

The Werewolf (2016)

By Alissa Burger

The figure of the vampire [...] is largely one of externally defined monstrosity, including fangs and the potential for violently penetrating the boundary between Self and Other. But what happens when the boundary being crossed is internalized, between the Self and the Other that resides within? This is the psychological duality¹ engaged by werewolves, people who hide a monster within themselves. That intimate relationship with the Self, the inescapable familiarity, is what makes the werewolf particularly terrifying. As King argues of the werewolf in *Danse Macabre*, “Here is the beast caught in the act of pulling down its weak and unsuspecting prey, acting not with cunning and intelligence but only with stupid, nihilistic² violence. Can anything be worse? Yes, apparently one thing: his face is not so terribly different from the face you and I see in the bathroom mirror each morning” (75). Therein lies the particular fascination of the werewolf figure: the vampire, the “Thing Without a Name,” and even the ghost are clearly Other, not us; while they may have once been human, they are no longer. We are alive, while they are dead; we are human, while they are monsters. But the werewolf is the darker part of the human psyche,³ the part kept hidden from the world but which, in the form of the werewolf, breaks out to run amok, leaving violence and destruction in its wake. The werewolf is human, but one with a monster inside: often undetectable, uncontrollable, and for its host, inescapable, except through death.

At the base of this discussion of duality and the werewolf are Sigmund Freud⁴ and his structural theory of personality. Freud argued that the personality is made up of three distinct, though interacting parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. According to Freud, “The ego represents that which may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which controls the passions”

(19). As Kendra Cherry explains, the id is the primitive nature of the individual, unconscious and instinctive, with its foundation in the pleasure principle, “which strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs. If these needs are not satisfied immediately, the result is a state [of] anxiety or tension.” This makes sense for infants, who have no other way of interacting with or understanding the world, but as individuals grow and mature, their personalities develop further, as does the complexity of their interactions with the rest of the world, which leads to the development of the ego and superego. Cherry goes on to explain, “The ego is the

component of personality that is responsible for dealing with reality.” In contrast with the pleasure principle that drives the id, the reality principle “strives to satisfy the id’s desires in realistic and socially

Id, Ego, & Superego	
Id	The instinctual part of the mind that responds immediately to wants and desires. The id is chaotic and animal-like, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.
Ego	The ego is the decision-making part of the mind. It also seeks pleasure, but uses reason and logic to do so. It tries to get the unrealistic id to cooperate in a society bound by laws and social norms.
Superego	The voice that incorporates the values and morals which are learned from one's parents and society. It tries to persuade the id and ego to turn to moral goals rather than seeking pleasure.

¹ an instance of opposition or contrast between two concepts or two aspects of something

² the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated

³ The human mind or spirit

⁴ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): Austrian neurologist, founder of psychoanalysis and modern psychology

appropriate ways. The reality principle weighs the costs and benefits of an action before deciding to act upon or abandon impulses.” Finally, the superego can be seen as a process of socialization, through which individuals learn what is acceptable and morally right within the parameters of their surrounding society, then govern their behaviors accordingly. As Cherry explains, “The superego is the aspect of personality that holds all of our internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire from both parents and society-- our sense of right and wrong.” Freud’s structural theory of personality is one of moderation, negotiation, and repression of antisocial, pleasure-hungry impulses.

With [...] the figure of the werewolf, we find individuals for whom this development has been derailed. Rather than proceeding in the usual fashion from the pleasure-craving id to its more moderated and socially aware balance with ego and superego, the werewolf lives in the id, maintaining it as a fundamental cornerstone of identity, through one which is subsumed and kept largely separate from the day-to-day life of the other, public Self. [...]

Despite their monstrosity, many werewolves are often depicted as potentially sympathetic. As Benjamin Radford explains, “Because lycanthropy was seen as a curse, werewolves were often thought of as victims as much as villains. The transformation from man to wolf was said to be tortuous (recall such scenes in the film *An American Werewolf in London*), and many sought cures for real and imagined symptoms” (Radford). Michael Collings argues in *The Many Facets of Stephen King* that “Unlike other creatures of horror, the werewolf is more sinned against than sinning... The curse works in two ways. On the level of plot, it transforms an otherwise sane, rational individual into a ravaging monster. More disconcertingly, however, on the level of theme and symbol, it divorces that individual from reality, often arbitrarily isolating the afflicted person from society at large and from personal standards of morality and behavior” (78). Most werewolves are unable to control their transformations, whether those changes are triggered by a full moon (as is traditionally the case [...]) or otherwise, which raises the question of that character’s agency, their degree of free will, power, and control over themselves.

