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The Presence of Death in Christopher Priest's 'The Prestige' (1995)

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the fear of death as presented in Christopher Priest's The Prestige, a novel published in 1995. Fear is manifested through various elements derived from gothic fiction, horror novels, science fiction, and similar narrative genres that come near the mystery of death. These elements are brought together in the text to embody humanity's primordial fear of death in a single creative work. This attempt necessarily relies on the insights, statements, and approaches of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Part of the conclusions this research aims to achieve is that the author of this novel seeks to warn the reading public about individuals who go to extreme lengths to avoid death, prolong their lives, and escape mortality, attempting to elude the inevitable fate of all living things. They commit evil and ignoble acts to live beyond the usual span of human years, leading to dreadful and satanic consequences. The work selected and also the experiences of life and death experienced therein were selected, in a sense, to show that this novel connects with and continues a trend and a tradition started by Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Bram Stoker, to name but a few. This paper discusses the implications of the presence of death in Christopher Priest's The Prestige.

Keywords: Presence of Death, the Double/Doppelgangers/Clone; Appearance and Reality

INTRODUCTION

To effectively analyze the samples chosen from *The Prestige*, it is essential to begin with a review of the terminologies involved in the analysis. These terms relate to the literary genre under investigation, as well as concepts from psychoanalysis. The central terms include Doppelgangers, Clones/Cloning, and the fear of death. Additionally, the literary subgenre of fiction must also be addressed in this section of the research.

According to *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* by Ganz and Beckson, the term "Doppelganger" originates from German and means "the Double." It refers to a device whereby the character is self-duplicated (Ganz and Beckson, 1990, pp. 66–67). Doppelganger also signifies a "mirror image" or "Alter Ego," as in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (1910) with Leggatt and the Captain or in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), where the internal struggle of Good versus Evil is externalized. The author's use of this device often reflects their ideological views on self-alienation, their conscious artistic intent, and an unconscious autobiographical sense of their divided nature as an individual. For example, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) reveals such aspects. Similarly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (1956) utilize the Doppelganger to explore the divided self (Ganz and Beckson, 1990, pp. 66–67).

The analysis by Arthur Ganz and Karl Beckson demonstrates that the Doppelganger became a frequent device in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction. This reflects an increasing awareness of the "self" as a fragmented and multi-faceted entity (Ganz and Beckson, 1990, pp. 66–67). Freud's psychoanalytic theory is particularly apt for analyzing these texts, as it approaches the Doppelganger from the perspective of the divided self and the fear of death, shared by many of the protagonists in these works.

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Gothic fiction, on the other hand, is a genre of romance that gained popularity in the late eighteenth century. Stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* 1796, and Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* (1818) capture the terror of the gothic. These tales feature castles, secret passageways, vaults, dungeons, wandering ghosts, and supernatural elements that evoke dread in readers. Gothic fiction also manifests melancholy, macabre tones, and graveyard imagery, as seen in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) (Ganz and Beckson, 1990, p. 101). Moreover, Science fiction, in contrast, speculates about scientific achievements in an imaginative and adventurous context. According to Ganz and Beckson, it serves as a medium for social commentary (Ganz and Beckson, 1990, p. 251).

Horror fiction, as described by J.A. Cuddon in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, shocks or frightens readers by exploring murder, suicide, torture, madness, and fear. It addresses themes like ghosts, vampires, Doppelgangers, witchcraft, and the macabre, often overlapping with gothic novels. Through such stories, serious and imaginative writers delve into psychological chaos, emotional wastelands, and fears tied to death, punishment, evil, and destruction (Cuddon, 1991, pp. 388–389).

Although lengthy, the quoted definitions above are indispensable for understanding Christopher Priest's novel. Regarding the fear of death, Sigmund Freud offers critical insights. He asserts that "every fear is ultimately the fear of death," a view he elaborates upon in his essay "The Dependent Relationships of the Ego". Freud identifies the fear of death as both an external reaction to danger and an internal process, particularly evident in melancholia. He explains that the ego, under the influence of the super-ego, experiences self-loathing, manifesting as fear of death (Freud, 1989, pp. 657–658).

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

The story of Rupert Angier and Alfred Borden as rivals in the business of stage magic during the late Victorian and early Edwardian Age is told through their diaries, which their great-grandchildren Kate Angier and Nicholas Borden (introduced as Andrew Westly) discover in 1995 or earlier. In the late Victorian Age, Borden develops a show called "The Transported Man", in which he appears to move from one closed cabinet to another, a hundred feet away, in less than a second. It defies logic. Rupert Angier, on the other hand, uses Nikola Tesla's science to perform a similar trick through a cloning device. Angier's trick is called "In a Flash". Every night, Angier must dispose of the remains of his clone by burying them in the family vault. This appalling secret is revealed only towards the end of the book.

In the fictional world of the novel, the clone is called "The Prestige" to conceal the fact that every night Angier dies and rises again like the legendary phoenix. Borden is curious to know how "In a Flash" operates. He sabotages Tesla's cloning machine backstage, eventually causing his own death and Angier's. It is revealed that Alfred Borden was actually two identical twin brothers, Albert and Frederick, using the composite name "Al (+Fred)." Their Transported Man trick was based on concealing the existence of an identical twin that would emerge from an exit door a hundred feet away.

It is revealed finally that Andrew Westly is the clone of Nicholas Borden, whose lifeless body lies in Angier's family vault. Andrew was created by Kate's father, who murdered Nicholas and allowed his clone, Andrew, to live. The destruction of Nicholas and the cloning of his entity to live in a self-alienated existence is the kind of fictional situation where Dorothy Van Ghent describes as follows: "The subject matter of novels is human relationships in which are shown the directions of men's souls." (Van Ghent, 1961, p. 3). The cloning process proves that the author Christopher Priest clearly and unequivocally proves to us that Angier's heart is not heading in the right direction, nor the heart of Kate's Angier's father, a murderous heart. Dorothy Van Ghent observes, in a context applicable to *The Prestige* that "Human experience is organized in patterns that are in movement, patterns that philosophers call events, emphasizing the temporal or moving aspect of them, and some psychologists call fields of perception, or Gestalten" (Van Ghent, 1961, p. 5).

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HIGHLIGHTS OF SIGMUND FREUD'S "BEYOND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE"

This section reviews Sigmund Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) because it sheds light on the underlying themes in *The Prestige*. The novel can be interpreted through Freud's essay, particularly regarding the dualism of self-destruction and the desire for immortality. According to Freud, whenever the "Id" disregards morals and acts in an unacceptable way, the superego punishes it by imposing guilt (Freud, 1920).

Freud's second principle, relevant to the novel, reveals that the life instinct manifests through desires for survival, pleasure, and reproduction. It prioritizes life preservation and prolongation through health and security (Freud, 1920). Freud's metaphor equates the Id to a horse, the Ego to its driver, and the Superego to the father criticizing and directing the Ego (Freud, 1920). Freud refers to the death instinct as "Thanatos" and states that it resides within every individual from birth, counterbalanced by the life instinct. Aggressiveness stems from this death instinct and can range from open violence to subtle hostility. It becomes harmful when the death instinct dominates over the life instinct (Freud, 1920).

The aggressiveness ranges from open violence to more intricate forms of hostility. Aggressiveness is impossible to remove entirely and completely. It can only be rechanneled to flow into the outlets which can help discharge the instinctual negativity. Aggression is harmful when the death instinct has the upper hand over the self-preservation instinct. In this novel, there are utterances and incidents which go in line with Freud's claim that in each person there is the self-preservation instinct, as well as its opposite; meaning the wish for self-destruction.

The career of both Angier and Borden demanded modesty, willingness to serve, and staying away from the futile or useless arguments. Instead, their career turned into a nightmare. This novel is written in the form of diaries. The diaries of Borden and those of Angier read like almost the same, as if written down by one person split into two, or a man and his double. This is because they seem to echo the same fears and apprehensions. This will be shown in the samples below, selected from each of these two magicians' diaries. They reflect the fear of failure, the fear of success, the fear of the unexpected or the unknown, ultimately reflecting the primordial fear of one's own very existence: the fear of death, or the fear of life.

Let us now examine some significant quotes that illustrate how the novel revolves around the concepts of the Double/Doppelgänger and the fear of death. Alfred Borden, the major protagonist, introduces himself as follows:

"I write in the year 1901. My name, my real name, is Alfred Borden. I was born in 1856 on the eighth day of the month of May, in the seaside town of Hastings… I slowly grew up and became the man that I am. That man is Le Professeur de Magie, and I am a master of illusions" (Priest, 1995, p. 31).

In the above, it is noted that Alfred Borden pays more attention to the years (1901, 1856, eighth of May) and the place (Hastings) than to his name itself. This suggests that the identity of the magician in the book seems secondary to the fear of death, madness, or the Doppelgänger.

Borden goes on to say the following about Rupert Angier, his counterpart, his foil, his antithesis, or his double:

"I learned the name and style of the man who was to dog my professional career: Rupert Angier, Clairvoyant, Spirit Medium, Séantist… I set out to hound Mr. Angier, intent on exposing his swindles" (Priest, 1995, p. 59).

Rupert Angier "dogs" Borden, and the latter "hounds" Angier. The terms "dog" and "hound" are synonymous, indicating that both may be one entity split into two. Borden continues: "My life was in two distinct halves, kept emphatically apart, neither side suspecting the other even existed" (Priest, 1995, p. 85).

This further reflects the divided-self and the theme of the Doppelgänger, central to the novel's exploration of identity and fear.

MODELS OF THE ARCHETYPE PERSONALITY IN THE PRESTIGE

To study and analyze the predominant personalities in *The Prestige*, it is important to note that both Borden and Angier represent variations of the same archetype. The difference between them lies in degree rather than essence. Both Borden and Angier exhibit the Eros-Thanatos duality, as described by Sigmund Freud. The differences between the two arise from situational variables, individual traits, and their distinct approaches to performing the same magic trick, "In a

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Flash". This trick suggests omnipresence, giving the magician godlike characteristics by appearing in multiple places simultaneously.

Each magician developed a distinctive method to execute this illusion. Both provide insights into human nature, reflecting broader themes beyond their individual characters. Freud's theory of personality emphasizes that the will to live (Eros) and the will to self- destruction (Thanatos) coexist within the same individual. This dualism is central to understanding the conflict within both characters (Freud, 1920). "The Transported Man" and "In a Flash" are both tricks in which the Double/ the Doppelganger is embodied. This Double is what R. D. Laing (1927_1989) calls the divided self. In his book titled "The Divided Self" (1960), Laing argues that the divided self implies two things in the self-consciousness of the person in question: "an awareness of oneself by oneself, an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observations." (Laing, 1960, p.106)

Both Angier and Borden demonstrate their Double identity/ Divided-self in their Transported Man tricks they perform on stage. Part of each performing magician is visible, another turns invisible, actually becomes dead. R. D. Laing connects the visibility-invisibility duality in the human being to the primordial stage of biological evolution:

"Being visible exposes the animal to the risk of attack from its enemies. Being visible is therefore a basic biological risk: being invisible is a basic biological defense. We all employ some form of camouflage." (Laing, 1960, p.110)

What the quotation above is actually saying is the following:

1. Visible = Alive
2. Invisible = Dead
3. In each human, there is a conflicting desire of being visible against being invisible, likewise in each human there is a conflicting desire of Eros against Thanatos, staying alive against accepting death.

In Chapter 29 of the novel, Borden reflects on the death, life, and work of Rupert Angier, juxtaposing them with his own achievements:

"I write in the year 1903—I had planned to leave my notebook closed forever, but events have conspired against me. Rupert Angier died suddenly. He was forty-six, only a year younger than myself. His death, according to a notice in *The Times*, was caused by complications following injuries incurred while performing a stage illusion at a theatre in Suffolk" (Priest, 1995, p. 89).

It is essential to include this quote as it aligns with the context; "As Freud demonstrated, the unconscious reveals its secret desires and fears in vivid images and surprising narrative sequences unconstrained by the logic of our waking lives." (Lodge, 1992, P. 175)

The quotation from David Lodge above rephrases Freud's Eros and Thanatos as 'secret desires and fears'; suits Priest's novel well. Both Angier and Borden go beyond their logic of rational, reasonable men to make their magic trick work. Their desire to be loved and remembered, as well as their fear of failure and death can only lead to the kind of narrative which this novel follows: memoirs and diaries uncontrolled by common sense. As the book nears the end, Christopher Priest uncovers the dark mysteries of his narrative.

Towards the end of the book, it is revealed that Borden unwittingly and unintentionally sabotaged the duplicating machine backstage. At this point, it is necessary to explain the workings of the machine. Angier was unaware that Borden's stage illusion, The New Transported Man, relied entirely on his identical twin brother. In contrast, Angier enlisted Nikola Tesla to create a cloning machine, which was concealed backstage. The audience was led to believe that Angier was transported over a hundred yards in an instant. Unbeknownst to them, the machine was creating a clone at the opposite end of the stage.

The original Angier, exposed to the cloning rays, would fall to his death beneath the stage, unnoticed by the audience, who remained focused on the newly emerged Angier. Each night, Angier dies and is reborn, much like the mythical phoenix. His cloning machine satisfies his deepest instincts: self-destruction on one hand and a victory over death on the other.

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Following Angier's death, Borden writes in his notebook that Angier was born in Derbyshire in 1857, was married, and had a son and two daughters. Borden adds that the press described "In A Flash" as a significant advancement over earlier transference illusions, including The New Transported Man. Borden reflects: "I tried, I honestly tried, to disregard such aggravation… but unquestionably, Rupert Angier was at the top of our profession" (Priest, 1995, p. 91).

These reflections suggest that Borden (already one half of a twin) also mirrors Angier in their shared identity as magicians. Both perform similar illusions of transference. One of the Borden twins dies eventually, while Angier's clone—a twin in a literal sense—dies every night. Ultimately, it is the undead clone of Angier who confronts Borden, leading to the latter's ultimate death.

Borden's notebook entry number 39 is truly revealing. It embodies R.D. Laing's Divided-Self, which is the Double/Doppelgänger in this novel. Laing writes: "In a world full of dangers, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger. Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others. The obvious defence against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another. (Laing, P. 109)

Thus, Borden's entry 39 reads like this: "It is 1st September 1903, my own career ended with Angier's death." (Priest 1995, p. 114)

Borden reflects further asking himself: "Which of me was it who tried to expose Angier? Which of me first devised The New Transported Man? Which of me was the first to be transported?" (Priest, 1995, p. 115)

In the statement above by Borden, this character "mitigates his state of depersonalization and derealization and inner deadness." (Laing p. 109) Borden's words suggest that his awareness of the double present inside him points to a sense of guilt burdening him, which helps to understand his position when he messes up with Angier's cloning (meaning: duplicating machine) as an attempt at understanding his own duality by viewing/spying on the invisible duality of his rival, or the backstage cloning machine. This intervention kills Angier, or the invisible double of Angier.

In his dressing room at the theatre, Borden encounters the undead Angier, described as follows: "He looked hellish, sounded harsh, smelled foul and reeky like a corpse, the rank smell of the grave and boneyard" (Priest, 1995, p. 117).

During their encounter, Angier (or his clone) appears to take pity on Borden, saying: "Leave me alone! You are dead! You have no business with me!"
Borden responds:

"Nor I with you, Angier. Killing you is no revenge. It should never have happened. Never!" (Priest, 1995, p. 117).

After this confrontation, Angier leaves Borden's dressing room, and shortly afterward, Borden dies. However, much like Angier's case, one part of Borden survives— his twin.

Angier (or his clone, or his ghost, or his undead double) leaves Borden's dressing room. A few days later, Borden dies. However, he lives again—one of the twin brothers dies, but the other survives. Similarly, Angier dies every night, but a part of him lives on. In each individual, there exists a part of the identity that desires to die and be forgotten forever. Conversely, there is another part that strives to survive and live eternally. As Sigmund Freud wrote in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle":

"The aim of all life is death" (Freud, 1920, p. 613).

Freud's hypothesis of self-preservative instincts stands in stark opposition to the idea that intellectual life as a whole serves to facilitate death. He elaborates: "Thus, the guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death" (Freud, 1920, p. 614). Freud further asserts: "The germ-cells that work against the death of the living … may mean no more than the lengthening of the road to death" (Freud, 1920, p. 614). It is implied in Freud's words, merely an implied statement, that the fear of death is also a sort of fascination with death. The individual is afraid of death, but this fear may also be the fascination with death.

To conclude, Borden and Angier represent doubles, the Doppelgänger archetype in this novel. They can both be interpreted as characteristic features of one entity—initially driven by the will to survive but simultaneously haunted by the desire to shut down, to cease existence. The life instinct is reflected in the desire for family, wealth, and health, while the death instinct is expressed through tendencies toward aggression, scheming, spite, hatred, and even murder. The rivalry between the two stage magicians in the Victorian Age provides a suitable framework to explore the internal

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conflict within the Doppelgänger. This conflict revolves around the desire to achieve immortality versus the wish to return to a pre-organic, inanimate state of existence. Toward the end of the novel, one form of the double persists through time. A clone of Angier, as well as another clone of Borden's grandson, survives. The conflict between life and death continues indefinitely, as long as the panorama of existence unfolds. The fear of death is a fact and the human being must come to terms with it.

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