

**The Portrayal of Mortality and Its Impact on Human Behaviour
in 'They Both Die at The End' by Adam Silvera**

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History: Received 30 June 2025 Approved 05 July 2025 Published 31 July 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Adam Silvera, Death Awareness, Human behaviour, Mortality, Portrayal</p>	<p>This study aims to explore the representation of death and its influence on human behavior in Adam Silvera's novel <i>They Both Die at the End</i> through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach. In the novel, the call of the "Death-Cast", which informs people of their last day, functions as a trigger for the primacy of death, a condition that increases existential anxiety and psychological tension. This study uses qualitative methods to examine the responses of two main characters, Mateo and Rufus, to the certainty of death they face by examining the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego. In addition, the study also highlights how defense mechanisms such as repression, rationalization, and sublimation are used by both characters as a way to deal with emotional stress. The findings show that awareness of death drives significant psychological changes, such as Mateo, who was initially introverted but developed into a more open and honest person with himself, while Rufus experienced a shift from impulsive and aggressive attitudes to deeper self-understanding and warmer relationships. This transformation reflects the inner conflict between unconscious drives, moral values, and the role of the ego in mediating the two.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Mortality is widely understood as the condition of being subject to death, an unavoidable aspect of human life; for a long time it has been a central concept in philosophical, religious, and psychological discourse. According to Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (1997), mortality awareness is a fundamental aspect of human cognition that can evoke existential anxiety. According to Becker (1998), the awareness of death makes human beings unique from other living creatures, as it forces individuals to deal with their limit of existence. This phenomenon, which

is usually called "mortality salience," has a big effect on how people think and feel.

How people live, making decision, and relationship are mostly influenced by the awareness of mortality. Terror Management Theory suggests that mortality salience can ignite psychological defense mechanisms that affect behavior in both conscious and unconscious ways (Greenberg et al., 1997). When people are reminded of their own death, the usually reaffirm cultural beliefs, chasing meaning, and engage in behaviors that protect their sense of self-worth (Arndt et al., 2004). Many strategies such as emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and the pursuit of

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legacy are used to cope with impending death. This kind of response shows the close connection between the concept of death and the psychological processes that influence human behavior.

Psychoanalytic theory has examined the concept of Mortality, especially in terms of how the unconscious mind responds to the fear of death. Id, ego, and superego, which are Freud's model of the mind, provide a way to understand how people behave when under pressure. He explained that the ego works to balance basic urges from the id, moral rules from the superego, and the challenges of the real world (Freud, 1923). Individuals may encounter internal conflict as these psychic forces collide, which may result in defense mechanisms such as rationalization, repression, or denial in the presence of mortality (Pick, 2015). The analysis of characters' behaviors using this framework can disclose the deeper psychological processes that are triggered by the awareness of death.

Studies on mortality have focused on human behavior and psychology (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1986); emotional and cognitive knowledge (Yu et al., 2020); and social interaction (Timmermans, 2007). Studies on *They Both Die at the End* have focused on human emotions (Susanta & Nurmally, 2020); friendship and self-discovery (Rum, 2024); and identity and the value of life (Stevens, 2017). However, none of them have applied Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the structural model of the id, ego, and superego, to examine how the characters psychologically respond to the certainty of their death. This absence presents a clear research gap. By employing psychoanalysis to explore the characters' inner conflicts, defense mechanisms, and behavioral shifts triggered by mortality salience, this study offers a novel contribution to the field. It not only deepens the psychological reading of the novel but also expands the application of psychoanalytic theory in contemporary young adult literature analysis.

This article aims to examine how the characters in *They Both Die at the End* cope with the knowledge of their impending death, using Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the primary analytical tool. *They Both Die at the End*, authored by Adam Silvera and released in 2017, is a young adult novel. A speculative universe where individuals received a notification from an app called Death-Cast, telling them of their certain death, is depicted in this Novel. This study aims to analyze the characters in the Novel *They Both Die at the End*, including their realization of their certain death, especially through the framework of mortality salience. The study initially examines the impact of the inevitability of death on the characters' emotions, choices, and behavioral

changes. The second segment of this research aims to analyze how the changes in human behavior explain the dynamic of id, ego, and superego as according to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and how the internal construction ignites many defense mechanisms as a way of coping. This research uses Freud's structural model to increase our understanding of the internal conflict of the characters and enhance the examination of mortality in modern young adult literature.

METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a close reading approach to analyze the Novel *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera. The use of descriptive qualitative methodology aims to examine how the characters process and respond to existential ideas such as death. Meanwhile, the close reading technique is used to examine texts intensively and repeatedly with the purpose of identifying the dynamic of the character, internal conflict, and psychological symbolism hiding and embedding inside the structure and narrative language (Duarte et al., 2019).

The changes of emotion and character behavior are examined through the dialogue, description, and internal monologue. The main focus of this research is the psychological reaction of Mateo Torrez and Rufus Emeterio to the announcement of their impending death by a fictional system called Death-Cast. Analysis based on psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud, especially the psychological structure model of the id, ego, and superego, along with the concept of defense mechanisms. This theory is used to examine the internal conflict that shapes the attitude, decision-making, and emotional response of the characters throughout the story.

The main data consists of direct citation, narration, and dialogue that show the development of the character's psychology in facing their imminent death. The process of analysis involves a few stages, the first stage including reading the novel thoroughly and identifying parts that reflect mortality salience. Those parts then analyze and categorize based on the transformation of behavior and psychological symptoms that are shown by the character. A deeper interpretation will then be

conducted with Freud's framework, focusing on the interaction between the id, ego, and superego. As well as the function of self-defense mechanisms such as repression, sublimation, and rationalization. Finally, all findings are synthesized to formulate an understanding of how the novel represents the psychological impact of death and the adaptive strategies that are employed by the characters in the novel

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Responses to the Mortality Salience

Mortality salience, a term from the Terror Management Theory, refers to a condition where an individual becomes extremely aware of their own impending death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). This awareness not only happens on the surface but also influences emotional and cognitive processes. In literature, this understanding mostly functions as a narrative catalyst, which pushes the characters to contemplate their identity, behaviors, and ideals. According to Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1997), Mortality salience can activate deep psychological conflict, especially between instinctual push and social norms that are internalized, due to the character trying to protect their sense of meaning and identity.

In the novel *They Both Die at the End*, the notification of death-cast is used as an external catalyst that raises the awareness of death towards the main characters. The impending death at a certain time forces Mateo and Rufus to have a sense of psychological urgency, necessitating confrontation with their death and quick decision making. This confrontation exposes both emotional distress and intricate cognitive processes as they traverse their dying hours. In this existential crisis the dynamic of id, ego, and superego starts to take shape.

Internal conflict of the characters inside the narration shows the dynamic interaction between the id, ego, and superego under the influence of mortality salience. Mateo and Rufus reacted to this condition with different psychological methods that reveal the composition of their internal self. Mateo's early departure shows the effort of ego to reconcile with the id, earning

emotional solace with the superego's ingrained imperative for responsible behavior. As he develops, his actions tend to show sublimation, a compromise that is driven by the ego, where internal pressure is transformed into meaningful and constructive behavior. Rufus, on the other hand, shows conflict between the impulsivity of the id and the moral reasoning of the superego, which is seen in early aggressive behavior, upcoming guilt, and yearning for reconciliation. These changes in emotions and behaviors are not without a cause. They emerge from the psychological pressure caused by mortality salience. The reaction of the characters exemplifies Freud's structural paradigm, which shows how death can activate the unconscious aspect of the self in conflict.

In the novel *They Both Die at the End*, the awareness of death significantly influenced the emotional trajectory and the behavior of the main characters. Mortality salience, as articulated by Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (1999) refers to an increase in awareness of one's mortality, which mostly causes emotional fluctuation and direct behavioral changes. In the novel, this condition is activated by Death-Cast, a fictional service that informs individuals when they enter their last 24 hours of their life. The certainty of death pushes the character into an intense psychological condition where every decision is filled with the weight of emotional and existential importance. According to Terror Management Theory, When individuals are faced with mortality, they try to maintain meaning, strengthen their values, and manage their response by both conscious and unconscious tactics (Greenberg et al., 1997). Freud (1923) examined that the ego is important in reconciling the internal struggle between the innate cravings and moral limitations in the middle of psychological pressure, such as confrontation with mortality.

The emotional and behavioral responses of the characters in *They Both Die at the End* illustrate the impact of mortality salience on human action. After receiving the Death-Cast alert, Mateo's reaction begins with fear and avoidance. He initially isolates himself, afraid to engage with the world:

“I unlock the front door, turn the knob, and pull the door open. I shake my head and slam the door shut. I’m not walking out into a world that will kill me before my time.”

(Silvera, 2017, p. 16)

His fear reflects an internal psychological paralysis, a refusal to act due to overwhelming anxiety. However, this mindset begins to shift as he gradually opens himself to the idea of living meaningfully:

“I need to get out of here and live—but first I have to make it out of this apartment alive.”(Silvera, 2017, p. 17)

This statement marks the beginning of change, Mateo is still afraid, but he acknowledges the desire to live. As the story progresses, he becomes more spontaneous and emotionally expressive:

“This is exactly the person I always wanted to be—loose, fun, carefree.” (Silvera, 2017, p. 38)

By the end of the novel, he reflects on his previous fear and realizes how much time he had wasted not truly living:

“I play the keys for Elton John’s ‘Your Song’ with a pounding heart... I’m off-key and I don’t care because of him.” (Silvera, 2017, p. 38)

These quotes show Mateo's progression from fear-driven avoidance to emotional liberation, illustrating the psychological impact of mortality salience on his behavior.

Rufus, in contrast, starts from a place of impulsivity and emotional disorientation. He responds to death awareness with anger and aggression, which later becomes regret and self-awareness:

“I jumped someone... I was pissed because it felt like my life was ending in a lot of ways. I felt unwanted, frustrated, lost, and I needed to take it out on

someone. But that’s not me. It was a glitch.” (Silvera, 2017, p. 235)

This admission reflects both his initial coping mechanism and the beginning of a shift toward emotional maturity. As he continues to interact with Mateo, Rufus experiences emotional clarity and personal acceptance:

“I’ll get to [Aimee] before Peck can... I just wanna get to Aimee and say goodbye... not the monster I was tonight.” (Silvera, 2017, p. 237)

By the end of the story, Rufus finds emotional safety in his relationship with Mateo and no longer feels the need to suppress his feelings:

“And I stopped being someone I don’t like,” I say. “You wouldn’t have liked me.”(Silvera, 2017, p. 239)

Rufus’s behavior evolves from externalized aggression to emotional openness. This transformation highlights how mortality salience encourages him to seek honesty, connection, and vulnerability before death arrives.

Together, these narratives demonstrate how death awareness alters the characters' thoughts and actions. The progression of their responses reflects not only emotional growth but also how mortality salience functions as a catalyst for self-discovery and transformation.

The Dynamics of the Id, Ego, Superego and Defense Mechanism in Responding to Mortality salience

Mortality salience does not only shape external behavior but also activates deeper internal processes. According to Freud’s structural model of the psyche, human behavior is governed by the interaction between three components: the id, representing instinctual desires; the ego, which mediates between those desires and reality; and the superego, which upholds moral values and social norms. When faced with the anxiety of imminent death, as in the case of Mateo and Rufus, these psychological structures engage in a dynamic

interplay to regulate emotional responses and decision-making.

In Mateo's case, his early behavior reflects the ego's dominance, as he attempts to protect himself by staying inside and avoiding perceived threats. However, as the pressure of death becomes more immediate, the id's desire for experience and connection begins to emerge. Mateo gradually allows himself to explore the outside world, form relationships, and pursue emotional fulfillment. His transformation shows how the ego eventually compromises, allowing some desires of the id to be expressed while maintaining a level of control and self-awareness. His desire to live before dying, despite fear, reflects a shifting psychological balance in favor of growth and acceptance.

Rufus, on the other hand, exhibits initial behavior driven by the id. His aggression and impulsive actions reflect an attempt to assert control over a situation that feels deeply uncertain. However, as he spends more time with Mateo and reflects on his actions, his superego becomes more active. He expresses remorse, shows empathy, and seeks meaningful closure with people around him. Rufus's transformation suggests a re-balancing of his internal structure: the ego begins to mediate more effectively between the id's impulses and the superego's values, allowing him to act with more emotional clarity and intention.

Throughout the novel, these psychological shifts suggest that mortality salience activates not only surface-level behavior but also underlying intrapsychic dynamics. As the characters face their final day, their responses mirror the tensions and negotiations between desire, fear, guilt, and the need for meaning, core elements of Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

The manifestation of the self-defense mechanism is apparent in both characters. According to Pick (2015), the self-defense mechanism is an unconscious tactic that is used by the ego to resolve internal conflict and discomfort. Mateo transitions from avoidance and emotional detachment to sublimation, converting anxiety into connection. Rufus evolves from suppression and justification to introspection and emotional originality. This mechanism acts as an instrument that is used by the ego to process psychological tension, which is caused by mortality salience,

providing insight into the profundity of each character's emotional evolution.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the characters in the novel *They Both Die at the End* in relation to mortality salience and how their actions mirror internal psychological processes. The investigation revealed that the Death-Cast call caused changes in emotional and behavioral on both Mateo and Rufus. Mateo develops from fear and isolation to openness and connection, whereas Rufus evolves from impulsivity to reflection and emotional honesty.

This modification illustrates the interaction between the id, ego, and superego, as pictured in Freud's psychoanalysis theory. Every character shows internal chaos and uses unconscious defense strategies, including repression, rationalization, and sublimation, as they face psychological pressure associated with the awareness of mortality. At the end, this novel shows how confronting mortality reveals profound facets of the self and influences human behavior significantly.

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