

NANCY DOWNS' PSYCHOLOGICAL EVOLUTION IN THE CRAFT (1996): A MELANIE KLEINIAN READING OF TRAUMA AND DESTRUCTIVE AGENCY

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Abstract

This study examines Nancy Downs' psychological evolution in The Craft (1996) through Melanie Klein's object relations theory. It aims to analyse how Nancy's traumatic experiences contribute to the development of splitting and projective identification, as well as how her failure to achieve psychological integration shapes her destructive agency. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study applies textual and visual analysis to selected scenes and dialogues. The findings reveal that Nancy's destructive behaviour is not caused by inherent evil but by unresolved trauma, fragmented object relations, and persistent defensive mechanisms. Her experiences of family instability, social rejection, and emotional neglect lead to psychological fragmentation, while splitting and projective identification reinforce her aggression and desire for control. Nancy's inability to integrate conflicting aspects of herself prevents emotional development and intensifies her destructive tendencies. This study concludes that Nancy's transformation represents a psychological response to trauma rather than a simple transition into villainy. Through Klein's perspective, The Craft (1996) demonstrates how unresolved trauma and failed psychological integration influence identity formation and destructive agency in horror narratives.

Keywords: *destructive agency; The Craft; Melanie Klein; object relations theory; projective identification; splitting; trauma.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji evolusi psikologis Nancy Downs dalam film The Craft (1996) melalui teori relasi objek Melanie Klein. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana pengalaman traumatis

*Nancy membentuk mekanisme pertahanan berupa splitting dan identifikasi proyektif, serta bagaimana kegagalannya mencapai integrasi psikologis menghasilkan agensi destruktif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif melalui analisis tekstual dan visual terhadap adegan serta dialog terpilih. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perilaku destruktif Nancy bukan berasal dari sifat jahat bawaan, melainkan dari trauma yang tidak terselesaikan, relasi objek yang terfragmentasi, dan penggunaan mekanisme pertahanan secara berkelanjutan. Ketidakstabilan keluarga, penolakan sosial, dan pengabaian emosional menyebabkan fragmentasi psikologis yang memperkuat agresi serta kebutuhan Nancy untuk mengendalikan orang lain. Kegagalannya mengintegrasikan aspek-aspek yang bertentangan dalam dirinya menyebabkan perkembangan emosional terhambat dan memperkuat perilaku destruktif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa transformasi Nancy merupakan respons psikologis terhadap trauma, bukan sekadar perubahan menjadi karakter antagonis. Melalui perspektif Melanie Klein, *The Craft* (1996) menunjukkan hubungan antara trauma, pembentukan identitas, dan agensi destruktif dalam narasi horor.*

Kata kunci: *kageni destruktif; The Craft; Melanie Klein; relasi objek; trauma.*

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1. Introduction

Horror films have long functioned as a medium for representing social anxieties, psychological conflicts, and cultural fears. Within this genre, female characters are often portrayed in an ambivalent position: they can appear as victims of oppression while simultaneously being constructed as threatening figures when they gain power. The representation of the “terrifying woman” in horror narratives frequently reflects deeper issues related to trauma, identity formation, social marginalisation, and unequal power relations. Rather than portraying female aggression as an inherent characteristic, contemporary horror films increasingly explore how psychological distress and traumatic experiences contribute to the transformation of female subjectivity.

One film that presents this complexity is *The Craft* (1996), directed by Andrew Fleming, which portrays the psychological transformation of Nancy Downs, one of its central characters. The film follows four teenage girls who use witchcraft as a means of overcoming their personal struggles,

including abuse, social rejection, and emotional instability. Among them, Nancy experiences the most significant transformation due to her traumatic background, including domestic instability, poverty, abandonment, and sexual abuse. Initially positioned as a victim seeking power and control over her life, Nancy gradually becomes an increasingly destructive figure after gaining supernatural abilities. Her transformation raises important questions regarding how unresolved trauma influences psychological development and shapes destructive patterns of behaviour.

To examine Nancy Downs' transformation, this study applies Melanie Klein's object relations theory as the primary analytical framework. Unlike approaches that view identity as a fixed condition, Klein's theory understands psychological development as a dynamic process shaped by internal conflict, emotional experiences, unconscious fantasy, and relationships with internalised objects. This study specifically focuses on three concepts: splitting, projective identification, and psychological integration. Splitting explains how individuals separate experiences or objects into opposing categories to manage anxiety, while projective identification describes the process of projecting unwanted emotions or parts of the self onto others. Meanwhile, psychological integration refers to the ability to recognise and reconcile contradictory emotions and experiences into a more balanced psychological structure. Through these concepts, Nancy's transformation can be understood not merely as a sudden change into a destructive figure, but as a gradual psychological evolution shaped by unresolved trauma and fragmented object relations.

Previous studies on female representation in horror films have examined issues of gender ideology, trauma, embodiment, and cultural meanings surrounding female monstrosity. Mustofa (2017), for instance, explores the ideological construction of female ghost characters in Hollywood and Indonesian horror films, highlighting how cultural narratives shape the representation of monstrous women. Parrish (2023) examines the relationship between trauma, embodiment, and identity transformation in body horror cinema, while Kilker (2020) applies object relations theory to analyse psychological dynamics in cinematic narratives. However, these studies primarily focus on broader representations of trauma, gender, or identity, while limited attention has been given to the

specific psychological mechanisms through which unresolved trauma gradually transforms a female character's identity and behaviour.

Therefore, this study aims to examine Nancy Downs' psychological evolution in *The Craft* (1996) through Melanie Klein's object relations theory. Specifically, this research investigates how Nancy's traumatic experiences contribute to the development of splitting and projective identification, as well as how her failure to achieve psychological integration leads to the formation of destructive agency. By focusing on the internal psychological processes behind Nancy's transformation, this study contributes to psychoanalytic and film studies by offering a deeper understanding of how trauma and unconscious defence mechanisms shape female identity within horror narratives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory

Melanie Klein's object relations theory explains psychological development through the individual's relationship with internal and external objects. Unlike traditional psychoanalytic perspectives that primarily emphasise biological drives, Klein focuses on how early emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships influence the formation of the self. According to Klein (1946), individuals develop their psychological structures through interactions with objects, which are not limited to external people but also include internal representations of significant relationships and emotional experiences.

Within this framework, psychological development is understood as a dynamic process involving anxiety, unconscious fantasy, and defensive mechanisms. When individuals experience overwhelming emotional conflicts, they may rely on primitive defence mechanisms to manage anxiety and protect the self. These mechanisms influence how individuals perceive themselves, others, and reality. Therefore, unresolved emotional experiences may result in fragmented object relations, unstable perceptions, and difficulties in establishing balanced relationships.

In relation to Nancy Downs' character, Klein's theory provides a framework for understanding her transformation as a psychological process rather than a simple transition from victim to villain. Nancy's destructive behaviour can be interpreted as the consequence of unresolved trauma, fragmented emotional experiences, and defensive responses developed to cope with psychological distress.

2.2 Splitting and Projective Identification

One of the central concepts in Klein's theory is splitting, which refers to a primitive defence mechanism in which individuals separate experiences or objects into opposing categories, such as good and bad, safe and threatening. Klein (1946) argues that splitting emerges as a way to manage anxiety when individuals are unable to tolerate contradictory emotions simultaneously. Instead of recognising positive and negative aspects of the same object, individuals maintain separate and conflicting perceptions.

In Nancy Downs' case, splitting explains her difficulty in integrating complex emotional experiences. Her traumatic background and repeated experiences of rejection contribute to her tendency to perceive herself and others through opposing positions. This mechanism allows Nancy to temporarily manage feelings of vulnerability and fear, but it also prevents her from achieving emotional stability and psychological balance.

Another important concept in Klein's theory is projective identification, which refers to the process of projecting unwanted emotions, impulses, or parts of the self onto another person. Through this mechanism, individuals attempt to remove painful internal experiences by locating them outside themselves. However, projective identification may also influence interpersonal relationships because individuals begin to interact with others based on projected emotions rather than actual experiences.

Applied to Nancy's psychological evolution, projective identification explains how feelings of humiliation, anger, fear, and helplessness are externalised through aggressive behaviour toward

others. Rather than processing her trauma internally, Nancy attempts to regain control by directing her unresolved emotional conflicts outward.

2.3 Psychological Integration and Destructive Agency

Psychological integration refers to the ability of individuals to acknowledge and reconcile conflicting emotions, experiences, and perceptions of self and others into a more balanced psychological structure. Within Klein's framework, successful psychological development involves movement toward a position where individuals can recognise both positive and negative aspects of objects simultaneously. This process allows individuals to develop emotional stability and more realistic relationships.

However, failure to achieve psychological integration may result in continued dependence on primitive defensive mechanisms, emotional instability, and destructive behavioural patterns. When contradictory feelings cannot be integrated, individuals may remain trapped in fragmented psychological structures where anxiety and aggression dominate their responses.

In *The Craft* (1996), Nancy's inability to achieve psychological integration contributes to the development of her destructive agency. Her pursuit of power does not represent genuine psychological empowerment but rather an attempt to overcome feelings of insecurity, fear, and vulnerability. The supernatural abilities she gains intensify her desire for control and reinforce destructive responses toward herself and others. Therefore, Nancy's transformation reflects how unresolved trauma and failed psychological integration can shape destructive forms of identity and behaviour.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design using a film studies approach through textual and visual analysis. A qualitative method is selected because this research focuses on

interpreting psychological development, character transformation, and the representation of trauma within a cinematic narrative. Rather than measuring psychological changes quantitatively, this study examines how meaning is constructed through dialogues, scenes, narrative elements, and visual representations in *The Craft* (1996).

The textual and visual analysis focuses on Nancy Downs' psychological evolution throughout the film, particularly the process through which traumatic experiences influence her perception of herself and others. The analysis examines significant moments in Nancy's development, beginning from her experiences of trauma, social marginalisation, and emotional instability, followed by her increasing dependence on supernatural power and the emergence of destructive behavioural patterns.

3.2 Data and Data Source

The primary data source of this study is the supernatural horror film *The Craft* (1996), directed by Andrew Fleming. The film serves as the main source of textual and visual data, including narrative development, character interactions, dialogues, and cinematic representations related to Nancy Downs' psychological transformation.

The collected data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, screenshots, and visual elements that represent important stages of Nancy's psychological evolution. These data focus specifically on moments that illustrate her traumatic experiences, emotional conflicts, defensive mechanisms, changing relationships with others, and transformation into a destructive figure

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected through repeated viewing of *The Craft* (1996) to obtain an in-depth understanding of the narrative, characters, and psychological conflicts presented in the film. During the viewing process, the researcher identified and selected scenes that demonstrate Nancy Downs' psychological development and transformation.

The selected scenes were then documented through dialogue transcription and screenshots to provide accurate textual and visual evidence. The data collection process focused on scenes portraying Nancy's traumatic background, experiences of social rejection, acquisition of supernatural power, changes in interpersonal relationships, and moments reflecting her increasing emotional instability and destructive behaviour.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Melanie Klein's object relations theory as the primary analytical framework. The analysis focused on three main concepts: splitting, projective identification, and psychological integration.

First, the study examined how Nancy's traumatic experiences contribute to psychological fragmentation and the emergence of splitting as a defensive mechanism. Second, the analysis explored how projective identification operates through Nancy's externalisation of unwanted emotions, such as anger, fear, and helplessness, onto others. Third, the study analysed Nancy's failure to achieve psychological integration and how this condition contributes to the development of destructive agency.

Through this analytical process, Nancy's transformation is interpreted not as an immediate change into a destructive character, but as a gradual psychological evolution shaped by unresolved trauma, fragmented object relations, and persistent defensive mechanisms.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Trauma and the Fragmentation of Nancy's Psychological World

Nancy Downs' psychological evolution in *The Craft* (1996) begins with a history of traumatic experiences that significantly shapes her perception of herself and others. Throughout the narrative, Nancy is portrayed as an individual who experiences various forms of emotional distress, including

domestic instability, poverty, abandonment, sexual abuse, and social marginalisation. These experiences create a psychological environment characterised by insecurity, fear, and a continuous struggle for acceptance. Rather than presenting Nancy's later destructive behaviour as an inherent personal trait, the film illustrates how prolonged emotional suffering gradually influences her psychological development.



Figure 1 Nancy Downs-Saunders Nancy suppressed her feelings of hatred and anger because she felt that her home was not a true home (The Craft) 00:27:50

Within Melanie Klein's object relations theory, traumatic experiences may disrupt the development of stable object relations because individuals struggle to process overwhelming emotional experiences. Nancy's inability to establish a sense of safety contributes to the fragmentation of her psychological world. Her relationships with others are shaped by feelings of rejection and distrust, causing her to interpret interpersonal experiences through a framework of threat and vulnerability.

Nancy's social position as an outcast further strengthens this psychological fragmentation. Throughout the film, she is repeatedly defined by others through negative social labels, which reinforces her feelings of worthlessness and exclusion. The combination of personal trauma and social rejection creates internal conflicts that Nancy cannot effectively integrate. As a result, she develops defensive psychological mechanisms as a way to manage anxiety and protect herself from further emotional pain.

The acquisition of supernatural power becomes a turning point in Nancy's psychological development. Initially, magic functions as a source of empowerment that allows Nancy to overcome feelings of helplessness. However, instead of resolving her trauma, power becomes a means of compensating for unresolved emotional wounds. Her desire for control reflects an attempt to overcome previous experiences of vulnerability, but this pursuit gradually intensifies her instability and contributes to destructive patterns of behaviour.

4.2 Splitting and Projective Identification as Defensive Mechanisms

Nancy's psychological transformation can be further understood through Klein's concepts of splitting and projective identification. Splitting operates as one of the primary defensive mechanisms that influences how Nancy perceives herself, others, and her surrounding reality. Due to her unresolved trauma, Nancy experiences difficulty accepting contradictory emotions and maintaining a balanced understanding of relationships.

Through splitting, Nancy tends to organise experiences into opposing categories, such as strength versus weakness, acceptance versus rejection, and control versus vulnerability. This mechanism allows her to temporarily reduce psychological anxiety by separating painful emotions from her conscious awareness. However, the continuous reliance on splitting prevents Nancy from recognising complexity within herself and others.



Figure 2 Nancy refers to herself and her gang as 'the weirdos' (The Craft) 00:28:48

This defensive pattern becomes increasingly visible after Nancy gains supernatural abilities. Her previous position as a powerless victim is replaced by an identity built around strength and dominance. However, this transformation does not represent genuine psychological growth because the vulnerable aspects of herself remain unresolved. Instead of integrating feelings of fear, insecurity, and anger, Nancy rejects these emotions and constructs an identity centred on superiority and control.

In addition to splitting, projective identification plays an important role in Nancy's destructive development. Through this mechanism, Nancy externalises unwanted emotional experiences onto others. Feelings of humiliation, anger, and helplessness that originate from her traumatic experiences are redirected toward those around her. Rather than confronting her internal conflicts, Nancy attempts to eliminate psychological discomfort by making others the target of her aggression.



Figure 3 Nancy responded aggressively to Sarah's concerns (The Craft) 01:00:46

Nancy Downs-Saunders: "Do you want in, or do you want to leave this circle? Just tell me right now!"

The interaction between splitting and projective identification demonstrates that Nancy's destructive behaviour emerges from unresolved psychological conflict. Her aggression is not simply an expression of evil but a defensive response developed to manage overwhelming emotional experiences. Nevertheless, these mechanisms prevent Nancy from achieving emotional stability and gradually intensify her destructive tendencies.

4.3 Failure to Achieve Psychological Integration

Nancy Downs' psychological transformation reaches its critical stage when she fails to achieve psychological integration. Within Melanie Klein's framework, psychological integration refers to the ability of individuals to recognise and reconcile conflicting emotions, experiences, and perceptions of themselves and others. Successful integration allows individuals to understand that objects and relationships may contain both positive and negative aspects simultaneously. However, Nancy remains trapped within fragmented psychological structures because she is unable to process her traumatic experiences in an integrated manner.

Throughout the film, Nancy continues to rely on primitive defensive mechanisms to manage anxiety and emotional conflict. Instead of accepting her vulnerability and recognising the complexity of her experiences, she increasingly identifies herself through power, dominance, and control. Her supernatural abilities become closely connected with fantasies of omnipotence, allowing her to temporarily escape feelings of insecurity and weakness. However, this sense of power is unstable because it is built upon unresolved trauma rather than genuine psychological development.

Nancy's failure to integrate conflicting aspects of herself also affects her interpersonal relationships. She becomes increasingly unable to tolerate disagreement, rejection, or emotional uncertainty. Her relationships with Sarah and the other members of the group gradually shift from mutual connection into relationships based on manipulation and control. This indicates that Nancy no longer perceives others as separate individuals with their own emotions and experiences, but rather as objects that either support or threaten her sense of power.

The inability to achieve psychological integration ultimately prevents Nancy from developing a stable sense of self. Her identity becomes divided between the vulnerable individual shaped by trauma and the powerful figure attempting to overcome that vulnerability. Instead of resolving this internal conflict, Nancy intensifies her dependence on destructive psychological mechanisms. Therefore, her transformation into a frightening figure is not an immediate change caused by supernatural power, but the consequence of accumulated trauma and failed emotional integration.

4.4 Destructive Agency as the Outcome of Psychological Evolution

Nancy's destructive agency emerges as the final outcome of her unresolved trauma, fragmented object relations, and failure to achieve psychological integration. Although the acquisition of supernatural power initially appears to provide Nancy with empowerment, the film demonstrates that this power does not lead to psychological healing. Instead, it amplifies her existing emotional conflicts and strengthens her desire for absolute control.



Figure 6 Nancy attacked Sarah in an attempt to kill her (The Craft) 01:32:13

Nancy Downs-Saunders: "I called him before you! You bitch! You bitch! I'll kill you!"

Nancy's increasing aggression, manipulation, and violent actions can be understood as attempts to manage unresolved anxiety and regain control over experiences that previously made her feel powerless. Her behaviour reflects a defensive response toward feelings of rejection, humiliation, and vulnerability. However, because these emotional conflicts remain unresolved, her attempts to achieve control result in further psychological instability and destruction.

The transformation of Nancy into a destructive figure also challenges the idea that female monstrosity in horror narratives is solely associated with evil or moral failure. Through a Kleinian perspective, Nancy's frightening identity can be interpreted as the external expression of unresolved internal conflicts. Her destructive behaviour represents the manifestation of psychological wounds that have not been successfully processed or integrated.

Furthermore, Nancy's eventual defeat and confinement in a mental institution demonstrate the consequences of remaining within fragmented psychological structures. Her pursuit of power fails to provide the security and acceptance she originally sought. Instead, her dependence on defensive mechanisms isolates her further and prevents her from establishing healthy relationships with herself and others.

Therefore, Nancy Downs' psychological evolution in *The Craft* (1996) illustrates a gradual movement from trauma toward destructive agency. Her transformation is not the result of an inherently malicious personality, but rather the consequence of unresolved emotional experiences, unstable object relations, and the inability to achieve psychological integration. Through Melanie Klein's object relations theory, the film reveals how trauma can influence identity formation and shape destructive behavioural patterns within horror narratives.

5. Conclusion

This study examines Nancy Downs' psychological evolution in *The Craft* (1996) through Melanie Klein's object relations theory. The findings demonstrate that Nancy's transformation from a vulnerable victim into a destructive figure is not a result of inherent evil, but rather the consequence of unresolved trauma, fragmented object relations, and persistent defensive mechanisms.

Nancy's traumatic experiences, including domestic instability, social rejection, and emotional neglect, contribute to the fragmentation of her psychological world. These experiences influence the development of primitive defensive mechanisms, particularly splitting and projective identification. Through splitting, Nancy separates herself and others into opposing categories, preventing her from recognising emotional complexity. Meanwhile, projective identification allows her to externalise unwanted feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness onto others, particularly those who challenge her sense of control.

The study further reveals that Nancy's inability to achieve psychological integration becomes a significant factor in the development of her destructive agency. Although supernatural power

initially provides Nancy with a sense of empowerment, it does not resolve her psychological wounds. Instead, it strengthens her fantasies of omnipotence, intensifies her need for control, and reinforces destructive patterns of behaviour. Her transformation therefore represents a psychological response to accumulated trauma rather than a simple transition into a villainous character.

Through the application of Melanie Klein's object relations theory, this study highlights how horror narratives can portray female monstrosity as a manifestation of unresolved psychological conflict. Nancy Downs' character demonstrates that destructive behaviour may emerge from the failure to process trauma and integrate conflicting aspects of the self. Therefore, *The Craft* (1996) presents female transformation not merely as a movement toward darkness but as a complex psychological evolution shaped by trauma, defence mechanisms, and the struggle to establish a stable sense of identity.

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