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Possession in *The Conjuring*: A Psychology of Literature Study

Pardi, Aigon Hariadi
Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
E-mail: pardi@sastra.uisu.ac.id

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the causes and effects of possession experienced by Carolyn Perron in Chad Hayes and Carey W. Hayes's screenplay The Conjuring. Using a qualitative descriptive method and a psychology of literature approach, the study analyzes dialogue, actions, and stage directions related to Carolyn's possession through close reading and thematic analysis. The findings reveal two primary causes of possession: psychological and spiritual factors. The psychological factor is reflected in Carolyn's persistent fear, anxiety, and emotional distress resulting from the unexplained events in her home and her concern for the safety of her daughters. The spiritual factor is associated with Bathsheba, the former owner of the farmhouse, whose curse is presented in the screenplay as the supernatural force behind the disturbances and Carolyn's possession. The possession produces three major effects: aggression, attempted killing, and attempted suicide. Carolyn demonstrates physical aggression by biting Brad and kicking Roger, attempts to kill her daughter April by holding her in a deadly grip, and attempts to take her own life by pulling a shotgun toward her chin and trying to pull the trigger. The findings indicate that the screenplay presents Carolyn's possession as the result of an interaction between psychological vulnerability and supernatural influence, with its effects extending beyond Carolyn herself to threaten the safety of those around her.

Corresponding Author:
Pardi
Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
E-mail: pardi@sastra.uisu.ac.id

1. Introduction

A screenplay is a written work that presents ideas in an organized form. It contains the story, the dialogue, and technical details such as camera shots and settings, so that the work can be produced for film or television (Suprapto, 2022). One screenplay that deserves closer study is The Conjuring, written by Chad Hayes and Carey W. Hayes. The two writers are twin brothers who also wrote House of Wax (2005), The Conjuring 2 (2016), and The Turning (2020).

The Conjuring is an American supernatural horror film inspired by a true case investigated by Ed and Lorraine Warren. The film was directed by James Wan, distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures, and released in 2013. The story takes place in 1971. It follows Carolyn and Roger Perron, who move into an old house in Harrisville with their five daughters. Nothing unusual happens on the first day. On the second day, however, Carolyn finds unexplained bruises on her body, and the family dog, Sadie, is found dead outside the house. The disturbances grow worse until one night Carolyn is locked in the basement, and a spirit in the form of an old woman attacks one of her daughters. Desperate for help, Carolyn asks the paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren to examine the house. The Warrens suggest

an exorcism, but the ritual requires approval from the Catholic Church, and this approval is not granted. Because no other solution remains, Ed decides to perform the exorcism anyway.

The screenplay presents three groups of characters. Carolyn and Roger Perron are the protagonists, Bathsheba Sherman is the antagonist, and Ed and Lorraine Warren are the deuteragonists. This study focuses on Carolyn Perron, the main protagonist, who experiences possession. Her condition puts both her own life and the safety of her family in danger.

Literature and psychology are closely connected, because literary works often show human behavior, emotions, and mental conditions. Wellek and Warren (1956) place the relationship between literature and psychology among the extrinsic approaches to literary study. This approach covers the psychology of the author, the creative process, and the psychological types found in literary works. In this study, the psychology of literature is used to examine the psychological condition of a fictional character, namely Carolyn Perron.

Possession is a social phenomenon that people often see in television programs and other mass media. In religious and traditional beliefs, a person is said to be possessed when a spirit enters the body and takes control of it. People in this condition may speak incoherently and behave in unusual ways (Merdeka, 2017). Psychology offers a different explanation. Hawari, a psychiatrist from the University of Indonesia, as cited in Pasmawati (2018), explains that trance or possession is a dissociative reaction. In this reaction, a person loses the ability to be aware of the surrounding reality because of physical or psychological pressure. International diagnostic systems support this view. The ICD-11 of the World Health Organization （World Health Organization, 2022） describes possession trance disorder as a trance state in which a person's usual sense of identity is replaced by an external "possessing" identity, and the person's behavior is experienced as controlled by that agent. The ICD-10 and ICD-11 both list this condition in the chapter on dissociative disorders. In the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), dissociative trance is recorded under other specified dissociative disorder. Research also links dissociative disorders to trauma. Spiegel et al. (2011) note a growing body of evidence connecting these disorders to a history of trauma. A systematic review of 402 cases also concluded that dissociative trance and possession disorders occur worldwide and can be understood as expressions of distress.

These two views show that possession can be understood either as the work of spirits or as a psychological disorder. This difference makes the topic interesting to examine, especially in a literary work. Therefore, this study analyzes the possession experienced by the protagonist in the screenplay The Conjuring through the psychology of literature approach. The concept of possession follows Echols and Shadily (1989) and Pasmawati (2018). The analysis focuses on the causes and the effects of her possession and uses a descriptive qualitative method..

2. Literature Review

2.1 Psychology of Literature

Psychology of literature is a field of literary study that focuses on psychological aspects of literary works. These aspects include the mental activity of characters, the author's creative process, and the emotional responses of readers (Wellek & Warren, 1956). Meiliana (2020) defines it as a scientific inquiry that sees literary works as portraits of human experience lived by fictional, and sometimes real, characters. Sulistiyana and Widiarti (2019) describe it as a discipline that studies mental processes and human behavior in literary texts in order to explain the psychology of authors, characters, and readers. These views agree that psychology of literature uses psychological principles to analyze human behavior in literature.

Because it borrows concepts from psychology to read literary texts, this field is interdisciplinary. Wellek and Warren (1956) identify four meanings of the term: the

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psychological study of the author as a type or an individual, the study of the creative process, the study of psychological types and principles in literary works, and the study of the effects of literature on readers. Recent studies show how the third meaning works in practice. Pardi and Hartika (2025) examine patience in Winston Groom's Forrest Gump using Szutta's theoretical framework, and they show how a psychological theory can clarify character development. Pardi et al. (2024) analyze the novel Disgrace through the theory of relational transgression and show that a character's actions affect not only himself but also the people around him. This study applies the third meaning, which examines the behavior of characters in a literary work. A character's behavior can be read from different perspectives. Possession, for example, has a cause, and it has consequences for the possessed character and for other characters, because it is directly tied to the character's emotional state and behavior.

2.2 Religious Literature

Literature is closely connected to human life and social reality (Pardi, 2026). Religious values appear in literature through the way authors present their works. Jauhari (2010, p. 36) names three forms of these values: faith (tauhid), norms of life (fiqh), and moral conduct (akhlak). Faith refers to a person's belief in the nature and attributes of God, and it shows the level of a person's devotion.

The term "religious" is related to "religion" but is not identical to it. Being religious covers a wider space than the formal and institutional side of religion. It refers to a way of deepening one's religious experience and staying open to the center of life. Early literature was largely religious in character.

Religious values exist in literature because authors both take part in human life and observe it. Their writing therefore tends to deal with human problems. According to Unger, as cited in Wellek and Warren (1989), these problems fall into five groups: (1) religious issues, such as ideas of God, sin, and salvation; (2) issues of human destiny, such as freedom, compulsion, and the human spirit; (3) issues of nature, including myth and the occult; (4) human issues, such as the concept of humans, death, and love; and (5) issues of society, family, and state.

This study belongs to the third group, which covers myth, magic, and the occult. A character's behavior can be shaped by several factors, and magic is one of them. In this study, possession is understood as a disturbance in a character's behavior caused by occult interference, which creates problems for the possessed character and for others.

2.3 Possession

Possession appears in many cultures and is usually associated with rituals, belief in spirits, and unusual behavior. In everyday understanding, a possessed person is believed to be controlled by a ghost or an evil spirit, and this belief is strong in societies with a long tradition of mystical thought. Such beliefs often find their way into literary works, because literature reflects the culture and social life that produce it (Pardi, 2026). In Indonesian, the word kesurupan (from surup) means being entered by a spirit so that a person acts strangely (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, n.d.). Echols and Shadily (1989) translate possession as trance.

Psychology explains the same experience differently. Hawari, as cited in Pasmawati (2018), describes possession as a dissociative reaction, in which a person loses awareness of the surrounding reality under physical or mental pressure. International diagnostic systems support this view. The ICD-11 describes possession trance disorder as a state in which a person's usual sense of identity is replaced by an external "possessing" identity, and the

person's behavior is experienced as controlled by that agent. The same entry adds that the state is involuntary, is not part of an accepted cultural or religious practice, and causes significant distress or impairment in daily functioning. The DSM-5 places dissociative trance under "other specified dissociative disorder." Spiegel et al. (2011) also recommended that the experience of possession be included in the definition of identity disruption.

In short, possession can be defined in two ways. In the cultural view, it is a loss of control caused by spirits or supernatural beings. In the psychological view, it is a dissociative condition in which a person cannot control themselves and behaves as if another personality has taken over.

2.3.1 *Causes of Possession*

Possession does not appear without warning. Preceding events and conditions usually lead to it, and the literature explains these conditions from two perspectives: the psychological and the spiritual. From the psychological side, stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma are the conditions most often linked to possession. A review of studies in low- and middle-income countries found a strong relationship between trauma exposure and spirit possession (Hecker et al., 2015). Pasmawati (2018) likewise explains dissociative trance through psychological and cultural factors. Literary studies show how this kind of explanation can be applied to characters. Pardi and Sonya (2025) show how Margio in Lelaki Harimau develops his disturbed personality through a traumatic environment and childhood adversity. Pardi and Hartika (2025) show that a psychological theory can clarify how a character develops. These studies support reading a character's disturbed state in terms of stress and past experience. Global mental health and trauma exposure: the current evidence for the relationship between traumatic experiences and spirit possession.

From the spiritual side, possession is believed to occur when supernatural forces influence a person. In the Islamic view, the disturbance is attributed to jinn or the devil entering the body, and it is said to happen to people in a weak spiritual condition (Pasmawati, 2018). Practices such as summoning spirits are also believed to raise the risk. In this view, the entry of the spirit cannot be seen, but its effects appear in the person's mind, senses, and body.

The two perspectives do not exclude each other. Both can serve as indicators when analyzing the cause of a character's possession in a literary work.

2.3.2 *Effects of Possession*

Opinions differ about the effects of possession. Hawari states that it is a form of hysteria that can spread through suggestion and has no fatal impact (Nia, 2013). In contrast, the ICD-11 describes the condition as one that can cause significant distress and impairment in personal, family, and social life (World Health Organization, 2022). This study focuses on the negative effects on the possessed character and on others. The effects discussed are aggression, attempted killing, and attempted suicide. Pardi et al. (2024) offer a useful model for this focus, because they show how one character's actions affect himself and the people around him.

Anderson and Bushman (2002) define human aggression as any behavior directed at another person with the immediate intent to cause harm. A possessed character who loses self-control may attack others physically, for example by hitting or biting, or verbally, for example by cursing.

Moreover, Anderson and Bushman (2002) separate violence from aggression. Violence is aggression whose goal is extreme harm, such as death. In this study, attempted killing means a character's effort to take another person's life, whether done knowingly or while not in control.

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Suicide-related behavior covers a range of acts, from thoughts of suicide to non-fatal attempts and death by suicide. De Leo et al. (2006) proposed unified terms for these acts, based on the WHO/EURO Multicentre Study. Bridge et al. (2006) explain that suicidal behavior results from an interaction of social, developmental, psychiatric, psychological, and family factors. In this study, attempted suicide refers to a character's act of trying to end her own life because of the pressure she experiences.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design to examine the causes and effects of the protagonist's possession in the screenplay The Conjuring. Qualitative description aims to give a comprehensive account of events in the everyday terms of those events, and researchers who use it stay close to the data and to the surface of words and events (Sandelowski, 2000). This design fits the purpose of the study, which is to describe and explain a phenomenon in a text rather than to build a new theory. The study also follows the psychology of literature approach, which treats the behavior of a character as an object of psychological analysis (Wellek & Warren, 1956). In line with Creswell and Creswell (2023), the data are analyzed and then organized into thematic categories that answer the research questions.

The primary data source is the screenplay of The Conjuring, written by Chad Hayes and Carey W. Hayes. The data are words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, monologues, and descriptions of action that relate to the possession of Carolyn Perron, the protagonist. Because these data come from a written text, the study is a form of document analysis, which Creswell and Creswell (2023) list among the main forms of qualitative data, together with observations, interviews, and audiovisual materials. Using the original text as the only primary source keeps the data directly traceable. Every finding can be checked against a specific part of the screenplay.

Data collection began with careful and repeated reading of the screenplay. The researcher used close reading, a technique that helps readers gain a deeper understanding of what a text says (Brummett, 2018). During this reading, the researcher marked and quoted the parts of the text that relate to the causes and effects of possession. The theory of possession guided this selection. The selected data were then sorted into categories based on the two research questions. Finally, the researcher checked the collected data and arranged them for analysis. The analysis moved from specific details to broader themes, which is the general direction of qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It used thematic analysis, a flexible method for identifying and reporting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher analyzed the protagonist's dialogue, actions, and thoughts, paying attention to the words, phrases, and sentences in the screenplay. The data were grouped into two themes: causes, which cover psychological and spiritual factors, and effects, which cover aggression, attempted killing, and attempted suicide. Next, the researcher interpreted each group of data using the psychology of literature approach and the theory of possession. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions by checking the findings against the data and the research questions..

4. Discussion

This study examines the causes and effects of the protagonist's possession in the screenplay The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes. The analysis of the protagonist's and other characters' words and actions shows two causes of her possession: psychological factors and spiritual factors. The possession affects both the protagonist and the people around

her, as shown by aggressive behavior and an attempt to kill another person. The following sections explain these findings in detail.

4.1 The Cause of the Possession

4.1.1 *Psychological Factors*

Possession is often linked to an unstable psychological condition, such as anxiety, depression, stress, or trauma from past events. A review of studies found a strong relationship between trauma exposure and spirit possession (Hecker et al., 2015). Research on dissociative disorders also points to a growing body of evidence connecting them to a history of trauma (Spiegel et al., 2011). Pasmawati (2018) likewise explains dissociative trance through psychological and cultural factors.

Hawari, as cited in Pasmawati (2018), describes possession as a dissociative reaction to physical or mental stress, and research connects dissociative conditions to trauma (Hecker et al., 2015; Spiegel et al., 2011). In this scene, Carolyn's emotional breakdown can be read as one cause of her later possession. The psychological factor appears to be one cause of Carolyn Perron's possession in the screenplay The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes. Several scenes and conversations show that Carolyn and her family face repeated strange events that leave her afraid, anxious, and exhausted. She also tries to protect her daughters, who often experience these events as well.

Carolyn's distress is clear when she asks Ed and Lorraine Warren for help. She says that "there's something horrible happening" in her house and that her five daughters are "scared to death" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 46). She also admits, "I'm so afraid that it wants to hurt us" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 46). These lines show constant fear and anxiety, and the stage direction adds that she is "falling apart quickly" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 46). This emotional state fits the psychological factors that are linked to possession.These lines show ongoing fear and anxiety, both for herself and for her children. Such stress fits the psychological factors linked to possession..

4.1.2 *Spiritual Factors*

Possession is often linked to mystical or spiritual causes. From this perspective, trance is explained as interference from a supernatural being, such as the devil or an evil spirit (Pasmawati, 2018). In The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes, the Perron family is disturbed by a presence tied to Bathsheba, the earlier owner of the farmhouse.

Carolyn first senses the spiritual nature of the threat when she asks the Warrens for help. She tells them, "There's something evil there, I know it" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 46). Lorraine Warren then explains Bathsheba's history. Bathsheba "was one of the women accused of witchcraft in Salem," and her husband "caught her sacrificing" their baby (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, pp. 62–64). Before she died, she "proclaimed her love to Satan, cursed anyone who tried to take her land, then hung herself" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, pp. 62–64). Ed responds, "That explains a few things" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, pp. 62–64). Immediately afterward, the stage direction states that "Ed's tape recorder clicks on by itself" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, pp. 62–64), which suggests that the presence is active in the present.

Together, these lines present Bathsheba as a vengeful spirit whose curse reaches the family now living on her land. Within the story, this presence is the spiritual cause that targets Carolyn. This fits the spiritual view that possession comes from supernatural interference.

4.2 The Effect of the Possession

4.2.1 *Being Aggressive*

Aggression is behavior directed at another person with the immediate intent to cause harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). It can be physical, such as hitting or biting, or verbal. In

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The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes, aggression is one effect of Carolyn Perron's possession.

The clearest evidence appears in the cellar scene. Carolyn first appears "getting tossed around the room like a rag," and the men must "grapple Carolyn to the ground." She then "screeches and takes a massive bite out of Brad's cheek," and Brad screams in pain with blood spurting (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 104). This act causes serious physical injury to another person. It also shows that Carolyn no longer acts like herself, which fits the idea that possession involves a loss of self-control.

Aggression appears again in the later struggle over the shotgun, when "The Witch kicks Roger away" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 109). Here the possessed Carolyn attacks her own husband, who is trying to stop the violence. This shows that the harm reaches the people closest to her. Taken together, the two scenes show that Carolyn's possession turns into physical violence against others.

4.2.2 *Attempting to Kill Other People*

Attempted killing is an effort to take another person's life, whether or not it succeeds. Anderson and Bushman (2002) describe violence as aggression whose goal is extreme harm, such as death. In The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes, Carolyn Perron's possession leads her to endanger the life of her own daughter.

The danger first appears when Roger reports that Carolyn "has taken off with Cindy and April." Lorraine immediately fears the worst and says, "She's going to sacrifice them!" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 101). Roger adds that Andrea said Carolyn's "breath smelled like rotting meat" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 101). This detail signals that Carolyn is no longer her normal self. Lorraine's fear also echoes Bathsheba's history, since Bathsheba was caught "sacrificing" her own baby (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, pp. 62–64).

The attempt is shown in the cellar scene. Carolyn "has one arm wrapped around April's (8) neck in a death grip," while Roger struggles to stop her. The text adds that "her strength is inhuman" and that "a wry smile crosses Carolyn's lips" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 102). These lines show a mother harming her child with unusual force and without the emotion expected of a parent. This fits the clinical description of possession trance, in which a person's behavior is experienced as controlled by an external possessing identity (World Health Organization, 2022). In the story, the possession turns Carolyn from protector into a threat to her own family.

4.2.3 *Attempting Suicide*

Attempted suicide is a non-fatal act in which a person tries to end their own life. Researchers distinguish it from suicidal thoughts and from death by suicide (De Leo et al., 2006). In The Conjuring by Chad Hayes and Carey Hayes, an attempt of this kind appears as one effect of Carolyn Perron's possession.

The attempt is shown in the cellar scene. The text describes a "Burst of energy that frees both of her hands," after which she draws Brad's shotgun toward herself and "Rotates the barrel right under her chin" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 108). At the moment she "goes to pull the trigger," Roger "shoves his finger behind the trigger, stopping the action" (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 109). Ed then pushes the barrel away, and the shotgun "goes off" and hits the ceiling (Hayes & Hayes, 2013, p. 109). Because of this quick action by Roger and Ed, Carolyn survives.

This scene shows that the possession endangers Carolyn herself as well as the people around her. The text frames the act as the work of "the Witch," not as a decision made from ordinary despair. This fits the clinical description of possession trance, in which a person's

behavior is experienced as controlled by an external possessing identity (World Health Organization, 2022).

The analysis of the causes and effects of Carolyn Perron's possession in The Conjuring reveals two primary factors underlying her possession: psychological and spiritual factors. The psychological factor is reflected in Carolyn's increasing fear, anxiety, and emotional distress caused by the unexplained occurrences in her home and her concern for the safety of her daughters. As these disturbing experiences intensify, her psychological condition deteriorates, particularly when she becomes increasingly desperate for help and seeks assistance from the Warrens. The spiritual factor is associated with Bathsheba, the former owner of the farmhouse, who is portrayed as a woman accused of witchcraft, the sacrifice of her child, and devotion to Satan. According to the narrative, Bathsheba curses anyone who occupies her land, and because the Perron family lives on the property, her curse becomes the supernatural force associated with the disturbances experienced by the family and Carolyn's eventual possession.

The possession produces three major negative effects on Carolyn's behavior. First, she becomes physically aggressive toward others, as demonstrated by her biting Brad and kicking Roger. Second, her behavior becomes potentially homicidal when she attempts to kill her daughter, April, by holding her in a deadly grip. Third, the possession places Carolyn's own life at risk when she attempts to commit suicide by trying to pull the trigger of a shotgun positioned under her chin. These manifestations demonstrate that the possession affects not only Carolyn's psychological and behavioral condition but also poses a serious threat to the safety of the people around her. However, the intervention of Roger and the Warrens prevents these violent acts from resulting in death. Overall, the findings indicate that Carolyn's possession is presented through an interaction between psychological vulnerability and supernatural influence, with its effects manifested in increasingly dangerous forms of aggression, attempted homicide, and suicidal behavior.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, Carolyn Perron's possession in *The Conjuring* is caused by two interconnected factors: psychological and spiritual factors. Her persistent fear, anxiety, and emotional distress contribute to her psychological vulnerability, while Bathsheba's curse represents the supernatural force associated with her possession. The possession subsequently produces three major effects: physical aggression toward others, an attempt to kill her daughter, and an attempt to take her own life. These effects demonstrate that the possession threatens both Carolyn's safety and the safety of those around her. However, the intervention of Roger and the Warrens prevents the violent acts from resulting in death.

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