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**Intergenerational Trauma and Fear: Freudian Study of Ernt and
Leni's Character in *The Great Alone* by Kristen Hannah**



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Abstract

This research explores the psychological impact of intergenerational trauma and fear through a Freudian analysis of Ernt and Leni Allbright's characters in *The Great Alone* by Kristin Hannah. The study investigates how trauma experienced by Ernt as a Vietnam War veteran is not only repressed but also unconsciously transmitted to his daughter, shaping her emotional development and identity. By applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concepts this research reveals how unresolved trauma manifests across generations. The narrative structure, symbolism, and character development in the novel demonstrate how fear and psychological pain persist silently within family systems. Ernt's violent behavior and isolationism represent his repressed wartime trauma, while Leni's internal conflict and emotional suppression reflect the inherited psychological burden. By decoding the psychological patterns and inherited fears within the family dynamic, this study provides insight into the broader implications of intergenerational trauma and how literature can reflect the lingering shadows of psychological wounds.

KEYWORDS: Intergenerational Trauma, Fear, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Repression, Unconscious mind, Post-war PTSD, Emotional Suppression

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Intergenerational trauma is a psychological phenomenon where trauma, distress, and unresolved emotional pain are transmitted from one generation to the next (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Danieli, 1998). This concept has been widely studied in psychology, particularly in relation to families affected by war, displacement, abuse, and other traumatic experiences (Danieli, 1998; Kellerman, 2001). When a person undergoes severe trauma, they often develop coping mechanisms that may not only affect their own emotional well-being but also shape the behaviors and experiences of their children (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008). These inherited patterns of fear, anxiety, and emotional instability create a cycle of trauma that continues across generations (Danieli, 1998; Bowe et al., 2025).

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a strong foundation for understanding trauma, repression, and fear. Freud argued that painful or disturbing experiences are often buried in the unconscious mind, but they continue to influence a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Freud, 1915/1957). He introduced the concept of repression, where individuals push traumatic memories deep into their unconscious as a defense mechanism (Freud, 1894/1957). However, these repressed emotions often resurface in different ways, such as irrational fears, aggression, or psychological disorders (Freud, 1926/1959). Applying Freud's theories to literature helps us understand how characters internalize trauma and how their fears shape their relationships and decisions (Barry, 2002; Wright, 1984).

Hannah's novel *The Great Alone* (2018) is a powerful exploration of intergenerational trauma, particularly in the context of post-war PTSD and domestic violence. The story revolves around Leni Allbright, a young girl growing up in an unstable home, and her father, Ernt Allbright, a Vietnam War veteran who suffers from severe PTSD. When

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Ernt returns from the war, he struggles to reintegrate into normal life, haunted by his past experiences and overwhelmed by emotional instability. His trauma manifests as violent outbursts, paranoia, and controlling behavior, which deeply affects his wife and daughter. As the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that Leni is not only a witness to her father's trauma but also a victim of its effects. She grows up in a household where fear, instability, and emotional turmoil define daily life. Over time, she internalizes this trauma, shaping her perception of relationships, survival, and self-worth. This makes *The Great Alone* an important text for studying how trauma and fear are transferred from parents to children and how these inherited emotional burdens shape personal identity.

By applying Freud's psychoanalytic framework, this study aims to examine the psychological complexities of Ernt and Leni's characters. Ernt represents the first-hand experience of trauma, while Leni embodies the second-hand consequences of living with a traumatized parent. The research will explore how fear functions as a recurring theme in both their lives, influencing their actions, thoughts, and relationships. Additionally, the study will analyze the mechanisms of trauma transmission and investigate whether Leni finds ways to break free from this cycle of inherited fear. Through this analysis, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how intergenerational trauma operates in literature and real life. It will highlight the psychological depth of Hannah's characters and demonstrate how Freud's theories remain relevant in contemporary literary studies. Furthermore, by examining the emotional and psychological struggles of Ernt and Leni, this study will provide insight into the long-lasting effects of trauma on individuals and families, emphasizing the importance of awareness, healing, and breaking cycles of inherited pain.

Statement of the Problem

The study on *The Great Alone* will discuss the intergenerational trauma, fear, and emotional suppression experienced by the Allbright family, particularly focusing on the characters of Ernt and Leni. In today's world, many individuals and families suffer from inherited emotional wounds, psychological fear, and broken relationships due to unresolved trauma, especially in post-war societies. This research highlights how Ernt's untreated trauma from the Vietnam War deeply affects his daughter Leni, shaping her sense of identity, security, and emotional stability. The novel reflects how trauma does not end with one person, but silently continues in the next generation, creating cycles of fear, silence, and emotional pain. The aim of the study will be to explore how Freudian psychoanalysis can be used to understand the unconscious fears, repressed memories, and the damaging psychological effects passed from parent to child.

Research Objectives

To examine how Ernt's trauma shapes his behavior through Freud's psychoanalytic concepts.

To explore how Leni reflects the effects of inherited fear and trauma.

To analyze how the father-daughter relationship in *The Great Alone* illustrates intergenerational trauma.

Research Questions

How does Freud's psychoanalytic theory explain Ernt's trauma in *The Great Alone*?

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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In what ways does Leni embody the effects of intergenerational trauma and fear?
How does the relationship between Ernt and Leni demonstrate the transmission of trauma across generations?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it applies Freudian psychoanalytical theory to explore how trauma is passed down through generations in literature. By exploring the psychological depth of Ernt and Leni's characters, this research highlights the long-lasting effects of trauma and fear on individuals and families. Additionally, this study provides insights into how literature reflects real-world psychological struggles, especially among war veterans and their families. Understanding these dynamics can help readers, scholars, and psychologists recognize the patterns of trauma transmission and the importance of breaking cycles of fear and abuse. Through this analysis, the research underscores the relevance of Freud's psychoanalytic theories in contemporary literature and their application in understanding complex human emotions and behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergenerational trauma is a phenomenon where psychological wounds are transmitted across generations and has been extensively explored in both psychological and literary discourses. Sigmund Freud's theories on repression, repetition compulsion, and the uncanny provide a foundational framework for understanding how unresolved trauma manifests in subsequent generations. While early psychoanalytic theory conceptualized trauma as an intrapsychic phenomenon, recent interdisciplinary research has expanded this understanding by demonstrating that trauma transmission operates through psychological, relational, biological, and socio-cultural mechanisms.

Several historical and psychological studies support the concept of intergenerational trauma. Research on Holocaust survivors (Kellerman, 2001) and their descendants has shown that trauma does not end with those who directly experience it but is passed down through emotional responses, parenting styles, and behavioral patterns. Similar findings have been observed in studies on war veterans' families (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008), showing that children of PTSD-affected parents often develop heightened anxiety, emotional suppression, and a tendency to unconsciously repeat traumatic experiences.

Freud's theory of repression suggests that traumatic memories, when not consciously processed, remain buried in the unconscious but continue to influence an individual's behavior and emotions (Freud, 1920). These studies provide a foundation for understanding Ernt Allbright's struggles as a Vietnam War veteran and his influence on his daughter Leni.

Ernt Allbright is a textbook example of the psychological effects of PTSD and unresolved trauma. Having served in the Vietnam War, he returns home emotionally damaged, unable to reintegrate into society. His experiences in the war remain largely unspoken, yet they manifest in his violent outbursts, paranoia, and need for control. Freud's concept of projection explains how individuals with repressed emotions often displace their internal suffering onto others (Freud, 1894). Ernt, unable to acknowledge his own vulnerability, externalizes his distress as aggression, making his wife and daughter the primary recipients of his trauma. His belief that danger exists

everywhere except within his own control leads him to move his family to the remote Alaskan wilderness, reflecting his psychological need to isolate himself from perceived threats.

This behavioral withdrawal aligns not only with earlier observations of war veterans (Shay, 1994) but also with contemporary trauma research. Recent phenomenological studies (Cacace & Summers, 2025) highlight that intergenerational trauma often manifests through silence, emotional fragmentation, and disrupted communication within families. Trauma is not always verbally transmitted; rather, it operates through fear, unpredictability, and relational instability. Ernt's refusal to articulate his trauma and his increasing isolation create precisely such an environment, intensifying the atmosphere of inherited fear within the household. A meta-analysis by Sirparanta et al. (2025) examining the link between parental childhood maltreatment and offspring attachment found only "a weak but significant combined effect of parental history of CM on child attachment insecurity ($r = .06$)" and a non-significant effect on attachment disorganization (p. 8). The authors caution that "parents' self-reported history of CM does not appear decisive for child attachment," suggesting that transmission pathways are complex and moderated by multiple factors (Sirparanta et al., 2025, p. 12). This finding aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Bowe, Thomas, and Mackey (2025) who argue for "flexibility between theories and the integration of theories" to achieve "new and enhanced understandings" of intergenerational processes (p. 28). Their review synthesizes multiple perspectives—including learning theories, relational perspectives, core beliefs frameworks, and developmental approaches—demonstrating that trauma transmission cannot be reduced to a single mechanism but must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Leni Allbright, Ernt's daughter, experiences the direct consequences of her father's trauma. Growing up in an environment marked by domestic violence, instability, and fear, she develops survival strategies typical of children raised in abusive households. Freud's theory of ambivalence explains how children of traumatized parents often experience conflicting emotions—love and fear—toward their caregivers (Freud, 1917). Leni deeply loves her father but simultaneously fears his unpredictable outbursts, a duality that shapes her emotional development.

Leni's psychological development reflects these findings, as she becomes highly alert to her father's moods, internalizes fear, and normalizes instability as part of everyday life. Her initial inability to break free from her father's control aligns with Freud's theory of repetition compulsion—the unconscious tendency to recreate past traumatic experiences in an attempt to resolve them (Freud, 1920).

Repetition compulsion is a crucial aspect of Leni's psychological struggle. Despite recognizing her father's abusive nature, she finds herself mirroring her mother's survival tactics—remaining silent, adapting to his moods, and hoping for change. Historical studies on intergenerational trauma suggest that individuals who grow up in abusive or traumatic environments often find themselves in similar situations as adults unless they actively break the cycle (Danieli, 1998). Leni's journey in the novel represents this struggle—she oscillates between inherited fear and the desire to carve out a different future for herself.

Freud emphasized that healing from trauma requires bringing unconscious fears into conscious awareness. Modern psychological research continues to support this view. Contemporary studies indicate that trauma processing, narrative reconstruction, and

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emotional acknowledgment are essential in interrupting intergenerational transmission patterns (Yehuda, 2018). In *The Great Alone*, Leni's eventual decision to leave her father represents this psychological breakthrough. Her escape is not merely physical but symbolic—a disruption of repetition compulsion and a conscious refusal to perpetuate inherited fear. Her departure reflects both Freudian psychoanalysis and modern trauma theory, which assert that confronting and articulating trauma is necessary for psychological liberation.

Existing scholarship on intergenerational trauma and Freudian psychoanalysis, reinforced by recent empirical developments provides a strong foundation for understanding the psychological complexities in *The Great Alone*. Freud's theories on repression, projection, ambivalence, and repetition compulsion illuminate Ernt's destructive patterns and Leni's inherited psychological burdens. Contemporary trauma studies further validate these psychoanalytic insights by demonstrating how trauma operates through attachment disruptions, emotional dysregulation, silence, and relational instability. By examining these characters through a Freudian lens while situating the analysis within current trauma research, this study contributes to the broader discourse on trauma's cyclical nature in literature, emphasizing how fear and repression shape identity across generations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative approach to analyze the characters of Ernt and Leni in Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone*, with a specific focus on the themes of intergenerational trauma and fear. Close reading methods and textual analysis will be applied. Freudian psychoanalytic concepts will serve as the primary lens for interpretation. By applying theories related to the unconscious mind and repressed emotions, the study will explore how Ernt's traumatic experiences shape her parenting style and, in turn, impact Leni's psychological landscape. This analysis will also identify how fear manifests in their interactions, creating patterns that reflect the cycle of trauma between generations.

To the analysis, a comparative study of their character arcs will be conducted, focusing on aspects such as psychological development, coping mechanisms, and identity. Additionally relevant scholarly literature on intergenerational trauma and Freudian psychology will be to provide contextual support for the findings. This literature will help establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of trauma and fear within the familial context presented in the novel.

Theoretical Framework

This section of the study focuses on the theoretical foundation for understanding the themes of intergenerational trauma and fear as they are portrayed in Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone*. The research will be grounded in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which explores the influence of the unconscious mind, repressed memories, early childhood experiences, and defense mechanisms on human behavior. Freud's theory is particularly relevant for this study because it offers insight into how trauma, especially when unaddressed, can affect not only the individual but also those around them—especially close family members.

At the heart of this study is the concept of intergenerational trauma, which refers to the transmission of trauma effects from one generation to the next. The analysis has

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explored how Ernt Allbright, a former prisoner of war suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), carries unresolved psychological wounds that deeply affect his mental health and behavior. These unresolved traumas influence how he interacts with his family, particularly his daughter Leni, thereby shaping her emotional and psychological development. As Leni grows up in an unstable and fearful environment, she internalizes much of the tension, pain, and fear experienced within the household. This reflects Freud's theory that early childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping adult identity and behavior. A central concept in this framework is repression, a Freudian defense mechanism in which painful or traumatic memories are pushed out of conscious awareness. The novel provides multiple examples of how both Ernt and Leni repress difficult emotions and experiences. For instance, Ernt suppresses memories of war and violence, often channeling his unresolved anger into aggression and control. Leni, in turn, represses her fear and confusion in order to survive and cope with her father's behavior. The study will analyze key scenes and dialogues from the novel that illustrate how repression operates within both characters and how it shapes their psychological states.

By applying Freudian psychoanalytic theory, this research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how trauma is both experienced and passed on between generations. It will show how Ernt's unhealed wounds result in psychological scars for Leni, creating a cycle of fear, repression, and emotional distress. Through this framework, the study seeks to highlight the complexity of the father-daughter relationship, the impact of war trauma, and the silent burden carried by children growing up in dysfunctional families. In short the theoretical framework provides a structured lens through which the psychological depth of *The Great Alone* can be analyzed. It reveals how Kristin Hannah's characters are shaped by their pasts, how they navigate fear and trauma, and how psychoanalytic theory helps us understand the emotional realities behind their actions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Intergenerational trauma refers to the emotional and psychological wounds that are passed down

from one generation to the next. In psychoanalysis, Freud believed that unresolved trauma, especially when repressed, continues to influence an individual's thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. These unconscious fears, anxieties, and suppressed memories often appear in destructive patterns. In a family, this leads to children absorbing emotional distress from their parents without fully understanding it. For example, a child raised in a home filled with fear, instability, or unspoken pain often mirrors those emotional states. They grow up internalizing the anxiety, leading to identity confusion, relationship struggles, and emotional imbalance. Freud's theory of repression explains how trauma, when not confronted, becomes buried deep in the unconscious mind, only to manifest in distorted ways. This is the core idea behind intergenerational trauma it doesn't just stop with one person. It echoes down through generations, shaping lives in unseen ways.

In *The Great Alone*, Kristin Hannah clearly presents intergenerational trauma through Ernt Allbright's psychological instability and its impact on Leni. Trauma first appears inside the home. Leni hears her parents fighting: "*Through the thin walls of the rambler, she heard her mother say, Ernt, baby, please don't. Listen ... and her father's angry leave me the hell alone*" (Hannah, 2018, p. 8). This moment shows that fear

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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defines Leni's childhood environment. Instead of safety, the home becomes a place of tension and unpredictability. Freud (1920/1955) explains that when individuals repress traumatic memories, those memories return in aggressive and uncontrolled forms. Ernt's violent responses reflect his unprocessed war trauma. He does not consciously deal with his psychological wounds; instead, he transfers them into his family space.

The narrator further connects nature with Ernt's unstable mental state: "*Weather like this brought out the darkness in her father*" (Hannah, 2018, p.8). The storm outside mirrors the storm inside Ernt. Freud (1915/1957) argues that repression pushes painful memories into the unconscious, but those memories continue to influence behavior. Ernt's "*darkness*" surfaces unpredictably, just like sudden harsh weather. The novel uses this imagery to show how trauma remains active beneath the surface.

Ernt constantly speaks about future war and disaster: "*It's only a matter of time before World War Three starts. It could be nuclear ... or biological. And when that happens, the shit will really hit the fan*" (Hannah, 2018, p.90). His language shows paranoia and catastrophic thinking. Freud's concept of repetition compulsion (1920/1955) helps explain this behavior. Ernt mentally relives war even after returning home. He cannot escape the battlefield psychologically, so he recreates a sense of threat in his present life. His fear becomes a permanent condition, and he passes that fear to his family.

Cora directly acknowledges the impact of this environment on Leni when she says, "*But I let her grow up in a war zone. I let her see what no child should ever see. I let her know fear of a man who was supposed to love her, and then I killed him in front of her*" (Hannah, 2018, p. 340). This statement clearly defines the home as a continuation of war. Trauma does not remain limited to Ernt's experience in Vietnam; it transforms into domestic violence. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma spreads across relationships and generations. Leni does not experience war directly, but she experiences its psychological consequences through her father's behavior.

Leni's internal conflict appears clearly during the hunting scene: "*She'd killed something. Fed her family for another night. Killed something. Stopped a life*" (Hannah, 2018, p.100). The repetition in the sentence shows her divided emotions. She feels both pride and guilt. Freud (1917/1957) calls this emotional state ambivalence, where love and aggression or pride and guilt coexist. Leni learns survival through violence, just as her father did during war. This scene symbolically shows how trauma silently transfers from one generation to another.

Ernt's need for control intensifies when others observe, "He's building a wall" and "He'll cut them off from the world" (Hannah, 2018, p.231,232). The wall represents physical and psychological isolation. Herman (1992) explains that trauma survivors often attempt to control their surroundings because they feel unsafe. Ernt believes he protects his family, but he increases their isolation and fear. His attempt to build security creates imprisonment instead.

This imprisonment becomes more visible in the line: "*Ernt waited for her on the porch, herded her back inside as soon as she was done. The door lock latched with a click behind them*" (Hannah, 2018, p. 231). The word "*herded*" suggests domination, and the sound of the lock symbolizes confinement. Freud (1926/1959) explains that constant fear produces anxiety and submission. Leni and Cora adjust their behavior to avoid conflict, showing how trauma shapes daily actions and emotional responses.

The cycle of violence reaches its tragic climax when Cora confesses: "*I, Coraline*

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Margaret Gollither Allbright, shot my husband, Ernt Allbright, when he was beating me” (Hannah, 2018, p. 354). Freud’s death drive theory (1920/1955) suggests that unresolved trauma can lead to destructive impulses. Ernt’s inability to heal ultimately destroys his family structure. Violence becomes both the cause and the outcome of trauma.

Even after Ernt’s death, emotional confusion remains. Cora reflects, “When you remember, I

know it’s easy to pull the bad up. Your dad’s violence. The excuses I made. My sad love for him” (Hannah, 2018, p. 353). This line shows trauma bonding and emotional ambivalence. Freud (1917/1957) explains that love and aggression often exist together in close relationships. Cora’s “sad love” demonstrates how trauma complicates emotional attachment.

Through these textual examples, *The Great Alone* clearly portrays how Ernt’s repressed war trauma creates fear, violence, and instability within his family. That trauma does not end with him; it shapes Leni’s emotional development and understanding of love, safety, and survival. The novel strongly supports the concept of intergenerational trauma when analyzed through Freud’s theories of repression, repetition compulsion, ambivalence, and the death drive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Great Alone* offers a rich and haunting exploration of intergenerational trauma, vividly portraying how unhealed psychological wounds can affect not only the individual but also future generations. Through a Freudian lens, the novel reveals the unconscious mechanisms that govern the lives of both Ernt and Leni repression, denial, projection, and repetition. Ernt’s inability to confront his trauma results in controlling and violent behavior, which shapes the emotional world of his daughter, Leni, who internalizes his fear and replicates patterns of silence and emotional suppression. Leni’s character arc from fearful obedience to courageous self-liberation reflects Freud’s belief that healing begins when repressed emotions are brought into conscious awareness. Kristin Hannah skillfully uses memory, symbolism, and emotional tension to show how trauma and fear are silently passed from parent to child. However, she also leaves room for hope, showing that the cycle can be broken. Leni’s eventual escape and emotional awakening symbolize the painful but powerful process of reclaiming agency and identity. This study reaffirms the relevance of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory in modern literature and deepens our understanding of the psychological inheritance that shapes human experience.

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