, Boudreau (2018) condemns the nostalgia of *Stranger Things* as problematic for the way it potentially propagates sexism and relegates the value of female characters as derived only from their relationship as facilitators of male characters. She criticizes the show for its "male fantasy narrative" in which "mothers are there to help their 'weird' ostracized sons become heroes"

(p. 167) and laments that the series “reaffirms domestic idealism” by keeping potentially strong female characters like Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) relegated to traditional female roles, “ensconced back into a domestic sanctuary” (p. 171).

Butler (2018) offers a different view on the political message of the series’ nostalgia, by suggesting that while the show does utilize some of the conventions of 80’s slasher horror it also challenges and subverts them, thereby making it an interrogation and criticism of rather than a champion for the conservative ideology of the time (p. 79). A prime example of this is in episode 3 of season 1 (Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly) when the death of Barbara “Barb” Holland (Shannon Purser) inverts the slasher tendency to reward chastity and punish female sexuality. Barb, who epitomizes the characteristics of Clover’s final girl, with her bookishness and virginal wholesomeness, is killed by the Demogorgon, while Nancy and Steve have sex, the transgressive act most typically associated as a predictor of slasher victimhood (Butler, pp. 79-80).

Rather than viewing nostalgia as reflecting conservative political agendas, others view it as rooted in universal psychological processes that transcend political ideologies. One such approach views both the appeal of adolescent characters and the nostalgia for the events of viewers’ own adolescence as rooted in the importance of that phase of life in both cognitive and social development. This approach is exemplified by the work of Richardson and Romero (2018), who argue persuasively that the fact that the main protagonists are adolescents is a key factor in contributing to the appeal of the nostalgia in *Stranger Things*, stating that “adolescence’s combustible mix of significance and instability make it an ideal conduit for nostalgic affect” (p. 99). In addition, Richardson and Romero suggest that the exploration of the mysterious world of the upside down in contrast to the mundane world of Hawkins is allegorical for the changes that occur at around age 12 when people transition from concrete to formal

operations in Piaget's model of cognitive development. Further, these authors draw on Erik Erickson's psychosocial stages of development to describe how the key tasks of adolescence is identity formation. The increasing importance of peer groups and the changing nature and complexity of friendships are common milestone of adolescence and themes that feature prominently in the plot of *Stranger Things*.

Another psychological approach to the appeal of nostalgia focuses on its ability to allow viewers to address issues of permanence and meaning. For example, Butts (2018) argues that nostalgia is rooted in a desire to confront existential issues, noting that some of the characters in *Stranger Things* are trapped in time longing for a return back to before they lost someone and being trapped in time means "facing their own temporality, which is to say their own impermanent mortality. We too do this along with the characters, using them as our mirror." (p. 241). This understanding of the function of nostalgia as rooted in the shared need to grapple with existential questions can be better informed by insights from TMT.

Sedikides et al. (2008) assert that the emotional experience of nostalgia can be a means of warding off existential anxieties. They note that nostalgia is often triggered by unpleasant states, such as being in a bad mood or feeling lonely, and therefore suggest that people seek out nostalgia as a way to restore a sense of psychological well-being. Nostalgia can prompt positive mood, increase self-esteem, enhance feelings of social connectedness, and promote a sense that life is meaningful, all of which can reduce anxiety about death (p. 305). Psychological research has confirmed that prompting people to think about death increases transient states of nostalgia (Juhl et al., 2010) and that inducing nostalgia protects people from death concerns when confronted with reminders of mortality (Routledge et al., 2008).

However, it is not just the problem of personal mortality that nostalgia helps alleviate, but also concerns about impermanence and the decay of culture writ large. Becker (1973) views the drive to feel heroic and to believe that one made a large scale and enduring contribution to the world as a psychological prerequisite for managing the terror of death. He described this as a need for *cosmic significance*, “The hope and belief is that the things man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive and outshine death and decay, that man and his products count” (p. 5). Consequently, perceptions that cultural creations are fleeting and ephemeral undermine psychological equanimity. Worries about impermanence seem a long-standing human concern, and are given Biblical expression. One example is seen in Psalms, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Psalm 103:15-17, RSV). A similar example is found in Ecclesiastes, “For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten” (Ecclesiastes 2:16, RSV). However, psycho-historian Robert Jay Lifton (1976) notes how the difficulty in symbolically connecting present to past and future, in order to perceive an enduring temporal coherence to human cultural activity, was made exponentially more difficult in modern times. According to Lifton, threats to existence, such as nuclear weapons and climate change, coupled with rapid growth in the sheer volume of cultural products being proliferated in mass media make it increasingly challenging for people to anticipate leaving any enduring legacy (p. 35). How can one hope to make any memorable and meaningful contribution to the world that will not be lost in an ever-expanding sea of information or simply destroyed with the death of the planet?

*Stranger Things* confronts viewers not just with anxieties about death, but also with imagery of the possibility of mass extinction. Vecna shares some physical resemblance to the

Night King from HBO's *Game of Thrones*, as Barry Gower and his BGFY makeup company created the look for both characters (LeGardye, 2022). However, the characters also share a conceptual similarity, in that both represent a global existential threat and are bent upon the eradication of all humanity. Vecna's goal of destroying and transforming the human world is revealed in Episode 9 (Chapter Nine: The Piggyback). He describes the upside down as a "realm unspoiled by mankind." He tells Eleven that "Hawkins will burn and fall with the rest of the senseless broken world and I will be there to pick up the pieces when it does and remake it into something beautiful." Although they initially think they have defeated Vecna, the protagonist realize at the end of season 4 that the portal to the upside down has been opened. The season ends with the main cast of characters staring out into an apocalyptic scene as fire and black cyclones spew out of multiple openings bringing the full force of unabated evil from the alternate realm. The threat of mass extinction made salient in the series potentially amplifies viewers' enjoyment of nostalgia as the re-experience and remembering of valued cultural artifacts from previous decades facilitates hope in the possibility of the transcendent and enduring properties of human activity.

## **Conclusion**

The psychological insights gained from TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 2015) about the need to ward off existential anxiety by investing in cultural belief systems that offer adherents hopes for immortality can provide a useful perspective for understanding both why horror media is potentially frightening and captivating. Well-executed works can succeed in horrifying consumers by eliciting the requisite amalgam of the emotions of fear and disgust by reminding consumers of the inevitability of personal mortality and by forcing a usually avoided confrontation with our corporeal and animalistic nature that calls into doubt questions about the

feasibility of transcendence. The existential horror evoked by images of death and gore makes viewers potentially more receptive to the narrative and visual elements that buttress psychological defenses and consequently produces a satisfying sense of interest and engagement. This can take the form of depictions of supernatural events that suggest there is more to existence than the empirical world and thereby validate beliefs in the possibility of spiritual transcendence. Additionally, psychological defenses against death anxiety can be buttressed by enforcing viewer's cherished cultural beliefs about fairness, heroism, and meaning.

The appeal of *Stranger Things* can be interpreted as evidence of the adroit way in which the series simultaneously elicits existential fears of mortality, corporeality, and impermanence while buttressing psychological defenses against these concerns through the elicitation of nostalgia and the presentation of narratives about the salvific power of relationships. The nostalgia, the universal relatability of the struggles of adolescence, themes about the power of pure friendship and love to persevere and always come through, and the celebration of popular culture as important and meaningful, while all appealing in their own right, are amplified by the mortal horror *Stranger Things* attempts to elicit in the minds of viewers. Just as the characters in the show use their encyclopedic knowledge of pop culture to avoid death and destruction in their diegetic world, fans are bolstered in the hope that the human enterprise and our cultural creations can have some enduring value that is not destined to extinction and insignificance in an indifferent universe.

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