

## What Are You Afraid Of? A Freudian Analysis of *It*

In 1986, Stephen King, America's most prolific horror novelist, released one of his most popular novels to date: *It*. Boasting over 1,100 pages, Stephen King's novel explores how the lives of seven children (Beverly, Bill, Ben, Eddie, Richie, Stan, and Mike – the self-proclaimed “Loser's Club”) are irrefutably changed due to being terrorized by an evil shape-shifting entity named Pennywise. The novel operates by switching back and forth between two timelines 27 years apart: one in which the children are pre-teens and one in which the children have aged into their late 30's. Due to the novel's incredible success, *It* was adapted into a two-part television miniseries in 1990. After 27 years – the same amount of time it took Pennywise to regenerate and come back to torture more children – the book was remade into a film in 2017 featuring an enhanced manifestation of fear. The 2017 adaptation, however, limits itself to covering the events that transpire when the characters first fight off Pennywise, leaving room for what would eventually result in an additional film that premiered in 2019.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) remains the most controversial clinical neurologist to date in the field of psychoanalysis. Born in what is now the Czech Republic, Freud earned his medical degree in 1881, but would not provide anything widely recognized as groundbreaking until 1900 with his publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* (Leitch, 808). *It* explores many of Freud's theories of psychosexual development. While the references to Freud's psychoanalysis are not necessarily explicit in the 2017 adaptation of *It*, any viewer can look closely and determine the ways in which Freud's work plays out in the film. A Freudian reading of *It* suggests that Pennywise acts as the id, which is reinforced by the consistent vaginal imagery and phallic symbols throughout the movie as well as the nature of the attempts the monster makes to prey on children's fear. Moreover, the initial Freudian reading can be seen as one that intersects with a

feminist reading when the viewer acknowledges Beverly's (the narrative's sole main female character) stake in the narrative at hand.

Throughout the film, the antagonist, Pennywise acts as what Freud refers to as the id. The idea of the id comes from Freud's theory of personality, in which each human being is composed of an id, an ego, and a superego (Felluga). The theory relies on a person's ability to control oneself, with the id representing a lack of control and the superego representing control and acknowledgement of social norms. Lois Tyson, in her textbook titled *Critical Theory Today*, cleanly outlines the motivations of the id when she writes that it is "devoted solely to the gratification of prohibited desires of all kinds – desire for power, for sex, for amusement, for food – without an eye to consequences" (Tyson, 25). Pennywise can be seen as an embodiment of the id in the sense that he does not appear to have any moral inclinations. Rather, Pennywise acts on his impulses and desires in order to attain personal pleasure. This idea of Pennywise as the id can be further complicated if one is to bring Sigmund Freud's theory of the Uncanny into the conversation. Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 825). The uncanny should prompt oneself to feel unsettled and fearful of something that is both recognizable and completely foreign. One can join the ideas of the id and the uncanny together upon recognizing that "the uncanny unconsciously reminds us of our own id" (O'Dowd and Barton, 133). Due to the fact that Pennywise can easily change forms, he is able to embody the uncanny (as the id) by altering his appearance to match that of the children's deepest fears. For example, Pennywise most frequently presents himself as in the figure of a clown. The clown fulfills the idea of the uncanny when one examines his extended forehead, green eyes that are near translucent, offset pupils, and high-pitched voice that would perhaps sound friendly if the evil sentiments were not present in the words he was saying.

Historically, clowns have served the purpose of being entertainers, often for children's parties or circus events. It is unnerving to see Pennywise in his clown form due to his odd features, but it is further unsettling when one acknowledges that people who typically step into this costume are not ones who we perceive as wanting to hurt us, causing viewers to question who they can truly trust. This is evident from the beginning of the film, as evidenced by the scene where Pennywise and Georgie, Bill's little brother, are conversing, and Georgie is wary because something is not quite right, or uncanny, about the clown that is initially engaging in a friendly manner.

One can further see Pennywise as symbolic of the id when looking specifically at his actions. Throughout the movie, Pennywise is solely governed by his urges, acting and causing harm regardless of the consequences. His ultimate desire is to scare and hurt the children so he can feed off of their fear. A primary example of this can be found at the beginning of the film, when Pennywise rips off Georgie's arm and drags him into the sewer. At this moment, Pennywise is solely motivated with the impulse to satisfy his urge to kill Georgie. Furthermore, the fact that Pennywise specifically bites off Georgie's arm can be further interpreted to understand that Georgie is food to Pennywise. This reading makes the idea of Pennywise feeding off of children's fear literal, and allows the audience to further recognize fear as something that fuels Pennywise. He is consistently driven by his urges and desires. This is unaffected by any rational, moral obligations, or conception of consequences – he simply perpetuates harm because he wants to. Additionally, the severance of Georgie's arm could be seen as the fulfillment of Freud's idea of castration anxiety. This is defined as one's "early childhood fear of castration," or the severance of one's genitals (Felluga). While it is Georgie's arm that is severed and not his penis, the sentiment remains the same: a vital part of Georgie's physical body has been forcibly

removed. While one can live without an arm or without a penis, it is the principle of violent detachment that makes the scene a reflection of the castration complex.

At this juncture, it is valid to question why, if Pennywise's actions are meant to depict the fulfillment of a castration complex, it was Georgie's arm that was severed. This can be explained by Freud's idea of the polymorphously perverse. The polymorphously perverse is defined as "the ability to find erotic pleasure out of any part of the body," specifically occurring in children, as they have not learned the societal expectations and norms surrounding sexual pleasure (Felluga). If the viewer returns to the scene where Pennywise bites off Georgie's arm now possessing an understanding of the castration complex, one can deduct that Pennywise, if one is to follow the logic of polymorphous perversity, is attaining sexual pleasure from biting off Georgie's arm. This is polymorphously perverse on the obvious, surface-level understanding that Pennywise is deriving sexual gratification from a child, but specifically from a child's arm. Due to the fact that polymorphous perversity is most present in children, the viewer can connect this back to the idea of the id, given how the id is the most childlike state in impulsivity, ability to rationalize, and moral understanding.

The notion of Pennywise's polymorphous perversity and the sexual pleasure he gains from scaring or harming children is reinforced by his visible and audible reactions after he has instilled fear in one or all of them. One of the first instances the viewer is presented with this idea occurs after Georgie's death. Bill wakes up in the middle of the night and thinks he sees Georgie, and follows him down into the cellar. It is there that Bill discovers that Pennywise is using Georgie's body as bait to attract him. As he escapes, Pennywise attempts to follow, but fails and lands on the stairs. In the moment after he lands and Bill successfully escapes, Pennywise slowly smiles and begins to slink back. While this scene occupies only a few seconds of the film, it is

incredibly important to acknowledge it due to the fact that as he is retreating, his eyes roll back into his head and he remains smiling. This can be read as an orgasmic reaction by the viewer, denoting that Pennywise is sexually pleased by his successful attempt at scaring Bill (see Figure A). Another instance of Pennywise demonstrating sexual interest or pleasure from children's fear occurs when the children first enter the Neibolt House (the abandoned house that holds the entrance to Pennywise's lair) and Eddie breaks his arm. Pennywise has Eddie cornered and is teasing him, acting as if he is going to eat his arm like he did to Georgie. At this moment, Eddie is arguably more scared of Pennywise than any of the other children have been thus far, which we can gather by his repeated screaming and evident distress. With this knowledge, the hideous smile Pennywise bursts into after beginning to taunt Eddie can be seen as evidence of Pennywise's pleasure with his success of scaring the child (see Figure B). This is further supported by Pennywise's next line, where he muses about the "tasty, tasty, beautiful fear" (*It*, Film). By describing the child's fear as tasty and beautiful, Pennywise is both acknowledging that the fear is something that feeds him while also noting that it is a source he is attracted to.

Pennywise's attraction to fear becomes evident throughout the film as the viewer is presented with repeating vaginal imagery and phallic symbols that often either conjure Pennywise's presence or occur when he is interacting with the children. So, not only is he fueled and sexually fulfilled by the children's fear, he is also demonstrating a pattern of returning to the children when they are in moments of recognizing their own sexual maturation. A subtle instance of this towards the beginning of the film concerns Ben prior to his official integration into the Loser's Club. Shortly after school has been let out, Ben is found in the library doing research on the history of Derry, Maine (the town they live in and where the film takes place). He is drawn away and downstairs into a reference section by a floating balloon and a trail of Easter eggs.

While these are meant to be a nod to the fire on an Easter holiday that supposedly killed hundreds of children that Ben was researching, these are also a clear symbol of female imagery in that they are literal eggs. Ben's trailing of the eggs was rather passive in its start, but when he physically picks one up, that is when Pennywise is conjured. Henceforth, when Ben touches the object that has connotations of sexual maturity, Pennywise appears. To drive this imagery home, Pennywise takes the form of a headless person with an armful of eggs that he slowly lets fall out of his arms (see Figure C). This image can further be interpreted to be a nod to the aforementioned castration complex, as in this is the second "character" we've seen missing a limb or appendage. Another interesting scene that demonstrates Pennywise's appearance concurring with the children's interaction with vaginal or phallic objects occurs in the same time frame where Eddie breaks his arm. While Eddie is downstairs being taunted by Pennywise, Richie is upstairs with Bill. Richie wanders off momentarily only to become trapped in a room full of clowns (his greatest fear) and a child's coffin. When Richie opens the coffin, he finds a doll version of himself. It is important to note that in the background of this scene, the viewer can see windows draped in pink and tan cloths that distinctly resemble the female genital structure (see Figure D). The doll, in this room full of his greatest fears and vaginal imagery, represents the death of Richie's childhood and his consequent descent into puberty. Moreover, this could be taken one step further to argue that the room represents the womb, where he can remain a child forever if he does not grow up. It is only when Richie physically touches and shuts the coffin, marking his acceptance that his childhood is over, that Pennywise reopens the coffin by springing out of it to scare Richie.

One of the arguably more disturbing scenes in the film that highlights Pennywise's polymorphously perverse nature as the id occurs when the only girl in the Loser's Club, Beverly,

is in her bathroom at home. Beverly is standing over her sink when she begins to hear the voices of children coming from the drain. Beverly peers down the drain, but unable to see anything, grabs the tape measure and inserts it into the drain. The imagery present here demonstrates that the tape measure is acting as a phallic symbol as it is penetrating the drain, while the drain, a tubular structure with a hole at the surface, acts as vaginal imagery (See Figure E). When Beverly realizes that the depth of the drain goes beyond even what the tape measure can account for, she begins to pull it out, and is greeted by clumps of hair and blood gathering on the end of the object. It is then that strands of hair erupt violently from the sink and wrap themselves around Beverly's hands and neck, pulling her towards the drain (See Figure F). As she is struggling to free herself, a fountain of blood comes flowing out of the sink, covering Beverly and the entire bathroom (See Figure G). This image, of the strands of hair trapping Beverly with blood gushing out of the sink, can be explicitly seen in Freudian terms as a reference to birth. The hair, wrapping itself around Beverly's body, is a reference to the umbilical chord wrapping around a child's neck in the bloody process of giving birth. This final instance could also be interpreted as a nod to Beverly's introduction to puberty and the impending presence of developing female sexuality. There are several instances throughout the film in which Beverly's maturation is hinted at, particularly when she is buying tampons preemptively at the store or when her father sexualizes her and asks if she is "still his little girl" (*It*, Film). Therefore, the eruption of blood out of the sink could be interpreted as Beverly's fear of menstruation and the contingent symbolic transition into adulthood.

While Pennywise is not physically present in this scene, the viewer gathers that by inserting the tape measure into the drain, Beverly has conjured him. This, in turn, is Pennywise's attempts to instill fear and harm Beverly. It could further be argued that this is Pennywise's

attempt to pull Beverly back towards her own personal id, back towards childhood and the point of entering the world when you are only governed by your urges and not reason. She is initially drawn to the drain when she hears the voices of children, calling her back to an idea of childhood that, paired with the notion of the id, means that there are a lack of responsibilities and an abundance of pleasure-seeking behaviors. This, in turn, would be an attempt to coerce Beverly into returning to a polymorphously perverse state. Pennywise's polymorphously perverse nature is evident in this scene when looking at the circumstances that caused him to act; he dramatically appears in the form of spewing blood when Beverly inserts the tape measure into the drain. This is both a demonstration of Pennywise's inability to control his own urges and an eruption of his sexual aggression prompted by a nod to the genital stage associated with adulthood through the insertional act.

Beverly is not the only character experiencing sexual maturation throughout the course of the film, however. While all of the characters are important to the narrative being presented, Bill and Ben become the two front-running male characters. This becomes increasingly important as the viewer gathers throughout the movie that both Ben and Bill have a crush on Beverly. While there is an underlying tension in this regard running throughout the film, it is not the primary focus, nor the primary narrative storyline for Bill nor Ben. Rather, throughout the film, Bill experiences his acceptance that childhood is over through the death of his brother. Bill's search for Georgie throughout the course of the movie is incredibly poignant and heartbreaking to watch, but it also serves as a vehicle for Bill's character development. By the time the movie is reaching its climactic scene, Bill's stutter, a very prominent speech impediment that is motioned to multiple times throughout the film as connected to his anxiety and grief over Georgie's disappearance, completely ceases. Prior to reentering the Neibolt house, Bill gives an



empowered speech to the rest of the Loser's Club without stuttering once, as noticed by Richie (*It*, Film). One can see the erasure of Bill's stutter as evidence that he has matured past childhood and is beginning to process the death of his brother. Turning next to Ben and his character development, the viewer watches as he goes from a lonely, insecure child to a teenager gathering self-confidence and surrounded by friends. The contrast in Ben's character between the beginning and ending of the film is impossible to miss, given how the viewer goes from seeing Ben as this sad and scared new kid at school to a burgeoning teenager who feels secure in both his historical (from his research) and personal (from his experiences) knowledge of the town.

Recognizing that the members of the Loser's Club are changing, developing characters reminds the viewer that Pennywise is stuck in the id, which becomes particularly evident in the culminating final scene. The scene opens with Beverly awakening in the center of an underground system down the well in the Neibolt house: Pennywise's lair. Upon getting up and looking around, Beverly recognizes the large mountain of lost items and children, which is phallic in shape (See Figure H). Pennywise appears and grabs Beverly, and begins to unhinge his jaws. The film focuses almost solely on Pennywise during this moment, and the viewer sees the inside of Pennywise's mouth as his entire face peels back to reveal a mouth full of teeth that distinctly resembles a vagina (See Figure I). This moment literally paralyzes Beverly with fear, as her eyes go white and she goes into a catatonic state. Pennywise, in this scene, acts instinctively to capture Beverly and traumatize her by forcing her to look into his mouth, a sexual organ. As the id, Pennywise is in an infantile state, which, in Freud's terms, means that he is in the oral phase. This would mean that his primary form of erotic pleasure comes from his mouth, which is how he feeds on Beverly's fear (Felluga). Therefore, this scene demonstrates Pennywise's polymorphously perverse nature as the id and his fixation on oral pleasure.

Following this instance, the remainder of the Loser's Club descends down the well in order to rescue Beverly. They explore a tubular system of tunnels, a nod to female anatomy, in order to find the center of the lair. When they come across a floating Beverly and pull her back down to earth, the boys shake her, trying to wake her from her trance. What occurs next is an incredibly important moment for the film's narrative as a whole: Ben kisses Beverly, which breaks her out of her trance. This is crucial to acknowledge for a number of reasons. First, in regards to Ben, this seems to mark his final step into puberty. It is no longer a crush, but rather a legitimate love interest. Recognizing this scene as a moment of growth for Ben, it is also necessary for the viewer to problematize it. If one is to accept that this is the signifier of Ben's transition into puberty, that would seem to imply that Beverly is being used as a vehicle for Ben's sexual growth. This is disturbing on many fronts, but perhaps most so when one considers Beverly's character arc. Throughout the film, Beverly is consistently sexualized by her father, the pharmacist, and the bullies at school. She is even occasionally sexualized by the boys, although this is done in less obvious ways, such as when the boys are staring at her laying down in her bra and underwear after their day at the lake, quickly turning away when she goes to look in their direction. As a contrast, her father, the pharmacist, and the bullies at school all make explicit sexual comments or advances towards a very clearly uncomfortable Beverly. While all of this is occurring, Beverly is trying to navigate the scary terrain of puberty by herself. Keeping this in mind when thinking of Ben kissing Beverly, this moment does seem to strip away a piece of Beverly's agency. Not only in the manner that she is unable to consent to being kissed because she is arguably unconscious, but also because this moment minimizes Beverly's fight for character development and complexity over the course of the film and turns her into the token love interest.

After breaking her out of the trance, and a proceeding trail of events that involves Bill killing Georgie's manifestation and Pennywise holding Bill away from his friends, a fight breaks out between the Loser's Club and Pennywise. The boys try to defeat the violent clown with chains, bats, a nail gun, and a crow bar, amongst other things. However, it is ultimately Beverly who is able to destroy him. Pennywise had opened his mouth, laughing at the children and the damage he had caused, when Beverly appears and shoves a large spear down Pennywise's open mouth and into his throat (See Figure J). The sword, a phallic object, ultimately destroys Pennywise by being inserted into his vagina-like throat. It is arguable that this is the act that undoes him because it breaks him out of the oral stage – the stage of life in which babies derive all pleasure from their mouth – and forces him several stages ahead with a reference to the genital stage, that being penetration. Pennywise cannot mature throughout the stages that quickly without shattering and losing his ultimate sense of existence, which relies on him being able to act as the id and revolve around his urges.

Although a Freudian reading of *It* is particularly evident, it is also very possible to do a psychoanalytic feminist reading of this film in convergence with Freud's ideas focusing on Beverly's agency. On a personal level for Beverly, outside of the horror she's enduring with Pennywise, she is able to free herself from the consistent threat of sexual abuse presented by her father. Additionally, when looking at the second half of the film, a similar thread emerges, as Beverly is the only one who is truly able to disarm or destroy Pennywise both times in the Neibolt house. Yet, while a feminist reading renders Beverly's actions as a reversal of the stereotypical boy-saves-girl trope, it is crucial to recognize that Beverly is only able to disarm and destroy Pennywise with the spear, an inherently phallic-shaped object. She is able to disarm

and destroy evil, but only in the confines of patriarchy where the phallus still holds the ultimate power.

*It* serves as a dramatic exploration of the complicated nature of puberty. Through the use of Freudian psychoanalysis, the viewer is reminded that puberty can be a horrifying transition for adolescents. Specifically, a psychoanalytic reading helps remind us that these children go from one understanding of the world, where everything makes sense and they are shielded from fear, to a completely changed perspective in which things are illogical and the terrifying nature of reality is revealed. Bringing feminist theory into the conversation with psychoanalytic theory, the viewer can gather that Beverly's entrance into puberty proves to be much more traumatic than that of her male peers. This is displayed by the nature of events that occur in Pennywise's lair at the end of the movie, in which Beverly is subjected to more pain and torture than of her male peers. The adaption of Stephen King's *It* ultimately will remain in the minds of viewers as a film that reminded them of what they are truly afraid of.

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## Figures

Figure A



Figure B

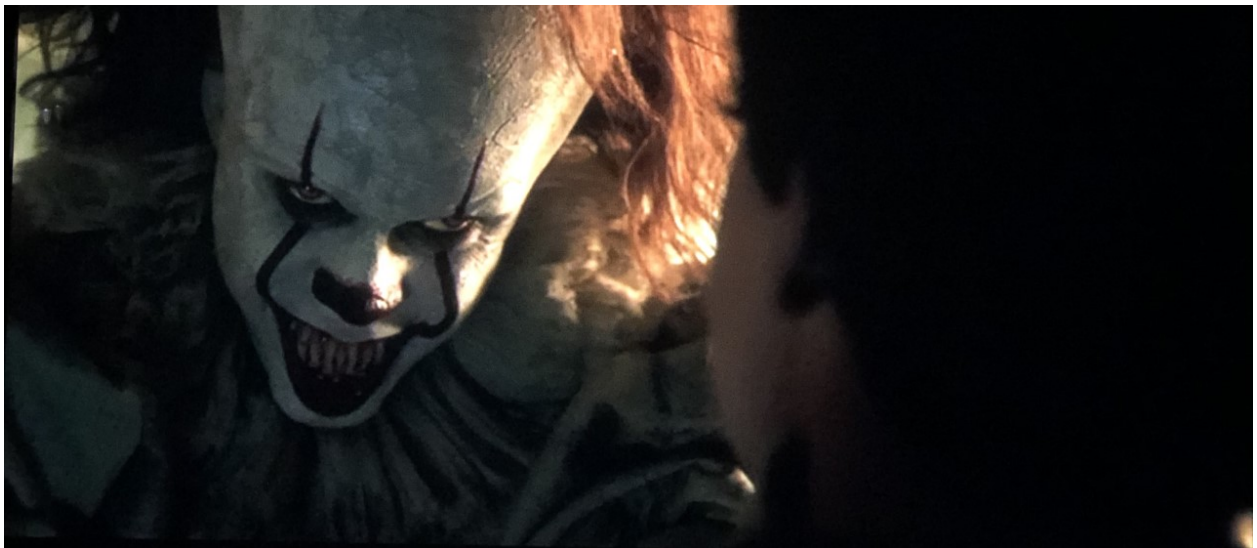


Figure C

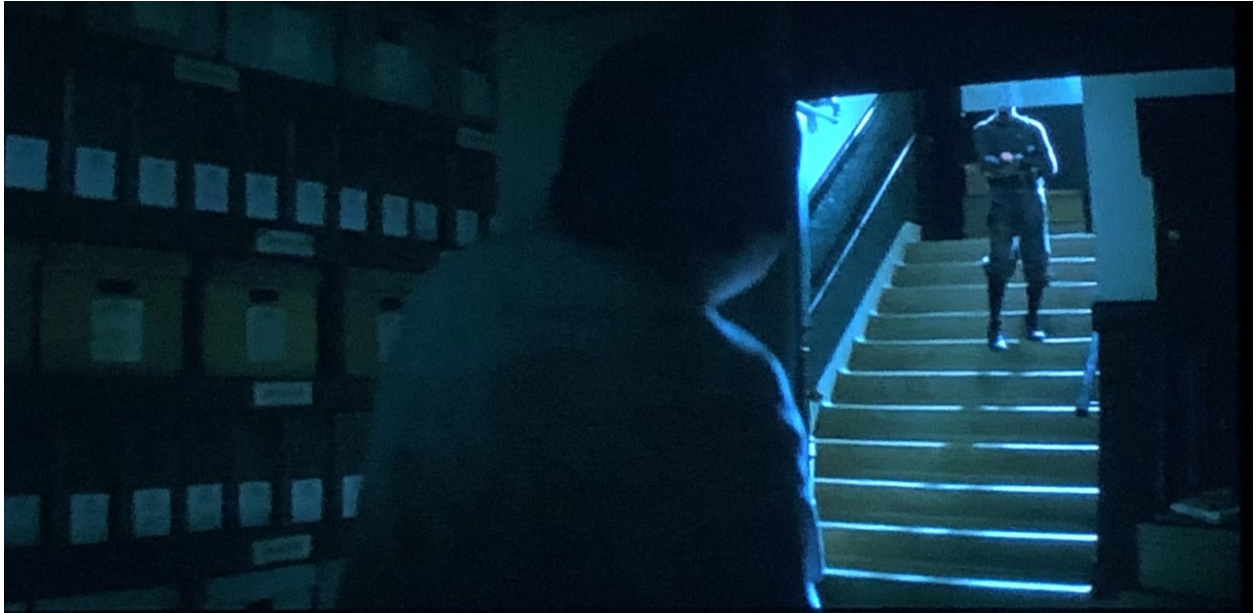


Figure D





Figure E



Figure F

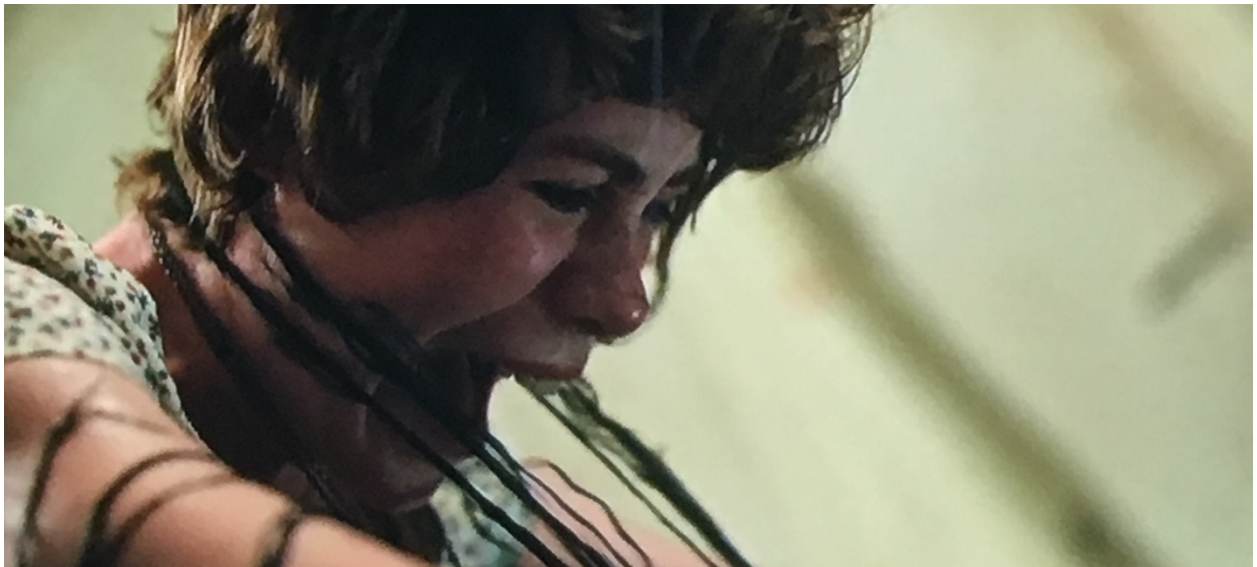




Figure G



Figure H



Figure I

