

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT OF THE LYRICAL PERSONA IN THE ALBUM BILLIE EILISH “WHEN WE FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?”

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Abstract

*This study analyzes the psychological conflicts experienced by the lyrical persona in eight selected songs from Billie Eilish's album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* using the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research identifies 97 instances of psychological conflict, including anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, unresolved grief, emotional dependency, and identity instability. Freud's theory reveals conflicts through the interaction of the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms, while Jung's theory highlights the roles of persona, shadow, and individuation. The findings show that the album functions as a cohesive psychological narrative portraying the persona's ongoing struggle for self-understanding and emotional balance. The study concludes that the album reflects complex psychological experiences and demonstrates the relevance of psychoanalytic approaches in analyzing contemporary song lyrics.*

Keywords: Psychological Conflict, Lyrical Persona, Freud, Jung, Billie Eilish.

Abstrak

*Penelitian ini menganalisis konflik psikologis yang dialami oleh persona lirik dalam delapan lagu pilihan dari album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* karya Billie Eilish dengan menggunakan teori psikoanalisis Sigmund Freud dan Carl Gustav Jung. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan menemukan 97 data konflik psikologis, seperti kecemasan, ketidakamanan, kesepian, kesedihan yang belum terselesaikan, ketergantungan emosional, dan ketidakstabilan identitas. Teori Freud menunjukkan bahwa konflik muncul melalui interaksi antara id, ego, superego, serta mekanisme pertahanan diri, sedangkan teori Jung menyoroti peran persona, shadow, dan proses individuasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa album tersebut membentuk sebuah narasi psikologis yang menggambarkan perjuangan persona lirik dalam memahami diri dan mencapai keseimbangan emosional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa album tersebut merepresentasikan pengalaman psikologis yang kompleks serta menunjukkan relevansi pendekatan psikoanalisis dalam menganalisis lirik lagu kontemporer.*

Kata kunci: Konflik Psikologis, Lyrical Persona, Freud, Jung, Billie Eilish.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has evolved beyond its traditional association with written forms such as poetry, novels, and drama. Contemporary scholars recognize literature as a broader cultural practice that encompasses various modes of expression, including song lyrics. According to Frith (2016), lyrics function not only as aesthetic language but also as a medium through which emotions, identities, and social experiences are communicated and interpreted. Similarly, Finnegan (2015) argues that literary meaning emerges through the interaction between texts, performers, and audiences within specific cultural contexts. This perspective suggests that song lyrics can be examined as literary texts that represent human experiences and emotional realities. Songs occupy a unique position as multimodal cultural products that integrate language, music, sound, and performance. Machin (2020) explains that songs generate meaning through the interaction of lyrical and musical elements, allowing artists to communicate emotional and ideological perspectives. Likewise, Eckstein (2021) views songs as intermedial texts whose meanings are shaped not only by their lyrics but also by their cultural and historical contexts. Through these characteristics, songs become powerful expressive media capable of depicting complex emotional states and psychological experiences. Consequently, the study of song lyrics provides valuable insights into the representation of human emotions and inner struggles. One of the most prominent themes represented in literary works is psychological conflict. Psychological conflict refers to the internal tension that arises when individuals experience competing emotions, desires, beliefs, or aspects of identity. Gross (2015) suggests that such conflict often manifests through difficulties in emotional regulation, while McAdams (2018) emphasizes its role in the formation of narrative identity, where contradictions between experiences and self-concepts generate psychological tension. In literary texts, these conflicts are frequently expressed through symbolism, imagery, metaphor, and shifts in emotional tone, enabling readers to understand the complexity of human psychological experiences. Psychoanalytic theories offer a useful framework for examining psychological conflict in literary works. Freud (1923) conceptualizes the human psyche as consisting of the id, ego, and superego. Psychological conflict occurs when instinctual desires represented by the id clash with moral expectations embodied in the superego, forcing the ego to negotiate between these opposing demands. Such tensions often result in anxiety and the use of defense mechanisms. In contrast, Jung (1964) interprets psychological conflict as the struggle between conscious and unconscious dimensions of personality. Through concepts such as persona, shadow, and individuation, Jung explains how individuals attempt to integrate hidden aspects of the self in the pursuit of psychological wholeness. Together, these

perspectives provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the dynamics of inner conflict and identity formation.

The representation of psychological conflict is particularly evident in Billie Eilish's debut album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (2019). The album explores themes of fear, loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, and the unconscious through dark and highly symbolic lyrics. The lyrical persona presented throughout the album frequently encounters emotional instability and internal struggles, creating a narrative that reflects contemporary psychological concerns. Images of darkness, dreams, nightmares, and uncertainty repeatedly appear across the songs, suggesting an ongoing confrontation between conscious awareness and hidden emotional experiences. These characteristics make the album an appropriate subject for psychoanalytic literary analysis.

Previous studies have investigated Billie Eilish's music from various perspectives, including mental health representation, adolescent identity, emotional expression, and linguistic features. Makiling et al. (2022), for example, examined selected Billie Eilish songs through Freud's psychodynamic theory and found psychological themes such as unresolved grief, abandonment, anxiety, isolation, and rejection. Similarly, Dinanti and Arti (2024) analyzed selected songs from *Hit Me Hard and Soft* using a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective and demonstrated how metaphorical symbols represent anxiety, loss, uncertainty, and internal conflict. Lin (2026) further examined Billie Eilish's identity construction and distinguished between the real person, performance persona, and song-specific characters, highlighting the importance of persona and identity in interpreting Eilish's musical expression. However, most of these studies focus on particular psychological themes, metaphorical symbols, or identity construction rather than systematically examining psychological conflicts experienced by the lyrical persona across a cohesive album. Furthermore, research combining Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian analytical psychology to analyze a cohesive body of work such as *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* remains limited. Existing scholarship has yet to provide a detailed explanation of how psychological conflict is constructed through imagery, symbolism, metaphors, and emotional transitions throughout the album.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the psychological conflicts experienced by the lyrical persona in eight selected songs from the album. By employing

Freud's concepts of the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms alongside Jung's concepts of persona, shadow, and individuation, this study seeks to identify the forms of psychological conflict reflected in the lyrics and examine how these conflicts are articulated through various lyrical devices. Through this dual psychoanalytic approach, the research contributes to literary psychology by offering a deeper understanding of song lyrics as representations of complex psychological experiences and processes of self-discovery.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach based on the framework proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018) to investigate the psychological conflicts represented in the lyrics of Billie Eilish's album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for a detailed exploration of meanings, emotions, and psychological experiences embedded within the lyrical persona. Through this method, the study seeks to understand how psychological conditions are expressed in song lyrics within their natural and artistic context. The analysis was conducted using the perspective of literary psychology, integrating the psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud and the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. Freud's theory was applied to examine unconscious desires, anxiety, fear, and internal conflicts, while Jung's framework was used to interpret the manifestations of persona, shadow, archetypes, and individuation found in the lyrical narratives. By combining these perspectives, the research provides a comprehensive examination of both conscious and unconscious dimensions of the lyrical persona's psychological experiences.

The primary data consisted of the lyrics of eight selected songs from the album, namely *Bad Guy*, *Xanny*, *You Should See Me in a Crown*, *All the Good Girls Go to Hell*, *Wish You Were Gay*, *When the Party's Over*, *8*, and *Ilomilo*. Data were collected by repeatedly listening to the selected songs, reading the lyrics carefully, identifying expressions related to psychological conflict, and classifying the findings based on Freud's and Jung's theories. The data were analyzed inductively through organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the lyrics to reveal the psychological conflicts experienced by the lyrical persona.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of eight selected songs from Billie Eilish's *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* revealed 97 occurrences of psychological conflict. The results indicate that psychological struggle constitutes a dominant theme throughout the album, manifested through feelings of anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, emotional repression, fear of abandonment, and identity instability. These internal conflicts are expressed through symbolic imagery, metaphorical language, and emotionally charged narratives that reflect

the complex mental state of the lyrical persona. The interpretation of these conflicts is based on Freud's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the interaction between the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms, as well as Jung's concepts of persona, shadow, and individuation. The distribution of psychological conflicts varies across the songs. *Wish You Were Gay* contains the highest number of conflicts with **15 occurrences**, followed by *All the Good Girls Go to Hell* and *Ilomilo*, each with **14 occurrences**. Meanwhile, *You Should See Me in a Crown* and *8* contribute **12 occurrences** each, whereas *Bad Guy*, *Xanny*, and *When the Party's Over* contain **10 occurrences** respectively. This pattern suggests that psychological conflict is consistently embedded throughout the album rather than concentrated in a single track.

a. Psychological Conflict in *Bad Guy*

The lyrical persona in *Bad Guy* constructs an image of dominance that emerges from a Freudian conflict between aggressive desires and internalized moral expectations, represented by the maternal figure. Rather than balancing these opposing forces, the ego employs Reaction Formation, transforming vulnerability into confidence and hostility. The statement "*I'm only good at being bad*" suggests a sense of shame that has been redefined as part of the persona's identity. Through Projection, the persona shifts responsibility for her threatening image onto how others perceive her. From a Jungian perspective, Shadow Inflation is evident as the persona openly embraces traits associated with the Shadow while concealing deeper emotional wounds. The Anima Conflict appears in the suppression of nurturing qualities and the emphasis on destructive expressions of femininity. Moreover, the line "*I'll be your animal*" reflects a Failure of Individuation, where contradictory identities of control and submission remain unresolved.

b. Psychological Conflict in *Xanny*

"*Xanny*" portrays social alienation through a persona who positions themselves as the only conscious observer in an environment dominated by collective intoxication. An overly rigid and hyperactive superego produces moral alienation rather than satisfaction, while the pull of the id-Thanatos toward a numbing state conflicts with the persona's conscious resistance. The metaphor of secondhand smoke externalizes Freud's concept of involuntary contamination a condition in which one is shaped by forces neither chosen nor consented to. Denial and rationalization maintain the persona's defensive stance, while Eros and Thanatos remain in unresolved tension. Jungian analysis reveals that the Shadow is projected onto the collective group, the tension between Persona and Shadow reflects a rejection of social masking, and an unintegrated Anima/Animus prevents authentic emotional connection.

c. Psychological Conflict in *You Should See Me in a Crown*

The grandiose fantasy in *You Should See Me in a Crown* reflects the Freudian formation of the Ego-Ideal an idealized self-image constructed by the ego to satisfy desires for recognition and control that cannot be achieved in reality. Reaction Formation appears in the emotional coldness of the line "*I'm okay, I'm not your baby,*" which transforms a repressed need for closeness into an exaggerated display of independence. The Death Drive (Thanatos) emerges explicitly through the existential question "Tell me which one is worse, living or dying first," indicating that beneath the fantasy of power lies deep emotional exhaustion. Repression sustains this "*performance*" by burying loneliness beneath the fantasy of a cold, all-powerful kingdom.

d. Psychological Conflict in *All the Good Girls Go to Hell*

"*All the Good Girls Go to Hell*" represents the psychological climax of the album's moral disintegration. With fourteen identified conflicts, the superego undergoes complete fragmentation rather than serving as an internal moral compass, it becomes a source of destructive guilt, existential despair, and moral inversion. The line "*all the good girls go to hell*" encapsulates a total reversal of the superego's value system, producing Moral Anxiety in its most extreme form. Projection displaces the persona's inner disappointment onto humanity as a whole "*man is such a fool, why are we saving him?*" while Repressed Guilt surfaces unconsciously in "*don't say I didn't warn ya.*" Anxiety Neurosis appears through the rising water imagery, and Thanatos is made explicit in "*there's nothing left to save now.*"

e. Psychological Conflict in *Wish You Were Gay*

The central Rationalization in *Wish You Were Gay* imagining the object of her affection is gay functions as a classic Freudian ego defense by attributing the rejection to circumstances beyond anyone's control, the persona avoids the painful possibility that she is simply unwanted. Anxiety Neurosis appears in the temporal distortion of "*four days has never felt so long,*" where emotional neglect stretches subjective time into something unbearable. Narcissistic Injury surfaces in "*to spare my pride,*" signaling a fundamental wound to self-esteem. The somatic image "*ten fingers tearin' out my hair*" shows Repressed Frustration finding bodily release once verbal expression is no longer possible consistent with Freud's idea of conversion. Instinctual Dependence and Emotional Anxiety reveal the ego's helplessness in reconciling the desire for love with the reality of rejection.

f. Psychological Conflict in *When the Party's Over*

"*When the Party's Over*" marks a significant turning point in the album's psychological arc. The central Freudian tension lies between the id which clings to emotional attachment and finds a perverse comfort in familiar pain and the superego, which recognizes the

relationship as harmful and morally untenable. The line *"don't you know I'm no good for you"* reflects a rare moment of moral self-awareness breaking through the ego's defenses. Self-Sabotage in Attachment reveals a habitual pattern of loss, while Repression of Emotional Need appears in the persona's willingness to lie about her own suffering. Abandonment Anxiety is deeply embedded in this relational pattern, and Emotional Withdrawal serves as protection against further pain.

g. Psychological Conflict in 8

The emotional paralysis in "8" is sustained by Freudian Repetition Compulsion: the persona expresses a desire to leave yet repeatedly fails to act on it, re-enacting the same cycle of pain and longing. This compulsion overrides conscious intention, showing how unconscious forces operate beneath rational decision-making. Emotional Neglect erodes the ego's self-worth the question *"do you even feel anything?"* reflects a fading sense of relational reality. Emotional Alienation appears precisely in *"you're looking at me like I'm see-through,"* where the persona feels not just unloved but essentially erased. Repression of Emotion suppresses deep attachment once it goes unanswered, while Abandonment Anxiety drives a premature withdrawal to preempt the feared rejection. From a Jungian perspective, the Ego-Self Axis crisis is central the question *"who am I to be in love, when your love never is for me?"* shows the persona has lost her inner compass entirely. Persona Dissolution reflects the collapse of social identity under the weight of feeling unseen, and the Shadow of Rejection evokes an archetypal fear of meaninglessness. Shadow Projection keeps the persona from recognizing that this emotional emptiness stems from her own unresolved wounds, while the Relational Complex traps her in a pattern of negative expectations about love.

h. Psychological Conflict in Ilomilo

"Ilomilo" serves as the emotional culmination of the album's psychological narrative. From a Freudian perspective, the song embodies Melancholia a state of unresolved mourning in which the persona cannot relinquish her libidinal attachment to the lost object. Unlike ordinary grief, melancholia involves identification with the lost object, causing the ego itself to become self-accusatory and depleted. Survivor's Guilt is explicit in *"now I'll never get to protect you,"* where the persona internalizes her perceived failure as a permanent moral identity. This Self-Punishing Superego sustains an ongoing Moral Anxiety that blocks the mourning process from reaching acceptance. Fear of Emotional Attachment *"I couldn't love someone 'cause I might break"* shows how trauma has reshaped the ego's capacity for intimacy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that psychological conflict serves as a fundamental theme throughout the album. Although the nature of the conflicts varies from one song to another, recurring patterns of insecurity, loneliness, anxiety, emotional dependency, and identity-related struggles are consistently evident. Freud's psychoanalytic theory reveals the persistent tension among the Id, Ego, and Superego, while Jung's analytical psychology highlights the interaction between the Persona, the Shadow, and the ongoing process of individuation. The progression of conflicts across the songs suggests that the lyrical persona remains engaged in a continuous process of negotiating opposing psychological forces. Rather than reaching a definitive resolution, the persona repeatedly confronts challenges related to self-understanding and emotional regulation. Therefore, the album can be interpreted as a psychological narrative that explores the complexities of human emotion and the enduring struggle to construct a coherent sense of self.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigates the psychological conflicts experienced by the lyrical persona in eight selected songs from Billie Eilish's album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* using the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. The findings reveal that psychological conflict is a dominant and recurring theme throughout the album, reflected in 97 identified instances of internal struggle. These conflicts manifest through anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, emotional repression, fear of abandonment, unresolved grief, and identity instability. The lyrical persona consistently faces tensions between conscious desires and unconscious impulses, resulting in complex emotional experiences that shape the narrative of the album. In conclusion, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* can be interpreted as a profound representation of contemporary psychological experiences. Through symbolic imagery, metaphorical language, and emotionally charged narratives, the album portrays the complexity of human emotions and the enduring struggle for self-understanding. This study contributes to the field of literary psychology by demonstrating that song lyrics can serve as rich literary texts that reflect intricate psychological dynamics, while also highlighting the value of combining Freudian and Jungian perspectives in the analysis of contemporary musical works.

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