

## Thanatophobia: A Study of Beloved People's Death in Bradbury's *The Night*

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**Abstract.** The young protagonist Shorts in Ray Bradbury's *The Night* is the subject of this study, which explores the concept of thanatophobia, or the fear of death. The research analyzes Shorts' experiences with death, including the death of his sister and grandfather, as well as the metaphorical contact with mortality in the ravine, using a qualitative descriptive approach. The data suggest that Shorts interprets death differently at each level, reflecting his developmental understanding and emotional responses. The study emphasizes how environmental triggers, developmental cognitive stages, and familial bonds influence his fear and coping mechanisms. These revelations highlight how crucial open communication and supportive caregiving are in assisting kids in grieving and building resilience. This study provides a greater knowledge of mortality dread in fictional and real-life circumstances by bridging the gap between literary analysis and psychological viewpoints.

**Keywords:** anxiety; death; fear; coping mechanisms; thanatophobia

**Abstrak.** Studi ini menganalisis tema thanatofobia (ketakutan akan kematian) yang dialami oleh karakter muda Shorts dalam cerita pendek *The Night* karya Ray Bradbury. Penelitian ini menyelidiki pengalaman Shorts terkait kematian, yang mencakup kehilangan kakeknya dan adiknya, serta konfrontasi simbolis dengan kematian melalui ravine. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Beberapa temuan menunjukkan bahwa Shorts menangani kematian dengan cara yang berbeda setiap tahapnya, yang mencerminkan perkembangan kognitif dan respons emosionalnya. Studi ini menekankan betapa pentingnya ikatan keluarga, tahap perkembangan kognitif anak, dan pemicu dalam menciptakan ketakutan dan mekanisme koping. Hasil penelitian ini menekankan bahwa dukungan orang tua dan komunikasi terbuka sangat penting untuk membantu anak mengatasi kesedihan dan menjadi lebih kuat. Studi ini menawarkan pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang kecemasan terhadap kematian dalam fiksi dan kehidupan nyata dengan menghubungkan analisis sastra dan perspektif psikologi.

**Kata kunci:** kecemasan; kematian; ketakutan; mekanisme koping; thanatofobia

## INTRODUCTION

Death is something that most people are afraid of. Talking about death seems to be a taboo for most people. They do not like talking about it because they feel death is something that needs to be feared. Someone who is not afraid of death is rare, and they are labeled as suicidal people. However, being unafraid of death and suicidal are different things. Fearless of death means they know and understand that someday they will die, and it is something unavoidable. They accept death as well as how they

accept life. While suicidal is thoughts of ending one's life but not taking any active efforts to do so, it may or may not involve exact planning or intent. Death seems wrong because the dead miss the good things in life. Death frustrates our investments in our lives, hopes, ambitions, plans, projects, and loving relationships with others. It is a fear of the unknown, of annihilation of self, of the process of dying with loss of function, of dependence on others, of incapacity to tolerate the pain involved in being alone, and of loss of beloved ones (Abdel-Khalek, 2002, p. 670). Moreover, death deprives us of ourselves; it eliminates us as subjects. Being dead is quite unlike any other misfortune. To be dead means to be completely removed from the world, to transition from existence to non-existence. However, this characterization of death raises a problem. If death is the end of our existence, it is arguably bad for us. This is because the dead are no longer around to be the subjects of either harm or benefit. The experience of harm or benefit is inseparable from the existence of a subject (a person or conscious being). Without a subject, there can be no experience of harm or benefit because no entity can face those experiences. Those who suffer the evil of death do not truly live, for they have not yet fully embraced life (Scarre, 1997, pp. 269-270). Hence, death is not always bad for anyone. Therefore, being scared of death is something normal because we do not know what exactly death is or how it feels.

Therefore, people may experience thanatophobia, fear their death, or they might fear the death of someone they love. There are numerous reasons for thanatophobia, some of which commonly include fear of the unknown, fear of loss of control, fear of pain, and fear of abandoning relatives (Sinoff, 2017, pp. 6-7). Fear of death is a common childhood fear for adolescents aged 7 to 16 and is generally not classified as a mental health condition. A child's fear of death can be devastating to the parent but may be a healthy part of normal development (Bassett & Bussard, 2021, p. 468). Children generally lack the defense mechanisms, religious beliefs, and understanding of death that help adults cope. Death is also recognized as a concept that carries a substantial emotional impact across the lifespan. In early childhood, the most common fears are separation from parents, the dark, animals, and imaginary creatures such as monsters (Gullone, 2000, p. 430).

Since the issue of death is a common theme in literature, many literary works use it. One is found in Bradbury's work entitled *The Night*. In *The Night*, an eight-year-old boy, Shorts, and his mother anxiously awaited his older brother, Skipper, to return home late one summer evening. This event forces Shorts to rekindle the memories of his grandfather and his sister, who have passed away. As their concern grows, they move into the dark streets toward a mysterious ravine, symbolizing fear and the unknown. The mother's visible anxiety and the bizarre silence worsen the boy's awareness of mortality, loneliness, and vulnerability. It is, then, very challenging to see how this little man deals with death.

Analysis of literary work and other literature subject texts about death has been done in plenty of previous studies, such as Skelton (2003), who talked of how death is portrayed in literature, from personal accounts to literary devices; Teodorescu (2016) that examined the relationship between cultural illusions of death and literary theories; Termizi et al., (2017) that explored how death influences the narrative structure, emotional impact, and character reactions; Carroll (2019) that discussed human concerns about death, blending biological and supernatural concepts; Farrant (2020) examined and explained contemporary literature's relationship with death and the post-literary age. Previous studies have shown that death is very variable and a great topic. Other related study on death has also been created by Judith Jai Jaleha-Jefwa (2016) entitled *Perceptions of Dying and Death in Selected Literary Works*. This study analyzed the various responses to death and dying through different literary works, focusing on themes of self-centeredness, denial, fear, and acceptance. It dives into the psychological and emotional aspects of facing mortality, from authors like William Faulkner,

Leo Tolstoy, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The analysis also touches on the role of religion, power dynamics, and societal influences on individual perceptions of death. It provides insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of human responses to mortality.

Therefore, this paper is different from the previous study since it examines Bradbury's *The Night* on why Shorts, an eight-year-old boy, has a thanatophobia or existential death anxiety, to be exact, which arises from awareness that natural life must end. This happens when Shorts and his mother looking for his brother, Skipper, who did not come home even though he usually comes home around that time. Especially, when they could not find him anywhere and finally decided to look in the ravine where the place was very dark and invited bad thoughts of what had happened to Skipper. Shorts immediately had thought that Skipper might in danger because of the death-related trauma he had experienced before when his grandfather and little sister dead. Moreover, thanatophobia is defined as a phobia that takes the form of anxiety characterized by the fear of one's death or fear of losing a loved one and even the process of dying itself. Thus, it is commonly referred to as death anxiety (Koocher et al., 1976, p. 220). For some, this involves a fear of being dead, and others are afraid of the dying process. Focusing on those factors, how Shorts dealt with death can be revealed. Therefore, the significance of this writing lies in its diverse approach to understanding an essential aspect of the human condition, fear of death, through this short story and psychoanalytic theory. It bridges the gap between literary analysis and psychology, offering insights that can deepen our understanding of fictional characters and real-life fears.

## METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive method to analyze *The Night*. Thus, qualitative description dealt with rigor and trustworthiness throughout the study to provide the reader with reflexive explanations (Beech, 2000). Qualitative research is inductive, and the researchers generally explore meanings and insights in a given situation (Levitt et al., 2017). It also refers to a range of data collection and analysis techniques (Dudwick et al., 2006; Gopaladas, 2016). Gopaladas (2016) also described it as an effective model that occurs in a natural setting and enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences. In other words, qualitative research is a type of research that aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, or actions as a whole, and by using various methods in a natural context. Hence, the study used this method because the method can help explain concepts that describe the phenomenon of human behavior.

The data for this study were acquired from the short story *The Night* by Ray Bradbury (1946), journals, books, and online articles related to this study. The data obtained were in the form of dialog and narration from the short story that describes the fear of death or thanatophobia. The data were gained through several steps: first by reading and rereading the short story *The Night* to understand its content, second by making notes about the primary data that shows thanatophobia behavior and third by reading sources related to the issue to find evidence that supports this study. After gathering the data, they were reduced and grouped. Then, they were also described and interpreted. The next step was analyzing the collected data to prove Shorts' thanatophobia. Finally, the last step was concluding the whole study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, there are revelations about how a young boy named Short dealt with death. Three main points are explored in depth: Short's grandfather's death, Short's sister's death, and the death in the ravine but before getting into the discussion here a synopsis of the short story. Set in 1927, an eight-year-old child, Shorts navigates a summer night filled with quiet tension in a small town. After a trip for ice cream, the evening takes a chilling turn when his older brother, Skipper, does not return home on time. As the darkness deepens, the mother's growing anxiety leads them on a tense search toward the ravine, a place of looming danger and fear, forcing Shorts to rekindle the memories of his grandfather and little sister's death. Shorts, once comforted by his mother's presence, begins to sense her vulnerability and the overwhelming presence of mortality. Just as dread peaks, Skipper returns safely, melting away the fear but leaving a lasting impression of the fragility of life. The night ends with a mix of relief and newfound awareness, as Shorts feels both the weight of fear and the comfort of family. To discuss deeper on thanatophobia in *The Night*, there are three main parts, namely, Grandfather's Death, his Sister's Death, and Death in the Ravine.

### Grandfather's Death

Experiencing the death of a family member at a young age can have significant effects on a child's psychological development and understanding of mortality (Palmer et al., 2016). This phenomenon is also illustrated in *The Night*. In that short story, a six-year-old boy named Shorts is confronted with the death of his grandfather. In this period of life, where cognitive and emotional capacities are still developing, encountering death can be both disorienting and impactful. Since the concept of death is typically abstract and complex for children, whose cognitive development is still in its early stages, what Short experienced could be something huge at his age. Moreover, according to Piaget (1952), in his theory of cognitive development, children in the preoperational stage (ages 2 to 7) are characterized by egocentrism and a limited ability to understand abstract concepts. Therefore, the child, Shorts, at the age of six, may struggle to catch the permanence and finality of death. Instead, death might initially be perceived as a temporary state or a form of sleep rather than a definitive end to life.

Furthermore, Shorts' relationship with his grandfather is one of admiration and respect. According to Kahana & Kahana (1971) grandparents often play a unique role in a child's raising, offering affection and wisdom. Their absence can create a deeply felt void, delaying the normal flow of a child's life and leaving them with a range of emotions that may be difficult to express. He sees his grandfather as someone knowledgeable who taught him to be a good boy and discussed complex topics like politics, which is shown in this narration:

"... no more to tell you [Shorts] how to be a good boy, no more to comment succinctly on politics," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160).

This shows that grandfather was a figure of moral guidance in Shorts' life, telling life lessons and creating his early understanding of the world. His grandfather's death is an early encounter with mortality. When facing with the death of his grandfather, he describes his appearance as "a great fallen vulture in his casket," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160). This metaphor conveys a mix of admiration and fear, highlighting that even in death, his grandfather remains powerful in his mind.

Shorts' understanding of death might be limited. This is supported by a study conducted by Panagiotaki et al., (2015) who stated that children's understanding of death often progresses from a

sense of it as a reversible and temporary state to an acknowledgment of its irreversible nature. In *The Night*, the statement is shown in:

"You [Shorts] are only eight years old, you know little of death, fear, or dread. Death is the waxen effigy in the coffin when you were six and Grandfather passed away—looking like a great fallen vulture in his casket, silent, withdrawn, no more to tell you how to be a good boy, no more to comment succinctly on politics," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160).

The early stage of cognitive development means that Shorts may not fully comprehend why his grandfather is laying in a coffin and why such a tremendous emotional response is drawn out from the adults around him.

The emotional impact of such early exposure to death can also be significant. According to study of Keyes et al., (2014), children, like adults, undergo a process of mourning and adjustment following the death of a loved one. The disruption caused by such an event can influence a child's emotional well-being and psychological development. In the case of Shorts, the loss of his grandfather not only signifies the end of a familial relationship but also represents a significant encounter with the concept of death itself. The absence of his grandfather's guidance and presence, as well as the emotional responses of those around him, might contribute to Shorts' evolving understanding of loss and mortality.

### **Sister's Death**

Witnessing the death of a family member twice at a young age can be immensely impactful and complex for Shorts. After losing his grandfather, Shorts experienced another impactful moment as he lost his sister. The sudden and tragic loss of his little sister, which he discovers in a moment of unanticipated loneliness, provides a poignant example of how children grapple with the concept of death and its ramifications. Shorts' discovery of his sister's lifeless body is an intense experience. The phrase "Death is your little sister one morning when you awaken at the age of seven, look into her crib and see her staring up at you with a blind blue, fixed and frozen stare until the men come with a small wicker basket to take her away," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160) shows the raw immediacy and emotional weight of this encounter. This moment of discovery is significant because it reflects the sudden and often incomprehensible nature of death as perceived by a young child. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, children form deep emotional bonds with family members, and the sudden absence of a sibling can disrupt these bonds, leading to intense feelings of grief and confusion (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 51, 254).

From another perspective, understanding death evolves with age and cognitive development. At seven years old, Shorts is in the later stages of Piaget's preoperational stage and beginning to transition into the concrete operational stage, where he starts to develop a more nuanced understanding of abstract concepts such as death (Piaget, 1952). However, his grasp of death remains limited and often characterized by confusion and a sense of finality. The realization that his sister's eyes are "lifeless" and her presence disappeared to a dead body in the crib aligns with findings from research on children's understanding of death, which suggests that young children often perceive death in concrete, rather than abstract, terms (Harris, 2018, p. 1). The following reflection by Shorts:

"Death is when you stand by her high chair four weeks later and suddenly realize she'll never be in it again, laughing and crying, and make you jealous of her because she was born," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160)



reveals an evolving understanding of loss and its emotional consequences. The realization that his sister will never occupy her high chair again emphasizes the permanence of death and its impact on the family dynamic. Research indicates that children's grief responses can include a range of emotions, such as jealousy, anger, and confusion, often intertwined with their developing cognitive abilities (Denham, 2007, pp. 3,7). Hence, Shorts feels mixed feelings about his sister's death. He recalled feeling jealousy when she was alive, as her presence took some attention away from him which is shown in the following narration:

"... suddenly realize she'll never be in it again, laughing and crying, and make you jealous of her because she was born,". (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160)

This passage highlights the complex emotions Shorts felt toward his sister, competition for affection, weakened by an undeniable familial bond.

Besides, the cognitive and emotional processing of such a loss for a child is complex. As noted by Packman et al., (2006), children often experience feelings of jealousy and confusion when faced with the death of a sibling, particularly if the sibling's death is perceived as a disruption to their sense of security and family structure. For Shorts, the absence of his sister's presence, her laughter, and her interactions create a stark contrast to his previous experiences, boosting his sense of loss and altering his perception of his place within the family.

The death of a child has generally been considered one of the most stressful events encountered by families in society (Murray et al., 2010, pp. 80-81). When his sister dies, Shorts struggles with the abruptness and incomprehensibility of the loss. He remembers waking up to see her staring at him with a frozen stare. Her death leaves a haunting impression, and he misses her in mundane moments. However, seeing her high chair empty, made her loss palpable. It is shown in this line:

"... one morning when you awaken at the age of seven, look into her crib and see her staring up at you with a blind blue, fixed and frozen stare," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160).

This reflects his difficulty grasping the concept of death at a young age. Different from Shorts' reaction to his grandfather's death, which is more stoic, Shorts experiences a deep, emotional reaction to her death. It feels immediate as her absence impacts his daily life meanwhile the loss of his grandfather is reflective and symbolic of losing a guiding figure.

Consequently, the experience of dealing with death at such a young age poses significant developmental challenges. The psychological impact of losing a loved one, especially a sibling, can affect a child's emotional regulation, behavioral responses, and overall development. The research by Fanos & Nickerson (1991) highlights that children who experience the death of a sibling may face long-term psychological effects, including increased risk for depression and anxiety, as they navigate their grief and the alterations in their familial relationships. Shorts' experience of seeing the death of two of his family members made him afraid and confused about the concept of death itself. Just being in a place that he feels is dangerous or losing the foundation that he considers to be his protection, he will immediately associate it with death, and that place is the ravine.

### **Death in the Ravine**

The ravine in this short story is a metaphorical and physical place that forces Shorts to face the concept of death yet again. It becomes a trigger that evokes his memories about his grandfather and his sister

who had passed away, as its darkness, silence, and threatening aura mirror the death itself (Slaughter, 2005, pp. 179-184). His mother's gestures, trembling hands, and nervous voice also trigger his nightmare because, at that moment, she was a figure of strength and braveness (Bowlby, 1969 pp. 221-225) which is visible in these lines:

"Her [Shorts' mother] hand trembles. Your belief in your private world is shattered. You feel Mother tremble," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 161) and "Mother's voice is strained, high," (Bradbury, p. 162).

This vulnerability scares Shorts, as he realizes that even adults, who are supposed to be strong, are defenseless against powerlessness. Her actions change the ravine into a shared space of dread, where even the adults' defenses against the unknown (and death) collapse. The description of the ravine on page 160 captures an atmosphere of decay and dread, reminiscent of classic fears associated with unfamiliar and dark spaces (Trigg, 2019, p. 4). It is shown in the following narration:

"... wide ravine that cuts and twists across the town, a jungle by day, a place to let alone at night," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160) with its "dark sewer, rotten foliage, and a thick green odor," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 160)

This description connects it directly to death and distress that are related to the unknown. For Shorts, it represents the boundary between safety (the known world) and danger (the unknown).

The sensory descriptions of the ravine, its odor, its darkness, and its unsettling atmosphere are instrumental in illustrating Shorts' psychological state. According to research on environmental psychology, such sense inputs can significantly influence emotional responses and fears. The ravine's characteristics, described as a place in phrase "civilization ceases, reason ends, and a universal evil takes over," (Bradbury, p. 161) in page 161, amplifies Shorts' perception of the area as a site of malevolent forces and impending danger (Burton & Kates, 1963, p. 412).

Shorts' reliance on his mother as a protective figure is evident in his description of her bravery. The notion of his mother as his sole shield against the unknown reflects Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory, which posits that children depend on primary caregivers for emotional security and protection, especially in threatening or unfamiliar situations. The way Shorts perceives his mother's bravery, "You feel braveness because she goes before, and you hang back a trifle for a moment, and then hurry on, too," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 161) shows the considerable impact that a caregiver's demeanor can have on a child's sense of security and fear management.

The changes of Shorts' fear are marked when he perceives his mother's trembling hand. Seeing his mother, whom he views as a paragon of strength, exhibit fear, this shift in perception challenges his understanding of security and protection. Research on childhood trauma and fear (Perry, 2009, pp. 241-243) suggests that encountering fear in a trusted caregiver can destabilize a child's sense of safety as they struggle to reconcile the idea of an omnipotent protector being vulnerable. Shorts' existential dread is reflected in his thoughts,

"You realize you are alone. You and your mother. Her hand trembles. Her hand trembles. Your belief in your private world is shattered. You feel Mother tremble. Why? Is she, too, doubtful? But she is bigger, stronger, more intelligent than yourself, isn't she? Does she, too, feel that intangible menace, that groping out of darkness, that crouching malignancy down below?" (Bradbury, 1948, p. 161).

This indicates a deeper cognitive and emotional struggle, as he begins to question the foundations of his protective environment and the reliability of adulthood (Perry, 2009, pp. 245-247).

The intense fear of death that Shorts experiences, including his thoughts about the futility of calling for help and the likelihood of being swallowed by darkness before rescue could arrive, aligns with developmental psychology research on children's perceptions of danger and mortality. According to studies, children in this developmental stage often have heightened fears of death and dying, exacerbated by their limited understanding of the rescue and the permanence of death (Panagiotaki et al., 2015, pp. 4-5). Bradbury (1946) shows that Shorts' fear of blackness could come swiftly, swallowing; and in one titanicly freezing moment, all would be concluded, (p. 161) showing his struggle with the concept of mortality and his anxiety about the unpredictability of life and death.

The moment when Shorts hears the silence after the crickets stop chirping highlights his heightened fear and anticipation. Which is shown through this narration,

"Suddenly, both of you [Shorts and his mother] realize there is something wrong. Something is very wrong. You [Shorts] listen intently and realize what it is. The crickets have stopped chirping. Silence is complete. Never in your life is silence like this one. One so utterly complete. Why should the crickets cease? Why? What reason? They have never stopped ever before. Not ever. Unless, unless—Something is going to happen," (Bradbury, 1948, p. 163)

The cessation of familiar sounds often signifies danger in the animal kingdom. It can trigger heightened anxiety in humans, particularly in children who may perceive it as a precursor to a coming threat (Gibbons et al., 2004, pp. 1049-1050). As Shorts describes, the heightened tension manifests his deep-seated fears and his struggle to make sense of the unknown.

The eventual relief when Skipper's voice is heard, "Okay, Mom! Coming, Mother!" (Bradbury, 1948, p. 163) marks a significant emotional shift for Shorts. The return of normalcy and the presence of his brother restore a sense of security and normalcy. This emotional shift is crucial for understanding how children manage and recover from terrible fear and trauma. Upon confirming Skipper's well-being, the sense of relief and safety demonstrates how familial bonds and familiar voices can serve as powerful anchors for emotional stability (Clark, 2020, pp. 6-7).

The contrast between the nightmarish fear and the calm of returning to bed with his brother underscores the significance of close relationships in lightening fear. The reassurance derived from the presence of his brother, the comforting smell of his sweat, and his father's return illustrate how emotional and sensory comforts can provide stability amidst fear and anxiety. Shorts is finding solace in the routine and the familiarity of home, reflecting the human tendency to seek comfort and normalcy after experiencing trauma and fear (Sandler et al., 2019, pp. 4-7).

## CONCLUSION

In *The Night*, Shorts' encounters with death through his grandfather, sister, and the ravine show how children struggle with mortality, fear, and the unknown. His grandfather's death introduces him to the concept of loss, highlighting a child's limited cognitive ability to understand the impact of death fully. The suddenness of his sister's death adds another emotional aspect to his understanding, pointing to the complexity of familial bonds and the long-lasting impact of her absence in daily life. The ravine raises these experiences, presenting as a metaphor for fear, vulnerability, and existential



dread, especially when he sees his mother, a figure of strength overwhelmed by anxiety. These experiences show how children rely on family to overcome fear and grief for emotional stability. Children who are exposed to death or traumatic events need supportive environments and trusted caregivers so they can control their emotions and fears effectively. Caregivers could try to communicate openly about loss and explain it with age-appropriate words. This can help them to understand grief and develop coping mechanisms. Caregivers' reactions significantly affect how children identify safety and manage fear, focusing on the need for emotional stability from trusted adults during times of hardship. Future research could explore the long-term psychological effects of early childhood exposure to death and how it influences emotional development in later stages of life. Moreover, studies could examine the role of literature and parental education in helping children process fear and grief, as well as how cultural differences shape a child's understanding of mortality. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of various grief counseling approaches to different developmental stages may provide valuable insights for caregivers and educators.

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