

# Psychoanalytic Examination of Stranger Things' Eleven: Trials and Tribulations of Childhood Trauma on the "Child-Hero"

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## Abstract

This essay seeks to add to the psychoanalytic literature of film and TV series by analyzing a character of an extremely popular online series, *Stranger Things*. Eleven, a main character who possesses impressive psychic and telekinetic abilities, is the main subject of analysis. Eleven is examined as a child hero of the series who has a potential diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), has significant psychosocial developmental delays that she continues to overcome as the series develops, and is an emblem for the cultural mythology of the 1980s.

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An explosively popular Netflix series since its initial release in 2016, "*Stranger Things*" has taken the world by storm through a nostalgia-evoking story revolving around the *strange* disappearance of Will Byers, a child in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana (*Stranger Things*, 2016). A homage to the 1980s horror genre, the story tackles themes of government conspiracies, the supernatural evils that lurk just outside our own realities, as well as the amazing powers lurking in our subconscious minds. Despite its immense popularity and subtly nuanced story, little has been done to examine the series beyond the scope of being an engrossing narrative. With the expansive universe created by the Duffer brothers, it seems intimidating at first to pinpoint topics in *Stranger Things* to look at under the psychoanalytic microscope. However, substantial psychoanalysis can occur simply through the inspection of some of the characters in this universe. One character in particular, "Eleven," is especially interesting in regards to looking at *Stranger Things* beyond the realm of fandom.

*Stranger Things'* narrative begins with the disappearance of Will Byers, a 12-year-old boy who goes missing after a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* with his fellow friends, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. The group teams up to search for Will, and with the help of Will's mother, Joyce, and the chief of the police department, Hopper, they uncover the secret operations of a government laboratory that lead to the eventual recovery of Will. The laboratory reveals that they have opened a gate to another dimension, which looks almost identical to reality but has evil lurking within it. The children describe this evil in terms of monsters from their

game: The Demogorgon, a violent creature that feasts on other animals that it had lured into its reality, and the Mind Flayer, a larger demonic entity that acts as a virus to infect Will in season two. The children work together to close this gate and battle these supernatural evils, but only truly succeed through the help of one specific character: a young girl named Eleven.

Eleven, taking her namesake from the tattoo on her left forearm, was the subject of intense psychological experiments throughout her lifetime, beginning from birth. She was a product of a classified, conspiratorial US government project in which children were used to test their psychic abilities in hopes to create supernatural weaponry for future use. In defiance of her heinous past, Eleven persevered and developed into a child that became the hero of the series - but not without her psychological trauma following close behind. This paper seeks to examine Eleven's place within the hero's cycle of the narrative, her behaviors in regard to her past trauma, how her development was affected by this history of complex trauma, as well as her essential role to understand the "*Stranger Things*" cultural mythology of the time period that it is set to - the 1980s.

To fully understand Eleven's place as the hero, one must be able to imagine her simultaneously as the child and hero archetypes. Jung describes this first idea of the child archetype as "...The child motif represents the preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche," (Jung, 1969, p. 161). Eleven is indeed a felicitous representation of this universal archetype, as she is perhaps the most innocent child of the party of four children in search of Will Byers during the first season, where she was introduced. While the other party members, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, have developed relatively normally, Eleven has retained much of the naivety that stems from earlier stages in childhood. She has not been exposed to much of the outside world like her friends, who have lived in the suburbs of Hawkins and lived in nuclear familial situations. Yet in defiance to this naivety, Eleven has also within herself unique powers contrary to her inexperienced persona; she has telekinetic and heightened psychic abilities developed through extensive experimentation in the Hawkins Laboratory over her lifetime. Jung described this dialectical opposition as

"... a striking paradox in all child myths that the "child" is on the one hand delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction, while on the other he possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity...the "child" is endowed with superior powers and, despite all dangers, will unexpectedly pull through," (Jung, 1969, p. 289).

With that being said, Eleven's place within the "*Stranger Things*" universe is that of the child hero and follows the hero's journey, a pattern of narratives that the American Scholar, Joseph Campbell, outlines in his book, "*THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES*," (1949). Heavily

influenced by Jung, Campbell details the journey as a myth that stories from the dawn of time follow: a hero that goes through the stages/acts of departing from the ordinary world (known just as Departure), initiation into the special world in which the hero goes through their trials and tribulations of the quest (known just as Initiation), and finally the return back to the ordinary world, with the task at hand finished (known just as Return) (Campbell, 1949). Christopher Vogler, in writing a guide to Campbell's idea, further illustrated this idea as “..the theme of the hero myth is universal, occurring in every culture, in every time; it is as infinitely varied as the human race itself; and yet its basic form remains the same, an incredibly tenacious set of elements that spring in endless repetition from the deepest reaches of the mind of man,” (2007, p. 04).

“Stranger Things” has been loosely structured into the timeless motif of the hero's journey, with Eleven going through these three acts alongside her friends in her quest to save Will Byers from the special world, known as the Upside Down. Initially, Eleven does not want to go through with the quest to find Will Byers but is called to this adventure in hopes that she might redeem herself from the guilt of opening the gate to the Upside Down itself. Her call comes from the alliance she has made with her party members, who have become her friends and helped her come to the realization that she is the common denominator in the interaction between the real world and the Upside Down. Through trials of failed attempts to contact Will, near-death experiences of being taken to the Upside Down, and disturbing discoveries of people brutally murdered by the monstrous Demogorgon, Eleven manages to enter the Upside Down and complete her quest of defeating the evil that had stolen Will away from their reality. However, in an unexpected plot twist, Eleven does not return to complete the hero's journey alongside her other friends at the end of season one. The season ends with her entrapped in the Upside Down, and she is not revealed to have come back to the real world until further information is released with the new season. She is returned refreshed and ready to tackle the hero's cycle once more, with newfound strength and knowledge to begin to move on from her troubled past in Hawkins lab.

Unfortunately, her past has influenced and continues to influence her behaviors throughout the series, since she sustained complex childhood trauma from the moment she was born. From erratic responses of screaming, crying, and rocking herself, to constant hypervigilance and disturbing flashbacks of being dragged through hospital corridors only to be thrown in a small closet, Eleven's past continues to haunt her mind despite her physical escape from the laboratory at the beginning of the series. It can be argued that Eleven meets the majority of criteria for a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis and utilizes many defense

mechanisms in order to cope with her trauma and potential disorder.

While the series does not allow for one to truly apply a proper diagnosis considering the viewer does not necessarily hear much of Eleven's inner dialogue or thought processes, it does allow for viewers to see some of the more obvious symptoms. Following the specifications of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, there are approximately 8 sections of criteria, labeled criterions A-H, respectively, to which a client must endorse a certain amount of symptoms in order to be considered for the diagnosis of PTSD (APA, 2013). In the case of Eleven, it is possible to endorse her to symptoms in almost all sections in the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-V, with some of them being:

- She has experienced direct exposure to physical and psychological abuse (Criterion A);
- She experiences persistent flashbacks of her abuse, which cause her significant distress (Criterion B);
- She attempts to avoid trauma-related thoughts when brought up (Criterion C);
- She thinks of herself extremely negatively, that she is the true monster (Criterion D);
- She is often portrayed as feeling isolated from the rest of her group (Criterion D);
- She is hypervigilant to her surroundings and is easily startled (Criterion E);
- Her symptoms have caused significant social impairment at the beginning of the series, as well as consistent distress throughout the series, which continue on into her behaviors in season two. Symptoms (as far as the viewer can tell) are not caused by any other means, such as physical illness or substance abuse (Criterion F, G, H) (APA, 2013).

Alongside this potential diagnosis, it seems that Eleven's psychological development has been heavily influenced by her traumatic past. At the start of the series, she seems to be mute, and struggles with language, learning basic words such as “friend” and “promise” from her friends, building upon them to eventually learn to communicate in simple sentences. She also has a hard time trusting others, especially adult figures. In the first episode, she starves herself for days while on the run before eventually sneaking into a diner, due to the fear of encountering any adults. The minute the diner's owner tries to help her, she goes silent and runs out the door as soon as he looks away to call a social worker. This could be because throughout her life she was not been given the appropriate nurturing environment to deal with the psychosocial crises at each stage of development - starting with the initial crisis of Trust versus Mistrust, all the way to her current crisis of Identity versus Role Confusion (Staff, 2011). According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, children must overcome each psychosocial crisis in

order to be able to utilize the subsequent skills and qualities learned for the future stages (Staff, 2011). Eleven has been at a disadvantage from the start since she was taken at birth and immediately placed in the hands of her abusers - affecting her ability to trust others and build positive relationships. However, in a more positive light, she seems to eventually work towards successfully overcoming this crisis by trusting her new friends, as well as the main adult figures in the show, such as Joyce Byers, Will's mother, and Jim Hopper, chief of Hawkins Police Department. In season two, she begins to experiment with handling the current crisis of Identity versus Role Confusion, as she spends much of the season seeking her own true identity, starting with the basics. She eventually discovers her true name, Jane, and begins the path towards building an identity for herself that was taken from her by the Hawkins Laboratory.

On a last note, it seems that Eleven's unique character design is a brilliant ode to the cultural mythology of the 1980's. Psychoanalyst Glen Gabbard discusses multiple ways in which viewers can look at films under the psychoanalytic lens, one of which being "as an explication of underlying cultural mythology..." (Gabbard, 1997). Going deeper than the various references to 1980s pop culture throughout the series, "Stranger Things" utilized Eleven by placing her in a position to reenact several elements of conspiracy theories centered on the belief that the US government had conducted secretive, strange experiments during the 1980s. Some of these projects include Project Montauk, Project MK-ULTRA, and the Stargate Project - all of which dealt with experimentation in psychic abilities and telekinesis, mind control, and telepathy, respectively (White, 2017). In the series, Eleven was the subject of various psychological experiments very similar to the ones that many accuse the United States' government of conducting, which supposedly utilized similar experimental constructs, such as sensory deprivation tanks, dark rooms, and personal items/pictures to conduct remote viewing. In addition, it was revealed that Eleven was the daughter of a female who was apart of experiments extremely similar to MK-ULTRA, another project run by the United States government that included the use of various hallucinogenic drugs being administered in hopes to unleash some kind of psychic powers from the subconscious (White, 2017). Eleven, therefore, carries the anxieties of these conspiracies wrapped up in an amazing character, who also happens to really adore Eggs. Furthermore, she also begins to overcome her tragic past and increase her own inner strength through her successes of defeating both the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer at the end of both seasons one and two, respectively. These displays of victory offer viewers the unconscious release to pent-up anxieties that are a result of various plot points in the series and ultimately send viewers the message that good came from the horrible things done to this child. This release extends outward to assist the viewer in coping

with the unconscious anxieties of the past cultural mythology discussed previously; by providing a positive outcome to the conspiracies that left many of those who lived in the 1980s quite concerned, the viewer can subconsciously sooth the anxiety revolving around these events with this newfound idea that the evils of these past events can be dealt with, even conquered.

"Stranger Things" encompasses the potential for countless layers of analysis with a complex plot line and even more complex messages being portrayed beyond its initial narrative. By focusing on the psychoanalysis of the character Eleven, we can begin to see the underlying themes of "Stranger Things", implicating the need to look deeper into the series from other angles. Eleven is a strong female character that endured a lifetime of abuse, yet possesses abilities to destroy things far beyond the scope of human imagination. She may display characteristics of PTSD and be set back in her psychosocial development, but she is still the true hero of the town of Hawkins, that has won the hearts of millions of viewers. The nostalgia she brings to the table from the 1980s is just syrup on our eggos, and it will be exciting to watch her development in the future of the "Stranger Things" series.

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