

Research Article

Received: 01/04/2024; Accepted: 20/06/2024; Published: 30/06/2024

Hidden Desires and Dark Secrets: Unraveling Amma's Character in "Sharp Objects" Using Freudian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This research delves into the intricate layers of Amma Crellin's character in Gillian Flynn's "Sharp Objects" through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory. By employing Freud's framework, this study embarks on a psychological journey, exploring her subconscious, desires, and inner conflicts. The analysis encompasses the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness, delves into the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego, scrutinizes manifestations of anxiety, and examines the use of defense mechanisms as they relate to Amma's character. Applying psychoanalysis to Amma is deliberate and fitting, offering a profound understanding of her psyche. This approach allows us to peel back the layers of her consciousness, navigate her mind's corridors, and shed light on her tormenting anxieties. By dissecting her neurotic, moral, and realistic anxieties, we bridge the gap between her inner world and external actions, underscoring the enduring relevance of Freud's psychoanalysis in comprehending her character. The methodology relies on a qualitative approach, emphasizing descriptive research. Data originates solely from Gillian Flynn's "Sharp Objects," with reading and close reading as primary tools. This research embarks on a detailed quest to unearth Amma's hidden desires and dark secrets, linking literature and psychology to emphasize the timelessness of the human mind.

Keywords: Anxiety; consciousness; self-defense mechanism; psychoanalysis; unconsciousness

1. Introduction

The human psyche, with its intricate emotions, desires, and mysteries, has long fascinated thinkers, psychologists, and artists alike. Gillian Flynn's novel "Sharp Objects" delves deep into this realm through the enigmatic character of Amma, whose complex personality warrants closer examination. Employing Freudian psychoanalysis, this thesis seeks to uncover the hidden desires and dark secrets shaping Amma's character throughout the narrative.

The intersection of psychology and literature offers a rich perspective to explore the interplay of these domains. By analyzing the psychological intricacies of literary characters and the cognitive mechanisms driving authors' narratives, we gain deeper insights into the human experience portrayed across literature. This foundation sets the stage for exploring psychology's role in deciphering layers of meaning in literature (Wellek and Warren, 1956).

"Sharp Objects" exemplifies this exploration, particularly in the portrayal of Amma Crellin. As a 13-year-old enmeshed in a murder investigation, Amma's perspective adds a unique dimension to the

narrative. She grapples with primal instincts, rationality, and moral imperatives, making her ripe for Freudian analysis.

Guided by Freudian concepts, this study unveils Amma's hidden desires and sheds light on the mysteries of the human mind. By applying Freud's id, ego, and superego theories, we gain insights into the motivations driving Amma's behavior, ultimately offering a nuanced understanding of mental disorders intrinsic to her character.

2. Methods

The research employs a qualitative approach coupled with Freudian psychoanalytic theory to investigate the character of Amma in Gillian Flynn's novel "Sharp Objects." Drawing on previous studies, including those by Tamir and Elfira (2020) and Hamraoui and Mortad-Serir (2021), the analysis delves into the complex interplay of patriarchal ideologies, societal expectations, and psychological motivations portrayed in the narrative. Utilizing close reading techniques, the study examines key passages and character interactions to unravel the hidden desires and dark secrets that shape Amma's character. Additionally, Freud's tripartite model of the psyche—the id, ego, and superego—is applied to interpret Amma's behavior and motivations, shedding light on the underlying psychological dynamics at play. This methodological approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Amma's character and the broader themes addressed in the novel, contributing to the existing body of knowledge on literature, psychology, and gender studies.

3. Results

3.1. The Dynamics of Id, Ego, and Superego.

Amma's peculiar possession, an oversized yet meticulously detailed dollhouse replica of her mother's Victorian mansion, serves as a compelling metaphor for her complex psychological makeup. At the age of thirteen, Amma finds herself suspended between the realms of childhood and impending adulthood, echoing the conflicts between her id, ego, and superego as described by Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This tension between what was and what will be, encapsulated within the present moment, is encapsulated in the dollhouse. Amma's insistence on its perfection mirrors the id's relentless pursuit of immediate gratification and pleasure.

Any deviation from her ideal triggers childlike tantrums, underscoring the raw, unfiltered impulses of the id, which can become vehement when unmet. As described in the novel, she expressed her frustration, emphasizing the importance of perfection and expressing her disappointment at the ruined state of the dining room. Her voice wavered, tears streaming down her face, as she conveyed her distress. It was evident that this situation had sparked a full-blown tantrum, with her face mottled in anger (Flynn, 2006: 52-53).

Simultaneously, the dollhouse transforms into a symbol of maturity. This transition aligns with the ego's role in introducing rationality and reality testing. Amma's growing awareness that the dollhouse cannot mirror the complexities and imperfections of real life demonstrates a shift towards the ego's attempts to balance her desires with practical considerations. Amma's character, undergoing a shift towards practical considerations signifies her growing awareness of the limitations and imperfections of the real world, which contrasts with her id-driven desire for perfection.

The clash between her id-driven desire for an exact replica and the reality of an imperfect dollhouse is a microcosm of the broader tension within her psyche. It underscores the intricate interplay between the id's relentless pursuit of pleasure and the ego's need to adapt to the constraints of reality.

Furthermore, the dollhouse may be seen as a manifestation of her superego, which holds society's moral and ethical standards. Amma's pursuit of perfection within the dollhouse echoes the superego's inclination toward perfectionism and adherence to societal norms.

When the dollhouse fails to meet her expectations, it may evoke guilt and anxiety, illustrating the superego's presence and its impact on her emotions. Conversely, despite her rebellious nature, Amma displays unwavering obedience to her mother. In her home, Amma plays the role of the perfect daughter, dressing in innocent outfits and meticulously crafting a dollhouse that mirrors her mother's grand mansion.

This image aligns with societal norms and her superego's ideals. For example, when she, adorned in a childlike checked sundress with a matching straw hat by her side, appeared to be her actual age of thirteen, a departure from my previous perceptions. Yet, upon closer inspection, the attire seemed more fitting for a ten-year old. Expressing disapproval as she noticed Camille's assessment, she mentioned her attire was for Adora, implying a certain role at home. In response to Camille's inquiry about Amma's demeanor when not at home, Amma cryptically hinted at being "other things," suggesting a complexity beyond her familial role. However, beneath this facade, her character reveals a hidden side (Flynn, 2006:43).

Amma leads a secret life filled with drugs, sexual escapades, and manipulative schemes to control her peers and friends. This hidden persona embodies the id's relentless pursuit of pleasure, disregarding societal norms and moral judgments. The stark contrast between her two selves highlights the ongoing clash between her id driven desires and the moral values imposed by her superego. Interestingly, Amma willingly endures her mother's treatments, seeking closeness through a facade of illness. This suffering demonstrates the id's quest for immediate gratification. Simultaneously, she attempts to escape her mother's influence and uses manipulative tactics she learned from Adora to control and intimidate the other girls in her neighborhood. This tumultuous dynamic emphasizes the ongoing clash between her id, ego, and superego.

Exploring the layers of Amma's character the writer begins to discern the enigmatic complexities that make her character all the more intriguing. On the surface, she skillfully portrays the image of the perfect daughter within her home. Adorning herself in innocent attire and dedicating painstaking hours to crafting a dollhouse that meticulously replicates her mother's opulent mansion, Amma adheres to the expectations set by societal norms and her superego's ideals. It's an embodiment of the conventional and the expected. However, beneath this facade lies a stark contrast. Amma also harbors a rebellious side that emerges in her interactions outside her home. She is anything but obedient to the standards and rules imposed by society. Instead, she indulges in a life of drugs, casual sex, and a network of elaborate manipulations that grant her control over her schoolmates and friends. This dual existence illuminates a profound contradiction within her character.

It's during one particular drug-induced escapade that Amma makes a chilling revelation—she "hurts" to feel better. Initially, Camille interprets this statement as a reference to self-harm, indicative of Amma's inner turmoil. Yet, as the story progresses, a more disturbing reality takes shape. This revelation exemplifies the intricate interplay of Freud's psychoanalytic dynamics within Amma's character. In this revelation, the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego come to the forefront. The id, driven by unbridled instincts and the pursuit of immediate pleasure, leads Amma to a life filled with reckless choices, drugs, and the manipulation of her peers. It's a life that seemingly contradicts the image of the perfect daughter. Meanwhile, the ego, struggling to balance her desires with the constraints of reality, is a battleground where these contradictions manifest. This internal conflict intensifies as the superego, the moral compass, grapples with the id's relentless pursuit of pleasure, creating an internal tension that Amma attempts to alleviate. The revelation that she "hurts" to feel better unravels the depths of this inner conflict. It

illustrates how her relentless pursuit of immediate gratification, the core principle of the id, eventually leads to self-inflicted pain. It's an unsettling revelation that hints at the darker dimensions of her character, where the clash of Freud's psychoanalytic dynamics ultimately shapes her hidden desires and dark secrets. The id, which represents the primitive and instinctive part of the mind, is clearly displayed during Amma's visit to the pig farm.

Her fascination with the brutal process of slaughtering and dismembering pigs can be seen as a manifestation of her id-driven desires. The id seeks immediate gratification and revels in primal, sensory experiences. In this context, Amma's attraction to the gruesome spectacle reflects her id's pursuit of pleasure, even when it involves witnessing violence and cruelty. On the other hand, the ego and superego attempt to exert control and moral judgment in this situation. The ego, which operates based on the reality principle, recognizes the socially unacceptable nature of her fascination with the pig farm. It acknowledges the potential consequences of being associated with such gruesome activities, which could damage her reputation in the community.

The superego, functioning as the moral compass, may be more subtle in its influence during this scene. However, it could evoke a sense of guilt or unease within Amma as she witnesses the violent acts. This inner conflict aligns with the superego's role in enforcing ethical standards and societal norms. The visit to the pig farm, therefore, offers a microcosm of Amma's id, ego, and superego dynamics. Her initial attraction to the gruesome spectacle highlights her id's pursuit of sensory pleasure. Simultaneously, the ego and superego struggle to reconcile these desires with societal norms, leading to inner conflict and potential feelings of guilt.

This scene underscores the intricate interplay of these psychological elements within Amma's character, contributing to her enigmatic and multifaceted persona throughout the novel. It showcases how her id-driven impulses can clash with her ego's efforts to maintain a facade of normalcy and her superego's moral judgments.

3.2. Amma's Post-Dynamic Anxieties.

In this section, the writer will scrutinize the multifaceted anxieties that haunt Amma, shedding light on the inner turmoil she grapples with. These anxieties emerge as a consequence of her id's relentless pursuit of pleasure, and it is within this psychological battleground that her character truly comes to life. Within the intricate of Amma's character, takes center stage as a psychological state marked by unpleasant emotional feelings and accompanied by physical sensations.

This intricate interplay of emotions and physiological responses serves as a crucial warning system, signaling Amma to impending threats or dangers in her tumultuous world. Freud's conceptualization of anxiety becomes integral in unraveling the depths of Amma's psyche, shedding light on the emotional complexities that define her character in "Sharp Objects." From the outset of Amma and Camille's encounters, Amma consistently perceived Camille's presence as a threat. This sense of threat is exemplified in various instances from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3, where Amma engaged in behaviors aimed at avoiding Camille.

These actions included feigning ignorance when encountering Camille and even hiding when Camille visited her mother's residence. Although not overtly depicted, a subtle undercurrent of unease is palpable in Amma's actions, manifesting each time she exhibits excessive or evasive behavior. The threat Amma felt was made clear when she asked her mother, saying, "But Camille was the first. The first is usually the best. Now that she's back, will you love Camille more than me?" Amma asked. She started the question teasingly, but her cheeks flushed as she waited for my mother to respond. (Flynn, 2006:59).

The sensation of envy, though commonly associated with the ego, can trace its origins back to the id. This is because individuals may encounter anxiety triggered by someone's presence, and this anxiety

can encompass elements of neurotic anxiety. Unbeknownst to Amma, the presence of Camille acts as a catalyst for her instinctual impulses, prompting her to react defensively in their interactions. Her defensive stance is a strategy employed to uphold her self-image as perpetually in the right. In this context, neurotic anxiety encapsulates the emotional response to perceived threats to one's ego.

When Camille is present, Amma's ego feels threatened by potential exposure or criticism, giving rise to a form of neurotic anxiety. Consequently, Amma's defensive reactions serve as a defense mechanism to mitigate this anxiety and maintain her self-concept as the dominant figure. It is essential to recognize that the ego's role in managing anxiety involves complex mechanisms, and Amma's reactions represent a nuanced interplay of id-driven impulses and egoic responses, all underpinned by unconscious tensions and desires.

Jackie explains Amma's violent nature to her friends, describing her as the vilest girl with a penchant for doing and seeing horrible things, as detailed in Chapter 8. Amma always didn't want anyone to get more attention than her, especially from boys. Amma's need to assert herself as the center of attention and her violent tendencies in Chapter 8 illustrate how these intertwined anxieties push her to extreme measures. Her actions are a result of her id-driven desires clashing with the ego's awareness of societal norms and the potential fallout. This dynamic engenders a sense of anxiety that she attempts to mitigate through violent and attention-seeking behaviors. Neurotic anxiety is a manifestation of the ego's conflict between the id's desires and societal norms.

In this context, Amma's ego grapples with the id's craving for attention, especially from boys. Her actions, such as behaving violently and displaying a penchant for witnessing gruesome acts, serve as outlets for her id's impulses. The desire to be the center of attention, a typical teenage yearning, is exacerbated by the id's relentless pursuit of immediate gratification. Proven by one of the scenes when Amma remained awake, fixing her gaze on John, applying suntan oil to her shoulders, chest, and breasts, discreetly sliding her hands beneath her bikini top, all while observing John's unresponsive demeanor, akin to a child engrossed in prolonged television watching. A subsequent comment described Amma's behavior as a reflection of her personality, attributing it to a perceived mean streak. It was suggested that her actions towards John stemmed from jealousy, insinuating that she attempted to steal him away, although the likelihood of her success was dismissed (Flynn, 2006:132).

In the realm of Amma's character, anxiety operates as a crucial ego-protective mechanism. It acts as an internal alarm system, signaling the presence of potential threats. When Amma perceives Camille's presence as a threat, this anxiety mechanism comes into play. It serves as a warning, indicating that something in her environment is amiss, and if not addressed appropriately, the perceived danger could escalate, leading to adverse outcomes.

The attempt to create a rumor that John Keene is the perpetrator of Natalie's murder Amma gleefully suggested, speculating aloud, Amma entertained the idea of someone targeting "all the freaks," suggesting it would be perfect. Confidently, she claimed that everyone knew who committed the crime, echoing sentiments expressed previously. Additionally, she asserted that Natalie's brother was involved, implying a familial connection to deviance (Flynn, 2006:68)

It could be seen as an example of moral anxiety in the characters involved, including Amma and her friends. Moral anxiety, in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, arises from conflicts between an individual's moral values and their own desires or actions that go against those values (Semion, 2006). In this case, Amma and her friends are engaging in a morally questionable act by falsely accusing John Keene of the murder. They may be driven by their own guilt and anxiety over their involvement in Natalie's death, as they want to divert attention away from themselves and shift the blame to an innocent person. This act of creating a false rumor reflects their inner turmoil and the moral conflict they experience due to their actions.

It's a way for them to cope with the guilt and anxiety they feel about their own role in the situation, and it demonstrates how moral anxiety can manifest when individuals try to rationalize or justify their behavior by deflecting blame onto others. While it's not a direct admission of guilt, their actions reveal their underlying moral anxiety and the need to protect themselves from the consequences of their actions.

On the other hand, Amma's behavior can be associated with a type of anxiety that aligns with the concept of "reality anxiety" in Freud's psychoanalytic framework. "She exhausted me. Amma was wildly needy and afraid with anxiety—took to pacing like a caged wildcat as she fired angry questions at me (Why is everything so loud? How can we live in such a tiny place? Isn't it dangerous outside?) and demanded assurance of my love. She was burning off all that extra energy from not being bedridden several times a month." Reality anxiety, as proposed by Freud, pertains to the ego's concerns about the actual consequences of one's actions and the external world.

In Amma's case, her mother's arrest has suddenly disrupted her life, leading to a heightened sense of vulnerability and insecurity. She finds herself in a situation that is different from her previous life, as she now shares a confined space with Camille. The abrupt change has triggered her anxiety. Amma's questions and demands for assurance reflect her anxieties about the world outside, the safety of her new living situation, and the difficulties of adapting to these changes.

The constant pacing and expressions of concern are manifestations of this reality anxiety. She is struggling to cope with the uncertainties and fears associated with her altered reality. Her anxious questioning and need for reassurance are responses to the ego's concerns about the implications of her mother's arrest and the new environment she finds herself in.

3.3. Amma Crellin's Self-Defense Mechanisms

Amma Crellin's character is a canvas for the application of Freud's self-defense mechanisms. These psychological strategies developed by the ego serve to shield against anxiety and resolve inner conflicts, and Amma exhibits a variety of them throughout the narrative. One prominent mechanism is repression, as Amma seemingly represses distressing or undesirable thoughts related to her family's history of illness and death, enabling her to maintain a veneer of normalcy.

Projection comes into play as well, with Amma projecting her own id-driven desires and insecurities onto others, deflecting anxiety and guilt while preserving her self-image. Her penchant for violence and manipulation, exemplified in Chapter 8 of the novel, can be understood through the lens of displacement, where she displaces her anxieties onto external actions and individuals. Denial plays a role in her character, as she avoids acknowledging her vulnerabilities and reality anxiety, resorting to drug-fueled escapades and a volatile temperament to maintain an illusion of control.

Lastly, rationalization is evident in her involvement in spreading false rumors to incriminate John Keene, justifying their actions as a defense against moral anxiety. These self-defense mechanisms not only provide a deeper understanding of Amma's character but also demonstrate how she attempts to protect her ego amidst the clash between her id-driven desires and societal norms. This complex interplay showcases the depth of her character and the application of Freud's psychoanalytic theories within the narrative.

However, an overreliance on these mechanisms may precipitate compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behavioral patterns. Amma's consistent use of these defense mechanisms may lead to the development of such patterns, impacting her relationships and actions throughout the novel. These defense mechanisms serve to protect Amma's ego from anxiety and distress, allowing her to cope with internal conflicts and maintain a sense of psychological stability.

4. Conclusions

The application of Freudian psychoanalysis to Amma Crellin's character in "Sharp Objects" reveals the intricate interplay between her id, ego, and superego. Her character embodies the conflicts that arise as she straddles the threshold between childhood and adulthood, as depicted through her dollhouse, where the id relentlessly pursues immediate gratification while the ego attempts to adapt to the constraints of reality.

Amma's hidden desires and dark secrets are illuminated through her dual persona, one conforming to societal norms as the perfect daughter and the other indulging in a life of reckless behavior. Her revelation that she "hurts" to feel better uncovers the deep-seated internal conflicts governed by Freud's psychoanalytic dynamics.

Furthermore, Amma's anxieties are central to her character's development. Her neurotic anxiety surfaces when she feels threatened by Camille's presence, triggering defensive behaviors to maintain her self-image. Her violent tendencies and desire for attention exemplify the clash between her id-driven desires and the ego's awareness of societal norms. Moral anxiety becomes evident as she and her friends create a false rumor to deflect blame and cope with their guilt.

Amma's reality anxiety emerges as she grapples with the consequences of her mother's arrest, leading to a heightened sense of vulnerability and insecurity. Her defense mechanisms, including repression, projection, displacement, denial, and rationalization, are employed to shield her ego against anxiety and resolve inner conflicts.

These mechanisms offer deeper insights into her character and demonstrate her efforts to protect her ego amid the ongoing clash between her id-driven desires and societal norms. In essence, the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to Amma Crellin's character in "Sharp Objects" not only unveils the complex layers of human psychology but also serves as a poignant reminder that hidden desires and dark secrets can shape the very core of our identities, leaving an indelible mark on our lives and the lives of those around us.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Anna Sriastuti, M.Hum. for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the entirety of this research project. Her expertise, patience, and insightful feedback have been instrumental in shaping the direction and quality of this paper.

I am also immensely thankful to Bapak Wahyu Seno Aji, M. Hum., for his meticulous examination and constructive critique of this paper as a reviewer.

Additionally, I extend my appreciation to the Department of English Literature at the Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (UKSW), for providing a conducive environment and resources essential for conducting this research.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my family and friends. Their encouragement and understanding have been invaluable throughout this journey.

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