

From Self-Doubt and Utter Anxiety to Calm Fear: Language, Perception, and the Shining Figure in Jon Fosse's *A Shining* *

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Abstract

Jon Fosse's A Shining redefines fear as an evolving psychological state rather than a singular emotion. This paper explores how fear evolves through cognitive and linguistic processes, reshaping Fosse's protagonist's perception and emotional experience. The journey unfolds through pervasive self-doubt and an overwhelming sense of existential anxiety, ultimately leading to a transformative calm fear, catalysed by the mysterious "shining" figure, illustrating fear's fluid nature. His oscillation between rational thought and fragmented internal dialogue reveals language as an active force in constructing and deconstructing reality. Integrating phenomenological insights from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and existential reflections from Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, this paper argues that Fosse's portrayal of fear challenges conventional understandings. Fear functions as both a defiant emotional state and an epistemological force, urging the protagonist and the reader to confront uncertainty, dissolve self-boundaries, and reimagine the interplay between language and lived experience.

Keywords: Fear, Uncertainty, Anxiety, Perception, Language

Introduction

Jon Fosse, the 2023 Nobel Laureate in Literature, is recognized for his minimalist prose and plays that "express the unsayable" (*A Silent Language* 3). Writing primarily in Nynorsk, Fosse has cultivated an expansive and diverse literary corpus encompassing novels, plays, poetry, essays, and children's literature, that has been translated to more than 50 languages. His work is marked by a profound introspection, frequently delving into themes of silence, mortality, and spiritual yearning. Such themes reflect his comprehensibility regarding both human nature and the accompanied emotional states, like fear, anxiousness, loneliness, uncertainty and also transcendental quest. Fosse doesn't shy away from producing characters that contradict themselves, swaying back and forth, from one emotion to another. Through his portrayal of "flawed" characters and authentic human interactions (Sundae 58), he creates a space where the innermost unsaid thoughts find voice and shape. His deliberate use of repetitions, silences and a pared-down linguistic style enable the characters to express, what has been termed as, "the unsayable" (*A Silent Language* 3). The term 'unsayable' can be defined as experiences carrying sundry and manifold emotions that generally cannot be expressed. Through the spaces between words, Fosse engages the readers to fill in the gap and dwell in the minds of the characters, allowing for "deep cathartic moments" (Sundae 59). He gives "words to silent speech" by making use of 'pauses' and 'repetitions' (*A Silent Language* 3), thereby suggesting

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the presence of silence lingering in every stage of character's experiences. Fosse places no boundaries on emotional expression, allowing thoughts to flow freely and uninhibited. It evokes the entire spectrum of human emotion, capturing even the most nuanced experiences. He uses language that explains the continuous flow of thoughts, creating a breeding place for the 'unsayable' to be vocalised. His characters are delineated in an unfiltered manner that focuses on the pauses between the said words, that is the spoken thoughts, thereby unravelling the persistent silence existing within the human mind.

Fosse's literary vision is also shaped by mystical elements and a formative near-death experience in childhood. Glimpses of this formative incident has been described by Fosse in his work, *Scenes from a Childhood*. It has profoundly shaped his life, from fear to freedom, leaving a lasting impression that ultimately guided him toward becoming a writer. He recalled encountering a kind of shimmering light - an experience he described as very peaceful, which transformed him in a fundamental way. Fosse's oeuvre invites critical reflection on the interplay between language and silence, presence and absence, and the human desire to articulate the ineffable. Fosse's most recent work, *A Shining*, bears autobiographical resonances, particularly through the depiction of the shining figure, which significantly influences the protagonist's mental, emotional, and psychological transformation. In *A Shining*, fear is not screamed or named—it is circled, echoed, and felt through repetition and silence, an emotional texture that mimics the circularity of inner turmoil.

Philosophical Frameworks

Fosse's *A Shining* challenges traditional literary and psychological representations of fear. Viewed externally, fear has often been looked at with disdain (Westermayr 250). It is commonly regarded as an instinctive response to both actual and perceived threats (Gullone 429). It has always been seen as an emotion marked by a looming sense of dread, driving a primal urge to escape (Öhman 710). However, rather than depicting it as a simple, unidimensional emotion, Fosse offers a narrative where fear is in constant flux, an ever-evolving state that mirrors the protagonist's internal conflict. This paper examines the fluid nature of fear, shaped by cognitive disarray, the interplay of language, and the transformation of perception. By engaging with phenomenology and existentialism, primarily through the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger, this investigation situates Fosse's narrative at the intersection of literature, philosophy, and psychology. The paper argues that the "shining" figure in the text proves a critical turning point in the protagonist's psychological journey, catalysing a metamorphosis in his emotional state and offering a radical epistemological perspective on fear. This analysis aims not only to elucidate the nuances of Fosse's depiction of fear and anxiety but also to underline the active role of language in shaping and reshaping human experience.

Fear and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception in *A Shining*

Fosse's portrayal of fear is marked by its lack of fixity. As the protagonist navigates a stark, desolate environment, his experience of fear continuously transforms in intensity and quality. In contrast to a static emotion, fear is a dynamic interplay of internal states that constantly evolves with new stimuli. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (M. Merleau-Ponty 3) argues that perception is not merely a passive reflection of the external world but an active, embodied process through which reality is constructed. His ideas suggest that perception is fundamentally creative, providing a framework in which the subject actively synthesizes sensory input with prior experience. He contends that the immediate impression of perception itself is "not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable" (M. Merleau-Ponty 4). Rather than centring attention on the perceived object, the focus should be on

engaging with the experience of perception itself,ⁱ highlighting the contrast between the visual and the perceived.

In *A Shining*, this philosophy manifests in how the protagonist's fear is inextricably linked with his perception of the world. What he visualizes and the images perceived in his mind directly shape his actions and thought process, bearing full responsibility for his decisions. The surrounding "darkness" (*A Shining* 17) stifles his thoughts, rendering him incapable of responding swiftly in challenging situations. In contrast, the "shining presence" (*A Shining* 20) emerges as an anchor amid the disintegration of his thoughts. Rather than acting as a mere external presence, a figure or one may call it a visual image, stabilizes his inner chaos, enabling him to transition from fragmented, erratic internal speech to a more reflective, structured dialogue. His perception of the darkness and the shining figure is subtly fused into his choice of words and tone. His language shifts from disjointed phrases to coherent reflections, illustrating Merleau-Ponty's notion that perception culminates in objects, which, once established, seem to account for all past experiences of them (*Phenomenology of Perception* 77). Language becomes more than a tool for recounting events - it serves as a dynamic medium where fear shifts its meaning based on the objects he encounters and how he perceives them. The phenomenological perspective deepens our understanding of Fosse's narrative by highlighting how fear is intrinsically linked to sensory perception, encouraging inquiry into whether a distinction exists between "the direct object of fear and the effects of being frightened by it" (Hollander 868). The external world - the dark forest, the barren road, the abandoned houses - does not merely serve as a backdrop but emerges as objects of fear, intricately interwoven into the protagonist's inner experience. This multifaceted interaction propels fear through a series of evolving transitions. Fear's transformation is both emotional and epistemological, demonstrating that the interaction with the world is shaped by language and the framework of perception. The protagonist's reality is translated through his "sensations" that can be defined as unfiltered perceptions, pure impressions (Merleau-Ponty 5). These sensations become the primary vessels of fear, expanding into different versions of themselves.

Self-Doubt, Anxiety and Sartre's Concept of Being and Nothingness in *A Shining*

Self-doubt is a recurring motif in *A Shining*, characterized as an "existential state" (Hathaway 4) that undermines the notion of a stable self. Hathaway describes this state to be an experiential disruption in one's sense of self, where one's feelings are not "solid or real or good," and ultimately leads to a diminished, almost "dead self" (4). This internal disintegration is vividly illustrated by the protagonist's ceaseless self-questioning. His internal dialogue, rife with repeated inquiries such as "And what was I doing on this forest road?" (*A Shining* 9), exemplifies a mental collapse where uncertainty proliferates and the sense of self erodes.

Drawing on the existential tradition, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, provides a philosophical framework that supports this interpretation. Sartre posits that fear is not simply the product of external threats; rather, it is born of a confrontation with the inherent meaninglessness at the heart of existence. In other words, it is the awareness of nothingness and the void that gives rise to anxiety and self-doubt. In Fosse's narrative, the protagonist's inability to reconcile his internal cascade of questions mirrors Sartre's idea that the self is persistently at risk of dissolving into nothingness that "lies coiled in the heart of being- like a worm." (Sartre 56) Fosse's protagonist in *A Shining*, stares into a void, into the same "nothingness" (*A Shining* 7), making him more anxious about his every step. His anxiety, manifested in the relentless rehashing of seemingly mundane questions, becomes a symbolic encounter with the existential void.

An exemplary passage is found in the protagonist's musings on why he ventured onto the forest road:

“And what was I doing on this forest road. Why did I drive into the forest on it. What kind of idea was that. What was my reason for doing it...And so why did I drive onto the forest road then” (*A Shining* 9)

In this passage, the repetition of self-directed questions not only highlights the pervasive nature of his doubt but also intimates that his fear is deeply philosophical. As the protagonist grapples with these questions, his self-identity unravels, aligning with Sartrean existentialism where fear and anxiety are intertwined with the fragility of the self. Öhman considers both fear and anxiety as “overlapping” states, with fear evolving into anxiety when coping mechanisms falter (Öhman 710). For Sartre, anxiety stems from the realization that humans possess radical freedom, devoid of any predetermined essence or purpose. This freedom, while expansive, can be deeply unsettling as it compels individuals to confront their absolute responsibility in shaping their existence. Fosse’s protagonist exemplifies Sartre’s notion of the interplay between human freedom and self-awareness. Sartre distinguishes between being-in-itself (a fixed, unconscious existence) and being-for-itself (a conscious being that experiences anxiety due to its awareness of choice and responsibility). The protagonist is free to respond in any manner he chooses, yet his surroundings predominantly steer him toward a state of worry, deepening his anxiety. In contrast, the shining figure embodies being-in-itself, possessing an existence that remains beyond conscious definition.

The environment he traverses, marked by abandoned houses and neglected, rundown farms, is the metaphor for his inner state. The desolation of these spaces reflects his internal desolation. The physical decay of the surroundings becomes an external manifestation of his crumbling self, reinforcing the inseparability of internal and external worlds. This intimate connection between the deteriorating physical landscape and the internal collapse of identity is a potent illustration of existential anxiety.

Beyond its function as mere communication, language in *A Shining* plays an active role in the construction and deconstruction of reality. Elham Abdullah Ghobain et. al. contends that “language reflects and shapes emotional experiences.” (Ghobain, Mahdi and Al-Nofaie 2) At the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist’s internal dialogue is fraught with disjointed phrases, erratic repetition, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty. This chaotic language mirrors his internal anxiety, suggesting that his thoughts are as fragmented as his feelings. Kristen et. al. (Kristen A. Lindquist 3) suggest that language is not a passive medium; it actively constructs our perception of reality. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist’s language begins to crystallize. His once chaotic monologue gradually gives way to more structured reflections, a transformation that occurs alongside the reduction in his anxiety. The structuring of his thoughts through language simultaneously reorganizes his perception of fear. In one pivotal segment, his transition is evidenced as, “It was nice to look at. It was weirdly nice to look at. The white presence and me” (*A Shining* 19). Here, language performs a dual function. It conveys the external observation of the “shining” figure and a profound internal change, from a state of fragmented terror to one of reflective calm. Through language, the protagonist begins to master his fear, suggesting that the naming and organizing of emotional experiences can lead to a more controlled and tempered state of mind. Thus, language in *A Shining* becomes a bridge between disparate cognitive states, actively shaping the contours of fear, guiding the character toward new epistemological insights, and validating that the language’s structure is critical to emotional experience as the experience itself.

A striking aspect of Fosse’s narrative is the constant oscillation between the protagonist’s conscious reasoning and his subconscious reflections. Early in the text, he vacillates between potential rational solutions and an overwhelming torrent of abstract sensations. For instance, he contemplates a pragmatic approach to his predicament, “Maybe I should try one more time to get the car free by hitting the gas, going forwards, then putting it in reverse. Forwards, backwards” (*A Shining* 11). However, this fleeting moment of logical thinking is swiftly

overtaken by sensory and abstract observations concerning his environment: “There’s the forest in front of me, it’s just a forest, I thought [...] Trees right next to one another, pines, pine trees.” (A Shining 7). This ongoing fluctuation between order and chaos encapsulates the protagonist’s struggle to maintain a coherent understanding of his situation. Hathaway observes that such “fluctuation and a conflict in thought and feeling” (Hathaway 4), lead to a deep-seated disorientation about what is real, what is possible, and what is inherently good. His vacillation is not mere indecision; it is a manifestation of an internal crisis where the delineation between external reality and internal experience begins to blur.

Utter Anxiety and Heidegger’s concept of Being in *A Shining*

This struggle resonates with Martin Heidegger’s concept of “angst”, either translated as “anxiety” or “dread” as delineated in his *Being and Time* (Heidegger 227). Heidegger argues that anxiety emerges when the everyday frameworks that ground our understanding disintegrate, exposing us to a profound uncertainty and a sense of ‘nothingness’ that challenges our conventional assumptions about existence. He refers to ‘being’ as the “darkest of all” (Heidegger 23). Heidegger examines the nature of being through an existential lens, acknowledging its indefinability while affirming its intrinsic significance. Rather than a fixed concept, being emerges as an evolving, deeply embedded experience that shapes individual existence. Such a reflection is seen where, amid his disjointed reasoning, the protagonist is compelled to confront not a singular external threat, but the pervasive void at the core of existence. His inability to settle into a stable mode of thought is emblematic of an encounter with the absurd, an existential crisis where language and logic no longer offer solace, and the self is cast adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

“But I can’t stay sitting in the car. I need to find someone [...] That’s why I can’t just stay sitting here in the car. I have to get out. I have to go into the forest. I have to find someone [...] Find someone as soon as I could. Find someone who could help me, but what was I thinking [...]” (A Shining 13-14)

The cyclical nature of his oscillations, where moments of clarity are quickly submerged by the next wave of confusion, is a testament to the destabilizing effect of fear. As his thoughts spiral, the protagonist’s capacity to process fear through rational mechanisms diminishes. The result is a perpetual state of disorientation, reflecting the deeper philosophical truth that anxiety is not eliminated but continuously reconfigured through both conscious and unconscious processes.

From Dread to Calm Fear: The Role of ‘Shining Figure’

Amidst the protagonist’s internal tumult, the appearance of the “shining” figure constitutes a critical turning point. Described initially in luminous, almost otherworldly terms as “a shining whiteness. An outline of a person. A person inside a shining whiteness” (A Shining 18) this figure immediately signals a marked shift in the protagonist’s internal state. The stark contrast between the oppressive darkness of his surroundings and the radiance of the figure brings clarity to his muddled thoughts. The figure’s effect is not only to abolish a detrimental fear but to stimulate within the protagonist a sense of fear, which Fosse terms as “a calm fear” (A Shining 17). In the wake of this encounter, the protagonist’s internal dialogue shifts noticeably. Where once his language reflecting self-doubt was riddled with hesitations and repetitive self-questioning, it now acquires a tone of reflective lucidity. He states, “It was nice to look at. It was weirdly nice to look at. The white presence and me” (A Shining 19)

This encapsulates the dual role of the shining figure: it acts as a stabilizing force and simultaneously as a symbol of hope, a beacon against the encroaching darkness. In this moment of clarity, the language becomes a measure of change. Encountering the luminous figure leads to the dissolution of self-doubt, allowing for the emergence of “faith as a deeper inner fidelity” (Hathaway 4). This transformation fosters a structured reflection in which fear, when anchored

to an entity beyond the tangible, one intrinsically linked to individual identity, transcends its initial distressing form and evolves into a state of profound psychological equilibrium.

The transformation likewise permeates his sensory experience. Despite the persistent physical chill, he perceives a subtle warmth radiating from the presence, a sensory interplay that signals a profound inner metamorphosis. His physical sensations shift along with his mental state. The ephemeral nature of his previous terror gives way to a more enduring, if paradoxical, calmness, a calm fear that hints at new possibilities for reconciliation with his inner self and the external world. Arguments advanced by supporters of this notion suggest that, rather than evading fear, a conscious embrace of it can precipitate significant insights into one's inner life (Haddad 3). Thus, the shining figure is far more than a narrative device; it represents the possibility of cognitive and emotional transformation. It anchors the protagonist's oscillations between despair and hope, underlining the idea that even in the deep recesses of anxiety, there lies a potential for renewal.

Fosse's narrative employs the physical environment as a metaphor for the internal states of his protagonist. The barren forest road, rundown houses, and neglected farms are not merely backdrops for his journey but are external mirrors of his inner disintegration. The depictions of these environments, "rundown houses are sad. Neglected houses. Houses no one cares about..." (A Shining 9-10) accentuate the pervasive sense of abandonment that haunts him. Such desolate imagery underpins his isolation and the erosion of self, where the internal and external landscapes converge.

This intermingling is particularly evident when the protagonist's self-doubt transforms into existential despair. His environment is no longer a separate, objective space; it becomes infused with the same uncertainty and decay that bedevil his mind. He experiences a loss of distinction between self and world, a theme central to existential thought. In this way, Fosse reflects Sartre's idea that our identity is inherently intertwined with the world, and fear arises not only from inner turmoil but also from recognizing our insignificance in an uncaring, vast universe. This external symbolism yields a broader cultural commentary on decay and neglect as metaphors for emotional disenfranchisement. The derelict settings implicitly critique modernity's failure to engender genuine connections, laying bare the psychological consequences of isolation in an impersonal landscape. Such themes invite comparisons to other works in existential and postmodern literature, where the environment becomes an active agent in shaping the narrative of despair and redemption.

One of the more intriguing elements in Fosse's depiction of fear is the emergence of what he terms "calm fear" (A Shining 17), a state, which at first glance, appears contradictory: it is fear stripped of its usual hallmarks of panic and anxiety, yet it remains an unmistakable presence. In traditional accounts, fear is synonymous with reactivity and overwhelming distress; however, here it is reconfigured into a more reflective, almost meditative condition.

This paradox reflects contemporary psychological theories that differentiate between acute, immobilizing fear and a more enduring form of anxiety that is subdued and introspective. Zeidner explains that in situations of prolonged uncertainty, fear can become intertwined with anxiety, a persistent state that subtly permeates all aspects of cognition (Zeidner and Matthews 5). The evolution of this emotion in Fosse's narrative suggests that the character no longer experiences fear as an immediate, explosive reaction. Instead, his transformation into calm fear indicates a trajectory where the catastrophic aspects of terror are tempered by moments of reflection and clarity.

The concept of calm fear challenges conventional distinctions between emotion and cognition. It is as if fear, once fully internalized and processed through language, is no longer a fleeting, paralyzing force but a persistent undercurrent that invites a deeper contemplation of human existence. Instead of a symptom to be eradicated, it becomes a catalyst for introspection, a necessary confrontation with the inherent uncertainties of life. Rather than fleeing from fear-

inducing scenarios, individuals might achieve greater psychological insight by understanding the roots and transformations of their fear (Haddad 3). Thus, the protagonist's journey toward embracing a calm fear is not a sign of defeat; it is an evolution that opens up new avenues for meaning-making. Fear, in its early and later forms, mirrors the contrast between darkness and light. In the presence of a shining figure, it shifts from a tormenting burden to an elevated state of being, one that emanates meaning and purpose from within.

Conclusion

The various threads of Fosse's narrative invite us to reconsider the role of fear in the human condition. Rather than an enemy to be vanquished, fear in *A Shining* is repositioned as an active force, one that is essential for the evolution of consciousness and identity. The interdisciplinary insights drawn from Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Heidegger, and contemporary cognitive linguistics collectively illuminate how fear permeates our emotional lives and the ways we construct our reality.

The narrative's recurrent oscillation between mental fragmentation and emerging lucidity ultimately suggests that fear compels a re-examination of the relationship between the self and the world. Where Fosse once depicted fear as an uncontrollable, destructive element, his work now invites us to accept it as a layered experience in the pursuit of meaning. The "shining" figure, as a transformative symbol, embodies this possibility: it stands as a beacon against the encroaching darkness, a reminder that even moments of profound despair may give rise to clarity, if only fleetingly.

This broader reading carries implications beyond literary analysis. In a cultural context increasingly marked by uncertainty and isolation, Fosse's exploration of fear resonates with contemporary struggles for identity, connection, and authenticity. Recognizing that fear is not monolithic but imbued with potential for transformation opens up new avenues for addressing both personal and collective anxieties. It encourages a view of the self that is agile enough to adapt to uncertainty and immature enough to recognize that even in the darkest moments, there lies the potential for renewed insight.

The integration of language as an active agent in the formation of perception suggests that cultivating a reflective, structured inner dialogue might serve as a therapeutic tool. If language can transform raw fear into a contemplative state of calm, then there is real promise in exploring narrative-based approaches to mental health, where rearticulating experiences might help reframe emotional responses. Such a perspective not only enriches literary scholarship but also contributes to broader discussions in psychology and philosophy regarding the management of existential doubt.

Endnotes

ⁱ "...it is because instead of attending to the experience of perception, we overlook it in favour of the object perceived. A visual field is not made up of limited views. But an object seen is made up of bits of matter, and spatial points are external to each other." (Merleau-Ponty 4)

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