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Dissociation and the Anatomy of the 'Inner Other' in Stephen King's The Dark Half

"الانفصام وتشريح 'الآخر الداخلي': دراسة في بنية 'الذات الأخرى' في رواية (النصف المظلم) لستيفن كينغ"

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Article abstract:
Stephen King's The Dark Half offers a thorough investigation of the authorial shadow self. This article examines how unassimilated trauma displays in the artistic mind by scrutinizing the conflict between the protagonist Thad Beaumont and his alter-ego, George Stark. First using R.D. Laing's "false-self system," and then employing Cathy Caruth's theories on belatedness, the research locates Stark as the bodily reoccurrence of biological trauma. Eventually, the article concludes that conquering the gloomier, instinctual self threatens psychological existence, demonstrating that creative dissociation is both an essential prerequisite for authorship and a site of petrifying, fractured identity.
Key words : *Stephen King; R.D. Laing; Cathy Caruth; trauma; dissociation; the shadow self; The Dark Half.*

ملخص المقال :
تقدم رواية (النصف المظلم) لستيفن كينغ استقصاءً معمقاً للكاتب 'كالذات الظل'. يتفحص هذا المقال كيفية تجلي الصدمات غير المستوعبة في العقل المبدع، وذلك من خلال تمحيص الصراع القائم بين البطل 'ثاد بومونت' وأناه البديلة 'جورج ستارك'. وبالاستناد أولاً إلى مفهوم 'نظام الذات الزائفة' لـ (آر. دي. لينج)، ثم توظيف نظريات (كاثي كاروث) حول 'التأخر' (Belatedness)، يحدد البحث موقع 'ستارك' بوصفه تجسيداً مادياً لعودة الصدمة البيولوجية. وفي الختام، يخلص المقال إلى أن قمع الذات الغريزية الأكثر قتامة — أو ما يُعرف بـــ 'الملهمة الوحشية' — يهدد البقاء النفسي؛ مما يثبت أن الانفصام الإبداعي هو محرك ضروري للتأليف، وفي الوقت ذاته، هو حيز لتشظي الهوية بشكل مرعب.
كلمات مفتاحية: ستيفن كينغ، آر. دي. لينغ، كاثي كاروث، الصدمة، الانفصام، الذات الظل.

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Introduction

The investigation of human dual nature is a basis of Gothic and horror literature, tracing its origins from Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Nevertheless, Stephen King in his novel *The Dark Half* invigorates this theme by anchoring it in the very act of creativity. The novel is a frightening and in-depth examination of the "other self"; the shadow side of the psyche which comprises our gloomiest, most unfiltered impulses, but at the same time serves as the drive for our greatest creative product. In *The Dark Half*, the other self transcends metaphor to become a rotting character named George Stark. The subsequent conflict between the author Thad Beaumont who is portrayed as a good-natured, constrained intellectual and his vicious alter-ego, Stark, offers a deep look at the troubled, dependent bond between an artist and their internal demons.

The novel's foundation revolves around Thad Beaumont who is depicted as a thoughtful writer and an academic whose intricate books sell modestly and gather critical applause. In order for him to provide for his family and secure a stable life, Thad writes vicious, ruthless, and extremely crime thrillers using the pen name George Stark. After receiving threats to expose his secret, Thad decided that it is time he "kills" Stark himself by performing a mock funeral for his penname in a national magazine. Yet, this psychological closure prompted a supernatural separation. Stark found his way out of the fake grave, human like, bloodthirsty, and desperate to survive.

To fully scrutinize the consequences of this resurrection, it is essential to dig deeper and move beyond surface-level analysis. By employing R.D. Laing's existential psychiatry and in particular his ideas of the false-self system and ontological insecurity along with Cathy Caruth's ideas of unassimilated trauma and narrative belatedness, a more complex understanding of the text appears. Crucially, this paper does not simply compare these theories; rather, it synthesizes them to prove that Caruth's historical belatedness structurally produces Laing's false-self system as an emergency survival mechanism**.** George Stark is not an external intruder; in fact, he is the hidden trauma and the repressed self-entreating incarnation. This article will investigate how Stephen King employs the mechanism of horror to literalize the dissociative tendency of creation, the traumatic belatedness of the body, and the recognition that the shadow for the artist is not an irregularity but an essential necessity.

1. Laing, Caruth, and the Fragmented Subject

1.1 George Stark as the 'Belated' Manifestation of Biological Memory:

R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) offers a fundamental background to understand the identity fractures individuals go through when confronted with profound insecurity and the ways to survive in a world which is innately threatening. Laing's book will help us navigate the psychological landscape of Thad Beaumont and establish the theoretical boundaries of dissociation and trauma. According to Laing, a person missing a solid sense of their reality and self-sufficiency might develop a "false-self system." Laing (1960) states that "The outsider, estranged from himself and society, cannot experience either himself or others as 'real.' He invents a false self and with it he confronts both the outside world and his own despair" (p. 17). The subsequent detachment leads to a mind/body fragmentation, in which the person withdraws into an unembodied, simply a mental state, letting the false self interact with the physical world.

Whereas Laing dealt with the existential configuration of the split self, Cathy Caruth's work on trauma covered the chronological and historical mechanism of psychological fragmentation. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth claims that trauma is defined by its belatedness; which is a catastrophic event not fully processed as it happens. Caruth (1996) claims that "The pathology consists, then, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (p. 4). Hence,

trauma is an "enigma of survival" (p. 58) which haunts the individual, recurring in repetitive behaviors, obtrusive images, or a literalized physical manifestation as in the case of Thad Beaumont.

In the context of *The Dark Half*, these theories depict a protagonist who is suffering from a heightened inner predicament. By creating George Stark, Thad is trying to cope with an unassimilated trauma following a Laing's false-self system which is a system that eventually gains independence then turns against its designer. Accordingly, we need a connecting apparatus linking these two theories within Thad's psyche. Caruth's belatedness structurally produces Laing's false-self system as an emergency survival mechanism. As a result of the biological trauma of absorbing his twin in the womb which eludes conscious experience during his infancy, this event remains an unassimilated, haunting void. To protect his susceptible core from the existential fear of this un-integrated past, Thad constructs a socially submissive, firm façade, specifically that of an academic, "nice guy" persona. This false self is therefore created as a psychological defensive fortification designed to keep the unprocessed trauma under control. Nevertheless, because trauma is fundamentally characterized by its belated, repetitive interference, this defensive architecture is doomed to fail. The delayed trauma ultimately breaches the false-self system, obliging the repressed biological memory to manifest in a physical form as George Stark.

1.2 Authorship as Schizoid Dissociation:

Writing, as represented by King, is integrally dissociative; it is an intentional submission of the ego to an *other* existing within the subconscious. The coercion to write for Thad Beaumont is in fact a defense mechanism which is his way to structure the void. In his 1989 novel *The Dark Half*, King states, "He sometimes believed that the compulsion to make fiction was no more than a bulwark against confusion, maybe even insanity." (p. 129) This description aligns closely with Laing's (1960) portrayal of the schizoid individual using the false-self system to avoid the full fragmentation of reality; therefore, writing turns out to be "a desperate imposition of order by people able to find that precious stuff only in their minds." (p. 129)

Nevertheless, this obligation of order entails a withdrawal from the physical body. When writing as Stark, Thad goes into a deep state of unembodiment. Throughout the novel, King plainly details this bodily change: "Something began to happen in his brain; he could almost feel the shape of the electrical waves there changing, losing their prissy goose-step discipline, turning into the soft, sloppy delta waves of dreaming sleep." (p. 337) In this state, "The words as individual units began to disappear." (p. 243) In this case, Thad goes through what Laing (1960) identifies as the severance of self from the body: "Such a divorce of self from body deprives the unembodied self from direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world...The unembodied self, as onlooker at all the body does, engages in nothing directly" (p. 69).

Although Thad believes he is simply adopting a personality, he in fact is involved in an essential splitting of his identity. "He is two men - he has ALWAYS been two men. That's what any man or woman who makes believe for a living must be," (King, 1989, p. 381) King notes. The boundary between creator and creation dissolves as Thad becomes George Stark, or George Stark becomes him – effectively separating the boundary between them; therefore, this absence of a clear-cut separation is the horror of the schizoid state. Stark comments that "I can get inside your man and look out, you know. I can feel him thinking" (p. 220) which highlights the onlooker perspective that Stark exhibits throughout the novel. This persistent inner onlooker is the hallmark of Laing's detached self, stuck in an inner void where words have represented his entry into the physical world.

Eventually, King suggests that society actively accepts this schizoid detachment in artists and even consumes it: "Writers INVITE ghosts, maybe; along with actors and artists, they are the only totally accepted mediums of our society…They make worlds that never were, populate them with people who never existed, and then invite us to join them in their fantasies." (King, 1989, p. 381).

2. The Corporeal Return: Cathy Caruth and the Bio-Trauma of the 'Other'

2.1 Biological Belatedness and Traumatic Return:

In order to realize the reason George Stark owns such pitiless independence, we must trace back his roots to an essential, implicit biological trauma in Thad's childhood. The novel discloses that as a baby in the womb; Thad absorbed his twin. During a childhood brain surgery to remove what was thought to be a tumor, surgeons revealed parts of this twin; an eye, teeth, fingernails that are persistently growing within Thad's brain. This biological residue serves as the gruesome substance for Stark.

King's backstory captures Caruth's (1996) description of trauma as the "missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known" (p. 62). Thad was not deliberately involved in the absorption of his twin in the womb; he was not awake during the surgery that removed the physical remnants either. This trauma circumvented his consciousness, which can be interpreted as an awful and unassimilated event. As Caruth (1996) states, "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (p. 8).

In this sense, George Stark is the deferred, traumatic coming back of the absorbed twin. He is the eventual delayed experience. In the novel, King describes this latency of trauma in chapter eighteen of the novel in which Stark highlights the fact that Thad and himself are "we are twins". This twin shares the same fingerprints, the same taste in cigarettes, and exactly the same vocal characteristics (p. 183). Stark's corporeal incarnation is the trauma asking for recognition, which is what Cathy Caruth observes in her 1995 book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory:* "Trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge." (Caruth, 1995, p. 153).

This horrific reappearance is signaled by the frequent idea of the sparrows. The phrase "The sparrows are flying again" acts as a warning of Stark's presence and the thinning borderline between the living and the dead. The sparrows are in fact the audio-visual resonances of the trauma. Stephen King's statement in his short story *N* in which he claims that "The birds are invisible - at least until a psychiatrist who is good, or lucky, or both, sprays them with his version of Luminol and shines the right light on them - but they are nevertheless very real." (King, 2008, p. 135) lines up with Caruth's (1995) declaration in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (pp. 4-5). The sparrows, therefore, are the language of Thad's trauma which Caruth explained as "the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand a new mode of reading and of listening" (Caruth, 1995, p. 9).

By forging a theoretical synthesis between these two frameworks, we can decode the precise architecture of Thad Beaumont's psyche. The biological trauma of Thad absorbing his twin in the womb evades conscious experience during his infancy, remaining an unassimilated, haunting void. To protect his vulnerable core from the fear of this un-integrated past, Thad displayed a socially subservient, stable academic façade being the "nice guy". This Laingian false self is created as a psychological self-protective mechanism designed to keep the unexperienced, Caruthian trauma under control. Nevertheless, because trauma is essentially characterized by its belated, repetitive interference, this defensive architecture is doomed to fail. The delayed trauma eventually finds its way into the false-self system, pushing the suppressed biological memory to exhibit in physical form as George Stark.

2.2 Thad Beaumont and the Mask of Sanity:

A critical misunderstanding in reading the psychological structure of the novel is classifying Thad Beaumont as the "true" self and George Stark as a superficial "false" façade. Applying Laing's theory upside down reveals a more upsetting reality: Thad Beaumont, the well-mannered academic and loving family man, operates as the submissive false-self system, built entirely upon compliance with social, familial, and academic expectations. This compliance, however, comes at the cost of his vital artistic strength, leaving him paralyzed

by writer's block when attempting to write his "serious" literary fiction. Conversely, George Stark embodies the repressed, unsettling, yet vital core such as the uninhibited creative drive.

To sharpen this theoretical distinction and avoid conceptual confusion, we must clearly delineate Laing's existential framework from classical psychoanalysis and Jungian archetypes. While a superficial reading might conflate Thad with the Superego and Stark with the primitive Id or Jungian Shadow, Laing's framework operates on an entirely different plane. A psychoanalytic model views the Id and Superego as universal, inherent psychic structures. In contrast, a Laingian framework views the split self as an artificial, defensive maneuver constructed explicitly to ward off ontological insecurity. Thad's academic persona is not simply a balanced Superego; it is a hollow, defensive fortification built to contain the volatile energy of his past. Stark emerges as a monstrous fusion: he is the primal, instinctual shadow given autonomous physical life precisely because Thad's existential fragmentation left an unembodied void for that shadow to inhabit. Without Stark, Thad is sterile and powerless; yet with him, he is whole but inherently destructive.

Laing (1960) describes this as the "false-self rises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of the other, or with what are imagined to be the other's intentions or expectations" (p. 98). Thad Beaumont has created his identity based on the expectations of the academic world, his publisher, and suburban social standards. Therefore, he is the Superego balanced, civilized, and controlled. Yet, this submission comes at the cost of his artistic strength. Thad suffers from an incapacitating writer's block when trying to write his "serious" literary fiction. His academic façade is sterile.

On the other hand, George Stark is the Id; unfiltered, hostile, and extremely creative "did Thad Beaumont have to live in the light and be happy while his darker brother; who had made him rich and famous…died in darkness like a diseased mongrel in an alley" (King, 1989, p.294). King depicted the sharp contrast between Stark who writes as a raw force of nature with an instinctual, terrifying ease, while Thad's good-mannered writing style fades away, making him a being of pure, uninhibited reasoning and action. Laing (1960) suggests that in case an individual substituted their vital communications with a system which is not their true self, "the world is experienced as unreal, and all that belongs to this system is felt to be false, futile and meaningless" (p. 80). Thad's gracious life appears to be hollow because it is detached from the hostile life of his internal shadow; the paradox is therefore, that the "nice man" is the façade of a darker ruthless other.

In this context, Stark represents the Jungian Shadow, described in the novel as "these days there is a killer out there who is partly me, a fellow who can apparently take over my body and make me do fun things." (p. 200) Stark is described as imprisoned in the womblike dungeon of Beaumont's imagination. However, it is vital to differentiate Laing's existential framework from Jung's archetypal lens. Whereas Laing's "divided self" is an artificial, defensive split built to shield the ego against ontological insecurity, Jung's "shadow" on the other hand, embodies the primal, instinctual, and nonintegrated mechanisms of the personal and collective unconscious. Viewed in this light, these two concepts complement one another. Thad's Laingian false-self system was built to contain and even withhold the unstable, dark energy of his Jungian shadow (Jung, 1968).

Stark appears as the frightening combination of both mechanisms; he is the primal archetypal shadow who was provided with an autonomous, monstrous life because the existential Psychic fragmentation left an unembodied void for that shadow to take possession of. This externalized double is in fact what psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1914/1971) describes as the "double" acting as an independent, threatening entity that mirrors the subject's internal guilt and fear of destruction. (p. 86) Thad faces the reality that this *shadow* is in fact the part of himself he never wanted; yet, it is precisely what makes him whole. Therefore, without Stark, Thad is powerless – but with him, he is whole, yet evil.

3. Creative Dissociation and the Survival of the Split Self

3.1 Ontological Insecurity and the Violence of the Inner Double:

The chief conflict of *The Dark Half* is a literalized one over ontological security. As Stark transmutes into the physical form, Thad's sense of reality destabilizes. For Laing (1960) ontological insecurity is a condition in which the person "cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and

others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, of preserving his identity" (p. 42). Both Thad and Stark are locked in an antagonistic dualism kind of existence. Since they share a sole psychic and biological origin, just one of them can inhabit the prime space of reality. Thad tells Stark over the phone, "You're dead, George. You just don't have the sense to lie down." (p. 392) However, Stark is violently alive, announcing, "I am the bringer," and violently terminating anybody who stands in his way. Stark declared, "When you f*** with me you are f***ing with the best," making sure Thad witnesses his ruthlessness: "Cut him. Cut him while I stand here and watch. I want to see the blood flow. Don't make me tell you twice." (p. 355)

Stark's ferocity actually aligns precisely with what Laing (1960) defines as the defense mechanisms of the ontologically insecure. "To forgo one's autonomy becomes the means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death, becomes a means of preserving one's aliveness" (p. 51). Thad attempted to "feign death" by performing Stark's mock burial, wishing to disunite the connection. However, Stark refuses to remain dead and fights with all his might against going back to the void of non-existence. As his shape begins, he drops into the hole of his own non-existence.

As the plot thickens, a frightening corporal conversion happens. Stark enters a state of physical deterioration in which his flesh is decaying, his body falling apart, and he is no longer separated from Thad and the act of writing. At the same time, Thad starts to show Stark's bodily qualities which strongly reflects Laing's (1960) statement that a person "may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable" (p. 42). Stark is literally losing his physical elements because he is a disengaged false-self suffering from what Laing named "existential gangrene" (Laing, 1960, p. 74). In order for Stark to survive, he must force Thad to cooperate on a new novel, demonstrating that they are symbiotically bound. As King writes, "Thad and I are collaborating on a new Stark novel" (p. 244) the story unfolds, highlighting the fatal risk of an unresolved inner psychological fissure.

3.2 Excavating the Authorial Subconscious:

In order to completely contextualize *The Dark Half*, we must acknowledge its profoundly autobiographical roots. The novel was written shortly after Stephen King's pen name was revealed. Under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, he published gloomier, more sarcastic, and deeply pessimistic novels such as *The Long Walk* and *Thinner*. Just like Thad Beaumont, King sensed a profound discrepancy between his two authorial personalities. Bachman was not simply a name; instead, he was a voice, a mode to unveil a crueler streak that did not fit the conventional, "friendly" writing style of Stephen King.

By turning his novels into paranormal horror stories, King was beginning a profound act of self-analysis. The novel itself is a confession that the "dark half" is not an anomaly to be erased, but the vibrant trigger of creativity and inspiration. It is the source of perilous thoughts. As King states, "Only the ones just starting out—the kids—aren't scared. The years go by and the words on the page don't get any darker . . . but the white space sure does get whiter." (p. 242) therefore, darkness must be accessed in order for the author to fill that petrifying white space.

Moreover, *The Dark Half* serves as a powerful metaphor for addiction. Written shortly after King achieved sobriety from alcohol and cocaine, the dynamic between Thad and Stark perfectly reflects the relationship between an addict and their substance. Stark is the embodiment of the addictive persona, he is madly destructive, and thoroughly upending Thad's private and professional stability. Yet, he remains undeniably seductive; Thad secretly misses the effortless, god-like high of writing as Stark.

Stark's physical decomposition - his sloughing flesh and foul odor - mirrors the physical degradation of long-term substance abuse and the agonizing process of detoxifying the psyche. The addict's shadow-self demands to be fed, warning that if deprived of the "substance" (which is the act of writing as Stark), both host and parasite face annihilation. This state of defensive textuality lines up with what Judith Lewis Herman describes as the trauma survivor's struggle to find words for an overwhelming internal experience, balancing the horror of disclosure against the vacuum of silence. (Herman, 2015, p. 175) Thad's final confrontation with Stark is parallel to the addict's battle with their own self-destructive urges. In this sense King states, "He didn't know if that was really true or not, but he discovered something which was tremendously liberating: he didn't

care. He was very tired of thinking and thinking and still not knowing." (p. 197) This submission to the tiredness of the divided-self characterizes the decisive moment to either incorporation or reciprocated extermination.

Conclusion

In *The Dark Half*, Stephen King goes past the traditional margins of the horror genre in order to structure a rigorous, traumatic framework of the creative mind. The clash between Thad Beaumont and George Stark is not purely a paranormal thriller; it is an intimate struggle for psychological incorporation and survival.

Using Cathy Caruth's influential theory, we realize that Stark is the disastrous reoccurrence of unassimilated biological trauma; the absorbed twin that was never lamented, the history that can "be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth, 1996, p. 18). As Anne Whitehead argues, trauma fiction frequently relies on formal experimentation and stylistic hauntings to recreate the fragmented, repetitive nature of unassimilated historical memories. Therefore, "trauma fiction" requires formal investigations, including stylistic hauntings, fragmented narratives, and repetitive historical circles; to mirror the unassimilated nature of historical memory. (Whitehead, 2004, p. 11) In his book *The Uncanny,* Nicolas Royle (2003) correspondingly links this literary fragmentation to the concept of the uncanny, where the abrupt externalization of an intimate, hidden reality destabilizes the subject's ontological borders. R.D. Laing's framework, on the other hand, recognized Thad and Stark as the tragic extremes of the divided self. Thad is the intellect who is obedient to social rules, but is an unembodied self, suffocating under the heavy weight of his own 'nice guy' false-self system, whereas Stark is the furious, ontologically insecure shadow, struggling to evade the void of non-existence.

Stephen King eventually suggests an alarming truth concerning the nature of creativity. The "brutal muse" cannot be safely repressed. Creativity, therefore, entails that authors should fracture themselves, to enter a trance where "the words as individual units begin to disappear," and to meet the monsters existing in their own psychological attic. While promoted summaries of the novel advocate for a generic clash between light and dark, King's actual edifice of the double is far more intimate and disturbing. He theorizes that the rival is not an outside shadow, but a biological and psychological inevitability. To be a writer is to split the psyche and George Stark is the frightening proof that the stories we suppress are always the ones that strive to be told.

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