

A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Depression in the Main Character of Ender's Game

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Abstract

The present study employs a psychoanalytic framework to analyse the portrayal of depression in the character Ender Wiggin in the film *Ender's Game*, thereby addressing a significant gap in academic literature at the intersection of cinematic representation, adolescent psychology and literary adaptation. Whilst the prevailing focus of preceding research has been on themes of strategy and empathy in the novel, this analysis specifically investigates how the film depicts the psychological consequences of extreme pressure on adolescents. The research methodology consists of detailed scene analysis, an approach chosen for its ability to reveal unconscious motivations and emotional subtext embedded in cinematic language, in line with Freud's focus on latent meaning. The study explores how external pressures, such as manipulation, isolation, and moral burden, manifest as symptoms of depression—including emotional withdrawal and internal conflict—in Ender's character. These findings contribute to the academic debate by demonstrating how the film employs the science fiction genre to critique society's perception of adolescent leadership in high-pressure environments. The paper's central argument is that the film's psychoanalytic depth offers valuable insights for mental health discourse, serving as a powerful educational tool for discussing the psychological burden of trauma and the ethical dimensions of grooming young leaders.

Keywords: Depression; Psychoanalysis; Ender's game; Mental health; Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of mental health, especially depression, has become an increasingly prevalent topic in both literature and cinema. Films allow audiences to engage with complex psychological issues, often through characters whose mental states reflect real-world internal struggles. In the 2013 film *Ender's Game*, based on Orson Scott Card's novel, the main character, Ender Wiggin, serves as an insightful case study for examining depression through a psychoanalytic lens. As a child soldier placed in a high-stress military training environment, Ender is subjected to manipulation, isolation, and immense moral pressure. These factors contribute to his psychological breakdown, making the film a fertile ground for scholarly exploration. The choice to focus on depression in Ender Wiggin's character arises from the need to address mental health representations in popular media, particularly among youth in leadership roles. Ender is shown as an intellectually gifted yet emotionally vulnerable boy who grapples with guilt, alienation, and the weight of expectations. His internal conflict and emotional detachment resonate with clinical symptoms of depression, such as hopelessness, self-doubt, and social withdrawal. This

article aims to analyze how these traits are presented through visual storytelling and narrative progression, grounding the analysis in Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

Freud's psychoanalytic approach highlights the unconscious drives and early developmental experiences that shape human behavior. Applying this framework to Ender's Game allows for a deeper understanding of how repressed emotions, internalized authority, and unresolved conflict manifest as depression in the protagonist. Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) emphasize that psychoanalysis provides a lens through which cinema can be understood as a reflection of psychological disturbances. Similarly, Freud's theory of melancholia (Leuzinger-Bohleber et al., 2022) and his model of the id, ego, and superego (Solms, 2021) provide critical structures for interpreting Ender's internalized guilt and conflict. Previous studies, such as Pangaribuan and Halomoan (2022), analyzed the main character's mental depression in *A Girl Like Her*, employing Freud's framework to understand emotional suppression. Sintami, Jayantini, and Juniartha (2022) explored depression in Spike Jonze's *Her*, highlighting emotional fragility and the psychological consequences of isolation. Arnetta and Amelia (2022), in their study on *A Star is Born*, examined how unresolved trauma leads to self-destructive behavior, providing parallels to Ender's emotional burdens. These works confirm the value of psychoanalytic theory in examining mental health portrayals in cinema.

The use of symbolic and expressive visuals is another important element. Grinenko (2023) explored this in musical theatre, where symbolism communicates inner distress. While her work focuses on musicals, similar cinematic techniques are present in Ender's Game to convey Ender's internal state. The symbolic use of space, sound, and isolation scenes enhances the portrayal of Ender's depression. MacRury & Rustin (2018) emphasized how psychoanalytic themes are embedded in science fiction narratives, such as *Doctor Who*, where characters often embody complex ethical and emotional dilemmas. This insight is relevant to Ender, who is shaped by leadership, trauma, and moral ambiguity. Literature also emphasizes the importance of social environment in youth mental health. Holt (2020) pointed out how media portrays adolescent distress through unrealistic expectations, reinforcing the idea that young characters must conceal emotional vulnerability. Housby, Thackeray, and Midgley (2021) highlighted the need for social support in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for youth, which is notably absent in Ender's environment. The psychological effects of violence and oppression, as noted by Aronson (2023) and Sofyan, Kuncara, and Asanti (2022), are directly applicable to Ender's experiences, where systematic manipulation erodes his autonomy.

In this chapter, we delve into the theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding depression through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, specifically examining its relevance to character development in film (Pangaribuan & Halomoan, 2022). Freud's psychoanalytic framework offers an insightful approach for interpreting mental health conditions, as it considers the complex interplay of internal conflicts and defense mechanisms within the psyche (Sintami, Jayantini, & Juniartha, 2022). This perspective not only aids in understanding the general nature of depression but also provides a deeper appreciation for the portrayal of psychological struggles in cinematic characters.

The section opens with a discussion on the key principles of Freud's theory, examining how concepts like the id, ego, and superego influence an individual's psychological state (Pangaribuan & Halomoan, 2022). Following this, the chapter explores defense mechanisms as critical tools for coping with internal and external stressors. The application of these concepts to the film *Ender's Game* highlights the ways in which characters grapple with their emotions and inner conflicts (Sofyan, Kuncara, & Asanti, 2022). Additionally, an analysis of depression as presented in film and media

reveals the significance of accurate mental health representation, underscoring the impact of such portrayals on public perception (Sintami, Jayantini, & Juniartha, 2022).

Holt's study, "Mixed Messages: The Portrayal of Adolescent Girls' Emotional Distress in Popular Culture" (2020), examines how media shapes societal views on mental health, particularly in adolescents. Holt observes that portrayals of emotional distress are often layered with societal expectations and conflicting messages about personal identity. This study is significant for understanding Ender's character in *Ender's Game*, as he faces immense societal pressures to fulfill his role in a militarized institution while grappling with his internal conflicts. Holt's insights suggest that media often reinforces unrealistic standards of emotional resilience, which aligns with Ender's struggle to meet external expectations while suppressing his vulnerabilities.

Gabbard & Gabbard's book *Psychiatry and the Cinema* (1999) explores how films portray psychiatric issues and the complex relationship between characters' psychological states and cinematic storytelling. The authors propose that film serves as a powerful medium for visualizing characters' mental health journeys, allowing viewers to empathize with their struggles. This perspective is essential for analyzing *Ender's Game*, as the movie uses visual and narrative techniques to depict Ender's depressive symptoms, isolation, and internal conflicts. Gabbard & Gabbard's work underscores the importance of film as a vehicle for exploring psychological complexity, making it relevant to the psychoanalytic examination of Ender's experiences.

In *The Inner World of Doctor Who: Psychoanalytic Reflections in Time and Space*, MacRury & Rustin (2018) delve into the psychological and emotional intricacies of characters in *Doctor Who*. Their psychoanalytic approach reveals how moral conflicts and high expectations shape characters' emotional journeys, making them more relatable to audiences. The authors' analysis is applicable to *Ender's Game*, as Ender, like characters in *Doctor Who*, is burdened by moral dilemmas, trauma, and high expectations that contribute to his depressive state. MacRury & Rustin's findings suggest that psychoanalytic theory can unveil the hidden layers within characters, enhancing the understanding of Ender's internalized conflicts and emotional burdens.

Grinenko's research, "Seriously Mad: Mental Distress and the Broadway Musical" (2023), investigates how musical theater portrays mental distress through symbolic and expressive techniques. Grinenko argues that symbolic representations effectively convey the nuanced experiences of characters struggling with mental health, enabling audiences to grasp the emotional depth of these experiences. Although focused on musicals, Grinenko's insights are valuable for analyzing *Ender's Game*, as the film similarly employs visual symbolism to represent Ender's mental state. Grinenko's study highlights the role of symbolism in media portrayals of mental health, providing a framework for interpreting Ender's psychological decline and its representation within the movie.

In their study on the representation of suicidal behavior in *A Star is Born*, Arnetta & Amelia (2022) apply Freudian psychoanalysis to explore how internal conflicts lead to self-destructive behaviors. They argue that characters experiencing unresolved trauma and internal struggles often exhibit behaviors that reflect their mental distress. This perspective is relevant for analyzing *Ender's Game*, where Ender faces significant psychological strain, resulting in a breakdown that, while not self-destructive, illustrates the emotional toll of his internal conflicts. Arnetta & Amelia's study highlights how psychoanalysis can uncover underlying psychological factors that contribute to a character's depressive symptoms, providing insight into Ender's journey and the emotional burdens he carries.

Several previous studies have explored the depiction of depression and psychological struggles in fictional characters using psychoanalytic theory. Pangaribuan and Halomoan (2022) analyzed the main character's mental depression in *A Girl Like Her*, employing Freud's psychoanalytic framework to examine internal conflicts and defense mechanisms.

Their study highlights how unresolved psychological conflicts can shape a character's actions and decisions. Similarly, Sintami, Jayantini, and Juniartha (2022) investigated the effects of depression on the main character in Spike Jonze's *Her*. They emphasized the significant role of depression in influencing the character's relationships and emotional well-being, shedding light on the broader impact of mental health representation in film.

Specific to *Ender's Game*, Sofyan, Kuncara, and Asanti (2022) discussed the oppression experienced by Ender, focusing on external pressures and their psychological consequences. While their study centers on themes of social and emotional suppression, it provides a foundation for further examining Ender's internal struggles through a psychoanalytic lens. These studies collectively underscore the value of psychoanalytic perspectives in understanding complex character development and mental health narratives in film.

The present study is situated within the prevailing discourse on mental health in cinema, offering a novel synthesis of psychoanalytic theory and cinematic analysis, specifically applied to the figure of the child soldier in a high-stakes science fiction narrative. Whilst the extant literature has employed Freudian theory to analyse depression in film, this paper is distinctive in its examination of how the *mise-en-scène*, editing, and sound design of *Ender's Game* visually and aurally externalise internal psychoanalytic constructs such as repression, melancholia, and the superego's demands. The approach under discussion aims to bridge a critical gap between abstract theory and tangible filmic technique, demonstrating how cinema can uniquely make the unconscious visible.

This article aims to bridge the gap between media studies, psychoanalysis, and youth mental health discourse. By interpreting Ender Wiggin's psychological journey through a psychoanalytic framework, this research contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of how depression can be portrayed with depth and nuance. The character's struggles reflect not only an individual crisis but also a broader commentary on societal demands for emotional resilience in youth leadership. The findings underscore the value of cinematic storytelling in raising awareness about the silent burdens carried by high-achieving young individuals. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the key indicators of depression in Ender Wiggin's character from a psychoanalytic perspective?
2. How do external factors, such as manipulation, isolation, and leadership burdens, contribute to his depression?
3. How does the film reflect broader societal perspectives on youth mental health and emotional vulnerability?

METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative research design grounded in psychoanalytic film criticism (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999) to analyse the depiction of depression in Gavin Hood's film *Ender's Game* (2013). The material object of analysis is the film itself, while the formal object is the manifestation of depression through Freudian constructs, including melancholia (Leuzinger-Bohleber et al., 2022), defence mechanisms, and the structural model of the psyche (id, ego, superego) as described by Solms (2021). The analysis is conducted through the lens of psychoanalytic film criticism, utilising a methodological framework established by MacRury and Rustin (2018). This approach involves the examination of specific scenes, dialogue sequences, visual motifs, and narrative developments, with the objective of elucidating the depiction of Ender Wiggin's psychological condition.

The data collection process entailed the repeated viewing and systematic annotation of key sequences, which were selected based on their thematic relevance to psychological disorders. This approach was outlined by Pangaribuan and Halomoan

(2022). The analysis employs a structured coding framework that has been developed from Freud's concepts, and it utilises theoretical triangulation through interaction with secondary literature (Sintami, Jayantini, & Juniartha, 2022). In order to ensure methodological rigour, this study incorporated peer debriefing procedures and maintained researcher reflexivity throughout the interpretation process, in accordance with best practices in qualitative film analysis (Grinenko, 2023; Holt, 2020). This approach facilitates an in-depth clinical examination of the cinematic representation of depression while maintaining theoretical consistency with the psychoanalytic framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In this section, we analyze key scenes and dialogues from the film "Ender's Game" that illustrate the main character Ender Wiggin's psychological state, particularly focusing on his depression. Each finding is accompanied by the corresponding timestamp from the film, providing a deeper understanding of how these moments contribute to the overall themes of isolation, internal conflict, overwhelming responsibility, identity struggle, and moral burden.

Table 1. Analysis of Depressive Indicators in Ender Wiggin Through a Psychoanalytic Lens

No	Depressive Symptom / Psychoanalytic Concept	Film Scene & Timecode	Key Dialogue / Visual Cue	Psychoanalytic Interpretation
1	Longing for acceptance & emotional isolation	Opening Scenes (Colonel Graff's Office) (12.37)	Colonel Graff: "You're not like the other boys. You're special, Ender." Ender: "I don't want to be special. I just want to be normal."	Ender's desire for "normality" signifies a rejection of the isolating burden of the gifted child (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). This aligns with depressive feelings of alienation and a yearning for the ego's integration into a social whole, which is denied to him.
2	Internalized Guilt & Moral Injury	The Fight with Stilson (25:48)	Ender: "I didn't want to hurt him. I just wanted to win."	The conflict between Ender's innate morality (superego) and the aggressive drives (id) required to survive manifests as guilt. This early trauma is repressed but fuels his later depressive melancholia, as he internalizes the violence as a flaw in his own character (Solms, 2021).
3	Overwhelming Pressure & Fear of Failure	The Battle Room (45:32)	Ender: "If we don't work together, we'll lose. I can't do this alone."	The immense pressure of leadership exacerbates ego fragmentation. His admission of vulnerability contrasts with the expectations placed upon him, creating a psychic conflict that manifests as anxiety and a depressive sense of impending failure (Holt, 2020).
4	Identity Crisis & Role Conflict	Confrontation with Bonzo (1:10:00)	Bonzo: "You think you're	Ender's declaration is a defensive projection, an attempt

No	Depressive Symptom / Psychoanalytic Concept	Film Scene & Timecode	Key Dialogue / Visual Cue	Psychoanalytic Interpretation
5	Profound Guilt & Melancholia	The Final Simulation (1:30:00)	<i>better than us?..." Ender: "I'm not a little boy. I'm a soldier."</i>	by the ego to solidify an identity under threat. The tension between the child ("little boy") and the role forced upon him ("soldier") creates a fractured self-image, a core feature of his depressive state.
6	Confronting Destroyer/Self	the Encounter with the Formic Queen (1:45:00)	<i>Ender: "I didn't want to kill them. I wanted to save them."</i> <i>Queen: "You have the power to create or destroy. Choose wisely."</i>	This is the culmination of Ender's repressed conflicts. The realization of genocide leads to a state of classic Freudian melancholia (Leuzinger-Bohleber et al., 2022), where the ego is consumed by guilt and self-reproach, turning the anger over the loss (of the Formics, his innocence) inward upon itself.

This analysis demonstrates how the film systematically maps Ender Wiggin's descent into a depressive state through narrative and dialogue. The progression across these key scenes reveals a causal relationship between external manipulation, internal conflict, and psychological decline. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Ender's journey is not merely one of strategic triumph but a profound tragedy of a child's ego shattered by the unbearable demands of the superego (the authority figures) and the id (the aggressive instincts necessary for survival). The film uses his character to offer a critical commentary on the psychological cost of grooming youth for leadership roles in high-stakes, morally ambiguous environments, making his depression a central theme rather than a mere character trait.

Discussion

The findings from the analysis of "Ender's Game" reveal a complex interplay between Ender Wiggin's psychological state and the external pressures he faces. Utilizing Freud's psychoanalytic theory, we can better understand the manifestations of Ender's depression throughout the film. This discussion will delve deeper into the themes of isolation, internal conflict, overwhelming responsibility, identity struggle, and moral burden, drawing connections to relevant psychological theories and literature.

Isolation and Alienation

Ender's feelings of isolation are a recurring theme in the film. As noted in the dialogue with Colonel Graff, Ender's uniqueness sets him apart from his peers, leading to emotional distress. Graff's insistence on Ender's exceptionalism alienates him from his fellow cadets, creating a profound sense of loneliness. This phenomenon aligns with the

concept of social isolation, which has been linked to various mental health issues, including depression (Housby et al., 2021). Freud's concept of the superego, which internalizes societal expectations, can be seen in Ender's struggle to meet the high standards set by authority figures (Solms, 2021).

The pressure to excel creates a rift between Ender and his peers, as he is constantly reminded of his "special" status. This internal conflict contributes to his sense of alienation, a common symptom of depression (Sintami et al., 2022). Moreover, Ender's isolation is exacerbated by the competitive environment of Battle School, where camaraderie is overshadowed by rivalry. The lack of genuine connections with his peers leads to feelings of worthlessness and despair. This aligns with the findings of Midgley et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of social support in mitigating depressive symptoms. Ender's inability to form meaningful relationships ultimately deepens his emotional turmoil.

Internal Conflict and Guilt

The fight with Stilson serves as a critical moment in Ender's psychological journey. His remorse after injuring Stilson reflects Freud's notion of melancholia, where unresolved grief and guilt manifest as self-reproach (Leuzinger-Bohleber et al., 2022). Ender's internal conflict between his desire to win and his aversion to violence illustrates the emotional turmoil that characterizes his experience as a child soldier.

Ender's guilt is compounded by the expectations placed upon him by Colonel Graff and the International Military. The pressure to succeed in a violent environment forces Ender to confront the darker aspects of his nature. This aligns with the findings of Aronson (2023), who discusses the psychological impact of violence on young individuals. Ender's struggle to reconcile his actions with his moral compass highlights the complexities of his character and the toll it takes on his mental health.

Furthermore, the internal conflict Ender experiences is indicative of a broader theme in the film: the loss of innocence. As he navigates the challenges of Battle School, Ender is forced to confront the harsh realities of war and leadership. This loss of innocence is a common theme in literature and film, often leading to feelings of guilt and despair (Haukaas, 2023). Ender's journey serves as a poignant reminder of the psychological toll of warfare on young individuals.

Overwhelming Responsibility

Ender's recognition of the need for teamwork in the Battle Room highlights the immense pressure he faces as a leader. Freud's theory suggests that individuals experiencing depression often feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, leading to feelings of inadequacy (Midgley et al., 2021). Ender's fear of failure and the burden of leadership exacerbate his depressive symptoms, as he grapples with the expectations placed upon him.

The pressure to perform is particularly evident in the Battle Room, where Ender is constantly evaluated by his superiors. The competitive nature of the training environment creates a sense of urgency, forcing Ender to make difficult decisions that weigh heavily on his conscience. This aligns with the findings of Schechter et al. (2022), who emphasize the psychological impact of high-stakes environments on young individuals. Ender's struggle to balance his responsibilities with his desire for connection ultimately leads to feelings of isolation and despair.

Moreover, the overwhelming responsibility Ender faces is compounded by the knowledge that the fate of humanity rests on his shoulders. This burden is a significant contributor to his depressive symptoms, as he grapples with the moral implications of his actions. The fear of failure and the weight of expectation create a perfect storm for emotional distress, highlighting the psychological toll of leadership in high-pressure situations.

Identity Struggle

The confrontation with Bonzo reveals Ender's struggle with his identity. Caught between childhood and the role of a soldier, Ender experiences a profound sense of confusion and self-doubt. This aligns with Freud's idea of the id, ego, and superego, where conflicting desires and societal expectations create internal strife (Housby et al., 2021). Ender's journey reflects the complexities of navigating identity in high-pressure environments, a theme that resonates with many young leaders today.

Ender's struggle with his identity is further complicated by the expectations placed upon him by his family and society. As the third child in a world that discourages large families, Ender grapples with feelings of inadequacy and the desire to prove himself. This internal conflict is indicative of the broader theme of identity formation in adolescence, where individuals often struggle to reconcile their desires with societal expectations (Midgley et al., 2021).

The pressure to conform to the expectations of others leads to a fragmented sense of self for Ender. He oscillates between the roles of a child and a soldier, creating a dissonance that exacerbates his feelings of isolation and despair. This struggle for identity is a common theme in literature and film, often leading to profound psychological consequences (Haukaas, 2023). Ender's journey serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by young individuals in navigating their identities in a complex world.

Moral Burden and Genocide

The final simulation and Ender's encounter with the Formic Queen encapsulate the moral complexities of his actions. Ender's realization of the genocide he has committed leads to profound guilt and despair, reinforcing the psychological toll of leadership. Freud's concept of projection, where individuals externalize their internal conflicts, can be observed in Ender's struggle to reconcile his role as a savior with the destruction he has caused (Schechter et al., 2022). This moment serves as a poignant reminder of the emotional burdens carried by those in positions of power.

Ender's moral burden is compounded by the knowledge that his actions have far-reaching consequences. The genocide of the Formics weighs heavily on his conscience, leading to feelings of guilt and remorse. This aligns with the findings of Leuzinger-Bohleber et al. (2022), who emphasize the psychological impact of moral dilemmas on individuals. Ender's struggle to come to terms with his actions highlights the complexities of leadership and the emotional toll it takes on those in positions of power.

Furthermore, the encounter with the Formic Queen serves as a turning point for Ender. Her acknowledgment of his role in the genocide forces him to confront the moral implications of his actions. This moment of reckoning is indicative of the broader theme of accountability in leadership, where individuals must grapple with the consequences of their decisions (Haukaas, 2023). Ender's journey serves as a powerful reminder of the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders in high-stakes situations.

This portrayal of institutionally-induced depression in Ender's Game offers a compelling point of comparison with other cinematic depictions. While many films, such as *A Girl Like Her* (Pangaribuan & Halomoan, 2022) or *A Star is Born* (Arnetta & Amelia, 2022), focus on depression stemming from interpersonal trauma or personal loss, Ender's psychological distress is uniquely framed as a calculated outcome of systemic manipulation. His environment is not merely a backdrop but an active, antagonistic force designed to suppress empathy and foster aggression for a strategic goal. This aligns with yet sharply expands upon MacRury & Rustin's (2018) exploration of ethical complexities in science fiction, presenting a narrative where the protagonist's mental state is the direct cost of humanity's survival strategy. Therefore, the film diverges from stories of personal

tragedy and instead serves as a systemic critique, using the psychoanalytic breakdown of its protagonist to question the ethics of grooming children for roles that demand the sacrifice of their mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

The film *Ender's Game* presents a compelling narrative that intricately weaves together psychological turmoil, moral conflict, and emotional isolation to depict the mental deterioration of its protagonist, Ender Wiggin. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this study has revealed how depression manifests as a result of manipulation, leadership burdens, alienation, and internal conflict. Ender becomes a representation of the psychological costs borne by youth placed in environments that prioritize achievement over empathy. These elements converge to depict a relatable psychological crisis that mirrors real-life struggles of young individuals facing immense societal expectations. From the onset, Ender is set apart from his peers, subjected to both adulation and isolation. His sense of being "special" leads to emotional detachment, further aggravated by an institution that values his performance over his well-being. As he navigates a competitive, militarized environment, his actions particularly violent confrontations and command decisions trigger guilt and identity confusion. These moments reflect Freud's theory of melancholia, where internalized loss results in diminished self-worth, and defense mechanisms like repression and projection are employed as coping strategies.

The film's climax Ender's realization that he has unknowingly orchestrated a genocide forces him into existential reckoning. This moment marks the collapse of his psychological defenses, highlighting the moral burden and trauma of leadership. His redemptive act of choosing to protect the last Formic egg becomes a symbolic recovery, aligned with Freud's concept of sublimation. It demonstrates how repressed guilt and sorrow can be transformed into purposeful, empathetic action. Ender's arc underscores the importance of ethical reflection and emotional resilience in leadership. Ultimately, this study affirms that *Ender's Game* is not only a profound cinematic text but also a valuable resource for exploring youth mental health, ethical leadership, and psychoanalytic theory. Future research should deepen investigations into how films can model empathy, resilience, and mental health awareness. Educators and policy-makers are encouraged to integrate such narratives into learning environments, fostering open dialogues and support systems for young leaders. Ender's story is a call to recognize and address the silent emotional struggles faced by youth under pressure and to guide them not with control, but with care.

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