

Analysis of David Prentiss Fight His Fear in *Chaos Walking* (2021): Fight-or-Flight Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Dystopian films often represent the dynamics of fear and power through conflict between characters, making them a relevant medium for examining human emotional responses in extreme situations. This study focuses on the character David Prentiss in the film Chaos Walking to analyze the forms of fear he experiences and the responses shown through the perspective of Fight-or-Flight theory. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with non-participatory observation techniques on selected scenes and dialogues that represent the character's emotional responses. Data are analyzed using interactive model, which includes reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that David Prentiss's primary fear is rooted in threats to his power, specifically from the arrival of the Violas and the presence of women without Noise. This fear is consistently responded to through a pattern of fighting manifested in aggression, psychological manipulation, propaganda, and structural violence. These findings confirm that fear of powerful figures can develop into a systematic mechanism of social control. This study highlights the relevance of Fight-or-Flight theory in the study of film literature and emphasizes the importance of a psychological approach to understanding the relationship between emotion, leadership, and power in cinematic representations.

Keywords: Chaos Walking; David Prentiss; fear; Fight-or-Flight theory

INTRODUCTION

Literature can be defined as a work filled with the author's feelings, expressions, and imaginative ideas through the medium of language. Through language as the primary medium, literature presents stories, conflicts, and characters that reflect human life while conveying social and cultural values (Ayesha Dar, 2022). Furthermore, literature serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying ideas, preserving cultural heritage, and instilling moral values across generations (Ogundokun, 2021). Literature has many forms, one of which is film. Film is a form of literary work that combines visual, sound, and narrative elements, representing conflict, ideology, and the dynamics of human behavior (Avatara et al., 2024) (Napitupulu, 2025). Films often express various dynamic genres, based on similarities in story elements such as plot, theme, visuals, and characters. The development of these genres is influenced by the interaction of various artistic elements and social factors, resulting in various film categories such as action, thriller, comedy, drama, and horror (Demeschenko, 2023). One of the most widely studied film genres is dystopian

films, which generally represent human fear of power, social control, and influencing the future, which is often manifested through antagonistic characters with dominant power and repressive tendencies (Akhtar & Bhat, 2025).

Chaos Walking (2021) is an adaptation of the novel *The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness. The film was released on April 8, 2021, directed by Doug Liman and produced by Alison Winter, Allison Shearmur, Doug Davison, and Erwin Stoff. This dystopian film tells the story of humanity's migration to a new planet in 2257 AD, approximately 64 years from Earth. The migration process is carried out in two generations with a departure gap, where the first generation has a larger population and therefore uses a larger capacity spaceship. The migration is expected to create a better life for the sustainability of humanity. However, they did not expect that the new world would give rise to a power upon entering the planet. This power is called *Noise*, which only appears in men and not in women. *Noise* allows everyone to see and hear the thoughts of men on the planet without having to be spoken or expressed. Men view *Noise* as both a strength and a weakness because it can be used to manipulate others if controlled, but becomes a disadvantage when uncontrolled because all thoughts can be read. The main conflict of this film begins with Todd Hewitt's encounter with Viola, a woman who does not have *Noise*, so her existence is considered a threat to the existing social order. David Prentiss as the main authority figure who has a fear that his power will collapse because Viola's presence tries to maintain her power through control, violence, and manipulation. Fear can be one of the reasons for the aggressive response that arises as a form of defense mechanism against the possibility of losing control or security (Jacobs et al., 2024).

David Prentiss is positioned as the main antagonist in *Chaos Walking*, representing an authoritarian leader with repressive tendencies in maintaining power. The main antagonist in dystopian films is usually depicted as the main authority figure who has control over society (Tarachand & Gediya, 2025). These actions are responses that David Prentiss gives as a form of resistance to overcome his fear. Aggressive reactions are often influenced by emotions that trigger motivation and so that individuals tend to respond aggressively to provocation, for example in physical fights (Hochstetler et al., 2014; Pham, 2007). From the perspective of the Fight-or-Flight Theory proposed by Walter B. Cannon, this response can be understood as a form of fight response, namely an automatic bodily and psychological reaction when an individual face a threat, which encourages aggressive response as an effort to defend oneself, position, and power (Cannon, 1932). Throughout the film, David Prentiss demonstrates violence, intimidation, and psychological manipulation as responses to overcome his fear. This aligns with Walter B. Cannon's Fight-or-Flight theory.

Walter Bradford Cannon was an American physiologist, professor, and chairman of the Department of Physiology at Harvard Medical School. He was the first to coin the term Fight-or-Flight Response in his book, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear, and Rage* (1915). Cannon (1915) states that when we face conflict, our bodies undergo physiological reactions that prepare us to confront or flee the threat. This approach has been used in several studies to analyze inner conflict and extreme character behavior (Top et al., 2024). This theory has become the "mother" of many theories about conflict responses. Nearly every current conflict theory involving emotions and response can be traced back to Cannon's original Fight-or-Flight response theory (Buss, 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The main idea of this theory is to examine how a person responds to the threats and stress they face. Cannon's theory states that fear and anger significantly influence human behavior, resulting in a fight response, which means fighting with aggression, or a flight response, which means the choice to flee (Cannon, 1929).

Fear and anger both play a crucial role in triggering the Fight-or-Flight response, but they activate different aspects of this defense mechanism. Fear primarily triggers the flight response, preparing an individual to avoid danger, while anger is more closely associated with

the fight response, motivating confrontation or aggression (Clayton et al., 2019; Valenta et al., 2020). The fight response is characterized by a tendency to confront a threat aggressively or domineeringly, with the goal of controlling the source of fear (Jacobs et al., 2024). This behavior can manifest through repressive actions, the use of violence, manipulation, and attempts to maintain control over others (Osborne et al., 2023). Conversely, the flight response occurs when an individual chooses to avoid the threat, withdraw, or flee from pressure (Furuyama et al., 2023). However, fear can trigger not only the flight response but also the fight response, depending on the context and the perceived ability to deal with the threat. In the case of David Prentiss, he chooses to fight because of his position of ultimate power in the film's narrative. Research shows that fear primarily motivates escape or flight response, but can also lead to defensive (fight) attacks when escape is not possible or when the individual feels they have sufficient strength to face the threat (Ungvari et al., 2025). Overall, fear serves as a motivational driver that initiates a fight response to help individuals deal with perceived threats more effectively (Jacobs et al., 2024).

The Fight-or-Flight response has broad implications. It is the foundation of various research streams and disciplines. In particular, it is fundamental to the study of stress, anxiety, and fear responses (Cannon, 1915; Öhman, 2008). Different fields within psychology apply the Fight-or-Flight response in various ways. For example, aviation psychology uses the Fight-or-Flight response to better understand how pilots respond to high-stress situations (Stokes & Kite, 2017). Clinical psychology and psychiatry study how maladaptive Fight-or-Flight responses contribute to mental health disorders such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Barlow, 2004). Endocrinology studies hormonal changes, specifically the role of adrenaline and cortisol, in triggering this response (Sheng et al., 2021). Communication studies have drawn analogous connections to how the Fight-or-Flight response influences interpersonal communication, particularly in conflict (Afifi & Afifi, 2009). Furthermore, military science has examined how soldiers react under the stress of combat and how to train for optimal responses (Boe & Hagen, 2015). Political science has considered how the Fight-or-Flight response can influence decision-making, particularly during crises (McDermott, 2004). Anthropology has sought to raise awareness of how context can shape genetic predispositions to stress responses, which influence individual and collective behavior in the face of stressors (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010).

Several previous studies have discussed the film *Chaos Walking* and its novel from various perspectives. Love & Fox (2021) explains that the *Chaos Walking* trilogy can be used as a space for critical reflection on power dynamics through the concepts of power-over, power-within, power-to, and power-with. Kertzer (2012) shows that the *Chaos Walking* trilogy depicts trauma, both individual and collective, through speculative fiction by highlighting the role of language, memory, and the experience of genocide in the healing process. Latifa (2022) examined gender representation in the film *Chaos Walking* and found male dominance and marginalization of women in the film's narrative structure. Meanwhile, Kamal & Sulistyorini (2019) analyzed the social system of Prentiss Town and concluded that the authoritarian environment shapes the characters' mindsets and behaviors. Penfold (2023) through a poststructuralist feminist approach examined the relationship between language, identity, and power with a focus on the concept of Noise as a metaphor for social pressure. Although, these studies have made significant contributions to understanding the social, political, cultural, and linguistic aspects of *Chaos Walking*, they have all focused on narrative structure, power relations, gender representation, and linguistic symbolism. No research has specifically examined the character of David Prentiss as an individual with psychological motivations underlying his repressive actions. Consequently, the relationship between fear as a basic emotion and the emergence of aggressive behavior and authoritarian leadership has yet to receive adequate attention.

These limitations indicate that there is still significant research room to explore. Without understanding how fear influences David Prentiss's actions as an authoritarian leader, explanations of the violence, manipulation, and domination in *Chaos Walking* will tend to focus on structural and ideological aspects. However, understanding the psychological motivations of the antagonist is crucial because it can explain why fear not only emerges as an individual emotion but also develops into a mechanism that legitimizes repressive leadership and social control. Therefore, research into David Prentiss's psychological dimensions is relevant to complementing our understanding of the relationship between emotion, power, and behavior in dystopian narratives.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the character of David Prentiss in the film *Chaos Walking* (2021) using the Fight-or-Flight theory perspective. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the primary form of fear experienced by David Prentiss and analyze how this fear drives the emergence of a fight response as a strategy to maintain power, focusing on two main research questions: (1) what is the main fear shown by the character of David Prentiss? (2) how does David Prentiss respond to overcome this fear? By answering these questions, this study is expected to fill the gap in previous research and provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between fear and the fight-or-flight response. Furthermore, this study aims to explain how Fight-or-Flight theory can be applied to analyze characters in a film. Therefore, the findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature on *Chaos Walking* and offer new perspectives on the application of Fight-or-Flight theory in the literary context.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research method because it aims to understand and interpret the representation of fear and the responses shown by the character David Prentiss through the perspective of Fight-or-Flight theory. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is not to measure the frequency of occurrence of certain behaviors statistically, but rather to interpret the psychological meaning contained in the dialogue, actions, expressions, and visual elements that build the character. Thus, a qualitative descriptive approach is considered most appropriate to answer the formulation of the research problem that is oriented towards an in-depth understanding of character behavior in the context of the film narrative (Karima et al., 2025). A qualitative approach allows researchers to conduct in-depth exploration of dialogue, actions, expressions, and visual elements that cannot be measured quantitatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In addition, qualitative research does not rely on numerical data or statistical analysis, but rather focuses on an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the research object (Furidha, 2024). The object of this research is the film *Chaos Walking* (2021). The research sample consists of selected scenes featuring the character of Major David Prentiss, especially those showing emotional responses to threats. The sampling technique was purposive because not all scenes in the film were relevant to the research objectives. Therefore, only scenes that explicitly depict fear, threat, conflict, and David Prentiss's response were selected as research data to keep the analysis focused on the problem formulation.

The primary data were obtained directly from the film, including dialogue that represents David Prentiss's character responses. Supporting data comes from secondary sources such as journal articles, books on Fight-or-Flight theory, and relevant film reviews. Data collection techniques were conducted through non-participatory observation by repeatedly watching the film, recording dialogue and key scenes reflecting David Prentiss's Fight-or-Flight response. Furthermore, a literature review was used to strengthen the theoretical framework and provide academic context for the analyzed character. Finally, the researcher connected data from the

film, Fight-or-Flight theory, and secondary sources to identify recurring patterns and relationships that demonstrate David Prentiss's Fight-or-Flight response.

The research instruments consisted of an observation sheet and a data categorization table used to group the character's responses into Fight-or-Flight categories. Data analysis refers to Miles & Huberman (1994) interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, the researcher selected scenes relevant to the fear response (Falah et al., 2026). Next, the data were classified into two main categories: the fight response (aggressive actions, dominance, intimidation, and control) and the flight response (avoidance or escape). At the interpretation stage, each data is analyzed by linking the character's actions with internal factors (personal fears and existential anxiety) and external factors (threats from Viola and her group), then interpreted using the Fight-or-Flight theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents answers to the research questions and offers a thorough analysis of the findings.

FINDINGS

WHAT IS THE MAIN FEAR SHOWN BY THE CHARACTER OF DAVID PRENTISS?

The character David Prentiss, the focus of this study, has two primary fears that drive him to engage in a Fight-or-Flight response. In the film, David Prentiss fears the arrival of the Violas from the space station and the women who lack the Noise. These two things are considered the greatest threats that could disrupt his power. Fear and anger can motivate humans to elicit a fight response, meaning to fight with aggression, or a flight response, meaning the choice to flee (Cannon, 1932).

DAVID PRENTISS'S FEAR OF THE VIOLAS

The first fear David Prentiss shows in the film is his fear of the presence of the Violas from the space station, which triggers a fight response. David Prentiss chooses to fight to overcome his fear because he feels empowered.

TABLE 1. David Prentiss's Fear of the Violas

No	Data	Scene Context	Description
1		In this scene, David tries to find out information about the Viola people by asking questions with a panicked and curious expression on his face and body. He asks questions like, "When and where will the plane land?" He also asked in the previous scene how many Viola people will be arriving.	David's fear is evident in the film's audiovisual elements, from his facial expressions and intonation to the tense atmosphere.
2		This scene is evidence that shows that David is afraid of the arrival of the Viola people who he thinks will destroy or colonize their planet, even though at the end of the film it is explained that the Viola people do not intend to destroy or colonize the planet. David says "Four	David is shown to have a fear of the Violas, which directly impacts his responses. This is evident in all his actions throughout the film.

(01. 32. 54)

thousand people are on their way to
destroy us."

DAVID PRENTISS'S FEAR OF WOMEN

David Prentiss's second fear is women, as they lack the ability to read his mind. This makes them difficult to control, potentially leading to rebellion. Once again, David Prentiss chooses the fight response to confront what he perceives as a threat.

TABLE 2. David Prentiss's Fear of Women

No	Data	Scene Context	Description
1	 (18. 03)	In this scene, David explains to Viola what noise is, the thoughts displayed or visualized above the heads of the men on the planet. David also explains that women don't have noise, saying, "It doesn't affect women."	The dialogue spoken by David in this scene indirectly shows his fear of women.
2	 (01. 06. 41)	In this scene, Todd asks Viola to read his mother's journal. It's finally revealed that everything David said about the war against "Spakcle" killing all the women was just a lie to protect her from her fears. What was really happening was that men were killing women at David's instigation.	This scene is proof of David's fear of women which makes him commit cruel acts such as murder and incitement.

HOW DOES DAVID PRENTISS RESPOND TO OVERCOME THIS FEAR?

David Prentiss's chosen response to overcome his fear is consistently the fight response. Fear is usually synonymous with the flight response, but there are several factors that can drive a person to initiate the fight response to overcome their fear. One reason that can drive someone to engage in the fight response despite being afraid is sufficient power or ability to overcome that fear. In David Prentiss's case, he, as the mayor and the highest authority, felt that his power was sufficient to overcome his fear. The responses David Prentiss exhibited in the film are explained in the table below.

TABLE 3. David Prentiss Response to Fight His Fear

No	Data	Scene Context	Response
1	 (18. 17)	This scene shows David explaining about a terrible war against the native species or "Spakcle" which killed all the women.	Propaganda that "Spackle" is a creature that has been killing women.

2	 (32. 12)	In this scene, David orders his subordinates, the residents of Prentiss Town, to immediately capture Viola, who is fleeing with Todd. The dialogue shown is "Catch that girl!" Throughout the film, David and his followers hunt down Todd and Viola, who are attempting to escape.	Militarization of citizens, conversion of fear into collective aggression, control of group Noise.
3	 (01. 31. 24)	This scene shows Todd trying to protect Viola by confronting David face-to-face. David responds by shooting Todd's father in front of Todd's eyes.	Physical attacks, and direct psychological pressure.
4	 (01. 34. 01)	In this scene, David confronts Todd, even though the situation is starting to turn against him. Prentiss doesn't choose to run away. Instead, she continues to try to control the situation by using Noise as her primary weapon to pressure Todd mentally and emotionally. Prentiss tries to manipulate Todd by creating illusions through Noise, showing that she is struggling to maintain her dominance amidst her fear of losing power.	Physical attacks, and direct psychological pressure.
5	 (01. 35. 14)	In this scene, it is proof that David was the one who killed and also taught men to kill women, as evidenced by the dialogue that reads "You taught all those men to kill."	Physical attacks, and direct psychological pressure.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that David Prentiss's primary fear, the arrival of the Violas and the presence of women without the *Noise*, poses an existential threat to the power and control system he has established in Prentiss Town. This fear is not merely personal, but rather a fear of the collapse of his political dominance and the legitimacy of his authority. Thus, these findings answer the first research question: the primary source of David's fear is rooted in threats to the power structure that underpins his position as supreme leader.

From the perspective of the Fight-or-Flight theory proposed by Cannon (1915, 1929), situations perceived as threatening will activate self-defences mechanisms through two possible responses: fight-or-flight. The results of the study indicate that David consistently chooses the fight response. (Cannon, 1929) argument that when individuals perceive sufficient capacity or power to confront a threat, the response that tends to emerge is active resistance. David's position as mayor and supreme authority figure reinforces his perception of control over the situation, making aggression the most effective strategy for maintaining power. This

aligns with (Ungvari et al. 2025) who stated that fear primarily motivates escape or flight response, but can also lead to defensive (fight) attacks when escape is not possible or when the individual feels they have sufficient strength to face the threat.

David's fear of women without the *Noise* reveals a deeper psychological dimension. Women cannot be "read" through the *Noise*, thus falling outside the mental surveillance system that has been the foundation of social control in Prentiss Town. This situation creates uncertainty and a loss of cognitive control. Öhman (2008) explains that fear is often amplified by unpredictable or uncontrollable stimuli. In this context, women represent a threat to the system of mental transparency that David has been exploiting to maintain dominance. As a result, this fear evolves from individual anxiety to structural violence, including propaganda about Spackle and the slaughter of women. This response reflects the characteristics of the fight response, characterized by dominance, aggression, and attempts to eliminate the source of the threat (Jacobs et al., 2024)

Compared to previous research on *Chaos Walking*, this study offers a distinct contribution. (Love & Fox, 2021) emphasize power dynamics, (Latifa, 2022) highlights gender marginalization, while (Kamal & Sulistyorini, 2019) analyse the authoritarian social system in Prentiss Town. These studies focus on structural and ideological aspects. However, this research shows that this authoritarian structure has strong psychological roots, namely fear, which triggers the Fight-or-Flight response. Thus, this research complements previous studies by explaining not only how power works but also why it becomes repressive from a psychological perspective.

Another important finding is the transformation of personal fear into collective aggression. David not only responds to threats individually but also constructs a narrative of a common enemy through propaganda and the militarization of citizens. Personal fear is projected into communal fear, legitimized as a threat to the entire community. This aligns with (Osborne et al., 2023), who stated that authoritarian leadership often exploits fear to justify domination and repressive actions. In this context, the Fight-or-Flight response is no longer merely biological but develops into a systematic mechanism of social control.

The theoretical implications of this research indicate that Fight-or-Flight theory is not only relevant for explaining individual biological reactions but can also be applied in literary and film studies, particularly in dystopian narratives fraught with issues of power and social control. Through this approach, fear is understood as a fundamental emotion that can shape leadership behaviour and legitimize structural violence. Therefore, a psychological approach is an important analytical tool in understanding the representation of authoritarianism in film texts.

In addition to contributing to the development of literary psychology studies, the findings of this study also have practical implications for language and literature learning. The analysis of David Prentiss's character through the perspective of Fight-or-Flight theory can be used as an alternative approach in literature learning to train students' abilities in analysing characters, conflicts, emotions, and power relations represented in literary works and films. This approach can also encourage students to develop critical thinking skills through interpretations of characters' psychological motivations, so that literature learning does not only focus on the storyline, but also on understanding the complexity of human behaviour.

This study has several limitations. First, the study only focuses on the character of David Prentiss in one film, so the results cannot describe the psychological dynamics of other characters or the broader representation of authoritarian leadership in dystopian films. Second, this study only uses Fight-or-Flight theory as an analytical framework, so other psychological dimensions, such as trauma, self-defence mechanisms, or character personality formation, have not been analysed. Therefore, the results of this study need to be understood according to the context of the object and the approach used.

Overall, this discussion confirms that David Prentiss represents an authoritarian leader who overcomes his fear through aggression, psychological manipulation, and collective control. His chosen fight response demonstrates that fear, when combined with power and the perceived ability to control threats, can develop into a structured system of oppression. Thus, Fight-or-Flight theory provides an effective conceptual framework for understanding how personal emotions can transform into mechanisms of domination in dystopian film narratives.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that David Prentiss's Fight-or-Flight response to his fear does not stop at the personal emotional realm, but develops into a systematic mechanism of power through aggression, psychological manipulation, propaganda, and collective control. Fear of the Violas and women without *Noise* serves as a primary trigger for the formation of authoritarian leadership that mobilizes emotions to legitimize structural violence. Within this framework, fear is no longer merely an individual affective experience, but becomes a political resource utilized to maintain domination and shape social compliance. By placing Fight-or-Flight theory within the narrative context of dystopian films, this study demonstrates that the theory is relevant not only to understanding human biological responses but also to explaining how basic emotions can shape power relations and repressive social orders. The main contribution of this study lies in expanding the application of Fight-or-Flight theory to film literature studies, while enriching the understanding of antagonist characters as products of the interaction between personal fears and structures of domination.

In addition to contributing to the development of literary psychology studies, the results of this study also have implications for literature and language learning. David Prentiss's character analysis through the perspective of Fight-or-Flight theory can be used as an alternative teaching material in literature learning, particularly to train students' abilities in analyzing character, conflict, emotion, and power relations in literary works or films. This approach can also encourage the development of critical thinking skills because students not only understand the storyline but also interpret the psychological motivations behind each character's actions. These findings also are important for readers because they offer a reflective framework for understanding how fear-based leadership can normalize violence, erode individual autonomy, and build collective trauma, both in cinematic representations and in broader social contexts. While this study provides insight into the relationship between fear and the fight-or-flight response in David Prentiss, it still has several limitations. The analysis focused solely on one character in one film, thus failing to describe the psychological dynamics of other characters or the broader representation of authoritarian leadership in dystopian works. Furthermore, this study employed only Fight-or-Flight theory as its analytical framework, thus undermining other psychological dimensions, such as trauma, defense mechanisms, or personality development. Thus, this study strengthens the position of the psychological approach as a significant analytical tool in examining the dynamics of emotion and power, and opens up space for critical reflection on the ethical consequences of leadership practices based on fear.

Further research is recommended to expand the object of study by comparing antagonist characters in several dystopian films or novels to identify Fight-or-Flight response patterns in different social contexts. In addition, future research can combine Fight-or-Flight theory with other psychological approaches, such as trauma theory, psychoanalysis, or personality psychology, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors that shape character behavior. Further research can also examine the use of the film *Chaos Walking*

as a medium for learning literature to evaluate its influence on students' critical thinking and literary interpretation skills.

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