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LOST IDENTITY: ANALYZING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUGGLES OF MARCO IN THE MOVIE *THE CHILDE* (2023)

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological struggles and identity crisis of Marco, the main character in The Childe (2023). It aims to identify the psychological factors contributing to Marco's identity conflict and examine how these struggles influence his character development throughout the film. By describing phenomena and social conditions as well as the content analysis in the movie, the study analyzes key scenes, dialogues, and symbols reflecting Marco's inner turmoil. The findings reveal that Marco's loss of identity is rooted in repressed trauma, emotional instability, and a breakdown in the balance between the id, ego, and superego. His fragmented memory, impulsive behavior, and denial of his familial identity reflect classic Freudian defense mechanisms. Analyzing the Psychological Struggles, such as repression and displacement. These symptoms demonstrate a fractured ego struggling to mediate between unconscious desires and social reality. Furthermore, Marco's identity confusion aligns with Erikson's psychosocial stage of identity vs. role confusion, wherein unresolved trauma prevents a coherent self-concept. The film portrays his psychological journey not as a linear recovery, but as a cyclical confrontation with suppressed truths. Through cinematic expressions—such as physical violence, symbolic imagery, and emotional breakdowns— the film illustrates how trauma shapes identity and behavior. This research highlights the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in analyzing cinematic narratives and offers interdisciplinary insights into trauma, masculinity, and psychological resilience.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Marco, Psychoanalytic theory, Repressed trauma, Sigmund Freud, The Childe (2023)

INTRODUCTION

In psychology and media studies, films have long been recognized as tools that reflect and construct human experiences. They portray complex aspects of behavior such as trauma, identity formation, and psychological conflict. Narratives in film not only mirror reality but also shape audience perceptions through symbolic representation and character development (Green & Brock, 2023). This dual role allows cinema to contribute to psychological understanding while engaging cultural discourse on mental health and identity. Freud's psychoanalytic framework provides a significant theoretical basis for analyzing identity. According to Freud, identity emerges from the ego's constant negotiation between instinctual drives (id), moral constraints (superego), and external reality. When balance is disrupted, individuals may experience identity crises that manifest as unconscious conflicts and defense mechanisms (S. Freud, 1915; A. Freud, 2018).

Trauma plays a decisive role in this destabilization. Freud argued that unresolved traumatic experiences are repressed into the unconscious yet continue to influence behavior indirectly, often resurfacing through symbols, dreams, or irrational emotions. Such repression weakens the ego and can result in anxiety, dissociation, or fragmentation of self (S. Freud, 1915; A. Freud, 2018). In coping with such conflicts, the ego employs defense mechanisms like repression, denial, and projection. While these mechanisms reduce anxiety, excessive reliance can lead to the disintegration of identity, as the self becomes unable to integrate conflicting elements. Within this Freudian context, "lost identity" emerges when trauma overwhelms the ego, leaving the individual in existential confusion. Gergel & Iacoponi (2017) emphasize that severe psychological distress, including psychosis or traumatic memory loss, disrupts coherent identity and continuity of self. Phinney et al. (2021) similarly stress that unstable identity makes it difficult for individuals to maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships. The South Korean action-thriller The Childe (2023), directed by Park Hoon-jung, exemplifies these psychological concepts.

Its protagonist, Marco, experiences memory loss, impulsive behavior, and emotional instability as he becomes entangled in a violent conflict linked to his past. These symptoms reflect an ego overwhelmed by unconscious trauma, unable to harmonize the demands of the id, ego, and superego. Through Marco, the film dramatizes both Freud's ideas of intrapsychic conflict and Erikson's stage of "Identity vs. Role Confusion." His struggles highlight how trauma distorts identity and how individuals navigate uncertainty while seeking coherence amid external threats. Marco's fractured self illustrates repressed trauma interfering with

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psychological stability. His memory gaps, emotional confusion, and erratic actions reflect an identity crisis deeply rooted in unconscious conflict. Thus, his character functions as a cinematic illustration of how trauma shapes and destabilizes identity. The film not only tells a story of violence and survival but also embodies the psychological struggle of a fragmented self. This study situates The Childe at the intersection of psychology, literature, and media studies. As Tyler (2021a) argues, film is not merely a mirror of reality but a cultural medium that shapes understanding of identity, trauma, and resilience. Marco's character arc demonstrates how cinema constructs psychological realities and engages with broader societal concerns about mental health. By analyzing his struggles, the research expands interdisciplinary dialogue on identity crises and trauma in visual storytelling. The urgency of this study lies in the lack of scholarly attention given to trauma-induced identity loss in fictional characters.

While psychoanalysis has been widely applied in psychology, fewer works examine its relevance in modern cinema. Wang & Dishion (2022) note that traumatic experiences exacerbate identity crises and complicate self-understanding. In The Childe, Marco's fragmented memory and unstable identity stem from unresolved trauma, making the film an important case for exploring how such experiences are represented in fiction. This study addresses the gap by situating trauma within both psychological and cultural frameworks, offering insights into real-world challenges of identity crisis. Furthermore, this research contributes to media studies by showing how modern films reflect and construct psychological complexity. Tyler (2021b) emphasizes that films reflect contemporary issues while shaping social perceptions. By analyzing The Childe, this research illustrates how film narratives influence audience awareness of trauma and identity, fostering reflection on psychological resilience and vulnerability. Cinema thus becomes a site where abstract theories of identity and trauma are made tangible for public understanding. In conclusion, identity within Freudian psychoanalysis is a dynamic construct shaped by internal conflicts and repressed trauma. Marco's character in The Childe provides a vivid case study of how trauma destabilizes the ego, leading to confusion, fragmentation, and the search for self. This research highlights the importance of analyzing cinematic narratives as psychological texts that reveal the impact of trauma on identity. By engaging Freud's and Erikson's theories alongside media studies, the research enriches the understanding of how films like The Childe reflect both individual psychological struggles and collective cultural concerns. The contribution lies not only in bridging psychology and film but also in illuminating the urgent need for deeper dialogue about trauma and identity in both fictional and real contexts. Based on the background, this study focuses on two central questions: what psychological factors influence Marco's identity struggle, and how this struggle affects his character development. The research is designed with two main objectives. First, it seeks to identify the psychological factors that contribute to Marco's identity conflict, including elements such as self-esteem, social influences, and internal conflicts. Second, it aims to analyze how these struggles shape Marco's character development, particularly in terms of his behavior, relationships, and self-perception.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the broader field of psychology and literature. It adds to existing scholarship by providing a deeper understanding of the interaction between psychological factors and identity formation. At the same time, the study offers educational value for students and educators in psychology and media studies, as it uses a specific character case to illustrate the complexities of identity struggles and character development. By analyzing Marco's journey, the research demonstrates how fictional representations can shed light on real psychological challenges, enriching both academic discourse and classroom learning. However, the study also has certain limitations. Its focus is restricted to Marco's character in The Childe, and therefore does not account for wider societal or cultural influences on identity crises. The use of qualitative methods introduces a degree of subjectivity and limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the research is conducted within a specific timeframe and concentrates on a single character, which restricts the depth of analysis regarding long-term consequences and reduces the applicability of its conclusions to individuals with different backgrounds or experiences.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a psychoanalytic literary criticism approach. The method enables an in-depth interpretation of Marco's identity conflict, trauma, and unconscious drives as represented through narrative, dialogue, and cinematic techniques. Freud's theory of the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms provides the theoretical framework for analyzing the character's internal struggles (Lewis, 2015; Barry, 2017; A. Freud, 2018; Tyson, 2006). The research focuses on Marco, the protagonist in The Childe (2023). His violent behavior, memory fragmentation, and emotional instability are analyzed through Freud's model of the psyche: id (instincts), ego (reality), and superego (morality). These traits reflect repressed trauma and the use of defense mechanisms like repression and denial (S. Freud, 1915; A. Freud, 2018; Cramer, 2000). The analysis seeks to uncover how trauma and inner conflict contribute to Marco's identity loss and unstable behavior.

Data were obtained through qualitative content analysis of the film. The process included: watching the film repeatedly to capture behavioral and emotional details, note-taking and documenting scenes showing trauma, instability, and conflict, transcribing dialogues and monologues related to memory and identity, and annotating cinematic elements such as lighting, expressions, and symbols. This method follows approaches used in similar studies (Saggu, 2020; Sabila & Khoiri, 2022; Mulyani, 2023). Techniques for analyzing the data analysis based on Freud's psychoanalysis were identifying id, ego, and superego within Marco's decisions and conflicts (A. Freud, 2018), tracing repression, unconscious motives, and defense mechanisms (S. Freud, 1915; A. Freud, 2018; Cramer, 2000), interpreting symbolic representations using semiotic analysis (Mulyani, 2023), and organizing findings into themes such as traumatic memory, identity confusion, and internal conflict (Kadam, 2017; Sabila & Khoiri, 2022). This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of how trauma shapes Marco's identity crisis and character development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal that Marco's identity struggles in The Childe (2023) are primarily rooted in unresolved trauma, fragmented memory, and continuous external pressures that force him into a survival-driven lifestyle. His partial amnesia functions as a psychological defense mechanism consistent with Freud's concept of repression, where painful or threatening memories are unconsciously pushed out of awareness. While this repression serves as a protective barrier, it simultaneously destabilizes Marco's sense of self, leaving him emotionally volatile and unable to integrate his past with his present identity. This instability is reflected in his repeated denial of paternal connections, his persistent distrust of others, and his reliance on violence as a primary coping mechanism when confronted with fear, stress, or vulnerability.



Figure 1. Rooftop Chase Scene (01:02:14)

From a psychological perspective, Marco's behaviors demonstrate the internal conflict between the id, ego, and superego. His id dominates in impulsive and aggressive acts driven by survival instincts, while his ego struggles to balance these impulses against external dangers. At key moments, the superego emerges through subtle expressions of moral hesitation, though these are quickly overshadowed by the immediacy of threats surrounding him. This dynamic is exemplified in the rooftop chase sequence where Marco admits, "No matter how Marco's mistrust and emotional volatility can also be interpreted as adaptive strategies shaped by his environment. As an underground fighter in the Philippines, he has learned to anticipate betrayal and to view physical dominance as the only reliable form of control. His reckless gambling in the betting bar and his hostile response to the Nobleman on the airplane both reveal how unresolved trauma drives him toward impulsive decisions, masking deeper insecurities. These behaviors illustrate Freud's notion of acting out, where unresolved conflicts manifest through immediate and risky actions rather than reflective thought. The result is a character who lives moment to moment, with little capacity for long-term planning or emotional connection, underscoring the emptiness of his identity and the absence of stable self-understanding. The film's recurring visual motifs further enrich this psychological portrait. Blood, frequently staining Marco's hands or body after violent encounters, symbolizes both literal survival and the figurative "stains" of his past that cannot be erased. Mirrors, which capture Marco staring at his own reflection, operate as confrontations with a fractured self-image. These cinematic elements align with psychoanalytic film theory, where imagery is treated as an unconscious language that externalizes a character's internal struggles. By repeating these motifs at crucial narrative points, the film emphasizes that identity reconstruction is inseparable from the acknowledgment of

unresolved trauma. The motifs also highlight that Marco's struggle is not solely external but deeply psychological, reinforcing the central theme that his greatest conflict lies within himself.

Marco's development throughout the film reflects a gradual but incomplete transformation. At the beginning, he is depicted as emotionally detached, defined by survival instincts and marked by defensive hostility. As the narrative progresses, his instability intensifies, leading to panic and breakdown when his defense mechanisms collapse, as shown in his frantic call to Teacher Kim after the ambush. However, repeated confrontations and near-death experiences slowly push him toward reluctant self-awareness. By the conclusion, Marco acknowledges that running from his past is unsustainable, and he begins to assert agency over his identity with the line, "Maybe I don't know who I was… but I'll decide who I'll become." This statement does not resolve his struggles but signals a shift from passive denial to cautious acceptance. In narrative terms, his journey mirrors real-life trauma recovery processes, which are often gradual, nonlinear, and incomplete. Overall, the findings indicate that Marco's identity struggles are shaped by the interplay of repressed trauma, adaptive survival strategies, and symbolic cinematic representations. His fragmented self is portrayed not as a fixed state but as an ongoing negotiation between past and present, denial and acknowledgment, avoidance and confrontation. The film resists offering a definitive resolution, instead presenting identity as a dynamic process of reconstruction. This conclusion emphasizes that psychological healing, particularly in cases of trauma, is not absolute but incremental, marked by small yet meaningful shifts in perception and decision-making.

The interpretation of Marco's characterization in The Childe (2023) can be fully understood through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which provides a framework for examining the interplay between repression, unconscious motives, and defense mechanisms in shaping individual behavior. Marco's partial amnesia and fragmented memories are central indicators of repression, where his unconscious actively suppresses painful experiences to shield him from emotional breakdown (S. Freud, 1915). This repression is not merely a narrative choice but operates as a psychological symptom that creates both protection and instability. His refusal to recognize his paternal identity demonstrates how denial serves as a defense strategy to prevent the resurfacing of unresolved trauma. This denial, however, leaves him without a coherent sense of self, sustaining his confusion and disconnection from others.

The dominance of Marco's id is evident throughout the narrative in his impulsive aggression, risk-taking actions, and instinctual drive for survival. As Freud (1923) outlined, the id represents unconscious desires that seek immediate gratification, and Marco embodies this through his violent encounters and reckless decisions. The ego, which should mediate between instinct and reality, struggles under the weight of external pressures. His environment as an underground fighter amplifies these tensions, forcing his ego into a constant state of negotiation. Yet, as Tyson (2006) notes, when the ego is overwhelmed by stressors, it often collapses into defensive strategies rather than balanced decision-making. Marco's superego surfaces only intermittently, usually in brief moments of hesitation or reflection, such as his acknowledgment during the rooftop chase that he cannot run from himself. These glimpses of conscience suggest the presence of a moral framework, but it is overshadowed by the relentless pull of survival and fear.

Symbolic imagery within the film reinforces these psychoanalytic readings. Blood, which frequently stains Marco's body, operates as a metaphor for both physical violence and the indelible marks of his past trauma. The visual repetition of blood underscores how his external conflicts are tied to deeper, unresolved wounds that continue to haunt him. Mirrors function as cinematic devices of self-confrontation, capturing Marco in moments where he must face his fractured identity. These scenes resonate with psychoanalytic theory, where symbols and imagery express unconscious realities (Barry, 2017). By employing such recurring motifs, the film externalizes Marco's internal state, revealing that his journey toward identity reconstruction requires him to acknowledge the past he has long attempted to suppress. In addressing the first research objective—identifying the psychological factors behind Marco's struggles—the findings clearly demonstrate that trauma, repression, denial, mistrust, and displacement are central forces driving his instability. His mistrust of others is not only a social trait but also a psychological necessity formed by his experiences of abandonment and betrayal. This lack of trust becomes a shield, preventing intimacy and reinforcing his isolation. His denial of paternal ties represents a deeper refusal to reopen wounds of neglect, while displacement is evident in his redirection of fear and resentment into violence against others. These patterns highlight Freud's (1923) proposition that defense mechanisms serve the ego by protecting the individual from unbearable anxiety, even when they distort reality.

The second research objective—understanding how these struggles shape Marco's development—is reflected in the gradual shift of his behavior across the narrative. Initially, Marco exists solely in survival mode, his actions motivated by the immediate needs of underground fighting and his mother's medical bills. His identity is narrowly defined by these roles, leaving no room for personal reflection. As the story progresses, escalating threats push him into heightened emotional instability. His phone call to Teacher Kim after the ambush reflects the breakdown of his defenses, showing that repression and denial are no longer sufficient to keep his fears at bay. This collapse forces him to confront vulnerability, a moment where his psychological armor

cracks. Yet, it also marks a transition: from being a purely reactive fighter to a man who begins to consider his own agency.

By the film's conclusion, Marco demonstrates a tentative acceptance of his fragmented identity. His reflection, "Maybe I don't know who I was… but I'll decide who I'll become," suggests a willingness to reconstruct himself despite unresolved trauma. This transformation, while incomplete, illustrates Freud's (1933) idea that confronting unconscious material is essential for personal growth. It also reflects Tyson's (2006) assertion that identity formation is a process, not an endpoint. Marco does not achieve total clarity or reconciliation, but he begins to shift from denial toward agency, signaling the possibility of psychological healing.

On a broader interpretive level, Marco's journey embodies the concept of identity as a fluid and constructed phenomenon. His fragmented self illustrates that identity is not simply rediscovered but actively rebuilt through choices and acceptance of past experiences. *The Childe* resists a conclusive resolution, leaving Marco's trajectory open-ended. This refusal of closure reflects the real nature of trauma recovery, which is often nonlinear, gradual, and incomplete (Cramer, 2000). Healing is portrayed not as an absolute victory over the past but as the courage to face uncertainty while making incremental steps toward self-definition. The recurrence of blood and mirrors throughout the narrative reinforces this theme, reminding the audience that the past cannot be erased but must be integrated into one's present.

Ultimately, the interpretation of Marco's struggles through psychoanalytic theory deepens the understanding of his character development. His repression and denial reveal the psychological cost of unresolved trauma; his impulsivity highlights the dominance of the id under threat; his fleeting moments of hesitation show the fragile emergence of the superego; and his reliance on violence underscores the ego's defensive strategies in the absence of stability. The film portrays identity not as a fixed truth but as a process of negotiation between memory, trauma, and choice. In line with Freud's (1915, 1923) theories and later interpretations by A. Freud (2018) and Tyson (2006), Marco's character illustrates that psychological healing begins with acknowledgment of the unconscious, even when the process remains incomplete.

CONCLUSION

Marco's identity crisis in *The Childe* (2023) is portrayed as the result of unresolved trauma, memory loss, and an ongoing psychological battle between his id, ego, and superego. His partial amnesia prevents him from accessing crucial memories of his past, leaving him in a state of emotional instability. This condition manifests through his defensive and aggressive behavior, repeated denial of paternal identity, and deep mistrust toward others. Violence becomes his primary coping mechanism, further emphasizing his fractured self. The film reinforces these struggles through recurring symbolic imagery, particularly blood and mirrors, which serve as reminders of both the violence he endures and the broken reflection of his own identity. He analysis of Marco's character development illustrates how these struggles shape his gradual transformation. At the beginning, Marco exists primarily as a survivor, defined by distrust, defensiveness, and the transactional nature of his underground fights. He has no long-term vision and refuses to acknowledge his origins, choosing instead to live moment by moment. However, as the story unfolds, repeated encounters with danger and hidden truths push him to face aspects of his past that he had long suppressed. This progression culminates in moments of reluctant self-awareness, where he realizes that avoidance and denial can no longer sustain him. By the conclusion of the film, Marco does not achieve complete resolution or healing. Instead, he reaches a turning point, shifting from outright denial to cautious acceptance of his fragmented identity. His closing reflection signifies the possibility of redefining himself on his own terms, despite lingering scars. This outcome highlights that in trauma-centered narratives, growth is not immediate or absolute but occurs gradually through small, meaningful steps toward self-definition.

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