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## **A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND INNER CONFLICT IN LITERATURE**

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Received: 26/05/2026 Revised: 12/06/2026 Acceptance: 13/06/2026 Published: 17/06/2026

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### **ABSTRACT**

Psychoanalysis has significantly influenced literary criticism by providing tools to explore the unconscious mind, suppressed desires, and psychological conflicts reflected in literary characters. This research paper examines the psychoanalytical dimensions of human behaviour as represented in literature through the theoretical framework developed by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by psychoanalytic thinkers. The study focuses on the concepts of unconscious motivation, repression, defense mechanisms, and identity formation. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research interprets how literary characters reveal psychological tensions between desire and social norms. The paper argues that psychoanalytical criticism enables deeper understanding of character construction and human psychology, highlighting literature as a reflection of inner emotional realities. The study concludes that psychoanalysis remains a powerful interdisciplinary approach connecting psychology and literary interpretation.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Unconscious Mind, Literary Criticism, Freud, Human Behaviour, Psychological Conflict

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## **Introduction**

Literature has long been regarded as a reflection of the inner life of human beings, presenting not only external events but also the emotional and psychological realities that shape human existence. Through stories, poems, and dramatic works, writers portray characters who experience complex emotions such as fear, love, anxiety, guilt, ambition, and desire. These emotional experiences closely resemble real human behaviour, allowing readers to connect with literary characters on a deeply psychological level. Literary narratives often reveal struggles between personal wishes and social expectations, highlighting the tensions that exist within the human mind. As a result, literature becomes more than entertainment; it serves as a medium through which the hidden layers of human consciousness are explored and understood.

Psychoanalytical criticism emerged as a significant interpretative approach that seeks to uncover these hidden psychological dimensions within literary texts. Rather than focusing only on plot or historical context, this approach examines the mental processes that influence characters' thoughts and actions. It attempts to interpret symbols, dreams, conflicts, and recurring patterns as expressions of deeper psychological truths. By analysing characters as if they were real individuals shaped by unconscious motivations, psychoanalytical criticism enables readers to understand why characters behave in certain ways, even when their actions appear irrational or contradictory.

The foundations of the psychoanalytical approach can be traced to the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, whose theories transformed modern understanding of human psychology. Freud argued that human behaviour is not governed entirely by conscious reasoning; instead, it is largely influenced by unconscious forces operating beneath awareness. According to his theory, individuals often suppress thoughts, memories, and desires that society considers unacceptable. These repressed elements do not disappear; rather, they continue to affect behaviour indirectly, appearing through dreams, slips of language, emotional disturbances, or symbolic actions. In literature, such unconscious tensions frequently emerge through imagery, symbolism, and character conflicts, making literary texts powerful representations of psychological reality.

This research paper therefore aims to explore how psychoanalysis contributes to literary interpretation by examining internal conflicts, symbolic representations, and the psychological development of characters. By applying psychoanalytical concepts, the study seeks to demonstrate that literature provides valuable insight into human behaviour, revealing the complex interaction between conscious thought and unconscious motivation. Through such analysis, psychoanalytical criticism deepens our understanding of both literary art and the psychological nature of human experience.

## **Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis**



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## **Freud's Model of the Mind**

Sigmund Freud's model of the human mind remains one of the most influential theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis. According to Freud, human personality is not a unified or simple structure; rather, it is composed of three interacting psychological components — the id, the ego, and the superego. These elements continuously interact with one another, shaping thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. Freud believed that much of human psychological struggle arises from the tension created by the competing demands of these three structures. The id is the most primitive and instinctual part of the psyche. Present from birth, it operates according to the pleasure principle, seeking immediate satisfaction of basic drives such as hunger, aggression, desire, and emotional gratification. The id is entirely unconscious and does not consider morality, logic, or social rules. In literature, characters driven by impulsive decisions, uncontrolled passion, or irrational behaviour often reflect the dominance of the id. Such characters act according to desire rather than reason, demonstrating the raw and instinctive side of human nature.

In contrast, the ego develops as an individual begins to interact with reality. Operating according to the reality principle, the ego functions as a mediator between the impulsive demands of the id and the limitations imposed by the external world. It attempts to satisfy desires in socially acceptable and realistic ways. The ego is partly conscious and partly unconscious, constantly negotiating between instinct and responsibility. Literary characters frequently display ego-driven conflicts when they struggle to balance personal wishes with practical consequences. Through internal debates and decision-making processes, authors portray the ego's role in maintaining psychological balance.

The superego represents moral conscience and internalized social values. It develops through cultural norms, parental guidance, and societal expectations. The superego judges actions as right or wrong and often generates feelings of guilt or shame when individuals fail to meet moral standards. In literature, characters experiencing intense guilt, moral anxiety, or ethical dilemmas often reveal the strong influence of the superego. This moral authority may suppress desires promoted by the id, creating emotional tension.

The interaction among the id, ego, and superego produces psychological conflict, which becomes a central theme in many literary works. Characters frequently struggle between desire and duty, passion and morality, or freedom and responsibility. Psychoanalytical criticism interprets these struggles as symbolic representations of internal psychic conflict, allowing readers to understand character dilemmas as reflections of universal human psychological processes.

## **The Unconscious Mind**



A central concept in Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the existence of the unconscious mind, which he considered the primary source of human behaviour. Freud argued that the human mind consists of different levels of awareness, and a large portion of mental activity occurs beyond conscious control. The unconscious stores memories, wishes, fears, and traumatic experiences that individuals may not be aware of but that continue to influence their thoughts and actions.

Many experiences, especially those associated with pain, fear, or social disapproval, are pushed out of conscious awareness through repression. However, these repressed elements do not disappear; instead, they remain active within the unconscious and seek expression in indirect forms. Freud believed that dreams, slips of the tongue, fantasies, and emotional reactions often reveal hidden unconscious desires.

In literary studies, the unconscious mind becomes a powerful interpretative tool. Authors frequently express psychological realities through symbolic language rather than direct explanation. Dreams described in narratives, recurring images, and mysterious or irrational actions of characters often symbolize unconscious emotions. For instance, darkness may represent fear or repression, while journeys may symbolize psychological transformation or self-discovery.

Psychoanalytical criticism therefore treats literary texts as symbolic representations of unconscious experience. Characters may act in ways that appear illogical on the surface but become meaningful when understood as expressions of suppressed anxiety or unresolved emotional conflict. Through this perspective, literature becomes a space where hidden psychological truths are revealed indirectly, enabling deeper interpretation beyond literal meaning.

### **Psychoanalysis and Literature**

Psychoanalytical criticism interprets literary texts as complex psychological expressions that reveal the inner workings of the human mind. Rather than viewing literature merely as a form of storytelling or artistic entertainment, this approach considers literary works as symbolic representations of emotional experiences, unconscious desires, and psychological conflicts. According to psychoanalytic theory, writers do not always consciously control the deeper meanings embedded within their works. Instead, literature often becomes a medium through which authors unknowingly project personal anxieties, memories, fears, and emotional struggles. The creative process itself may function as a psychological outlet, allowing suppressed thoughts and unresolved conflicts to emerge in symbolic or indirect forms. As a result, literary texts can be examined not only for their thematic or stylistic qualities but also for the psychological realities they express. Psychoanalytical criticism generally operates through three major interpretative perspectives, each focusing on a different dimension of the literary experience: the



author, the character, and the reader. These perspectives collectively demonstrate how literature reflects universal aspects of human psychology.

The first perspective, author-centered analysis, focuses on understanding the psychological background of the writer. This approach assumes that literary works are influenced by the author's personal experiences, childhood memories, emotional conflicts, and unconscious desires. Psychoanalytic critics examine biographical details, recurring themes, and symbolic patterns within an author's writings to identify possible psychological motivations behind creative expression. For example, repeated themes of loss, isolation, or anxiety in an author's work may reflect unresolved emotional experiences. While this approach does not reduce literature entirely to biography, it highlights the idea that creative writing can serve as a form of psychological expression or sublimation, transforming personal struggles into artistic creation.

The second perspective, character analysis, treats fictional characters as if they were real psychological beings. Instead of analysing characters only in terms of plot function, psychoanalytical criticism explores their motivations, fears, desires, and internal conflicts. Characters' actions are interpreted as outcomes of unconscious drives, moral pressures, and emotional repression. Conflicts between desire and duty, love and guilt, or ambition and morality are often understood as manifestations of psychological tension similar to Freud's model of the id, ego, and superego. Through this method, readers gain deeper insight into why characters behave irrationally, experience anxiety, or undergo emotional transformation. Characters thus become representations of universal psychological struggles rather than merely fictional creations. The third perspective, reader-response psychoanalysis, shifts attention from the text and author to the reader's psychological experience. This approach suggests that readers bring their own emotions, memories, and unconscious expectations to the act of reading. A literary text may evoke fear, sympathy, attraction, or discomfort because it resonates with hidden aspects of the reader's own psyche. Psychoanalytic critics argue that readers unconsciously identify with certain characters or situations, projecting personal feelings onto the narrative. In this way, meaning is not fixed solely within the text but is partially created through the emotional and psychological interaction between the reader and the literary work.

Through these three perspectives, psychoanalytical criticism demonstrates that literature reveals recurring and universal psychological patterns found across cultures and historical periods. Themes such as fear, guilt, desire, repression, trauma, and identity crisis appear repeatedly because they reflect fundamental aspects of human experience. Literary works therefore become spaces where individuals confront emotional realities that may remain unspoken in everyday life. By uncovering these hidden psychological dimensions, psychoanalytical criticism deepens literary interpretation and emphasizes literature's enduring role as a mirror of the human mind and its complex inner world.



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## **Symbolism and Dream Interpretation in Literature**

Symbolism and dream interpretation occupy a central place in psychoanalytical literary criticism, particularly in relation to Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind. Freud regarded dreams as meaningful psychological events rather than random mental activities. According to his theory, dreams function as expressions of unconscious wishes, desires, and fears that cannot be openly acknowledged during waking life. Because these hidden impulses are often socially unacceptable or emotionally disturbing, they appear in dreams in disguised or symbolic forms. This idea has greatly influenced literary studies, as many literary texts employ imagery and narrative patterns that resemble the structure and function of dreams.

In literature, symbolism serves as a powerful technique through which writers communicate deeper psychological meanings beyond the literal surface of the text. Just as dreams transform unconscious thoughts into symbolic images, literary works often translate emotional experiences into metaphors, motifs, and recurring images. Psychoanalytical criticism interprets these symbols as representations of suppressed emotions, unresolved conflicts, or hidden desires within characters or even within the author's psyche. Through symbolic expression, literature becomes capable of conveying complex psychological realities that may be difficult to express directly.

One of the most common symbolic elements in literature is darkness, which frequently represents fear, uncertainty, repression, or the unknown aspects of the unconscious mind. Characters moving through darkness may symbolically be confronting hidden anxieties or unresolved emotional struggles. Darkness can also signify psychological confusion or moral ambiguity, reflecting internal conflict rather than merely physical surroundings. Similarly, journeys often symbolize psychological or emotional transformation. A physical journey undertaken by a character may represent an inner quest for identity, self-understanding, or emotional healing. Psychoanalytical interpretation views such journeys as symbolic processes through which individuals confront unconscious fears, overcome repression, and achieve psychological growth. The challenges faced during these journeys frequently mirror internal struggles between desire, responsibility, and self-realization.

Another important symbol is the mirror, which commonly reflects issues related to identity and self-awareness. Mirrors in literature may represent self-examination, fragmented identity, or conflict between one's true self and socially constructed identity. Characters who avoid or struggle with reflections often symbolize denial or fear of confronting their inner reality. From a psychoanalytic perspective, mirrors highlight the tension between conscious self-perception and unconscious emotional truth. Beyond these examples, literature frequently incorporates dream sequences, hallucinations, fantasies, and surreal imagery that resemble dream logic rather than realistic narration. These narrative techniques allow authors to portray psychological experiences such as trauma, desire, guilt, or anxiety in symbolic form. Dreams within literary works often reveal truths that characters themselves are unwilling or unable to acknowledge consciously.



Thus, dream interpretation becomes a valuable analytical tool for understanding hidden motivations and emotional conflicts. Symbolism also enables writers to address sensitive psychological themes indirectly. By embedding meaning within imagery rather than explicit explanation, authors invite readers to interpret emotional depth through association and intuition. This indirect communication reflects the way the unconscious mind operates — not through logical statements but through symbols and emotional impressions. Consequently, psychoanalytical criticism views symbolism and dream imagery as essential pathways to understanding literature’s psychological dimension. By analysing recurring symbols, dream-like structures, and metaphorical language, critics can uncover layers of meaning that reveal the inner emotional world of characters and the broader human condition. Symbolism and dream interpretation therefore strengthen the connection between psychology and literature, demonstrating how artistic expression mirrors the hidden processes of the human mind.

### **Significance of Psychoanalytical Criticism**

The psychoanalytical approach has made a substantial contribution to literary studies by introducing psychological depth into the interpretation of texts. Unlike traditional methods that focus primarily on plot, language, or historical background, psychoanalytical criticism examines the inner emotional and mental dimensions of literature. It treats literary works as reflections of human consciousness, allowing critics and readers to explore the complex relationship between imagination, emotion, and psychological experience. Through this approach, literature is understood not only as an artistic creation but also as a meaningful representation of the human mind and its hidden processes. One of the most important contributions of psychoanalytical criticism is that it deepens the understanding of character psychology. Characters in literary works are no longer seen merely as fictional figures serving narrative purposes; instead, they are analysed as psychologically complex individuals shaped by unconscious desires, fears, and internal conflicts. Psychoanalysis helps explain why characters behave irrationally, experience guilt, struggle with identity, or undergo emotional transformation. By applying concepts such as repression, defense mechanisms, and unconscious motivation, critics can interpret character actions in a more nuanced and meaningful way. This psychological perspective enriches literary analysis by revealing layers of personality that may not be immediately visible on the surface.

Another significant aspect of psychoanalytical criticism is that it connects literature with human emotional experience. Literature often resonates with readers because it reflects universal emotions such as love, anxiety, jealousy, ambition, trauma, and longing. Psychoanalysis explains this connection by suggesting that literary works engage with shared psychological structures present in all human beings. Readers may identify with characters or situations because they unconsciously recognize aspects of their own emotional lives within the narrative. In this way,



literature becomes a space where personal and collective psychological experiences intersect, allowing readers to better understand themselves and others.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that psychoanalysis provides a powerful framework for understanding literature as an expression of human psychology. By examining unconscious desires, internal conflicts, and symbolic representations, psychoanalytical criticism uncovers deeper meanings embedded within literary texts. Literature reflects emotional and psychological realities, allowing readers to explore universal human experiences. Even in modern literary studies, psychoanalysis remains relevant because it bridges the gap between psychological theory and artistic expression. Ultimately, psychoanalytical interpretation enriches literary understanding by revealing the hidden dimensions of human consciousness.

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