



Factors Forming Charlie Emily's Identity in Scott Cawthon's The Fourth Closet

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Abstract. This study explores how identity is formed and shaped in Scott Cawthon's *The Fourth Closet*, focusing on the psychological development of the protagonist, Charlie Emily. The research arises from the problem of how internal conflicts and external relationships form one's understanding of self, especially when faced with trauma, memory distortion, and existential uncertainty. Drawing from theories in psychology and narrative identity, the study aims to identify the key factors contributing to identity instability and transformation. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method, the research conducts a close reading of the novel, emphasizing literary elements such as characterization, monologue, and emotional expression. The results of this research show five factors that form Charlie Emily, such as, memory, emotion, dissociation, internal dialogue, and interpersonal. The findings reveal that Charlie's identity is not static but constantly negotiated through fragmented memories, emotional crises, and shifting self-perceptions. Ultimately, the novel illustrates that identity is not predetermined or singular, but constructed through narrative, emotional integration, and relational validation. This study contributes to the understanding of how literary texts can mirror the complex psychological mechanisms behind identity formation and offers insights into how fiction addresses trauma and selfhood.

Keywords: *Identity, Identity Construction, Memory*

INTRODUCTION

Understanding identity is essential to understanding human life. From childhood to adulthood, individuals constantly reflect on who they are, where they belong, and what gives meaning to their experiences. Identity helps people make sense of the world around them and their place within it. It influences how individuals view themselves, how they relate to others, and how they make life decisions. The individual forms his or her identity by identifying with someone or something. (Coulmas, 2019)

However, identity is not something that is simply given or fixed. It is constructed over time, formed by a wide range of factors including personal experiences, family relationships, culture, memory, and emotional response. (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) stated that identity and emotion are understood as unfolding through processes of self-organization. When individuals face transitions or trauma, identity can be challenged, lost, or reformed. These moments often lead to personal transformation, creating new self-understandings or disrupting past beliefs. Therefore, identity involves both continuity and change across a person's life span.

The challenge arises when identity becomes unstable. Loss, trauma, fragmented memory, or conflicting emotions can interfere with how a person perceives themselves. In such cases, the individual may experience confusion or even dissociation. However, identity can also be restored or reconstructed through reflection, emotional processing, and supportive relationships. Literature and psychology both highlight that identity formation is not a solitary process. It is influenced by inner dialogue, emotional experiences, and external recognition. These insights provide a framework for examining how identity can be broken and reassembled.

Several recent studies support the idea that memory, emotion, and interpersonal relationships are key elements in identity development. Conway & Pleydell-Pearce (2000) explain how autobiographical memory supports the continuity of self. Singer & Conway (2011) further emphasize that emotionally significant experiences are often used as reference points in constructing personal identity. McLean and Syed (2015) also argue that identity is formed in context, emerging from narratives created through personal and social experiences. Yet, while these studies have offered important contributions, fewer have explored how identity operates within fictional narratives, especially those involving psychological trauma or speculative elements. This represents a gap between psychological theory and its representation in literary texts.

This article aims to explore how identity is formed, disrupted, and reconstructed through internal and external experiences. By using a psychological literary approach, the study examines how identity development can be reflected in fictional narratives that portray emotional conflict, memory distortion, and personal transformation. The research highlights the importance of psychological and relational factors in shaping the sense of self, and how literature can serve as a lens to understand the complex nature of identity construction in human experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is a complex and evolving construct that reflects how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. It encompasses the sense of self-continuity, coherence, and uniqueness, formed by personal experiences and social environments. According to Kroger (2007), identity development is a lifelong process involving the integration of past experiences, present awareness, and future aspirations. Rather than being a fixed trait, identity is dynamic and constantly negotiated in relation to memories, emotions, and interpersonal interactions.

One of the primary factors shaping identity is memory, particularly autobiographical memory. Memory plays a central role in forming a personal narrative, allowing individuals to integrate life experiences into a coherent sense of self. Tulving (2002) emphasized that episodic memory enables people to mentally travel back in time and recall experiences that contribute to identity construction. When memory becomes fragmented due to trauma or dissociation, the narrative structure of identity can weaken, leading to confusion or disconnection from the self (Neisser & Fivush, 1994).

Emotion also serves as a significant factor in identity development. Emotional experiences contribute to how people define themselves, particularly when those experiences involve meaningful relationships or life-changing events. Holland & Kensinger (2010) stated that emotions are interwoven with memory and narrative,

influencing which events are remembered and how they are interpreted. Intense emotions such as fear, grief, or love often mark turning points in identity formation.

Another relevant factor is dissociation, a psychological response that may occur when individuals are exposed to overwhelming or traumatic experiences. Dissociation can involve memory gaps, identity confusion, or the emergence of separate internal selves. As Putnam (1997) argues, dissociation is a protective mechanism that can lead to fragmented identity when the individual is unable to process trauma coherently.

The concept of internal dialogue or multiple inner voices is also vital in identity studies. Hermans and Kempen (1993) introduced the theory of the dialogical self, in which identity is formed through interactions between various internal “I-positions” within the self. This multiplicity allows individuals to negotiate between conflicting roles, desires, and emotions. However, when this internal conversation becomes disjointed or contradictory, it may signal a fragmented or unstable identity structure.

Finally, relationships and social interactions significantly influence identity development. The feedback individuals receive from others, like parents, peers, partners, helps form self-perception. Erikson (1968) proposed that identity formation is deeply connected to social roles and the validation of the self by others. When relationships are supportive and consistent, individuals are more likely to develop a stable identity. In contrast, relational trauma or neglect can contribute to identity confusion and emotional vulnerability (Main & Solomon, 1986).

These five interrelated elements: memory, emotion, dissociation, internal dialogue, and interpersonal relationships, offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how identity is constructed, disrupted, and potentially restored. These theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for analyzing identity formation in literary narratives. In particular, this study applies the above concepts to Scott Cawthon’s *The Fourth Closet*, focusing on the character of Charlie Emily, whose fragmented experiences, psychological struggles, and shifting sense of self offer a compelling case for examining how identity is formed and transformed under conditions of emotional and existential crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a literary psychological approach to analyze how identity is constructed, fragmented, and reconstructed in Scott Cawthon’s *The Fourth Closet*. Drawing on Erikson (1968), identity is viewed as a lifelong psychosocial task involving integration of past, present, and future self-concepts. Hermans & Kempen (1993) expand the view by framing identity as a dynamic, multi-voiced dialogical self, formed through internal dialogues among multiple “I-positions.” Kroger (2007) reinforces that identity development is an ongoing, processual journey formed by personal history, current experiences, and future aspirations within relational and cultural contexts. These psychological concepts serve as the theoretical lens to explore how the protagonist, Charlie Emily, navigates her evolving sense of self throughout the novel.

Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research focuses on close reading as the primary tool for data collection. The researcher functions as the main instrument, identifying key points like dialogues, inner monologues, narrative descriptions, and symbolic moments, that reflect the psychological dimensions of identity formation. Data is gathered by systematically analyzing the novel's textual elements, especially scenes involving memory disruption, emotional intensity, dissociative responses, or

interpersonal interactions. These narrative cues are then categorized and interpreted according to the five core factors that form identity.

The analysis emphasizes literary elements such as characterization, plot structure, and internal conflict, particularly as they pertain to Charlie's fragmented memories, shifting self-perception, and relational dynamics. The narrative setting marked by themes of trauma, artificial intelligence, and bodily transformation, provides a unique context for examining identity disintegration and reconstruction. Ultimately, this method allows the researcher to explore how identity is not only a personal psychological construct but also a narrative function embedded within the novel's structure and symbolism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the representation of identity in Scott Cawthon's *The Fourth Closet* by focusing on five primary psychological dimensions: memory, emotion, dissociation, internal dialogue, and relationships. The analysis centers on the character of Charlie Emily, whose identity is portrayed as unstable, fragmented, and contested throughout the novel. The study draws on close reading of key passages that demonstrate how these five factors operate in shaping her complex sense of self.

Memory

Memory plays a central role in shaping identity, especially for individuals grappling with trauma. In *The Fourth Closet*, Charlie Emily constantly struggles to connect the fragments of her past into a coherent narrative. Her memories are scattered, and at times, she cannot discern whether they are her own or implanted by someone else. This confusion over memory causes a dissonance in how she perceives herself, eroding the continuity of her identity. The novel presents memory not as a reliable source of self-understanding, but as a contested terrain that both reveals and obscures the truth.

One of the clearest expressions of this confusion appears when Charlie says, "I have these memories. I know they don't belong to me; and yet at the same time, they do." (Cawthon.2018:158). This quote captures how her autobiographical memory feels disconnected from emotion, like static images without personal resonance. Her inability to emotionally identify with her memories makes it difficult for her to trust them, leading to a crisis in personal identity.

The confusion deepens with outside influences, such as the appearance of Elizabeth Afton, who embodies a mirrored version of Charlie. The similarities between them create uncertainty in Charlie's sense of self, especially when others also begin to question her authenticity. "She didn't know everything, though. She blamed all the gaps in her memory on the near-death experience... everything changed" (Cawthon.2018:131). This implies that others, too, view Charlie's memory inconsistencies as symptoms of something broken or altered.

As the novel progresses, Charlie's struggle to piece together her identity becomes symbolic of the broader challenge of surviving trauma. Memory is not just a mental record, it is a battleground. The more she tries to remember who she is, the more she is haunted by conflicting accounts, repressed images, and inherited memories. The narrative presents memory not as a guide, but as a fragmented mirror, making identity something that must be constantly reconstructed rather than simply recalled.

Ultimately, Charlie's memory confusion reflects the deeper psychological disarray brought about by trauma, loss, and manipulation. Her journey becomes one of reclaiming narrative authority, learning to differentiate real memories from artificial ones, and accepting the gaps as part of her lived truth. Only through this process can she begin to reconstruct a more stable sense of self.

Emotion

Emotions in *The Fourth Closet* serve as powerful indicators of Charlie's psychological turmoil. Unlike memories, which can be suppressed or altered, emotional responses often arise involuntarily, revealing the truth beneath her confused thoughts. Charlie's emotional journey is marked by suppression, breakdown, and, eventually, emotional assertion. Each phase reflects a shift in her internal understanding of who she is.

From the beginning, Charlie's emotional suppression is a key defense mechanism. Even when she experiences physical and mental pain, she avoids expressing it. "A shock of pain hit her suddenly... she clenched her jaw, unwilling to make a sound" (Cawthon.2018:35). This shows how deeply she internalizes her suffering, preferring silence over vulnerability. Her refusal to vocalize pain signals not only emotional repression but also a crisis of self, worth believing that expressing pain makes her weak or inauthentic.

Her emotional numbness is disrupted by moments of intimacy and fear. When Charlie begins to realize she might not be fully human, she questions the authenticity of her emotions. "He scooped her up with care. She was warm in his arms... she was dreaming" (Cawthon.2018:135). In this moment of vulnerability, Charlie experiences comfort, yet the scene blurs the boundary between reality and dream, between feeling and fabrication. This emotional ambiguity reflects her growing identity crisis: if her body was built, are her feelings real?

Throughout the novel, emotional disintegration accompanies revelations about her past. She reacts with guilt, fear, and rage, often in ways that surprise even herself. Her emotions often do not match her memories, creating dissonance and confusion. This mismatch is a central part of her identity crisis, as she cannot find consistency between how she feels and who she believes herself to be.

Eventually, her emotional expression becomes a tool for reclaiming identity. Her vulnerability, particularly in moments of connection with John, allows her to begin expressing emotions as her own, not as manufactured responses. It is through these emotions, not memories or logic, that Charlie starts to reconnect with a more stable self. Her emotional recovery reflects a deeper restoration of self-trust.

Dissociation

Charlie's experiences in *The Fourth Closet* reveal a profound sense of dissociation, a psychological mechanism through which she distances herself from overwhelming experiences. Her dissociative episodes indicate a fractured identity where parts of her consciousness are numbed, silenced, or detached from the present. This is especially evident in scenes involving physical trauma or the reemergence of past memories.

A striking example of this occurs when Charlie is physically injured, yet detached from the pain. "She was still sitting, leaning against the wall, but she looked limp... when his hand touched her arm she made a distressed, high-pitched noise" (Cawthon.2018:142).

Her reaction is more mechanical than emotional, illustrating how her self-awareness is dimmed. She is present, but not fully inhabiting her body, her sense of self is split between experiencing pain and avoiding it.

This fragmentation continues as she begins to understand her artificial nature. Discovering that she may be a manufactured being creates a rupture in her identity. "Someone that looks like me... Never let go..." (Cawthon.2018:144). Confronted with an identical copy, Charlie questions her originality and autonomy. The fear that she might be replaceable or indistinct from another self leads to a dissociation not just from her body, but from her essence.

The settings in the novel mirror this fragmentation. Underground facilities and robotic doppelgängers represent her inner world, confusing, lifeless, and full of hidden mechanisms. These metaphorical environments reflect the layers of emotional defense Charlie has built to survive. Her sense of reality fluctuates, and she questions whether her memories and feelings are genuine or fabricated.

Despite these dissociative defenses, Charlie occasionally reclaims fragments of self-awareness. In moments of choice like deciding to save others, she asserts control over her actions. These decisions signal a gradual reintegration of her fractured self, showing that dissociation is not permanent, but a survival response that can be softened through agency and connection.

Internal Dialogue

Internal dialogue is one of the most powerful tools *The Fourth Closet* uses to depict Charlie's fractured identity. Her consciousness often splits between multiple voices, her own and Elizabeth Afton's, engaging in a struggle for dominance over her sense of self. This mental conversation reveals her internal conflict: the tension between being who she believes she is and who others claim she might be.

Early in the novel, Charlie's voice is hesitant and uncertain. When Elizabeth's presence grows stronger, the internal dialogue becomes combative. "You can't overpower me," Elizabeth whispered. "You aren't like me" (Cawthon.2018:329). This voice is critical and dominating, representing the part of Charlie that doubts herself and feels illegitimate. Elizabeth's presence acts like an intrusive thought, constantly undermining Charlie's attempts to assert her identity.

Over time, Charlie's voice becomes more confident, shifting the balance of power in these inner dialogues. In a crucial moment, she declares, "You're not me," and her own face smiled cruelly back at her. "I'm the only you that matters" (Cawthon.2018:241). This exchange demonstrates that Charlie is no longer willing to be silent. Even when faced with a version of herself that claims to be more "real," she responds with rejection and self-affirmation.

The dialogue structure itself reflects identity fragmentation. Long, anxious thoughts are interrupted by blunt statements or contradicting perspectives. These interruptions are evidence of a divided self, a mind that does not fully trust its own thoughts. Yet, in the act of arguing with Elizabeth, Charlie defines herself not just by what she believes, but by what she resists.

Ultimately, this internal conflict drives Charlie toward resolution. Rather than being passively overwhelmed by Elizabeth, she confronts her. This confrontation is internal but

vividly dramatized acts as a rite of passage for identity consolidation. In choosing to reject Elizabeth's voice, Charlie chooses her own.

Relationships

Relationships are crucial to Charlie's identity development. While much of her struggle is internal, her interactions with others, particularly John, provide moments of grounding and recognition. These connections do not erase her confusion, but they offer mirrors through which she begins to see herself more clearly. In a world where her memories betray her and her self-image fractures, being seen and accepted by someone else becomes a critical part of her journey toward wholeness.

John's presence is consistently a stabilizing force. "Charlie," he whispered. "I'm sorry, but I have to move you, now. I'll be careful" (Cawthon.2018:135). This scene, tender and careful, shows how interpersonal connection can interrupt dissociation. Even in moments when Charlie feels least human, John's concern reminds her that she is still seen, still cared for. His words serve as a bridge between her fractured self and the world outside, affirming her existence beyond her internal chaos.

This emotional support is echoed in moments of shared vulnerability. "What do you need?" he asked, searching her face. She reached out farther and then he understood; he took her hand. "I won't ever let go of you again," he whispered. She smiled faintly" (Cawthon.2018:143). The physical act of reaching out, followed by a quiet but affirming verbal response, illustrates how emotional regulation and identity repair are made possible through sustained relational presence. It's not grand gestures but small, repeated affirmations that help Charlie believe in her right to exist.

Jessica, too, plays a subtle but impactful role. When she tells Charlie, "It won't do either of you any good to pretend nothing has changed" (Cawthon.2018:56), she pushes Charlie to confront her altered identity rather than hide behind pretence. This confrontation may feel harsh, but it reflects a deeper form of recognition, acknowledging change rather than denying it. Jessica's honesty serves as a different kind of support: one that challenges, rather than comforts, but still nurtures growth.

By the end of the novel, it is through these relational mirrors that Charlie begins to regain a coherent self. Her sense of identity becomes not just about who she is in isolation, but who she is in connection with others. These relationships form the framework through which she can be vulnerable without losing herself. Relationships become the final thread in weaving together the fabric of her reconstructed identity, offering not just support, but validation, recognition, and space for transformation.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing *The Fourth Closet* by Scott Cawthon through a literary psychological lens, it is evident that identity is not a fixed or singular entity, but a complex and evolving construct formed by interwoven psychological experiences. The novel portrays identity as something that is continually questioned, negotiated, and reconstructed in response to internal and external pressures. Through the character of Charlie Emily, the narrative explores how memory, emotion, dissociation, internal conflict, and human relationships interact to form and challenge one's sense of self.

Charlie's fragmented memory, emotional instability, and dissociative experiences reveal how trauma and confusion can obscure the boundaries between past and present, real and

imagined. Her internal dialogues further expose the presence of multiple selves in conflict, reflecting the instability of her identity as she processes revelations about her origin. Her relationships, particularly with her father, friends, and herself, serve as both sources of conflict and pathways toward redefinition. These factors combine to illustrate that identity is not merely inherited or biologically determined, but constantly formed by experience, perception, and recognition.

Ultimately, *The Fourth Closet* demonstrates that identity is not formed in isolation. It is built through a dynamic process that includes emotional memory, psychological fragmentation, and social affirmation. In portraying Charlie's internal and external struggles, the novel emphasizes that understanding oneself requires not only the integration of memory and emotion, but also the courage to assert agency in the face of disintegration. Identity, therefore, is both a personal journey and a narrative act of something lived, remembered, challenged, and reclaimed.

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