

THE IMPACT OF BULLYING ON THE MAIN CHARACTER IN HOLLY BLACK'S THE CRUEL PRINCE (2018)

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the forms of bullying and analyze the psychological impacts experienced by the main character, Jude Duarte, in *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a literary psychology approach and Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic theory. The data were collected through library research using note-taking and close reading techniques on dialogues, monologues, and narrative events relevant to the research focus. The findings reveal that Jude experiences various forms of bullying, such as verbal humiliation, intimidation, threats, and discriminatory treatment due to her position as a human in the Faerie world. These repeated bullying experiences lead to anxiety, insecurity, and basic hostility, which later develop into neurotic needs for power, control, and domination as defense mechanisms. This study concludes that experiences of bullying play an important role in shaping Jude's psychological dynamics, particularly in the development of her tendency to move against people as a way to gain a sense of security and avoid being in a vulnerable position.

Kata Kunci : Discrimination, Bullying, Literary Psychology, Social Psychoanalysis

Article History

Received : Juli 2026
Reviewed: Juli 2026
Published: Juli 2026

Copyright : Author
Publish by : Argopuro



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INTRODUCTION

Bullying is widely recognized as a serious social and public health problem on a global scale. This behavior can occur in various settings such as schools, workplaces, families, and online spaces, and its impact is not only felt at the moment it occurs but can also persist into an individual's future and affect society more broadly. Bullying is generally defined as an aggressive act carried out intentionally and repeatedly, accompanied by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). This behavior encompasses various forms, such as physical violence, verbal attacks, social exclusion, and bullying that occurs through digital media, or cyberbullying (Armitage, 2021). If bullying practices occur widely, their impact can extend to the level of society as a whole. The normalization of intimidating behavior and the abuse of power can shape unhealthy patterns of socialization, in which dominance

and oppression come to be regarded as normal (Wardani & Astuti, 2024). As a result, groups that frequently become targets of bullying are at risk of experiencing limited access to education, employment, and other social opportunities. In the long term, this condition can reinforce social inequality and create sustained socio-economic losses for the affected individuals or groups (Wolke et al., 2013). One of the environments most vulnerable to bullying is the school, where this behavior negatively affects students' mental health, academic ability, and peer relationships while leaving psychological impacts that may persist into adulthood (Martono, 2012; Armitage, 2021).

Bullying at school generally occurs due to a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Lines, 2008). It may take the form of verbal bullying, physical bullying, relational or social bullying, and cyberbullying (Mishna et al., 2020; Rigby, 2007). This phenomenon is reflected in data showing that during the 2018-2019 school year approximately one in five students aged 12-18 in K-12 schools in the United States experienced repeated bullying, demonstrating that bullying is a systemic social issue rather than an isolated incident (GAO, 2021; Nces, 2024). Victims frequently experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, declining academic performance, absenteeism, and social isolation, while perpetrators and bully-victims are also at greater risk of emotional and behavioral problems (Han ZY et al., 2025; Wolke et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2025; Lines, 2008).

The complexity of bullying is not only a social issue that occurs in real life but is also frequently represented in various literary works. Through stories, conflicts, and characters' experiences, literary works are able to depict the psychological dynamics of bullying victims in greater depth. This shows that understanding the representation of bullying in literary works cannot be separated from the psychology of literature approach. One interpretation of psychology of literature examines the psychological condition of the characters within a literary work (Wellek & Warren, 2016), while several methodological approaches have been proposed to connect psychological theory and literary texts (Minderop, 2010). Through this approach, literary texts can be interpreted as representations of psychological concepts reflected in the characters' actions and inner conflicts.

The representation of bullying is found in the novel *The Cruel Prince* (2018) by Holly Black. The main character, Jude Duarte, is portrayed as a human living in the world of faeries, where she becomes the target of mockery, humiliation, discrimination, and violence, particularly from Prince Cardan and his friends. These experiences create feelings of insecurity, anger, and alienation, leading Jude to pursue recognition and power through various political strategies within Faerie (Black, 2018). To understand these psychological impacts, this study employs Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic theory, which explains that an unsafe or rejecting environment can produce anxiety, insecurity, emotional conflict, and neurotic needs as psychological adjustment mechanisms.

Although numerous studies have discussed bullying and its psychological consequences, most have focused on real-life victims or educational settings. Studies examining the representation of bullying in literary works, particularly through Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic perspective, remain limited. Likewise, research on *The Cruel Prince* has generally emphasized themes of politics, power, romance, or identity rather than examining how bullying shapes the protagonist's psychological development. Therefore, this study fills that research gap by analyzing both the forms of bullying experienced by Jude Duarte and their psychological impact through Karen Horney's theory. This constitutes the novelty of the study by integrating bullying studies, literary

psychology, and Horney's psychoanalytic framework in the analysis of a contemporary fantasy novel.

Based on the background above, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How are the experiences and forms of bullying experienced by the main character represented? and (2) What are the impacts of this bullying on the main character? Accordingly, this study aims to identify the experiences and forms of bullying experienced by Jude Duarte and to examine their psychological and social impacts as represented in *The Cruel Prince*. The analysis is limited to the main character and scenes directly related to bullying and its influence on her psychological development.

This study is expected to contribute to literary studies by providing a psychoanalytic interpretation of bullying through Karen Horney's perspective. It also demonstrates that the pursuit of power and control by Jude Duarte can be understood as a psychological response to insecurity and repeated bullying experiences, thereby enriching discussions on the relationship between social experience, psychological condition, and character development in literary works.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black from the perspective of literary psychology. Qualitative research is appropriate because it aims to understand social phenomena holistically and analyze data in the form of words, symbols, and meanings rather than statistical figures (Sugiyono, 2018; Abdussamad, 2021). Literary research itself examines human life through literary texts by exploring the values, culture, and social behavior reflected in characters, conflicts, and narratives (Endraswara, 2013; Ahmadi, 2019).

The object of this study is *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black, first published in 2018 by Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. As the first novel in *The Folk of the Air* trilogy, it consists of approximately 384 pages and centers on Jude Duarte, a human raised in the Faerie world who experiences persistent bullying, discrimination, and psychological pressure due to her identity. These experiences shape her ambition, survival strategies, and psychological development, making the novel suitable for examining the forms and impacts of bullying through a literary psychology approach.

This research applies library research as its primary data collection technique. The primary data consist of quotations, dialogues, narrations, and events found in *The Cruel Prince* (2018). Secondary data are obtained from books, scientific journal articles, previous studies, internet sources, and other relevant references related to literary psychology, bullying, and Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theory. These sources provide the theoretical foundation and support the interpretation of the findings.

Data were collected through documentation by repeatedly reading the novel, identifying passages relevant to the research focus, and selecting quotations representing bullying experiences and their psychological impacts on the main character. The selected data were then analyzed descriptively by examining both intrinsic and extrinsic elements and interpreting them through Karen Horney's concepts of basic hostility, basic anxiety, and neurotic needs.

The findings are presented using a descriptive-analytical method. Relevant quotations from the novel are organized systematically and interpreted using the literary psychology approach. Each quotation is analyzed in relation to the character's psychological condition, the social context of the story, and Karen Horney's theoretical framework. The analysis is arranged chronologically to illustrate the development of Jude Duarte's psychological condition as a consequence of repeated bullying experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the novel *The Cruel Prince*, the main character Jude Duarte is initially depicted as a normal and innocent human child before ultimately experiencing trauma and alienation after being brought to Elfame. The following quotes illustrate the early development of Jude's character: "Inside the house, Jude sat on the living room rug and ate fish sticks, soggy from the microwave and dragged through a sludge of ketchup." (Black, 2018: Prologue.) This scene highlights Jude's simple life before a major event permanently alters her world. Daily activities like eating fish sticks in the living room reflect a safe and familiar home environment, free from threats or pressure. This condition shows that Jude grew up as a child who enjoyed a stable family life filled with a sense of security.

"The way the neighborhood kids avoided Vivi or the way their parents talked about her in low, worried voices, Jude didn't think it was anything important. Grown-ups were always worried, always whispering." (Black, 2018: Prologue)

This sense of security is also reflected in how Jude perceives her surrounding environment. Even though the other children avoid Vivi and the adults talk about her in worried tones, Jude considers it all ordinary. Her innocence prevents her from reading signs of danger or understanding that something unnatural is happening around her. However, this peaceful life changes drastically when Madoc arrives at her house.

"When the knock came, Jude hopped up to answer it. She hoped it might be one of the girls from across the street, wanting to play video games or inviting her for an after-dinner swim. The tall man stood on their mat, glaring down at her. He wore a brown leather duster despite the heat. His shoes were shod with silver, and they rang hollowly as he stepped over the threshold. Jude looked up into his shadowed face and shivered.....When the man plunged the sword into Dad's stomach, pushing it upward. There was a sound, like sticks snapping, and an animal cry...She was almost around the corner when his blade struck her in the back." (Black, 2018: Prologue)

This scene marks the turning point in Jude's life. In a brief moment, the security she previously possessed shatters as she witnesses Madoc murder both of her parents right before her eyes. This experience transforms Jude's position from a child living in a normal family environment into a victim of violence who has lost both parents at once. This very event becomes the primary source of her trauma and heavily influences the development of her personality in subsequent stages.

This trauma does not end with the loss of her parents; it continues as Jude must live in Elfame, a world that constantly makes her feel different. "Here, I am the strange one, with my blunt fingers, round ears, and mayfly life." (Black, 2018: 4).

Through this admission, Jude reveals her awareness of being a stranger in her new environment. Her physical differences and her status as a human make her feel as though she does not belong to the faerie society. This awareness of alienation intensifies the impact of her previous trauma, as Jude has not only lost her family but has also lost a sense of belonging to the environment she inhabits.

On the other hand, living with Madoc presents a much more complicated psychological conflict.

“Madoc personally instructed us in the art of fighting with the cutlass and dagger, the falchion and our fists. He played Nine Men’s Morris, Fidchell, and Fox and Geese with us before a fire. He let us sit on his knee and eat off his plate. Many nights I drifted off to sleep to his rumbling voice reading from a book of battle strategy. And despite myself, despite what he’d done and what he was, I came to love him. I do love him.” (Black, 2018: 4)

Although Madoc is the cause of the greatest trauma in her life, he also plays the role of the figure who raises and educates Jude during her time in Elfhome. This dual role creates a paradoxical emotional relationship. Jude is unable to completely hate Madoc because their daily experiences as foster child and parent foster a sense of closeness and affection. Thus, from the beginning of the story, Jude experiences a complex inner conflict: loving the very figure who perpetrated violence against her family. The complexity of this relationship becomes a foundational pillar in Jude’s psychological development throughout the novel.

Forms of Bullying Experienced by the Main Character

Jude’s position as a human in the middle of Elfhome’s hierarchical and violent environment makes her vulnerable to various forms of bullying, whether verbal, physical, or social. The following quotes represent these forms of bullying: “The servants are overfond of telling me how fortunate I am, a bastard daughter of a faithless wife, a human without a drop of faerie blood, to be treated like a trueborn child of Faerie.” (Black, 2018: 3)

From the start of her life in Elfhome, Jude faces insults that attack her personal identity. The servants’ remarks calling her a bastard daughter and a human without a drop of faerie blood are not compliments, but rather sneers that diminish her existence. By masking the insult as an expression that Jude is “fortunate,” the servants assert that humans are viewed as inferior to the fae, thereby placing Jude in a subordinate position. These insults eventually evolve into social labeling that further reinforces Jude’s ostracization. “She frowns with an expression just like one I might make if she was being particularly thickheaded. ‘Do you know what they call us?’ she demands. ‘The Circle of Worms.’” (Black, 2018: 21). The moniker *Circle of Worms* given to Jude and her twin sister, Taryn, serves as a symbol of how they are perceived by their surroundings. Calling them “worms” is not just insulting, but also associates them with something dirty, weak, and worthless. Such labeling demonstrates that discrimination against humans has become a part of the social culture in Elfhome, solidifying Jude’s position as an individual who is continuously looked down upon.

The bullying Jude experiences does not stop at verbal or social insults; it escalates into direct physical violence.

“When I was nine, one of Madoc’s guards bit off the very top of the ring finger on my left hand. We were outside, and when I screamed, he pushed me hard enough that my head smacked into a wooden post in the stables. Then he made me stand there while he chewed the piece he’d bitten off. He told me exactly how much he hated mortals. When it was over, he explained that I better keep what happened secret, because if I didn’t, he’d eat the rest of me.” (Black, 2018: 30)

This experience shows a much more brutal escalation of bullying. Madoc’s guard not only inflicts a cruel physical injury on Jude’s body, but also forces her to keep the incident a secret by threatening her with even greater violence. As a result, the action does not merely hurt her physically, but also instills a fear that strips away her courage to seek protection or fight back. This pattern of violence then continues in the form of group bullying.

“I begin to speak when a hand claps down over my mouth. Fingers sink into the skin around my lips. I strike out, swinging my body around, and see Locke grabbing Taryn’s waist. Someone has my wrists. I wrench my mouth free and scream, but screams in Faerie are like birdsong, too common to attract much attention. They push us through the woods, laughing... Then a shove at my shoulders and the horrible shock of cold water closing over me... ‘There are nixies in this river,’ Valerian says. ‘If you don’t get out before they find you, they’ll pull you under and hold you there. Their sharp teeth will sink into your skin.’” (Black, 2018: 33)

Unlike the previous incident carried out by a single perpetrator, this violence involves Cardan and his group. Jude and Taryn are gagged, restrained, and then pushed into a river while being intimidated with threats of dangerous creatures that could kill them. The laughter of the perpetrators during the incident shows that the victim’s suffering is treated as entertainment. This situation simultaneously highlights an imbalance of power that leaves Jude with almost no room to defend herself.

This dominance reaches a more complex form when Cardan combines physical violence with verbal insults at the same time.

“Cardan is waiting for me when I get off the field. I am struck suddenly by his height, by the arrogant sneer he wears like a crown... Cardan grabs my face... His other hand grabs my hair... ‘Do you know what mortal means? It means born to die. It means deserving of death. That’s what you are...’” (Black, 2018: 53)

In this scene, Cardan not only grabs Jude’s face and pulls her hair to demonstrate physical dominance, but also uses words that directly attack her identity as a human. By equating the status of “mortal” with death and unworthiness to live, Cardan attempts to crush Jude’s self-esteem while asserting his superiority as a faerie prince. The combination of physical violence and verbal degradation shows that the bullying directed at Jude is no longer just a spontaneous act, but a form of oppression aimed at maintaining the social hierarchy in Elfame.

The Impact of Bullying on the Main Character

The continuous bullying Jude endures inflicts significant psychological impacts, ranging from fear, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion to a shift toward a more aggressive demeanor. The following quotes depict these effects: "I was raised by the man who murdered my parents, reared in a land of monsters. I live with that fear, let it settle into my bones..." (Black, 2018: 20)

Ever since losing her parents, fear has become an inseparable part of Jude's life. She not only has to live with the person who murdered her family, but she also grows up in an environment filled with threats and violence. This condition causes the fear—initially sparked by a traumatic event—to develop into a persistent emotion, meaning that insecurity has fused into her daily existence. This fear, sustained by her environment, subsequently affects how Jude views herself. "I am weak. I am fragile. I am mortal. I hate that most of all. Even if, by some miracle, I could be better than them, I will never be one of them." (Black, 2018: 31). This statement shows that Jude internalizes the inferior position constantly imposed on her. She views herself as weak and fragile due to her identity as a human in the midst of a faerie society. The realization that she will never truly be a part of them breeds ongoing anxiety and reinforces her sense of alienation.

This persistent feeling of insecurity gradually evolves into emotional exhaustion. "I'm so tired," I say out loud. "So tired." I sit there for a long time.... "Tired of what, sweetmeat?" it asks me... I sigh and answer honestly for once. "Of being powerless." (Black, 2018: 16). Jude's admission that she is tired of "being powerless" reveals the accumulation of psychological pressure she has long endured. This exhaustion is not driven solely by the acts of bullying she receives, but by the reality that she feels she lacks the power to stop it or protect herself from such treatment. Consequently, the bullying does not just cause momentary suffering, but drains her emotional well-being continuously.

These experiences ultimately lead Jude to question the changes happening within herself.

"I mostly don't like to imagine the life I could have had, the one without magic in it... Where I wasn't so angry. Where my hands weren't stained with blood... Whatever essential thing the other Jude has, whatever part that's unbroken in her and broken in me, that thing might be unrecoverable." (Black, 2018: 211)

Through this reflection, Jude compares her current self to the life she might have lived had she not experienced loss, violence, and bullying. She realizes that these various experiences have transformed her into a person consumed by anger and violence. The awareness that a part of her might be broken and unrecoverable demonstrates that her trauma has not only impacted her emotional state, but has also shaped her identity and the way she understands herself.

The shift in how Jude perceives herself subsequently influences how she confronts the world around her. "If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse." (Black, 2018: 154). This statement marks a vital turning point in Jude's response to the bullying she has endured. Rather than continuing to seek acceptance from an environment that rejects her, she chooses to adopt more cunning and dangerous methods to survive. In other words, the experience of being bullied does not just inflict fear and suffering, but also drives a behavioral shift from a once-passive stance to a more aggressive one as a mechanism to handle a threat-filled environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of *The Cruel Prince*, it can be concluded that the bullying experienced by Jude Duarte is heavily dominated by verbal abuse through persistent threats and insults, which systematically escalate alongside dangerous physical violence and severe social ostracization. In response to this trauma, Jude abandons her initial passivity and adopts a "moving against people" interpersonal trend as outlined in Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic theory; she transforms into an aggressive, ambitious, and manipulative individual who confronts her deep-seated anxieties by seeking to dominate others, eventually securing her safety through ruthless political maneuvers and controlling Cardan as a puppet king. Theoretically, this finding contributes to literary psychology by demonstrating how Horney's framework effectively dissects character radicalization within contemporary fantasy, while practically serving as a reflection of how severe real-world discrimination can drive victims to adopt highly defensive, aggressive survival strategies.

However, because this study is limited strictly to the text of the first novel, the long-term resolution of Jude's psychological development across the entire trilogy remains unexamined. To complement these findings, future researchers are suggested to expand the object of study to the subsequent sequels—*The Wicked King* and *The Queen of Nothing*—in order to evaluate whether Jude's aggressive defense mechanism remains stable or shifts as her political power solidifies. Additionally, future studies could utilize a comparative method to contrast Jude's *moving against people* strategy with other marginalized human characters in fantasy literature, thereby offering a broader understanding of trauma-driven defense mechanisms in fiction.

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