



THE GOD OF MISCHIEF'S INNER CONFLICTS: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF LOKI

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Abstract: Loki, from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is one of the most captivating and intriguing characters to have ever graced the big screen. His character is one that straddles the line between hero and villain. This paper attempts to read Loki through the lens of psychoanalysis by examining Loki's motivations, actions, and personality traits and exploring how they align with Karen Horney's Theory of Neurosis. Through a Horneyan perspective, the paper analyses the neurotic patterns that can be identified in Loki's behaviour, such as his need for power, his need for approval, and his feelings of inferiority. The study considers the impact of external factors, such as Loki's troubled upbringing and his relationship with his adoptive family, on his neurosis. The purpose of this research is to illuminate the psychological motivations and conflicts that underlie Loki's actions and provide insights into his nuanced personality.

Index Terms - Loki, Psychoanalysis, Neurosis, Karen Horney, Marvel Cinematic Universe

I. INTRODUCTION

"Nobody is a villain in their own story. We're all the heroes of our own stories."— George R.R. Martin

Loki, the adopted brother of Thor, is one of the many memorable characters the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is home to. Also known as the "God of Mischief," he is a trickster and master of illusions. He is astute, intelligent, and skilled at manipulating others. Portrayed by actor Tom Hiddleston, Loki was introduced in *Thor* (2011) and has since been featured in five other movies, including *The Avengers* (2012), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). His story is continued in the television series *Loki* (2021). Since his very first appearance, Loki has been a captivating and dynamic character whom the audience has grown to love and sympathise with.

Often portrayed as a calculating trickster, Loki exploits deception and chaos to further his own selfish interests and seize control. His character is complicated because it's not always evident what drives him. Loki's role in the MCU is tricky to categorise. He can be either a villain or a hero, depending on the circumstances and his personal goals. He often acts out of spite and a desire to prove himself, but also out of love and a desire to protect those he cares about. This ambiguity in his character makes it possible for the audience to relate to him, making his tale all the more engrossing and engaging.

Over the course of his appearances in the MCU, Loki has undergone significant character development, evolving from a mischievous trickster to a more nuanced and complicated character. He has displayed a range of emotions, from rage and bitterness to vulnerability and remorse, and has faced numerous challenges that have tested his loyalties and sense of self. He possesses both heroic and villainous traits, which have been displayed through his elaborate character arc. This dichotomy between good and evil makes Loki unique and allows the audience to form their own opinions on whether he is a villain or a hero, ultimately

creating an engaging character who is much more than a typical villain. His inner conflict between these two sides of himself and his ability to shift between villainy and heroism make him a dynamic personality. Although powerful, he is nonetheless vulnerable. His multifaceted nature makes him a unique villain that viewers can sympathise with while still being a formidable and dangerous foe. His evolution across the movies is significant, as his struggle between the sides of himself carries the narrative forward.

Loki's psychology is extensively explored throughout the MCU, particularly in the later films and the television series. His inner conflicts serve as the cornerstone of his personality, which grants him an ironic complexity as a villain. His insecurities cause him to frequently engage in unspeakable acts that he would not otherwise do, making him both a victim and an antagonist. Loki's characterization serves to explore the complexity of human nature, making him a character worthy of further exploration.

Many studies have been conducted on Loki in relation to Norse mythology as well as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In her article, "I am the Monster Parents Tell Their Children About at Night: The Marvel Films' Loki as Gothic Antagonist," Alice Nuttall suggests that Loki's characterization incorporates several Gothic themes, such as the Gothic idea of the unstable and fragmented body since Loki is a shape-shifter. Several scholars have studied the sexuality and gender identity of Loki. For instance, in his work, "Loki: Thoughts on the Nature of the God, a Queer Reading," Lar Romsdal argues that Loki is more than just a trickster deity and that knowing Loki's role in the pantheon might help us better comprehend Norse conceptions of gender identity and sexuality. He uses the mythology of Loki to argue that some Norse people may have had a queer or fluid view of gender identity and sexuality before the advent of Christianity, akin to some of our modern Western understandings. Similar to this, in her work "Loki's Gender Fluidity and Bisexuality in Norse Mythology and in Modern Adaptations," Alice Martinelli analyses how the Norse god Loki's capabilities for shape-shifting have been rendered into gender fluidity and bisexuality in contemporary media such as Marvel Comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Despite the growing interest in Loki's psychology, there hasn't been much study of how psychoanalytical theories can be used to analyse Loki's personality. One exception is Helena Bassil-Morozow's "Loki Then and Now: The Trickster Against Civilization," in which she suggests that Loki's trickster nature can be understood through the lens of Jungian psychology, which emphasises the importance of archetypes and the collective unconscious. The article explores the psychological significance of the trickster for the contemporary individual by examining Loki's origins in the Icelandic Edda as well as the commodification of the character by Hollywood.

It is possible to interpret Loki's complicated and dynamic psychological state in various ways. This paper is an attempt to read Loki through the lens of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a means of examining a character's anxiety or desire that affects their action and behaviour. By applying Karen Horney's Theory of Neurosis, this paper aims to illuminate the inner conflicts and motives that steer Loki's actions.

This paper employs a qualitative research design in order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of Loki's inner conflicts. The primary materials chosen for the study are the movies in which Loki appears, i.e., *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). A methodical search of pertinent databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest, produced the secondary materials used in this study. The chosen materials were thoroughly read and examined. The process involved a close reading of the primary materials to identify how Loki's motivations, actions, and personality traits align with Horney's Theory of Neurosis. During the reading process, notes were made to record observations and insights.

II. KAREN HORNEY AND THE THEORY OF NEUROSIS

Karen Horney (1885–1952), the German psychoanalyst who strongly questioned the tenets of the Freudian school, is widely considered a Neo-Freudian. Her theory of neurosis, which she formulated, still remains influential. Compared to her contemporary psychoanalysts, Horney had a unique perspective on neurosis. She defined neurosis as the "psychic disturbance brought by fears and defences against these fears, and by attempts to find compromise solutions for conflicting tendencies" (Horney 28-29). Contrary to Freud, Horney believed that culture, as opposed to instinctual drives, has a significant influence on behaviour and psychological traits, particularly in neurosis. Her departure from traditional Freudian psychoanalytic thought

and her sui generis conceptualization of neurosis opened up a new avenue for advancement in psychoanalysis.

In her first book, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), she differentiates symptom neuroses from character neuroses. She gives priority to character neuroses because, from a cultural standpoint, character formation is more significant than symptoms. Primarily, it is character that influences behaviour. For Horney, anxiety is the dynamic centre of neuroses, which is an inordinate response to danger. It differs from fear in that the danger is concealed and personal. Character neuroses are characterised by "basic anxiety" from childhood that serves as their essential component. Basic anxiety and basic hostility are inextricably linked by the pervasive sense of being alone and powerless in a hostile world. She believed that a variety of environmental variables could contribute to this anxiety, but in the fifth chapter of the same book, "The Basic Structure of Neuroses," Horney illustrates how the manifestation of neurosis is frequently due to distorted parent-child relationships. This could include, for instance, parents who are controlling, uncaring, insouciant, or unpredictable; who do not honour a child's needs or offer support; who display derogatory perspectives and either insufficient or ample admiration; or parents who broke promises and lacked sincere warmth and affection, which Horney refers to as the "basic-evil."

Horney posited that a child, as a response to poor parenting, could develop the perception that the parents were hypocrites. As a result, the child feels vulnerable and deserted in a vicious world and is driven to defend himself against malevolence and incertitude. He organises his behaviour to protect him from these adverse situations, which gives him a sense of security. The child develops what Horney refers to as "ad hoc strategies" in an effort to navigate his environment, including securing affection, servility, power, and withdrawal. These strategies served as the foundation for Horney's tripartite concept of orientations.

These original four drives outlined by Horney were expanded to ten neurotic trends in her third book, *Self-Analysis* (1942). According to her, these strategies will grow more obsessive and inflexible, eventually evolving into neurotic trends. These needs include the neurotic need for affection and approval, the need for a dominating partner, the need to confine one's life within specific boundaries, the need for power, the need to exploit others, the need for prestige, the need for personal admiration, the need for personal achievement, the need for independence and self-sufficiency, and the need for perfection and unassailability. The individual's life becomes centred on meeting these needs, which can result in distorted thinking and behaviour patterns.

These ten neurotic trends are reconfigured again in Horney's fourth book, *Our Inner Conflicts* (1946), which encapsulates and expands all her previous works. She develops her tripartite concept of orientations, which refers to the ways in which individuals cope with feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty in their lives. She argues that there are three different ways in which individuals can move interpersonally: the need for intimacy and connection fosters the move *towards* others, i.e., the compliant type; the need for autonomy and self-reliance encourages a move *away* from others, i.e., the detached type; and the need for self-assertion and friction cultivates the move *against* others, i.e., the aggressive type. All three are present in every individual. However, neurotic individuals persistently prefer one of the three neurotic orientations. In some circumstances, all orientations appear to be equally manifest, which leads to conflict, chaos, and confusion. As a result, the individual experiences constant inner conflict, which Horney calls the "basic conflict."

In order to resolve the inner conflict and attain a sense of integrity, the individual attempts four solutions: repressing all but one trend and trying to live by a single set of motivations; detaching, withdrawing from people and situations; developing what Horney refers to as the "idealised image," an unconscious self-portrait in which his internal contradictions are resolved; and externalising his inner conflicts, viewing them as conflicts between himself and the exterior world rather than within himself.

Here, the idealised image is recognised as a solution to resolve the inner conflict that allows neurotic individuals to experience harmony and wholeness. Horney, however, had already acknowledged that the idealised image, because of its profound impact on the complete psyche, is perhaps the most significant of the solutions. The idealised image has been referred to as the child and parent of neurotic development. Horney demonstrates in *Our Inner Conflicts* how a person's attempts to resolve inner conflicts lead to the development of an idealised image, which simultaneously causes a new personality rupture that is almost more perilous than the real one.

According to Horney, the idealised image is an image of what the neurotic thinks he is or, at the time, feels he can or should be. The individual crafts an idealised version of himself in an effort to harmonise contradictory inclinations within him by concealing or reconciling conflicting traits. The idealised image is a part conscious and part unconscious, glorified and fabricated, idea of the self. It is glorified as an outcome of the admiration the neurotic individual accords himself and believes he gets. This image is crafted out of the individual's actual, if exaggerated, and imagined qualities.

As neurotics begin to believe in the reality of their idealised selves, they start to incorporate it into every aspect of their lives, including their objectives, notions of who they are, and their interactions with other people. Horney termed this extensive quest towards the realisation of the ideal self the neurotic search for glory. Instead of self-realisation, the neurotic individuals go on a "search for glory" that will enable them to realise their idealised selves. The idealised self, however, is an impossibility that will never materialise. As a result, neurotic individuals magnify the self-hate they were trying to alleviate, which culminates in the "despised self." This is one of the "vicious circles" that are characteristic of Horney's thought. Meanwhile, the "actual self," which comprises one's strengths, weaknesses, flaws, failures, and triumphs, exists at any given moment.

Bernard J. Paris, in his book *Imagined Human Beings*, explains the relevance of Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theories to the analysis of fictional characters. He says, "The fact that Horney works well with literature from a wide variety of periods and cultures tells us something about both the power of her theory and the enduring features of human behaviour." He was taught to interpret fictional characters primarily in figurative and thematic terms, like the majority of literature students. But when he looked at realistically drawn characters from a Horneyan perspective, he realised that "there was an immense amount of psychological detail that literary criticism had simply ignored." He says, "These characters were not simply functions in a text or encoded messages from the author but were imagined human beings whose thoughts, feelings, and actions made sense in motivational terms" (Paris 6).

Loki's psychology, motives, and actions can be further understood and analysed by the application of Karen Horney's Theory of Neurosis. The premise of Horney's theory is that unresolved childhood issues might culminate in maladaptive behaviours. This is evident in Loki's situation, since his issues with acceptance and identity are at the heart of his quest for power. He is driven by a need to prove himself and gain recognition, which is often taken to extremes in his various schemes throughout the MCU.

III. LOKI'S INNER CONFLICTS

Unlike his origins in Norse mythology, Loki in the MCU is a descendant of the Frost Giants (the Jotun), an ancient race of merciless and lawless titans long acknowledged as the arch-enemies of the Asgardians. He is the legitimate son of the King of the Frost Giants, Laufey. Ages ago, Odin engaged in a protracted battle between Asgard and Jotunheim, ultimately defeating Laufey. In the aftermath of the battle, he found Loki in the temple, abandoned and presumed dead due to his unusually small size as the baby of a giant. With the hope of reuniting the kingdoms in the future and establishing peace among the Nine Realms through him, Odin took Loki to the Realm Eternal, Asgard, to be raised as his son and a prince. However, Loki was kept from knowing the truth about his ancestry.

Growing up in Asgard, Loki always felt like an outsider, as he looked different from the Asgardians, with fair complexion and golden hair, while Loki looked pale and had dark hair. His years of Asgardian fostering and the knowledge he ingested along with his brother Thor contributed to his perception of himself. All-Father Odin, the King of Asgard, instilled in them an understanding of the duties connected with ruling Asgard and preserving peace among the Nine Realms. But he always said that only one of them would ascend to the throne, even though both of them were born to be kings. Upon entering adulthood, Loki realised that Odin always favoured Thor and grew to feel resentful and jealous of him, knowing that he was the future king of Asgard and would ultimately ascend to the throne.

Throughout his life, Loki felt as though he was living in the shadow of his fearless and confident brother, Thor. He saw these qualities as positive and valuable. In pursuit of self-worth, he constantly compared himself to Thor, but he struggled to see these qualities in himself. He battled with self-doubt, was overly sensitive, and occasionally misbehaved. Knowing that Loki felt dwarfed by his brother's physical

skills, his mother Frigga taught him the craft of sorcery, hoping that this would counteract their differences and provide him with a feeling of expertise. But he constantly lamented his perceived status as the "lesser" son of Odin.

Odin unveiled the truth regarding Loki's parentage during Thor's exile to Midgard, i.e., Earth, which was the outcome of Loki's cunning plot. Loki experiences a deep, self-hating pang when he discovers the horrifying truth about his ancestry. His sense of self crumbles beneath the crushing burden of guilt, treachery, and isolation. Everything began to make sense to him at that very moment. The ensuing breakdown in their connection and Loki's realisation of his true identity as the enemy's son drastically alter his perception of himself. In this newer structure, his early experiences of ineptitude and abnormality are given a new dimension: Loki was unwanted and forsaken. He turns towards this entirely novel, extremely threatening tale: His actual guardians spurned him and prevented him from assuming his rightful position as a ruler, a person of authority. His foster parents considered him a political pawn and reared him while subjecting him to the perpetual agony of restricting his opportunities and denying him access to a throne, belongingness, and love.

In a nutshell, one may describe the bond between Loki, Thor, and Odin as "complicated." Though initially kind and generous, Loki, over time, views Odin and Thor as more thorns in his life that keep him from blossoming into the powerful ruler he was supposed to become. Loki does, however, have more affection and love for his adoptive mother, Frigga, than he does for the other members of his family. Loki feels resentment for Odin's deceit after discovering the truth about his parentage. He thinks the All-Father saw him as a 'monster' unfit for the Asgardian crown. His constant feelings of inferiority and jealousy of Thor are fuelled by this. Thor, however, never loses faith in Loki's potential for greater things.

This distorted relationship is at the root of Loki's neurosis. Odin lacked genuine warmth and affection, which according to Horney is the "basic-evil". Due to Odin's poor parenting, Loki came to believe that the All-Father was a hypocrite. He asserted that Odin had never intended to place a Frost Giant on the Asgardian throne and had only saved him as a political tool for peace, not out of compassion. He consequently experienced a sense of helplessness and abandonment in a hostile environment and was motivated to defend himself from hostility and unpredictability. This explains why Loki is constantly calculating. Just as time never stops, he is always scheming.

Loki exhibits a number of neurotic trends, including the neurotic need for affection and approval, the need for power, the need to exploit others, the need for prestige, and the need for personal achievement and admiration. Throughout the films, Loki demonstrates a strong desire for affection and approval from others, particularly from Odin. He feels inferior to Thor and seeks to prove himself worthy of the title "Odinson". For example, Loki welcomes Laufey to Asgard to slay Odin while he is in his Odinsleep and take back the casket. However, upon entering Asgard, Loki illudes Laufey and murders him with Odin's Gungir spear as a ruse to strike Jotunheim using the Bifrost, which would eventually annihilate the planet, to prove that he is a worthy candidate for the position of king of Asgard.

Loki came to believe that one's worth was inextricably linked to their power as a result of his upbringing in Asgard, where he was exposed to the extravagant world of gods, rulers, and nobility. Yearning for prominence and recognition, he retained the strong conviction that he was meant to be a great ruler. Loki's desire for power, however, mutated into a neurotic need for power after discovering the truth about his ancestry, which revealed that his adoptive father never intended for him to become a king, while his biological father abandoned him and foiled him from becoming the legitimate king. Since he could not rule Asgard or Jotunheim, he turned to Midgard, his brother's favourite realm. He submits to The Other, the supreme leader of the Chitauri, an ancient alien race, and to Thanos, who grants Loki supremacy over Midgard in exchange for the Tesseract. He was presented with a Scepter, which served as a tool for mind control, allowing him to exert influence over others.

He seeks to establish himself as a powerful figure on Earth and is willing to manipulate and harm others to achieve his goal. Loki often exploits others for his own gain. He manipulates and deceives those around him in order to gain an advantage or further his own interests. He used Clint Barton, better known as Hawkeye, and Dr. Erik Selvig as puppets in his scheme, for instance. He controlled them using the Chitauri Scepter, tailoring them according to his demands. He craves admiration and attention, and he is willing to engage in grandiose displays to achieve this. For instance, in *The Avengers*, Loki arrives on Earth with an army of alien invaders in an effort to impress and intimidate his enemies. Loki also has a strong need for personal achievement and admiration, and he is driven to prove himself superior to others.

Drawing upon Karen Horney's tripartite concept of orientations, Loki, in an attempt to cope with his emotions, exhibits all three orientations at different times, depending upon the situation and his own psychological requirements. At times, Loki displays a moving *towards* orientation in his interactions with his family, especially his adoptive father Odin. He seeks validation and acceptance from them, and he feels wounded when he is rejected. He may act in ways that please others out of a need for approval, as when he pretends to team up with Thor and the Avengers to fight a common foe. He frequently exhibits a moving *against* orientation as he seeks to manipulate and exploit others for his own purposes. He can be deceitful and manipulative, and he often engages in acts of violence and aggression to achieve his goals. Occasionally, Loki exhibits a moving *away* orientation in his interactions with others, as he seeks to distance himself from his family and reject their expectations of him. When he feels threatened or vulnerable, he often withdraws from interpersonal relationships and can be emotionally distant and aloof. In certain circumstances, it seems as though all orientations are equally manifest, which causes Loki to experience constant inner conflict. Although Loki's interpersonal actions are intricate and multifaceted, his neurotic personality continuously favours the moving against others orientation. Moving against orientation is characterised by a drive to dominate and control others. This orientation expresses a need for power and control, and it frequently shows up as animosity and aggression towards others.

Loki develops an idealised version of himself as a means to end his inner conflict and attain a sense of unity. He portrays himself in a glorified way, especially as the god of mischief and master of illusions. He sees himself as a trickster and manipulator who is always one step ahead of the competition. His abilities as a shapeshifter and illusionist, which enable him to project any picture of himself he wishes, further support this idealised image of himself. He does, in fact, draw strength from the nexus of sorcery and deceit. His illusions function as a powerful realisation of his actual self. He was aware that he was broken and imperfect and was unable to live with himself. He always conjured illusions to try to astound and intimidate others because he never wanted anyone to notice his shortcomings. The idealised self, however, is an impossibility that can never be achieved. Loki's meticulously crafted illusions mask a perpetual agony. His self-image diminishes and disappears, becoming hollow and insignificant, just like his spells. Loki's fragile cloak of magic reveals his overwhelming dread that he is barely anything of value. Loki invariably feels wounded and helpless at his core. His concept of self, or how he perceives his own characteristics, convictions, and role in the world, is brittle and susceptible to a multitude of criticisms. His mind is constantly being told that he is inferior and inept. He employs his most valuable skills—his cunning intellect and sorcery—to distract others and conjure illusions to divert their focus from his flaws.

One thing that Loki enjoys the most, apart from making grand entrances, is announcing himself: "I am Loki, of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose." Loki genuinely believes he has a duty to ascend to the throne, torment and conquer as many people as he can, and to feel worthy of glory and contentment. As a neurotic individual, he embarked on a quest for glory in an effort to actualize his idealised self. But when he discovered that it was impossible, it heightened his hatred of himself. According to Horney, an individual with a neurotic search for glory will never be satisfied with who he is because he will start to detest and loathe himself when he realises that his actual self can never satisfy his idealised self's unquenchable demands.

Through an absurd performance with Loki as the protagonist in *Thor: Ragnarok*, we get a sense of Loki's unfulfilled desires. Aware that he can never experience these relationships in reality, Loki assumed the throne while masquerading as Odin and constructed scenarios that surround him with adoration, exuberance, and love.

Loki always struggled with his identity: whether he is an Asgardian or a Jotunn, whether he is Odinson or Laufeyson. In his mind, Asgard was his true home; Jotunheim was never his. But he always stood out and was treated differently by everyone. But in *Avengers: Infinity War*, Loki addressed himself as "Odinson," finally accepting Odin as his father and Thor as his brother, before dying a ruthless end at the hands of the mad Titan Thanos. He realised that his "glorious purpose"—for which he gave his life—was to save both his brother and what was left of Asgard. Thus, Loki became an Avenger.

IV. CONCLUSION

The character of Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe presents a rich and intricate example for the application of Karen Horney's theory of neurosis. The neurotic trends of Loki, such as his neurotic needs for affection and approval, power, prestige, personal achievement, and admiration, can be illustrated through the analysis of his troubled upbringing and interpersonal behaviour. Loki's fabrication of an idealised version of himself and neurotic search for glory, evidenced by his infamous declaration of having a "glorious purpose," further highlight his deep-seated inner conflicts and psychological struggles.

As a whole, this paper has demonstrated the relevance and usefulness of Horney's theory of neurosis in analysing the psyche of fictional characters, particularly those with complex motivations and behavioural patterns like Loki. By understanding the underlying neurotic needs and coping mechanisms at play in Loki's character, we can gain deeper insights into his motivations and the reasons for his actions throughout the MCU. Such a study may have relevance not only for the analysis of fictional characters but also for our comprehension of real-life individuals and their psychological makeup.

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