Survival Strategies: A Behaviorist Perspective on The Maze Runner's Main Character by James Dashner

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ABSTRACT

James Dashner's The Maze Runner is a young adult science fiction novel that vividly portrays the psychological dynamics of survival under extreme conditions. This study examines the main character, Thomas, through the lens of behaviorist theory, with a particular focus on B.F. Skinner's principles of operant conditioning. The research aims to identify the specific physical and psychological challenges Thomas encounters and to analyze how his survival strategies are shaped by behavioral responses to reinforcement and punishment. Employing a descriptive qualitative method within the framework of literary psychology, this study analyzes Thomas's actions, decisions, and adaptive strategies as depicted in key narrative events. Data is drawn from direct quotations in the novel and supported by relevant scholarly literature on behaviorism. The findings demonstrate that Thomas's behavior is continuously conditioned by his environment: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and both positive and negative punishment play crucial roles in his learning process and decision-making throughout the narrative. This analysis highlights how Dashner's novel illustrates core concepts of behaviorism and shows that Thomas's survival is not merely instinctive but systematically shaped by stimulus-response patterns. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary characters can be examined through psychological theories, offering insights into the interaction between narrative structure and behavioral conditioning.
Keywords: Behaviorism; Operant Conditioning; B.F. Skinner; Survival Strategies; The Maze Runner

INTRODUCTION

Dystopian fiction stands out in its portrayal of nightmare futures, setting itself apart from thrillers and survival narratives that focus on catastrophe or post-apocalyptic scenarios. This distinction is crucial for understanding the eco-dystopian novel, especially in its depiction of environmental crises compared to other fictional forms (Johnson, H. 2018). A dystopian society is a carefully designed world where people lose their basic rights and are controlled by a powerful, oppressive government. The citizens in these societies often face harsh and challenging conditions, which may include severe shortages, environmental disasters, or threats deliberately created to

keep them in fear for their safety. In this setting, those in power maintain control through constant surveillance, harsh punishments, and psychological tricks that undermine personal freedom (Babu, A. 2017). This environment of ongoing danger, mixed with deep-seated fear, significantly harms human dignity and leaves individuals feeling powerless. As a result, people have little control over their lives, finding themselves stuck in a cycle of oppression and anxiety (Alcantara et al., 2023).

In his novel The Maze Runner (2009), James Dashner aims to highlight the harmful effects of a harsh dystopian system on human dignity. The story centers around Thomas, who finds himself in a mysterious maze without any recollection of his past. He soon learns that he is in a highly controlled environment designed to create fear and restrict personal freedom. Constantly under surveillance and facing deadly dangers, along with manipulative experiments by the organization WICKED, Thomas utilizes different strategies to survive, such as forming alliances, questioning those in power, and daring to push against the limits set by the system. His bravery in leading others to escape and confronting the unknown illustrates a battle to regain personal freedom in a place meant to keep individuals powerless. Therefore, Dashner uses Thomas's experiences to examine how oppressive systems can diminish human dignity, compelling individuals to grow resilient and think critically to survive (Al-Aghberi, M. A. 2021).

The Maze Runner effectively demonstrates how Thomas's experiences act as a reaction to the oppressive conditions of the dystopian environment around him. Thus, to thoroughly examine Thomas's psychological adjustment and methods of survival, B.F. Skinner's behaviorism theory proves to be the most appropriate perspective to consider. Behaviorism which focuses on observable actions influenced by reinforcement and punishment. According to B. F. Skinner (1938), state that operant conditioning, also known as instrumental learning, was described by Skinner as behavior that happens because it previously led to specific outcomes. This type of behavior alters the consequences in an organism's surroundings. In this scenario, the action taken positively influences the environment and is therefore more likely to be repeated (DiBlasi, T., & Waters, L. 2017). This offers insight into how Thomas learns to manoeuvre through the strict regulations of the Glade and the perilous maze. Within WICKED's deceitful experiments, Thomas and the other boys face controlled stimuli designed to condition fear, compliance, and loyalty to the group, fundamental aspects of operant conditioning. Dashner emphasizes how oppressive systems strive to program individuals, highlighting both human fragility and strength.

LITERATURE REVIEW

James Dashner's The Maze Runner is a quintessential example of a dystopian novel that explores the psychological dynamics of survival in an environment dominated by fear and control. The narrative follows Thomas, the protagonist, who finds himself trapped in a mysterious maze with no memory of his past. The

psychological challenges he faces as he navigates through the maze under oppressive conditions are central to understanding the core themes of the novel. This study aims to explore these psychological dynamics through the lens of behaviorism, particularly focusing on B.F. Skinner's principles of operant conditioning. Skinner's theory of behaviorism, which posits that behavior is shaped by its consequences, offers a framework through which Thomas's survival strategies can be examined. This theory provides a lens to analyze how reinforcement and punishment influence Thomas's actions, decisions, and responses to environmental stimuli.

In exploring the application of Skinner's operant conditioning to Thomas's behavior, it is important to examine the environment in which he operates. The Glade, the controlled space where Thomas and the other boys are imprisoned, serves as a crucial stimulus for the behaviors exhibited by its inhabitants. According to Skinner, behaviors are reinforced through rewards or punishments, which either increase or decrease the likelihood of a behavior being repeated. In The Maze Runner, the Glade and the maze itself are designed to condition responses, shaping the behaviors of the boys through both positive and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement occurs when a behavior results in a desired outcome, such as safety or success, while negative reinforcement is the avoidance of an unpleasant consequence, such as punishment or death. Thomas's responses to the threats in the maze, and his subsequent survival strategies, are shaped by these reinforcement patterns, illustrating Skinner's principles in action.

One of the most significant aspects of Skinner's operant conditioning is the role of punishment, both positive and negative. In The Maze Runner, punishment is a constant presence. The boys are subjected to harsh conditions, including the ever-present danger of the maze, and the fear instilled by WICKED, the organization controlling them. Skinner's theory suggests that punishment can lead to the cessation of unwanted behaviors, but it also has the potential to create fear, anxiety, and compliance, which are central themes in Dashner's novel. For Thomas, navigating these punishments requires not only survival instincts but also a capacity for critical thinking and adaptation. His ability to recognize and respond to these punishments—such as escaping the Grievers, the monstrous creatures in the maze—demonstrates the ways in which negative reinforcement shapes behavior.

Furthermore, the concept of behavioral adaptation is crucial in understanding Thomas's survival. Skinner's operant conditioning theory suggests that behavior can be modified through the systematic application of reinforcement and punishment. In The Maze Runner, Thomas gradually adapts his behaviors in response to the various environmental stimuli he faces. His decisions, from forming alliances to taking risks, are driven by his learned responses to reinforcement and punishment within the oppressive system created by WICKED. The novel depicts Thomas's transformation from a confused, fearful boy to a resilient leader, a process that mirrors the way in which individuals adapt to their environments through

behavioral conditioning. This adaptation is not merely instinctive; rather, it is the result of continuous conditioning by the environment around him.

Skinner's theory also emphasizes the concept of shaping behavior through successive approximations, which is evident in Thomas's progression throughout the novel. As Thomas encounters different challenges, his behavior is shaped and refined by the reinforcement he receives. His ability to think strategically and lead others to freedom is not an innate trait but rather a learned response to the environmental stimuli he faces. This process of shaping behavior through gradual adjustments is central to the survival strategies employed by Thomas and is crucial to understanding his development as a character. By continuously responding to positive and negative stimuli, Thomas gradually learns how to navigate the maze and confront the dangers that lie within it.

The role of social interactions in behaviorism is another key aspect of this analysis. Skinner believed that social reinforcement plays a significant role in shaping behavior, as individuals are often influenced by the responses of others in their environment. In The Maze Runner, Thomas's relationships with the other boys in the Glade are integral to his survival. These social bonds are formed through shared experiences and mutual reinforcement, as the boys work together to escape the maze. The social reinforcement that Thomas receives from his peers, particularly from characters like Minho and Newt, encourages him to take risks and challenge the established rules of the Glade. The group dynamics in the novel underscore the importance of social reinforcement in shaping individual behavior, as Thomas's survival is not just a result of his personal efforts but also of the collective actions of the group.

In examining the novel through a behaviorist lens, it becomes clear that Thomas's behavior is not simply a reaction to his environment but is also shaped by the structured system of rewards and punishments imposed by WICKED. The organization's experiments aim to condition the boys' behaviors to ensure compliance and fear, and Thomas's resistance to this control highlights the complexities of behavioral conditioning. While reinforcement and punishment play a critical role in shaping Thomas's survival strategies, his ability to think critically and defy the system demonstrates the limitations of behaviorism. Despite being subjected to constant reinforcement and punishment, Thomas is able to resist full conditioning, exhibiting agency and autonomy in his decisions. This tension between conditioned behavior and personal agency adds depth to Dashner's exploration of psychological survival in extreme conditions.

Finally, the application of behaviorism to The Maze Runner contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's psychological themes and highlights the complex interaction between behavior and environment. By analyzing Thomas's behavior through the lens of Skinner's operant conditioning, this study illustrates how Dashner's portrayal of survival is intricately tied to the principles of behaviorism. The novel demonstrates that survival in a dystopian environment is not solely the

result of instinct or luck but is shaped by a system of reinforcement and punishment that continuously conditions the protagonist's actions. This analysis not only enriches the understanding of Thomas's character but also provides a valuable framework for interpreting other literary works through psychological theories.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the behavioral development of the main character, Thomas, in James Dashner's the Maze Runner, through the lens of B.F. Skinner's theory of behaviorism, particularly operant conditioning. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of meaning constructed by individuals or groups within a particular context. In this case, the focus was on how external stimuli and their consequences influenced Thomas's actions and decisions in a dystopian environment marked by fear, survival challenges, leadership struggles, and moral dilemmas. The novel The Maze Runner served as the primary source of data, with its events and character behaviors providing the foundation for analysis. No human participants were involved, as the study was literature-based.

Instruments and Procedures

The main instrument for this study was textual analysis, using the novel itself as the core material. Supporting this were secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, academic books, and credible digital resources that explored behaviorism, Skinner's operant conditioning, and literary critiques of The Maze Runner. Data collection was conducted through library research, extensive reading of the novel, and consultation of academic databases. The procedures involved identifying and compiling relevant information and interpretations related to psychological behavior, survival mechanisms, and dystopian fiction. These resources provided the theoretical and contextual background needed to analyze how the reinforcement and punishment elements shaped the main character's behavior.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was carried out in five systematic phases. First, a comprehensive reading of the novel was undertaken to identify significant events where Thomas's behavior appeared to be shaped by external consequences. Particular attention was given to incidents involving fear conditioning, group expectations, and encounters within the Maze. Second, observed behaviors were categorized according to Skinner's operant conditioning framework, distinguishing between positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. Third, patterns were identified across these categories to understand Thomas's behavioral adaptations and coping mechanisms. Fourth, the study contextualized these patterns within the dystopian environment of the novel,

interpreting how rewards, threats, and manipulation served as tools for behavioral conditioning. Finally, to ensure validity and depth, the findings were cross-referenced with existing scholarly literature related to The Maze Runner and psychological themes in dystopian fiction. Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research by citing all sources accurately and respecting academic integrity. This structured analysis provided meaningful insights into how Thomas's survival strategies were shaped by consistent exposure to behavioral conditioning throughout the narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis of Thomas's behavior in The Maze Runner, focusing on the mental challenges he experienced and the survival strategies he adopted throughout the story. The survival strategies are categorized based on key components of operant conditioning: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment.

Mental Challenges Experienced by the Main Character

Throughout the narrative, Thomas experiences a series of intense mental and emotional challenges as he navigates life in the Glade and the Maze. From the moment of his arrival, he is overwhelmed with confusion and disorientation, triggered by memory loss and an unfamiliar, hostile environment. This emotional instability is intensified by the strict social hierarchy among the Gladers and the looming threat of the Grievers.

Thomas repeatedly experiences fear, anxiety, confusion, hopelessness, guilt, and trauma. These emotions surface most prominently during life-threatening encounters and after witnessing the suffering or death of others. His first night trapped in the Maze, for instance, causes deep panic and a sense of dread. The intense pressure of surviving alone, navigating a deadly landscape, and encountering monstrous creatures leaves him psychologically shaken.

As he becomes more involved in the Glade's routines and relationships, Thomas also experiences emotional conflict, particularly regarding moral decisions. He struggles with guilt after taking actions that endanger others, even if those actions are necessary for the group's survival. This includes his decision to allow himself to be stung by a Griever or when he must leave someone behind during an escape attempt. These events burden him emotionally and contribute to the overall psychological toll he faces. By the end of the novel, Thomas exhibits signs of emotional exhaustion and numbness. Although he survives the Maze and helps others escape, he does not express joy or relief. Instead, he becomes withdrawn and silent, indicating that the cumulative mental stress has deeply affected his emotional state.

Thomas's Survival Strategies

Thomas's survival is not simply a matter of luck but is rooted in learned behaviors shaped by the consequences of his actions. These behaviors fall into four main categories based on the effects of reinforcement and punishment.

a. Positive Reinforcement

Thomas repeatedly receives positive reinforcement through praise, increased responsibility, and group approval. These consequences encourage him to continue engaging in courageous and strategic behavior. One notable example is when Thomas rescues Alby and Minho by surviving a night in the Maze—a feat previously thought impossible. As a result, he gains the respect of the Gladers and is nominated to become a Runner. This recognition and change in status positively reinforce his bravery and quick thinking, motivating him to take on more responsibilities.

Later, Thomas plays a central role in devising and executing the escape plan from the Maze. His leadership and initiative are praised by others, reinforcing his role as a problem-solver and leader. This positive feedback encourages him to continue acting assertively and collaboratively. Even small acknowledgments, such as verbal praise from Newt and Minho or expressions of trust from Teresa, reinforce Thomas's belief in his ability to contribute to the group's survival. As a result, he becomes increasingly confident and willing to lead others in high-stakes situations.

b. Negative Reinforcement

Thomas also modifies his behavior to avoid or escape aversive conditions, which constitutes negative reinforcement. In these cases, the removal of a negative stimulus strengthens a behavior. One example occurs when Thomas is hiding from a Griever inside the Maze. He controls his fear and remains absolutely still, avoiding detection. The Griever eventually leaves, and the fear is removed. This successful avoidance reinforces the behavior of staying calm and quiet in dangerous situations.

Another clear case of negative reinforcement is when Thomas chooses to undergo the Changing by deliberately getting stung by a Griever. Although the act itself is painful and risky, it allows him to access suppressed memories. This mental clarity removes the confusion and helplessness he previously felt, reinforcing the idea that temporary pain may result in long-term benefit. Thomas also repeatedly escapes death by using careful observation and strategic planning. Each time he survives an encounter with the Grievers or the Maze, the removal of fear, danger, or failure reinforces the use of calculated, calm behavior in future threats.

c. Positive Punishment

In several scenes, Thomas experiences direct negative consequences following certain behaviors, which serve as positive punishment to reduce the likelihood of those behaviors recurring. When Thomas breaks a rule and enters the Maze unauthorized to help Minho and Alby, he is subjected to social criticism and disciplinary action. Although his decision ultimately saves lives, the initial reaction from Glade leadership is anger and punishment. This response temporarily discourages rule-breaking, even if done for the right reasons.

Similarly, when Thomas first questions the authority structure of the Glade or confronts Gally too aggressively, he is met with hostility, suspicion, or even physical threats. These experiences punish overly assertive or confrontational behavior before Thomas learns to express himself more tactfully and build trust gradually. These instances of positive punishment do not cause Thomas to become passive, but they influence him to become more strategic and socially aware in how he challenges rules or expresses dissent.

d. Negative Punishment

Thomas also encounters negative punishment, where a desired condition is taken away following his actions, resulting in reduced motivation to repeat that behavior. An example of this occurs when Thomas's attempts to speak or act without explanation are met with exclusion or silence from other Gladers. Early in the story, when he insists that he should be made a Runner, others dismiss him or ignore his input. The social isolation and lack of recognition reduce his tendency to push for roles before proving himself.

Another significant instance is when Thomas's actions although well-intended lead to conflict or loss of trust. If he acts impulsively or fails to communicate effectively, he sometimes loses the trust or support of peers, which discourages future rash decisions. These losses of approval or access to social inclusion cause Thomas to reevaluate his behavior. Over time, he adopts a more careful and measured approach when dealing with group dynamics, reinforcing a pattern of deliberate, cooperative interaction.

The findings of this study highlight how Thomas's survival in The Maze Runner is shaped by a continuous process of adaptation through reinforcement and punishment core principles of Skinner's operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1953). As the main character, Thomas consistently faces situations that test his physical strength, emotional endurance, social understanding, and moral reasoning. Through repeated exposure to challenges and consequences, he learns which behaviors lead to safety, acceptance, and leadership, and which lead to danger or failure.

Thomas's physical endurance becomes a foundational element of his survival. His repeated willingness to endure pain and fatigue such as climbing to save Alby, fighting off Grievers, or running through the Maze demonstrates behavior reinforced by the successful outcomes of his actions. Surviving high-risk scenarios not only increases his chances of survival but also earns him social status. This positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of him repeating such high-effort behavior in future events (Catania, 1998).

Emotionally, Thomas undergoes a transformation from fear and anxiety to measured control and resilience. Early in the story, he displays visible signs of panic, but over time, he learns that emotional outbursts lead to negative consequences, such as loss of trust or failure in missions. Emotional regulation suppressing panic, staying calm in danger, and acting decisively is consistently reinforced by its outcomes. Each time he manages his emotions effectively, he solves problems, escapes threats, and gains respect. This exemplifies how internal behavior patterns are strengthened by external feedback (Domjan, 2010).

Social interaction is also crucial in Thomas's development. He learns that helping others, communicating clearly, and cooperating result in social reinforcement praise, trust, and leadership opportunities. His rescue of Alby, partnership with Minho, and growing bond with Teresa all strengthen his standing among the Gladers. Conversely, antisocial or aggressive behavior, especially when he first arrives, is met with criticism or exclusion. These responses shape Thomas's increasing use of prosocial strategies to survive and thrive, which aligns with principles of operant conditioning where socially approved behavior is maintained through positive consequences (Slavin, 2009).

Thomas's rise to leadership further illustrates the impact of reinforcement. As he begins to take initiative proposing plans, organizing escape routes, and motivating others he is met with encouragement and increased authority. His leadership is not based on imposed power but earned through repeated reinforcement of his decision-making success. These patterns align with the notion of behavior shaping, where increasingly complex behaviors are built from simpler reinforced actions (Skinner, 1953; Miltenberger, 2016).

Additionally, Thomas often faces moral dilemmas that involve emotionally and ethically challenging decisions. When he must choose between rescuing someone or saving the group, his choices often bring short-term emotional discomfort but result in long-term group benefits. These scenarios reflect the complexity of reinforcement schedules, where delayed rewards still reinforce certain behaviors if the outcome is deemed meaningful (Pierce & Cheney, 2013). His willingness to endure emotional pain in exchange for group survival shows how reinforcement can go beyond immediate gratification and shape long-term behavioral patterns.

Behavioral adaptation is another consistent theme. Thomas demonstrates what Skinner referred to as "operant behavior" actions that are modified by their

consequences. With each challenge, Thomas becomes more deliberate and skilled in adjusting his behavior. When early impulsive behavior leads to negative consequences, he adapts by becoming more observant and strategic. This gradual refinement of behavior exemplifies shaping, where small successes lead to the reinforcement of more advanced responses (Skinner, 1974).

Negative reinforcement and punishment also play major roles in conditioning Thomas's behavior. Fear of the Grievers, isolation, and witnessing death act as aversive stimuli. These experiences decrease the likelihood of reckless or uncooperative behavior and promote careful, team-oriented action. For instance, Thomas's repeated survival following strategic planning reinforces the use of preparation and foresight, while impulsive or disobedient acts are discouraged by immediate or social punishments (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2020).

The Glade and the Maze themselves serve as environments carefully designed to control behavior, consistent with Skinner's view that environments shape responses (Skinner, 1953). The Maze functions as a behavioral testing ground, where trial, error, and consequence dictate learning. Thomas, placed in this setting, learns to interpret patterns, adjust strategies, and condition his behavior in line with the threats and reinforcements present in the dystopian system.

Ultimately, Thomas's character arc reflects how survival behavior is shaped by a blend of external reinforcement and internal adaptation. Each decision, action, and emotional response is influenced by its outcome, reinforcing successful strategies and eliminating ineffective ones. Over time, Thomas emerges not only as a survivor but as a leader, molded by consistent behavioral feedback from his environment. His development illustrates how operant conditioning operates within a fictional context to shape human behavior under extreme conditions.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that The Maze Runner effectively depicts Thomas's behavioral adaptations within a repressive dystopian environment characterized by significant physical and psychological challenges. Utilizing B.F. Skinner's behaviorism framework, the analysis elucidates how Thomas's survival strategies formed through mechanisms of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment embody fundamental aspects of operant conditioning. His experiences with fatigue, pain, fear, and anxiety highlight the severe stimuli that shape his subsequent behaviors. Through Thomas's changing responses to both external dangers and internal conflicts, Dashner explores human resilience in the face of extreme environmental control. Finally, this research underscores that the novel functions not merely as an engaging dystopian tale but also as a psychological inquiry into how individuals are influenced by reinforcement and punishment, thereby providing valuable insights into the vulnerabilities and strengths inherent in human behavior when subjected to manipulation.

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