



AN ANALYSIS OF REALITY, NEUROTIC, AND MORAL ANXIETY IN *DON'T BREATHE* FILM

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Abstract

This article analyzes the depiction of anxiety in the *Don't Breathe*, focusing on the types of anxiety experienced by the characters, Rocky and Alex. Using Calvin Hall's theory of anxiety (1954), the research identifies three key forms of anxiety portrayed in the film: reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Reality anxiety manifests through the characters' fear of real external dangers, such as getting caught or physical harm. Neurotic anxiety reflects their internal conflicts and fears about losing control over instincts and impulses. Moral anxiety reveals their feelings of guilt and shame related to the ethical implications of their actions. Employing a qualitative approach, this article examines how these anxieties shape the characters' decisions and behaviours in a high-pressure, life-threatening situation. The film's use of setting, cinematography, and narrative techniques intensifies the portrayal of anxiety, immersing viewers in the characters' psychological struggles. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how psychological theories of anxiety can be applied in film studies to explore complex character experiences and enrich narrative meaning.

Keywords: anxiety, *Don't Breathe*, moral anxiety, neurotic anxiety, reality anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a complex and multifaceted emotional state that deeply influences human behavior and decision-making. Hall (1954) defines anxiety as "the unpleasant emotional state that is brought on by bodily organ excitations" (p. 6), emphasizing its physical and psychological dimensions. It is a universal experience, often triggered by external dangers or internal conflicts, and can be observed not only in real life but also vividly portrayed in literature and film. The intersection between psychology and film offers a rich field for exploring how anxiety affects characters and narratives. As noted by Yimer (2019), "psychology investigates human behaviors and their causes, and literature portrays human behaviors through fictional narratives" (p. 159). This research focuses on the psychological portrayal of anxiety in the *Don't Breathe* film by Fade Alvares (2016), analyzing how the characters experience and respond to anxiety in life-threatening situations.

In *Don't Breathe*, three young protagonists, they are Rocky, Alex, and Money, attempt to steal from a blind man's house, believing the task to be easy due to the man's blindness. However, their plans quickly unravel as they face unexpected danger, and their fears escalate dramatically. The film intensifies the characters' anxiety through its dark, claustrophobic setting and tense narrative, creating a gripping atmosphere where every sound can spark panic. The film displays the anxiety that is dealt by the characters and makes the audience feel the same fear as the characters. This portrayal provides a powerful lens for examining anxiety not only as fear of external threats but also as internal moral and neurotic struggles.

Calvin Hall's theory of anxiety categorizes anxiety into three types: reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety (Hall, 1954, p. 62). Reality anxiety arises from real external dangers, exemplified in the film when the characters face the immediate threat of physical harm, such as Alex's worry about "getting caught" and the consequences of their actions. Neurotic anxiety stems from internal conflicts and fears, manifesting in the characters' struggles with loss of control and fear of impulsive reactions. Moral anxiety emerges from the

conscience and feelings of guilt or shame, notably in Alex and Rocky's internal conflict about stealing from a vulnerable blind man and Rocky's compassion for a captive woman they discover. As Hall (1954) explains, moral anxiety is experienced as feelings of guilt or shame in the ego, aroused by a perception of danger from the conscience (p. 68). The film skillfully integrates these anxieties, illustrating the psychological depth of the characters and the moral complexities they face.

According to Creswell (2005), a literature review involves summarizing journals, articles, books, and other relevant sources related to the research topic. It provides information from both past and current studies, organizing the material into subtopics essential to the research (p. 79). This indicates that the researcher relies on previously written or published works to support the research. Junaid (2017) views literature as an art, not due to its subject matter, but because of the creative way the author transforms ideas and thoughts (p. 23). Literature encompasses various forms such as prose, poetry, drama, and films. In this research, the focus is on films as the object of analysis. Jing (2023) highlights that film is a captivating medium that combines visuals, sound, and performance to narrate stories that transcend different eras, cultures, and languages (p. 142). Thus, film integrates images, sounds, and acting across diverse times, cultures, and languages. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used to analyze the research subject, addressing both narrative and cinematographic components.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze anxiety in the *Don't Breathe* film. Qualitative methodology, as defined by Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (1949), "refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data, people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (p. 7). This method gathers rich, descriptive information to simplify complex topics by exploring phenomena from participants' perspectives. The data source consists of key scenes and dialogues from Fade Alvares' (2016) film, illustrating how characters Rocky and Alex experience anxiety in intense situations. The film's use of camera angles and dark lighting enhances the tense atmosphere, enabling the audience to feel the characters' fear.

The data collection process involves identifying the research focus and repeatedly watching the film to deeply understand the plot and characters. These steps form the foundation for analyzing the film's intrinsic elements, such as narrative and cinematography, alongside extrinsic aspects using Calvin Hall's anxiety theory. The qualitative method allows the writer to provide a descriptive analysis of the film by capturing "important scenes that are related to the research question" and examining these through both the literary and psychological lenses. This approach ensures credible and accountable data interpretation, grounded in a thorough film analysis.

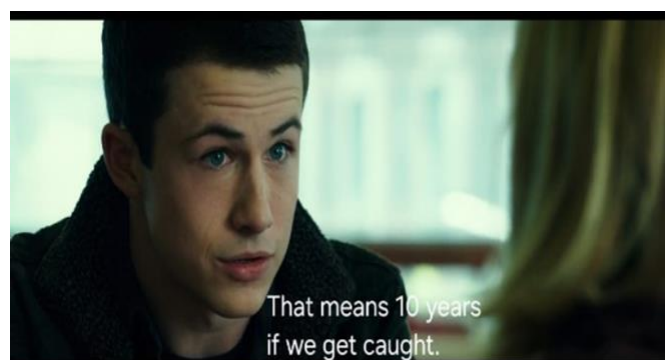
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

REALITY ANXIETY

Hall (1954) describes reality anxiety as a natural emotional response to actual and immediate dangers in the external environment (p. 63). It occurs when a person perceives a real threat to their safety or well-being, which can be rooted in inherited fears or learned through life experiences. For example, fear of heights or the anxiety caused by a past car accident are forms of reality anxiety because they relate to genuine risks. This type of anxiety functions as a protective mechanism by alerting individuals to dangers, helping them take precautions. Unlike neurotic anxiety, which involves fear of imagined threats, and moral anxiety, related to guilt, reality anxiety is always based on real external threats. Its purpose is to enhance survival by making individuals aware of and responsive to real dangers.

Alex's anxiety about the potential consequences of getting caught. (Minute 07:30)

In this scene, Alex warns his friends about the real consequences of their robbery plan by saying, "it means 10 years if we get caught," demonstrating Hall's idea of reality anxiety, which stems from recognizing actual threats. His statement reminds them that their plan is not merely reckless fun but



carries serious risks and legal penalties. This cautionary message urges his friends to think carefully about the potential dangers before moving forward, emphasizing the gravity of their situation.

The setting of the scene, a quiet public place with gentle, natural lighting and a softly blurred background that draws attention to the importance of their conversation. The camera's close, eye level shot of Alex creates a sense of intimacy, making viewers feel as if they are part of the discussion. This cinematographic approach highlights the characters' emotional expressions, strengthening the tension and seriousness of the moment. The focus on Alex's face and dialogue help communicate the "weight of their decision" and the anxiety about the possible consequences of their risky actions.

By concentrating on the character's facial expression and dialogue, the scene effectively communicates the emotional weight of the situation. Viewers can sense the fear and uncertainty the characters face as they consider the dangerous risks ahead. This attention to detail in both performance and filming reinforces the reality anxiety Alex experiences, emphasizing how "the weight of their decision" and the "fear of facing the consequences" shape their actions.

Alex is worried about a potential police investigation.
(Minute 07:35)



In this scene, Alex expresses his concern about the possible consequences of their robbery plan by saying, "and there will be an investigation," illustrating Hall's concept of reality anxiety. This type of anxiety comes from fear of real dangers, as Alex understands that a police investigation could uncover their involvement and cause serious trouble for everyone. Hall (1954) explains that reality anxiety arises from the awareness that actions have real-world consequences (p. 63). Alex's worry reflects this understanding, showing

that he and his friends recognize the risks they face, which encourages careful consideration before making dangerous choices.

The scene is set in a bright, open space with large windows, creating a calm contrast to the tense conversation. This setting, combined with the medium close-up shot at eye level, allows viewers to closely observe Alex's facial expressions and body language, emphasizing his anxiety. The soft, natural lighting and blurred background help maintain focus on Alex, enhancing the emotional realism of the moment. These cinematographic choices effectively convey the seriousness of the situation and build empathy for Alex's fear, showing how reality anxiety plays a key role in the characters' decision-making process.

Alex's anxiety about a loved one facing consequences for their actions
(Minute 07:36).



In this scene, Alex expresses his worry by saying, "My dad can get in trouble," reflecting a deep sense of responsibility not only for himself but also for his family. This aligns with Hall's concept of reality anxiety, which is rooted in real-life dangers and consequences outside the mind (Hall, 1954, p. 63). Alex's fear extends beyond personal punishment to the potential harm his actions could cause to his father's reputation and social standing. This highlights a mature awareness of the broader

impact of his choices, illustrating how reality anxiety is shaped by social and cultural contexts. The scene adds emotional depth by showing that the consequences of their plan affect not just the individuals involved but also their loved ones.

The setting is a bright, open public space, possibly a café, which contrasts with the seriousness of Alex's words and heightens the tension of their secretive conversation. The camera focuses closely on Alex at eye level, framing

only his upper body to make him the focal point. This shot, combined with soft natural lighting and a blurred background, emphasizes his emotions and the gravity of the situation. The use of shallow depth of field isolates Alex from his surroundings, drawing the audience's attention to his internal conflict and the weight of his decisions. Through these cinematographic choices, the scene effectively conveys Alex's reality anxiety and invites viewers to connect with the seriousness of the moment.

NEUROTIC ANXIETY

Hall (1954) defines neurotic anxiety as an internal fear originating from a person's instincts or strong impulses, where the ego worries that it might fail to control these urges (p. 95). This anxiety is not caused by real external threats but by the fear that one's uncontrollable emotions, such as anger or aggression, might suddenly overwhelm them. For example, a person may feel anxious about unexpectedly losing their temper and acting impulsively. Since neurotic anxiety stems from inner conflict, it can create tension and worry even when no real danger exists. To manage this, the ego employs defence mechanisms like repression or denial. Physical symptoms may also appear, such as rapid heartbeat or sweating, despite the absence of actual external threats.

Rocky shares her anxiety (Minute 07:41)



In this scene, Rocky tries to reassure Alex about their robbery plan by saying, "Alex, if we do this, we'll never have to do it again." While her words aim to convince Alex that the risky action is a one-time event, they also reveal a deeper anxiety within her. This type of fear, known as neurotic anxiety, arises from internal struggles rather than immediate external dangers. According to Hall (1954), neurotic anxiety occurs when the ego fears it may fail to control strong impulses or urges (p. 95). Rocky's tense

expression and cautious words show her effort to manage her inner fear and maintain control during a situation that could easily become dangerous if emotions get out of hand.

Rocky's anxiety stems from the worry that either she or Alex might lose control emotionally or behaviorally at a critical moment. Even though there is no direct threat in the scene, this internal tension makes her nervous and stressed. The ego tries to protect her by suppressing extreme emotions like panic or aggression, but the underlying fear remains. Her nervous demeanour and attempts to calm Alex illustrate how she struggles to keep things under control, reflecting Hall's idea that neurotic anxiety relates to the fear of the mind's own impulses causing harm when the ego cannot manage them properly (1954, p. 95).

The cinematography strengthens the emotional intensity of the scene by using a close-up shot of Rocky's face at eye level, bringing viewers into the heart of the moment. The soft, natural lighting and muted color palette create a serious and tense atmosphere, emphasizing the weight of their conversation. These visual choices help the audience connect with Rocky's feelings and highlight the importance of the plan while capturing the tension and anxiety she experiences internally.



Alex starts to be anxious (Minute 25:48)

In this scene, Alex questions Money by asking, "Why'd you bring a gun?" revealing his growing unease about the plan becoming more dangerous. His concern goes beyond the fear of getting caught; he worries about the unpredictable risks the gun might introduce inside the house. According to Hall's concept of neurotic anxiety, this fear arises from within Alex's mind rather than from immediate external threats (1954, p. 95). Neurotic anxiety involves a vague but persistent worry about potential problems, making Alex imagine negative outcomes that

have not yet occurred. This internal fear creates a feeling of being out of control and increases his stress as he grapples with the unknown dangers the gun may bring.

The cinematography in this scene heightens the tension by using a low-angle shot, which makes the characters appear larger and more imposing, intensifying the seriousness of the moment. The dim lighting, with faint illumination from windows and a ceiling lamp, casts shadows that contribute to a sense of mystery and danger, reflecting the gravity of their conversation. The characters are positioned apart within the frame, highlighting the tension between them. These visual elements combine to immerse the audience in the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, reinforcing the neurotic anxiety Alex experiences as he contemplates the possible consequences of the gun's presence.

MORAL ANXIETY

Hall (1954) describes moral anxiety as a feeling of fear or worry originating from a person's conscience or sense of right and wrong (p. 69). It occurs when the ego senses a threat from the conscience, warning the individual that they may have done something wrong or might violate their moral values. This inner alarm causes feelings of guilt or shame, prompting people to recognize their mistakes and motivate them to correct their behavior. For example, a person who lies to a friend or a student who cheats on an exam may experience moral anxiety, feeling guilt even if their actions go unnoticed. Similarly, in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, Moses experiences moral anxiety through his deep guilt over failing his people and family (Warkey, et al., 2020, p. 98). Moral anxiety serves as a reminder to adhere to one's values and maintain ethical behavior, despite sometimes causing discomfort or stress.

Alex believes stealing from a blind person is wrong and extreme (Minute 13:45)

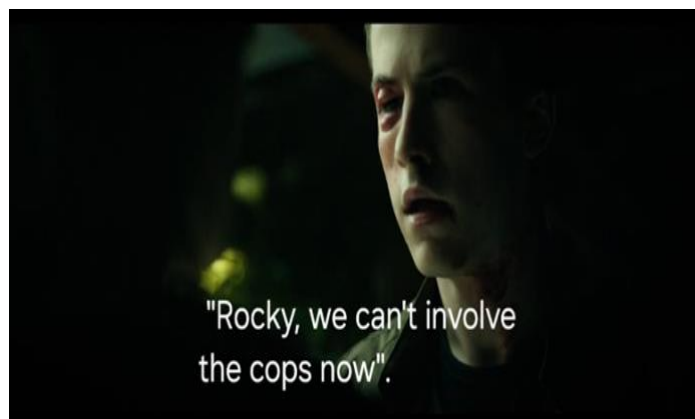


In this scene, Alex expresses his discomfort about robbing a blind man by saying, "it's kind of f*** up to rob a blind guy, isn't it?" This reveals his internal struggle and guilt, reflecting what Calvin Hall (1954) describes as moral anxiety, a fear rooted in one's conscience over doing something that contradicts personal values (p. 69). Alex's worry is not only about the external risks but also about the unfairness and harm their plan could cause. His feelings of guilt and shame show how moral anxiety influences him to question whether they should go through with the robbery, highlighting the powerful role conscience plays in guiding ethical decisions.

The cinematography enhances this emotional tension by placing the camera inside the car, using a close-up shot focused on Alex's face and ear, which makes the audience feel as if they are right beside him. The blurred background directs attention solely to his expressions and words, emphasizing his inner conflict. Soft, dim lighting and natural colors create a tense, intimate atmosphere, while the confined space of the car makes viewers share Alex's sense of being trapped by the difficult moral choice. These visual elements work together to underline the seriousness and pressure of the moment as Alex wrestles with his moral anxiety.

Alex tries to stop Rocky from reporting the blind man immediately (Minute 12:14)

In this scene, Alex tells Rocky, "Rocky, we can't involve the cops now," expressing his worry and the pressure he feels after the robbery. His fear goes beyond being caught; it stems from a deep guilt rooted in his conscience, which warns him that their actions are morally wrong. According to Calvin Hall



(1954, p. 69), moral anxiety is the feeling of guilt or shame that arises when the conscience signals moral danger. Alex's hesitation to involve the police reflects his awareness of the legal repercussions and the shame that would come with admitting their wrongdoing. This moral anxiety acts as an internal alarm, making Alex cautious about the next steps to avoid worsening the situation.

The cinematography reinforces the intensity of the moment through a close-up shot tightly framed on Alex's face and upper body, focusing the audience on his serious expression and words. The dark, blurry background removes distractions, enhancing the tension and gravity of the conversation. Dim, side lighting casts shadows on Alex, creating a secretive and tense atmosphere that mirrors his fear and uncertainty. The eye-level camera angle makes viewers feel present in the scene, emphasizing the stress and seriousness in Alex's plan to stop Rocky from contacting the police. Together, these visual choices deepen the emotional impact of Alex's moral anxiety.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the analysis reveals that the *Don't Breathe* film portrays various types of anxiety as described by Hall: reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Reality anxiety is evident when Alex fears real threats such as imprisonment, police investigations, or his father facing trouble if they are caught during the robbery. Neurotic anxiety appears through Alex and Rocky's internal nervousness and guilt, even when no immediate danger is present, as they worry about potential problems with their plan. Moral anxiety arises from their awareness that their actions conflict with their values and sense of right and wrong. Throughout the scenes, Alex tries to make his friends recognize the serious risks involved, emphasizing that robbing is not a trivial act but one that can cause harm to themselves and others. The film effectively conveys their anxiety by focusing on their concerned expressions and using quiet, sombre settings with soft lighting to evoke the tension and gravity of their decisions. Together, these forms of anxiety contribute to making the story feel authentic, highlighting the importance of understanding real consequences, internal fears, and moral considerations when facing difficult choices.

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