

# Psychological Trauma in Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle*

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## Abstract

Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970) is a harrowing exploration of childhood psychological trauma, bullying, and the devastating consequences of parental neglect. The novel examines the impact of bullying, isolation, and emotional neglect through the tense relationship between Edmund Hooper and Charles Kingshaw. Kingshaw, subjected to relentless psychological torment, experiences profound fear, anxiety, and hopelessness, leading to tragic consequences. Hill's narrative exposes the cyclical nature of trauma, illustrating how Charles's isolation, fear, and failed attempts at escape culminate in his tragic suicide—a stark critique of adult obliviousness and emotional failure. Hill portrays trauma as a silent, accumulating force, shaping identity and emotional resilience. This paper analyses how fear, manipulation, and social hierarchy contribute to Kingshaw's psychological deterioration, emphasizing themes of power dynamics, victimization, and the lasting effects of psychological abuse.

**Keywords:** gothic, fear, bullying, psychological trauma, architecture, symbols

## INTRODUCTION

Susan Hill is a celebrated English author known for her psychological fiction, gothic horror, and literary novels. Born in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, in 1942, she gained prominence with works that explore themes of isolation, trauma, and human relationships. Her novel *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970) won the Somerset Maugham Award, while *The Bird of Night* (1972) earned her the Whitbread Novel Award and a Booker Prize nomination. Hill is perhaps best known for *The Woman in Black* (1983), a chilling ghost story that became a long-running West End play and was later adapted into a film starring **Daniel Radcliffe**. She has also written crime fiction, including the **Simon Serrailier series**, and founded her own publishing house, **Long Barn Books**. Her writing style blends traditional gothic elements with psychological depth, making her a distinctive voice in modern British literature.

### *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970)

Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970) is a psychological novel that delves into themes of bullying, isolation, power dynamics, and childhood trauma. The novel is set in **Warings**, a gloomy English mansion that serves as a metaphor for oppression and emotional suffocation. The story follows **Edmund Hooper**, a cold and manipulative boy, and **Charles Kingshaw**, who is forced to live with him when Kingshaw's mother, **Helena**, takes a position as Hooper's father's housekeeper.

From the outset, Kingshaw is subjected to relentless psychological torment by Hooper, who asserts dominance through cruelty, manipulation, and emotional abuse. The novel explores how unchecked power and fear can shape a person's psyche, leading to deep-seated trauma and despair. Kingshaw's suffering is exacerbated by his mother's indifference, leaving him without emotional support or escape. His growing isolation and hopelessness culminate in a tragic ending, reinforcing the novel's bleak portrayal of childhood cruelty.

Hill's writing is deeply atmospheric, using the oppressive setting to mirror the characters' emotional struggles. The novel's dark tone, psychological depth, and tragic conclusion make it a compelling study of human nature, particularly the devastating effects of unchecked cruelty. It won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1971 and remains a significant work in modern British literature.

### **Psychological Trauma**

Psychological trauma is an emotional response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It can result from a single shocking incident (such as an accident or assault) or prolonged exposure to stress (such as abuse or neglect). Trauma affects both the mind and body, leading to symptoms like anxiety, flashbacks, emotional numbness, and difficulty trusting others.

#### **Key Elements of Psychological Trauma:**

##### **1. Loss of Control and Powerlessness**

Trauma often involves a sense of helplessness, where individuals feel they have no control over their circumstances. This can lead to feelings of vulnerability and fear.

##### **2. Overwhelming Emotional or Physical Distress**

Traumatic experiences can cause intense emotional reactions, such as anxiety, depression, or panic. Physical symptoms like insomnia, fatigue, and headaches may also manifest.

##### **3. Disruption of Safety and Security**

A traumatic event can shatter a person's sense of safety, making them feel constantly threatened or on edge. This can lead to hypervigilance and difficulty trusting others.

##### **4. Long-Term Psychological Impact**

Trauma can have lasting effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional numbness, and difficulty forming relationships. The brain may struggle to process the event, leading to intrusive thoughts or flashbacks.

##### **5. Fight, Flight, or Freeze Response**

When faced with trauma, the body may react with fight (aggression), flight (avoidance), or freeze (paralysis). These responses are survival mechanisms but can persist long after the traumatic event.

##### **6. Emotional Dysregulation**

Trauma can disrupt emotional stability, leading to mood swings, anger, sadness, or emotional detachment. Individuals may struggle to manage their emotions effectively.

##### **7. Cognitive and Behavioral Changes**

Trauma can alter thought patterns, leading to negative self-perception, guilt, or shame. It may also result in avoidance behaviors, where individuals withdraw from situations that remind them of the trauma.

## Psychological Trauma in Susan Hill's I'm the King of the Castle

### 1. Psychological Trauma through Bullying and Power Struggles

The novel's central conflict revolves around Edmund Hooper's relentless psychological torment of Kingshaw. Hooper asserts dominance through manipulation, cruelty, and intimidation, creating an environment of fear and helplessness. Kingshaw's inability to escape this abuse leads to deep-seated anxiety and emotional distress, reinforcing the idea that trauma can stem from prolonged exposure to psychological aggression.

Hooper's bullying is not merely physical but deeply psychological. He uses verbal taunts, humiliation, and calculated cruelty to break Kingshaw's spirit. One of the earliest instances of Hooper's cruelty is when he mocks Kingshaw upon his arrival at Warings:

"I didn't want you to come here."

This immediate rejection sets the tone for their relationship, establishing Hooper's territorial dominance and Kingshaw's sense of alienation. Hooper's psychological warfare intensifies when he leaves a note for Kingshaw that reads:

"I didn't want you to come here, so go away."

This act of psychological manipulation reinforces Kingshaw's powerlessness, a key element of trauma. The repetition of rejection deepens Kingshaw's emotional distress, making him feel unwanted and trapped.

### 2. Isolation and Emotional Neglect

Kingshaw's trauma is exacerbated by his mother's indifference. Helena Kingshaw fails to recognize her son's suffering, prioritizing her relationship with Hooper's father over Kingshaw's well-being. This emotional neglect leaves Kingshaw without support, intensifying his feelings of loneliness and despair.

Kingshaw's desperate need for comfort is evident when he tries to express his distress:

"She would not understand. She never had."

This line highlights emotional neglect, as Kingshaw realizes that his mother is incapable of providing the support he needs. Her failure to intervene reflects a broader theme in trauma literature—the absence of a protective figure. Without emotional validation, Kingshaw internalizes his suffering, leading to self-destructive thoughts.

### 3. Psychological Manifestations of Trauma

Kingshaw exhibits classic symptoms of psychological trauma, including:

Fear and Anxiety – He constantly anticipates Hooper's next act of cruelty.

Emotional Withdrawal – He struggles to express his pain, internalizing his suffering.

Hopelessness and Suicidal Ideation – His inability to escape his torment leads to a tragic conclusion.

His growing despair is evident when he reflects on his situation:

"There was nowhere to go. He was trapped."

This line encapsulates learned helplessness, a psychological state where victims feel they have no control over their suffering. His eventual suicide is the ultimate expression of this internalized trauma.

### 4. Symbolism and Setting as Psychological Triggers

The novel's setting, Warings, serves as a metaphor for Kingshaw's entrapment. The oppressive atmosphere of the house mirrors his emotional suffocation, reinforcing his sense of powerlessness. Additionally, the recurring imagery of dead animals (such as the crow attack) symbolizes Kingshaw's vulnerability and foreshadows his tragic fate.

The crow attack is particularly significant:

"The crow swooped down and pecked at his head. He ran, but it followed."

This moment is a symbolic representation of Kingshaw's trauma, with the crow embodying Hooper's relentless cruelty. His inability to escape the crow mirrors his inability to escape Hooper's torment. Hill also uses gothic elements to heighten the psychological tension. The house itself is cold, unwelcoming, and devoid of warmth, much like Kingshaw's emotional state. The landscape, particularly the forest and the river, represents both temporary escape and impending doom, reflecting Kingshaw's fleeting moments of hope and his ultimate despair.

### 5. The Cycle of Abuse

Hill subtly suggests that Hooper himself is a victim of emotional neglect, as his father is distant and uninvolved. This lack of affection may contribute to Hooper's need for control and cruelty, illustrating how trauma can perpetuate cycles of abuse.

Hooper's emotional detachment is evident when he dismisses his father's presence:

"It doesn't matter. He never notices anything."

This line suggests that Hooper has internalized neglect, leading him to externalize his pain through cruelty toward Kingshaw.

Hooper's behavior aligns with social learning theory, which suggests that children model behaviors they observe. His emotional detachment and cruelty may stem from his father's coldness, reinforcing the idea that trauma is often cyclical—victims can become perpetrators if their suffering is not addressed.

### 6. Thematic Depth and Literary Significance

Hill's novel is a harrowing study of childhood trauma, demonstrating how bullying, neglect, and emotional isolation can have irreversible psychological consequences. Kingshaw's tragic fate underscores the devastating impact of unchecked cruelty, making *I'm the King of the Castle* a compelling exploration of trauma in literature.

The novel also raises important questions about societal responsibility—who is accountable for Kingshaw's suffering? Is it Hooper, his mother, or the broader system that fails to recognize and intervene in cases of psychological abuse? Hill does not provide easy answers, instead leaving readers with a haunting depiction of trauma's lasting effects.

### Conclusion

Hill's portrayal of psychological trauma in *I'm the King of the Castle* is deeply unsettling yet profoundly insightful. Through Kingshaw's suffering, the novel highlights the long-term consequences of emotional abuse, the importance of psychological resilience, and the tragic reality of neglected children.

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