

The Psychology of Fear and Control in The Maze Runner

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ABSTRACT

Dystopian literature frequently explores the relationship between fear, authority, and psychological manipulation, revealing how systems of power maintain control through emotional and mental oppression. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* presents a compelling representation of these themes through the experiences of adolescents trapped within a mysterious and dangerous environment known as the Glade. This research examines the psychological dimensions of fear and control in the novel, focusing on the ways institutional authority manipulates memory, identity, isolation, surveillance, and violence in order to regulate human behaviour. The study analyses how the organization WICKED uses fear as a strategic tool to shape obedience and conduct social experimentation. At the same time, the research explores how the characters resist psychological domination through courage, friendship, hope, and the recovery of memory.

The paper investigates the symbolic significance of the Maze, the Grievers, and the process known as the Changing as representations of psychological trauma and institutional oppression. It further examines the effects of memory loss on identity formation and emotional stability, demonstrating how uncertainty and confusion increase vulnerability to manipulation. Drawing upon psychological theories of fear, trauma, learned helplessness, and surveillance, the study interprets the Glade as a controlled experimental space designed to observe human reactions under extreme stress. The research also considers the ethical implications of WICKED's utilitarian ideology, questioning whether the suffering of individuals can ever be justified in the name of collective survival.

Through literary analysis, this study argues that fear in *The Maze Runner* functions not only as an emotional response but also as a mechanism of social and psychological control. However, the novel simultaneously presents fear as a catalyst for resistance, transformation, and the recovery of autonomy. Ultimately, Dashner's work critiques authoritarian systems that exploit human vulnerability while emphasizing the resilience of identity, emotional connection, and moral agency even under oppressive conditions.

Fear has consistently occupied a central place in dystopian literature because it reflects the anxieties of societies confronted by instability, violence, and authoritarian power. In many dystopian narratives, fear becomes more than a personal emotion; it transforms into a political instrument through which institutions maintain order and suppress resistance. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* explores these concerns by presenting a world where adolescents are subjected to psychological experimentation inside a deadly and controlled environment. Through the experiences of Thomas and the Gladers, the novel examines how fear influences human behavior, identity, and social organization. Dashner portrays fear not only as a reaction to danger but also as a carefully constructed mechanism of control imposed by an institution known as WICKED. The novel therefore becomes a significant text for examining the relationship between psychological manipulation and authoritarian power.

The opening of the novel immediately immerses readers in psychological uncertainty. Thomas awakens in darkness inside a metal elevator called the Box with no memory except his own name. This sudden loss of memory creates confusion and emotional vulnerability. Human identity depends heavily upon memory because personal history provides continuity between past and present experiences. Without memory, individuals lose the foundation upon which self-understanding is constructed. Dashner uses Thomas's disorientation to illustrate the psychological consequences of identity fragmentation. The absence of memory weakens Thomas's sense of security and places him in a condition of dependency upon the unfamiliar environment of the Glade.

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The Glade initially appears to function as a refuge from the terrifying Maze that surrounds it. However, this apparent sanctuary is itself governed by fear and rigid social regulation. The Gladers follow strict rules established to preserve order and ensure survival. Their daily activities, responsibilities, and movements are carefully controlled. Leaders such as Alby and Newt maintain authority by emphasizing obedience and caution. The social structure of the Glade reflects how communities under threat often sacrifice individual freedom in exchange for security. Fear of the Maze and the Grievers reinforces conformity because disobedience may result in death. Dashner demonstrates how external dangers can justify systems of internal control.

The Maze itself operates as both a literal and symbolic representation of psychological entrapment. Its walls shift every night, preventing the Gladers from developing familiarity or stability. This unpredictability intensifies anxiety because individuals cannot anticipate danger or establish certainty. Psychologists argue that unpredictable threats produce greater emotional distress than consistent dangers because uncertainty increases helplessness. The constantly changing structure of the Maze mirrors the unstable mental condition of the Gladers, whose memories and identities remain fragmented. Dashner therefore transforms physical space into a reflection of psychological experience.

The Grievers further intensify the atmosphere of terror within the novel. These monstrous creatures combine mechanical and biological features, creating a disturbing symbol of technological violence. Their attacks are not random acts of destruction but components of WICKED's larger experiment. The Grievers function as instruments designed to maintain fear and pressure among the Gladers. Through these creatures, Dashner illustrates how institutions may deliberately create terror in order to regulate behaviour. The psychological impact of the Grievers extends beyond physical danger because their presence ensures that fear remains constant within the lives of the Gladers.

One of the most psychologically significant processes in the novel is the Changing. Individuals stung by Grievers experience intense pain and recover fragments of their erased memories. This process reveals the relationship between trauma and memory. The return of memory is associated with suffering rather than comfort, suggesting that truth itself has become dangerous. WICKED manipulates memory in order to shape identity and behavior. By controlling what the Gladers remember, the institution controls how they perceive themselves and their environment. The selective restoration of memory during the Changing demonstrates that knowledge is both empowering and psychologically destabilizing.

Thomas emerges as a character who resists the psychological conditioning imposed upon the Gladers. Although he experiences fear, he refuses to accept fear as a justification for passivity. His curiosity drives him to explore the Maze and question the rules governing the Glade. Thomas's resistance highlights the distinction between fear and submission. Fear alone does not guarantee obedience; rather, obedience occurs when individuals internalize hopelessness and abandon independent thought. Dashner portrays Thomas as a figure who preserves agency despite overwhelming uncertainty. His actions suggest that courage consists not in the absence of fear but in the determination to act despite fear.

The arrival of Teresa introduces further psychological complexity into the narrative. As the first girl to enter the Glade, Teresa disrupts the established social order and challenges assumptions about the system controlling the Gladers. Her telepathic connection with Thomas suggests that emotional bonds persist even after memory erasure. This connection implies that identity cannot be entirely destroyed through institutional manipulation. Dashner thereby presents human relationships as sources of resistance against psychological oppression.

WICKED functions as the central embodiment of institutional authority within the novel. The organization claims that its experiments are necessary to save humanity from global catastrophe. This utilitarian justification complicates moral judgment because WICKED believes that the suffering of a few individuals may secure the survival of many. Such reasoning reflects historical examples in which governments and institutions have defended oppressive practices by appealing to collective welfare. Dashner critiques this logic by emphasizing the emotional and psychological suffering experienced by the Gladers. The novel questions whether any goal can justify the systematic manipulation and traumatization of human beings.

The slogan "WICKED is good" demonstrates the organization's use of language as a tool of ideological control. By repeatedly associating itself with goodness, WICKED attempts to normalize its actions and suppress moral doubt. Language becomes a mechanism through which authority shapes perception and influences thought. Psychological studies of propaganda indicate that repetition can alter beliefs and reduce critical resistance. Dashner uses the slogan to reveal how institutions manipulate language in order to maintain legitimacy and obedience.

Surveillance also plays an essential role in the psychological dynamics of the novel. The Gladers eventually discover that they are constantly observed by unseen monitors. This surveillance transforms the Maze into a psychological laboratory where every emotional reaction and behavioral response is analyzed. Philosopher

Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon explains how the possibility of constant observation encourages self-regulation. Individuals alter their behavior when they believe they are being watched. In *The Maze Runner*, surveillance becomes an invisible form of power that shapes conduct without requiring direct physical force.

Isolation contributes significantly to the effectiveness of WICKED's control. The Gladers are separated from families, society, and personal history. This isolation weakens emotional stability and increases dependence upon the controlled environment of the Glade. Human beings rely upon social relationships for psychological support and identity formation. By severing these connections, WICKED creates vulnerability and limits the ability of the Gladers to imagine alternative realities. Dashner demonstrates that isolation is a powerful mechanism of psychological domination.

Leadership within the Glade reflects the influence of fear upon social organization. Alby's leadership style emphasizes caution, discipline, and adherence to established rules. His authority is based upon maintaining order and minimizing risk. Thomas, however, represents a contrasting form of leadership rooted in curiosity and transformation. The tension between these approaches reflects broader political debates regarding security and freedom. Dashner suggests that societies governed entirely by fear may preserve stability temporarily but ultimately suppress individuality and progress.

Different characters within the novel respond to fear in distinct ways, illustrating the complexity of psychological trauma. Gally reacts with aggression and hostility because fear intensifies his insecurity and distrust. Chuck seeks emotional attachment and reassurance as coping mechanisms. Minho channels fear into action and determination. These varied responses emphasize that trauma does not affect individuals uniformly. Dashner portrays psychological suffering as deeply personal and multifaceted.

The concept of learned helplessness is particularly relevant to the experiences of the Gladers. Psychologist Martin Seligman defines learned helplessness as a condition in which repeated failure leads individuals to believe that resistance is impossible. Many Gladers have accepted the idea that escape from the Maze cannot be achieved because previous attempts have failed. Thomas disrupts this mentality by insisting upon the possibility of change. His refusal to surrender psychologically threatens the foundations of WICKED's experiment because control depends partly upon hopelessness.

Dreams and fragmented memories further reinforce the novel's psychological themes. Thomas experiences visions that reveal hidden truths about the Maze and WICKED. These memories emerge unpredictably, blurring the boundaries between conscious awareness and subconscious knowledge. Dreams often symbolize unresolved trauma and suppressed identity. Dashner uses these experiences to suggest that the human mind resists complete domination even under conditions of manipulation and memory erasure.

The Maze itself reflects the internal psychological condition of the characters. Its shifting corridors, dark passages, and hidden dangers symbolize confusion, anxiety, and entrapment. The Gladers' attempts to navigate the Maze parallel their struggle to understand themselves and reclaim autonomy. Dashner transforms physical space into a metaphor for psychological conflict, emphasizing the interconnectedness of external and internal experiences.

The adolescent age of the characters is significant because adolescence represents a period of identity formation and emotional vulnerability. Young people are particularly susceptible to external influence as they seek belonging and self-definition. WICKED exploits this vulnerability by placing adolescents in extreme circumstances designed to shape behavior. Dashner thereby critiques systems that manipulate youth for institutional or ideological purposes.

Fear also influences violence throughout the novel. Characters often respond aggressively when confronted by uncertainty and danger. Gally's hostility toward Thomas reflects his fear of disruption and change. WICKED itself relies upon violence and psychological terror to maintain authority. Yet Dashner demonstrates that violence generated by fear ultimately perpetuates instability and suffering rather than genuine security.

Hope functions as a crucial counterforce to fear within the narrative. Despite overwhelming danger, the characters continue searching for escape and truth. Psychological studies suggest that hope strengthens resilience by enabling individuals to imagine positive outcomes. Thomas inspires hope among the Gladers because he refuses to accept imprisonment as inevitable. Hope therefore becomes psychologically and politically subversive because it undermines systems dependent upon despair.

The ethical ambiguity of WICKED distinguishes *The Maze Runner* from simpler dystopian narratives. The organization's goal of saving humanity complicates the moral interpretation of its actions. Dashner does not present authority as purely evil but rather as capable of rationalizing cruelty through utilitarian logic. This ambiguity encourages readers to reflect upon ethical questions regarding sacrifice, experimentation, and collective survival.

Friendship and emotional solidarity emerge as forms of resistance against psychological control. The relationships among Thomas, Teresa, Minh, Newt, and Chuck provide emotional support that counters isolation and despair. Human connection preserves empathy and individuality within oppressive conditions. Dashner suggests that authoritarian systems seek to weaken interpersonal trust because solidarity strengthens resistance.

The novel also critiques scientific experimentation detached from ethical responsibility. *WICKED* treats the Gladers as data rather than human beings. Their suffering becomes part of a larger research project intended to benefit society. This depersonalization reflects historical abuses in scientific experimentation where individuals were reduced to objects of study. Dashner warns against systems of knowledge that ignore moral accountability and human dignity.

Thomas's gradual recovery of memory symbolizes the reclamation of selfhood. Memory restoration enables him to recognize the mechanisms of manipulation governing the Maze. Although truth is painful, it becomes essential for freedom. Oppressive systems often depend upon ignorance because informed individuals are more capable of resistance. Dashner portrays memory as both a burden and a source of empowerment.

The conclusion of the novel reinforces the persistence of psychological control. Although the Gladers escape the Maze, they discover that their liberation may itself be another stage of *WICKED*'s experiment. This revelation creates continued uncertainty and distrust. Trauma does not disappear with physical escape because psychological manipulation leaves lasting effects. Dashner thereby emphasizes the enduring influence of fear upon human consciousness.

The contemporary relevance of *The Maze Runner* lies in its exploration of surveillance, institutional authority, and emotional manipulation. Modern societies increasingly confront technologies capable of monitoring behavior and influencing perception. Dashner's fictional world reflects anxieties regarding the ethical consequences of such power. The novel encourages readers to question how fear operates within political, technological, and social systems.

In conclusion, *The Maze Runner* presents a profound exploration of the psychology of fear and control. Through memory erasure, surveillance, isolation, violence, and institutional experimentation, James Dashner demonstrates how fear can function as a mechanism of domination. At the same time, the novel emphasizes human resilience through hope, friendship, courage, and the recovery of identity. Fear shapes the experiences of the Gladers, but it does not entirely destroy their humanity or their desire for freedom. Dashner ultimately critiques authoritarian systems that exploit vulnerability while affirming the enduring strength of moral agency and emotional connection.

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