Who is Frank? Interpreting the Mysteries of Donnie Darko

The 2001 indie film, Donnie Darko, is classified as pulp science fiction, due to its shock value and frequent plot twists, however, it is also grouped in the category of cult films or cult classics with other titles such as Fight Club and The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Either way, this movie attracts a specific viewer and therefore, this viewer is expected to have a prior understanding of what the film is attempting to achieve. In this essay, I will construct two critical readings of the film, the first being reader-response and the second, psychoanalytic with direct reference to Freud and the unconscious mind. In her article on reader-response criticism, Elizabeth Freund states that not only is the reader “…an active participant in the production of meaning, but also by impersonating or characterizing” and this statement rings true when analyzing Donnie Darko (76).

The title “Donnie Darko” sends the viewer an ominous message about the film before it even begins. As an alliteration, the name automatically stands out from the rest of the characters, especially in comparison to his family members. Donnie’s love interest, Gretchen, comments, “Donnie Darko is a cool name. Sounds like a superhero” (Donnie Darko). The word “superhero” brings to mind a typical plot scenario of conflict and resolution; however, Donnie Darko is a bit more complex than that. Even though some might say he “saves” the world, he does not exactly meet full superhero criteria; instead, he is more of a “poet-hero, who demands [a] more complex and powerful [trope]” (Klock 2). Throughout the film, there are many references to his name being out of the ordinary, which targets him as abnormal even on top of the fact that he is schizophrenic.

The movie contains a subtitle narrative that informs the viewer of the month, date, and year; for instance, when Donnie is first woken by Frank, the subtitle reads “October 2, 1988”. All
throughout the movie, the viewer is reminded of how many days have passed since then, which emphasizes the subject of time and its relevance to the plot. Also, the fact that it is set in the eighties proves significant to understanding what type of viewer the film is targeting. Placing *Donnie Darko* in this time era creates a unique authenticity that would have been absent from the film if set in modern day. *Donnie Darko* is considered an indie film; however, there is reason to believe that if it were produced today, it more than likely would pertain to a broader spectrum of viewers. At the time (2001), films with ambiguous plot lines and concepts were not nearly as popular as they are today, where movies such as *Inception* and *The Secret Window* have fallen subject to a mainstream audience; "my readings of reader-response criticism suggest that inconclusiveness is intrinsic..." (Fruend 76). Today, “the historical reader” for *Donnie Darko* might be classified as “hipster”, but more importantly, the historical viewer was expected to be accepting of such an elusive plotline.

The plot structure in the film is circular, and in some sense, almost linear as “….Donnie wakes up on a mountain, returns home to deal with his family, and is soon after killed by a falling jet engine (from the future)” (Klock 3). Frank, Donnie’s “imaginary friend”, is one of the most important aspects of the film. Almost everything in the film refers back to Frank’s warning that the world is about to end, and the viewer is left to interpret the meaning of this character in relation to Donnie. There is no proof that Frank is demonic or evil, but given the film’s consistently grim undertones, it is only fitting that he directs the series of tragic events, similar to an omen. There is also heavy indication that Donnie is crazy, as the entire plot revolves around whether or not “Frank the Rabbit” is real. In the end, it is entirely up to the viewer to make sense of it all and decide if he is simply a product of Donnie’s schizophrenia or something more sinister.
The film begins with Donnie miraculously escaping death in the form of a jet engine crashing through his house, more specifically, his bedroom, however, there is no information to where the engine came from and no airline will claim ownership. Donnie’s family does not seem to realize exactly how close their son came to death and they take the entire situation rather lightly. Donnie’s father mocks *The Twilight Zone* as he quotes Rod Stewart’s famous line: “You are entering a new dimension of sight and sound”, a reference that is more than fitting (Donnie Darko). Not ironically, this line foreshadows what is to come and the horizon of expectations shifts dramatically.

The viewer quickly discovers that Donnie is schizophrenic, as he sees a therapist and is prescribed daily medication to help him deal with the effects of his illness. During his weekly sessions, Donnie’s therapist approaches him as if he were a child, cautiously and carefully choosing her words before she asks him a question. This is odd because there are several hints throughout the movie that Donnie is exceptionally intelligent; “Dammit, Donnie! Why do you always gotta get all smart on us!” a quote from Donnie’s friend Ronald, as he comments on Donnie’s habit of over analyzing a situation. Despite the fact that he is schizophrenic, there is no need for her to “dumb down” her advice. This behavior causes the viewer to stop and assess why Donnie’s therapist is so particular in her treatment of him; what has he done in the past to cause this, and exactly how unstable is Donnie?

A central focus in *Donnie Darko* is time travel, “pop culture’s version of the more respectable philosophy-oriented anachronism and untimeliness” (Klock 5). When the jet engine crashed into Donnie’s house, it sparked a tangent universe through the creation of a worm hole and placed Donnie in a trope, or “…a turn against death…an attempt at more life” (Klock 3). The tangent universe consists of Frank’s projected 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds and
is meant to show that if Donnie had not died at this premature age, the universe would have been disrupted significantly, resulting in the death of four people, which includes Donnie’s own mother and little sister, Samantha. The subject of time travel arises multiple times in the movie and it is one of the main reasons that this film falls under the list of cult movie productions. The film’s emphasis on time travel launched an obsession with fans contemplating the possibilities of a tangent universe or even the existence of “spear paths” that direct a person’s future actions. 

*Donnie Darko* now has an interactive website that allows fans to approach the movie as if it were reality; it

“pick[s] up on the thematic logic inherent in the actual film text and allow[s] . . . users to dwell, protract and luxuriate in the diegetic space that the film has constructed… the website for *Donnie Darko* enhances the narrative by including dispersed elements that operate together to form one cohesive plot” (Booth 399).

Essentially, the subject of time travel is what takes the ambiguous vibe of *Donnie Darko* up a notch and it is “…remarkable [that] among [other] time travel films, it is more severe for [its] internalization of the time travel trope, [where] the anachronism proves [that] it was not just a dream” (Klock 9).

There are many reasons why this film gives the viewer such an important role. To me, this statement by Stanley Fish explains the viewer’s relationship with the movie perfectly, as he claims that “we “write” the texts we read” and with *Donnie Darko*, there is much responsibility placed upon the viewer to interpret the film whichever way they see most fitting (Fruend 135). As the film’s director states in behind the scenes footage, “There is no right or wrong interpretation”. *Donnie Darko* has such a large fan following due to its multitude of themes that allow the reader to move past the film itself, and take the plot a step further, whether in the form
of fan fiction or fan sites that focus more on the science-fiction aspect of time travel. *Donnie Darko* is a film that creates a very intimate relationship with its fans, which becomes apparent when you apply a reader-response criticism to the text.

When considering the film from a psychoanalytic perspective, there are many points to draw upon, the most discernible being the condition of Donnie’s mental state, however, other aspects such as religion and his strange connection to Grandma Death assist the viewer in deciphering the mysteries of *Donnie Darko*. 
The opening scene starts out with Donnie asleep on top Carpathian Ridge, a cliff that overlooks the city. His bike lays strewn carelessly beside him and it is obvious he did not intend to fall asleep there; “He slowly opens his eyes and looks around, disoriented by the morning light… After a moment of hesitation, he takes his bike back up the hill” (Donnie Darko). The fact that Donnie is unsure of his location immediately alerts the viewer that there is something unusual going on. Later on in the film, we find out that Donnie routinely sleepwalks and when he sleepwalks, he sees Frank, a “man in a grotesque, full-body bunny suit, who tells him that 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds remain until the end of the world” (Klock 1). According to Freud, the “unconscious is one of the most powerful and persuasive tropes of Western civilization” and there is no doubt that Donnie’s unconscious mind has strong influence over his actions.

When Donnie arrives back at his house, he opens the refrigerator which reveals the words “Where is Donnie?” scribbled across a magnetic notepad. This can be interpreted in more than one way, the obvious being the question at face value, but it may also be an indirect reference to Donnie’s mental state as there is no given answer to who wrote the message. That night, Donnie is woken by a voice calling his name, and as he slowly rises to his feet, it appears he is not entirely conscious. He follows the voice out onto the street where he stands face-to-face with Frank for the first time. Frank tells Donnie, “I’m here to save you. The world is coming to an end” (Donnie Darko). He then orders Donnie to look up in the sky as he proceeds to tell him exactly how much time he has left. At this point, it seems that “Frank” is an image conjured from Donnie’s unconscious mind or a “…(disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish”, which makes it likely that the warning is meant specifically for him (Parker 128).
While this is occurring, a crucial moment in the film takes place; a jet engine crashes into Donnie’s home, falling through his bedroom and down into the foyer. If Donnie was still sleeping, he would have surely been killed, which makes it remarkable that Frank choose this night to make his appearance. The next day, police cars and news media surround the Darko house as Donnie and his family stand outside, watching the scene unfold. Donnie, once again, appears dazed and confused like he is not all there. The family is sent to a hotel for the night, due to the damage the engine has caused to their home. They discuss how peculiar it is that the jet engine simply “fell out of the sky”, and Donnie appears notably uneasy at any mention of the accident.

The next morning, Donnie waits at the bus stop with his friends. They talk animatedly about the incident, amazed at how their friend cheated death. However, Donnie remains silent with a stoic expression upon his face. When his friend Ronald asks if he was sleepwalking, Donnie replies “I don’t want to talk about it” and the subject is dropped. When Freud discusses the act of repression he refers to the term resistance, which is defined as “the unconscious defence against awareness of repressed experiences in order to avoid the resulting anxiety”. In the film, Donnie shows resistance on more than one occasion, but this is displayed most prominently in his therapy sessions with Dr. Thurman, who turns to hypnosis as an attempt to coax information out of him. During a specific session, Donnie tells her that he made a new friend and she responds by asking if he is real or imaginary; Donnie replies, “Imaginary”. He continues to talk about Frank, claiming that he saved his life while Dr. Thurman listens intently from across the room. She seems confused by this statement, obviously unaware of yesterday’s events. Donnie informs her of the crash and tells her about Frank’s warning, but instead of commenting on this new information, she asks, “Do you believe that the world is coming to an
end?” to which Donnie replies “No, that’s stupid.” (Donnie Darko). It’s clear that Dr. Thurman is skeptical of the entire situation, even doubting whether or not the engine really did fall through Donnie’s bedroom, making the viewer wonder what lies Donnie has told in the past. Also, Donnie’s answer reveals something very important about his personality. By disagreeing with Frank, who represents Donnie’s unconscious mind, as well as his id, he is denying his irrational side and possibly denying the fact that he is schizophrenic altogether. If Frank were placed into a category of Freud’s Tripartite model of the Psyche, he would most strongly represent the Id, a “seething cauldron of basic drives in their primitive, selfish, unorganized state” (Parker 124).

Donnie is required to take medication for his schizophrenia, but recently he has been skipping out on his dosages, conveniently at the same time that Frank appears in his life. There seems to be a pattern between the absence of medication and Frank, which once again, links back to Donnie’s psyche. As time goes by, Frank appears to Donnie more frequently, directing him to act out in one way or another and each time the behavior is more extreme than the last. For example, the first time Frank appears, he instructs Donnie to follow him. The second time, it is through a reflection in the bathroom mirror and Donnie stabs at Franks left eye repeatedly with a knife. The third time is when Donnie is at the movie theaters with Gretchen, and this particular interaction maybe the most important to occur between the two. Donnie tells Frank to take it off, referring to the mask of his rabbit suit and he abides, revealing a bullet wound directly through his left eye. Donnie is taken back and Frank gives no explanation, but the expression of guilt on Donnie’s face is undeniable. Referring back to Frank’s image in the mirror, it’s almost as if Donnie had known about the wound beforehand. This scene is key to analyzing Donnie Darko, as it tells the viewer that Frank is not simply just an extension of Donnie, but derived from an actual person. Later on in the film, it is discovered that Frank receives his bullet wound by none
other than Donnie himself, making the possibilities for interpretation never-ending. When Donnie shoots Frank, it is assumed to be out anger for the death of his girlfriend; however, it can also be seen as a metaphor to him finally putting an end to his repression and owning up to his schizophrenia once and for all.

Other than Frank, another defining character in the film is “Grandma Death” or Roberta Sparrow. Grandma death is known for her memorable phrase in the movie, “Every living creature on this Earth dies alone” (Donnie Darko). Grandma Death represents Donnie’s fear of dying, a topic that Dr. Thurman presses on in many of her therapy sessions. Donnie’s fear can also be related to his lack of faith, which is another constant theme throughout the movie. Dr. Thurman addresses the topic of religion when Donnie is under hypnosis, which causes him to break down and expose his vulnerability to the subject. While in tears, Donnie talks about finding a time portal that will take him back to when he felt no regret; “It would have to be God's portal. They will lead me to it” (Donnie Darko). Donnie writes a letter to Grandma Death, and this letter signifies him coming to terms with many of his mental fears:

“Dear Roberta Sparrow, I have reached the end of your book and... there are so many things that I need to ask you. Sometimes I'm afraid of what you might tell me. Sometimes I'm afraid that you'll tell me that this is not a work of fiction. I can only hope that the answers will come to me in my sleep. I hope that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief, because there will be so much to look forward to” (Donnie Darko).

When Donnie writes “Sometimes I’m afraid that you’ll tell me that this is not a work of fiction” there are a few things he could be referring to, one being religion and the ultimate question of the existence of God. However, I believe that it relates more to his internal struggle to fully embrace
his rational side, or his ego, while at the same deny his mental illness, which represents a combination of the id and superego, whenever he was fully conscious and coherent. It is not until the very end of the movie that Donnie accepts his fate, finally at peace with the fact that he will die young and goes back to his bedroom by his own free will; “Evasion is a process of avoiding, a way of escaping, but it is also an excuse…what is being evaded ultimately is fate, particularly the necessity of dying” (Klock 3).

With a film as intricate and intriguing as Donnie Darko, it is important to take note of all the major themes and character attributes. When applying the theory of psychoanalysis to Donnie Darko, it allows for the viewer to place themselves more directly in Donnie’s head and make sense of the many symbols that surround him. In Harold Bloom’s Pal, Donnie Darko, Geoff Klock writes that “Sigmund Freud introduces an important and related concept in his notion of deferred action, in which an experience does not gain full significance until the introduction of later knowledge retroactively changes it”, meaning that it is only after every tragic event has occurred when Donnie finally realizes what he must do. It’s almost as if he’s had a self-induced epiphany and finally understands what Frank was trying to tell him, or in other words, what he was trying to tell himself the entire time.

Works Cited


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