

Literary Criticism Psychological Approach: Nora Seed's Character in Matt Haig's Novel The Midnight Library

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the main character of the novel, Nora, by examining how she describes and reacts to her problems, which are influenced by her mental health, regret, and sadness. The study employs a qualitative descriptive analysis using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as a psychological approach to explore the development of the character's psychological state. The data for this research were collected from *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig through careful and repeated reading, followed by note-taking of relevant passages. The primary data source consists of quotations from the novel, while secondary sources include theoretical references related to psychology and literature. The researcher analyzes the selected quotations in relation to Freud's theory of literary psychology. The findings reveal three defense mechanisms that significantly affect the protagonist's personality: displacement, repression, and projection. Additionally, the study identifies three levels of consciousness—id, ego, and superego—experienced by Nora throughout the narrative. Therefore, the research highlights that practicing self-acceptance and confronting personal issues can have a profound impact on one's life, influencing how individuals respond to challenges, go through daily life, and embrace personal growth. This can ultimately lead to a more meaningful and fulfilling future.

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INTRODUCTION

In terms of existing research, literature can be defined as a form of essay—a means of expressing ideas or reflections on life and society through the use of beautiful language. The beauty of literary works is not only determined by the elegance of words or sentences but also by the depth and substance of the story itself. Literature evolves over time, and the distinction between literary and non-literary works can often be relative. This is because writers continuously and creatively reshape the boundaries of literature in response to societal changes and cultural developments (Ah, 2022).

According to Wuryani (2017), literature does not emerge from a cultural vacuum. Literature and culture are interconnected; literature is born as a reaction to and is influenced by cultural conditions. One example of literary work that reflects culture is the principle of custom upheld by a particular society. Similarly, Wellek (2018) describe literature as a creative human endeavor that contains aesthetic value. Literature is considered a form of cultural art because it constructs its own world—an incarnation of life as observed and interpreted by the writer (Damono, 2011).

Novels are one of the most popular forms of literature, alongside drama, poetry, and film. Novels come in a wide range of genres, including fantasy, romance, religious, and social fiction (Kurniasih and Setiana, 2022). Typically, novels allow for freer expression, offering detailed, rich, and expansive narratives that address complex issues. One of the most dominant elements in a novel, and a fundamental pillar of literary creation, is the character. A novel can be likened to a puppet show in which the author is the puppeteer who orchestrates the entire narrative, while the characters act as the puppets enacting the story crafted by the author.

According to Hardjana (1981), literary criticism is the result of a reader's effort to identify and determine the essential value of a literary work through systematic understanding and interpretation, expressed in written form. Any reader can critique a literary work; however, without thoroughly exploring and assessing the human experiences within it, they may fail to uncover its essential values.

Literary criticism through a psychological approach examines the human psyche in relation to the structural elements of a literary work. Wellek and Warren (1956) emphasize the relevance of literary psychology by analyzing characters and plot structures based on psychological principles. The author consciously and carefully constructs characters and settings that reflect psychological realities.

The purpose of this study is to examine the personality of the main character in the novel and relate it to Sigmund Freud's psychological theory. Unlike previous studies, this research offers a more in-depth analysis of the main character's personality and its connection to several defense mechanisms outlined in Freud's psychoanalytic framework.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The theory of psychoanalysis was introduced by Sigmund Freud in the 1890s and is recognized not only as a theoretical framework but also as a psychological and academic practice (Thurschwell, 2009). Within literary studies, psychoanalytic theory serves as a valuable tool for analyzing characters and narratives. Freud's model of the human psyche comprises three main components: the id, ego, and superego. The id, representing the unconscious part of the mind, drives instinctual desires and seeks immediate pleasure, operating beyond the bounds of logic and time. The ego, positioned between the conscious and unconscious, mediates between the id's impulses and the realities of the external world, aiming for balance. The superego, as the moral compass, embodies societal rules and personal ideals, guiding judgments of right and wrong (Putri et al., 2023).

A key concept within Freud's psychoanalysis is the notion of defense mechanisms—unconscious strategies that shield individuals from anxiety and psychological conflict (Muriyana, 2022). This research focuses on three primary defense mechanisms: repression, projection, and displacement. Repression involves unconsciously blocking distressing thoughts or memories, relegating them to the subconscious to avoid discomfort. Projection allows individuals to externalize their own unacceptable feelings by attributing them to others, while displacement redirects negative emotions from a threatening source to a safer target. These mechanisms are particularly relevant in the analysis of *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, a novel that delves into themes of mental health, regret, and the quest for meaning. The protagonist, Nora Seed, faces an existential crisis and suicidal despair, eventually encountering a magical library where she can explore alternate versions of her life. The narrative's deep engagement with emotional conflict, identity, and choice makes it highly suitable for examination through the lens of psychological criticism, particularly Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Nahdiyah, 2022).

METHOD

The object of this research is Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library*, which contains 368 pages and was published in 2021 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama. However, the novel was first published by Canongate Books on August 13, 2020. This research employs a qualitative

descriptive method with an analytical approach that is integrative and conceptual. It aims to discover, analyze, identify, and interpret the object of research to make its meaning, content, and significance easier to understand.

The sampling technique used in this study is purposive sampling. Data were collected using two techniques: reading and note-taking. Data analysis was conducted by first understanding and identifying the elements of the novel. The researcher then continuously read and analyzed the data, relating the findings to relevant theories and expert opinions from previous studies that align with the research focus.

Several prior studies have also used Sigmund Freud's psychological approach as the theoretical foundation. This study specifically examines the structural elements in *The Midnight Library*, including theme, character and characterization, setting, moral values, and social values. It also aims to explore and critique the psychological development of the main character. Several quotations throughout the novel highlight the presence of psychological aspects such as the id, ego, and superego, which significantly influence the behavior of the main character. Additionally, the defense mechanisms of repression, projection, and displacement are identified as having a notable impact on the protagonist's thoughts and actions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this novel by Matt Haig, it is highly relevant to the research as it centers on Nora Seed's journey through depression, regret, and existential reflection. Through a psychological approach and perspective, key principles such as mental health struggles, cognitive processes, and emotional resilience are highlighted.

The psychological approach focuses on analyzing Nora's state of mind during the most important moments of her life, such as the onset of despair and her progressive understanding of happiness and purpose in life. This approach uses concepts such as existential therapy which is in line with the novel's theme of finding meaning in life, as well as self-actualization which is seen in Nora's eventual acceptance of her unique existence.

This perspective enlightens *The Midnight Library*, as it allows readers to understand the deeper psychological issues behind Nora's choices in her life. By examining how Nora's regret, self-doubt and hope affect her journey, using this psychological approach can also reveal the author Matt Haig uses the novel as a therapeutic narrative, providing a compassionate exploration of mental health.

The data that has been collected is as follows:

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Data	Page	Quotes	Category
1.	4	<i>"Dad thinks I've thrown everything away. Now, I've stopped swimming."</i>	Repression, Projection, and Superego
2.	10	<i>"Nora stared down at the small mole on her left hand. That mole had been through everything she'd been through. And it just stayed there, not caring. Just being a mole. 'Not a massive demand for philosophers in Bedford, if I'm honest, Neil.'"</i>	Superego and Repression
3.	23	<i>"Every move had been a mistake, every decision a disaster, every day a retreat from who she'd imagined she'd be. Swimmer, musician, philosopher, spouse, traveller, glaciologist, happy, loved. Nothing, she couldn't even manage 'cat owner', or 'one hour a week piano tutor', or 'human capable of conversation.'"</i>	Superego and Repression
4.	160	<i>"I still think my actual life isn't worth living. In fact, this experience has just managed to confirm that."</i>	Id and Repression
5.	255	<i>"I had all the chances to make something of my life, and I blew every one of them. Through my own carelessness and misfortune, the world has retreated from me, and so now it makes perfect sense that I should retreat from the world."</i>	Superego

6.	9	<i>"Everyone got mental-health stuff. I am feeling much better, generally."</i>	Ego, Repression, and Projection
7.	17	<i>"I, um, gave it up (swimming). Was more into music...at the time. Then life happened."</i>	Ego and Repression
8.	22	<i>"That was it. No one needed her. She was superfluous to the universe."</i>	Superego and Repression
9.	25	<i>"If I felt it was possible to stay, I would. But I don't. And so I can't. I make life worse for people. I have nothing to give, I am sorry. Be kind to each other. Bye, Nora."</i>	Id, Superego, Repression, Projection, and Displacement
10.	32	<i>"And there really were quite a lot of things she hadn't become. The regrets which were on permanent repeat in her mind. I haven't become an Olympic swimmer. I haven't become a glaciologist. I haven't become Dan's wife. I haven't become a mother. I haven't become the lead singer of The Labyrinths. I haven't managed to become a truly good or truly happy person. I haven't managed to look after Voltaire."</i>	Id, Superego, and Displacement
11.	41	<i>"That's what I want. I want to be dead. I would be dead because I want to be. That's why I took the overdose. I want to die."</i>	Id, Repression, and Projection

Data 1

"Dad thinks I've thrown everything away. Now, I've stopped swimming."

In this quote, Nora's statement about her father thinking that she "threw everything away" suggests a repression of a deeper emotional truth. Her father disapproving of her choices most likely triggered feelings of guilt and inadequacy in Nora. Instead of facing these emotions head-on, Nora may have repressed the deeper pain associated with her perceived failures in life. The fact that Nora mentioned that she "stopped swimming" soon after suggests that she needed validation from her father. By giving up swimming, Nora may be subconsciously avoiding the deeper pain of not meeting her father's expectations or her own.

The superego plays an important role here, especially regarding guilt judgments. Nora is clearly affected by her father's opinion of her, as his judgment ("Dad thinks I've thrown everything away") seems to weigh heavily on her. Nora's father here represents a critical and authority figure in Nora's life. The phrase "thrown everything away" brings a sense of failure to Nora, and it shapes her perception of what her father values. Here, the Superego encourages Nora to feel that she has wasted her potential, and in response, she stops doing the things that bring her joy, namely swimming. Nora punishes herself because her Superego makes her feel that she does not deserve the pleasure or accomplishment that swimming provides.

There is also Projection in the quote. Nora projects these feelings onto her father. She says, "Dad thinks I've thrown everything away." While her father may indeed have concerns about Nora's choice of swimming, Nora's projection reflects an internalized judgment about herself. Her failure to become a swimmer was so painful that she transferred it to her father's perceived judgment, as if he thought she had thrown everything away when she had not.

Data 2

"Nora straddled down at the small mole on her left hand. That mole had been through everything she'd been through. And it just stayed there, not caring. Just being a mole. 'Not a massive demand for philosophers in Bedford, if I'm honest, Neil."

This quote comes when Neil, Nora's friend, asks her why she doesn't work as a philosopher in Bedford. Here, the Superego plays an important role. In his mind, the mole, by simply existing and staying in place, and not doing anything wrong, he can live, unaffected by the turmoil of his own mind. Meanwhile, Nora has always considered her failure to become a

philosopher, someone of intellectual merit, as her failure in society. Her comment about demand for philosophers in Bedford is not quite high, reflects the critical voice of her superego.

Nora's internal struggles also reflect repression, especially as she implies her unfulfilled potential. By focusing on a mole that "stays there", she represses deeper emotions related to her self-esteem, frustration and inadequacy that come with not fulfilling her intellectual aspirations. Instead of addressing the deeper psychological pain of regret over unattainable dreams, Nora projects a simplistic view of existence as something to be "accepted" without the constant struggle she feels internally.

Data 3

"Every move had been a mistake, every decision a disaster, every day a retreat from who she'd imagined she'd be. Swimmer, musician, philosopher, spouse, traveler, glaciologist, happy, loved. Nothing, she couldn't even manage 'cat owner', or 'one hour a week piano tutor', or 'human capable of conversation.'"

A strong sentence on page 23 lists Nora's failures "Swimmer, musician, philosopher..." which makes her Superego sound critical. Nora's unattainable aspirations reflect the high expectations of her Superego and her failure to fulfill these aspirations makes her feel ashamed and inadequate. Nora ends up feeling that because she did not fulfill these ideals, she is a failure.

There is also Repression in the quote. By focusing on the ways in which she has failed, Nora represses more complicated emotions such as sadness, disappointment, or even feelings of worthlessness that have accumulated over the years. Nora always focuses on the negative aspects, which eliminates the possibility of finding meaning in the days she lives or the small achievements she experiences. The fact that Nora can't even see herself as a "cat owner" or "able to have conversations with people" is where she discards positivity and can't see herself neutrally.

Data 4

"I still think my actual life isn't worth living. In fact, this experience has just managed to confirm that."

From the middle of the novel comes this quote, where Nora has finished exploring the various lives she wants. However, Nora still seems unsatisfied with her original life and some of the alternative lives she has experienced in *The Midnight Library*. This quote reflects the Id, which focuses on wish fulfillment and pain avoidance. Nora's belief that her life is not worth living despite having experienced many other lives in *The Midnight Library*, reflects a deep dissatisfaction. Nora here does not see her alternative life as an opportunity to grow and learn, instead she focuses on her Id's desire to be free from her emotional distress. Her Id is preoccupied with a direct escape from her suffering, namely through death, rather than using her experiences to reflect and heal.

There is also Repression in the quote. Even though Nora is in *The Midnight Library* where she is given the opportunity to explore countless alternative lives, Nora still thinks that her life cannot possibly be meaningful. Here she shuts down her potential for growth, her ability to be happy, and her sadness about many things. Nora continued to focus on external validation and not on addressing her emotions. She failed to recognize her internal psychological shifts that could have been healed.

Data 5

"I had all the chances to make something of my life, and I blew every one of them. Through my own carelessness and misfortune, the world has retreated from me, and so now it makes perfect sense that I should retreat from the world."

Superego showed here. Her Superego shows sharp self-criticism, guilt, and negative judgment of the decision towards the protagonist's life. The superego acts as a harsh moral voice, emphasizing the failure of a person or individual when compared to high standards. In addition, the statements about “carelessness” and “retreating from the world” show the influence of morality and a strong sense of responsibility.

From the quotes, we can understand that the main character in the novel tries to reflect what she feels about Nora's deep internal struggle with self-esteem, regret, and existential despair.

Data 6

“Everyone got mental-health stuff. I am feeling much better, generally.”

The sentence can be categorized as Ego. Nora reconciles her situation in a more subtle way, even though it tends to be exaggerated and untrue. Nora's Ego here is very much managing her self-view. She also tries to mediate her emotions in a way that is acceptable to herself and others. In addition, Repression is also present in the sentence. Nora is most likely experiencing deep emotional turmoil and pushing those feelings away in those words. Nora tries to suppress or cover up the emotional state she actually feels.

There is also projection in the sentence. The words “Everyone got mental-health stuff” mean a projection of Nora's feelings onto others. Instead of focusing on her own struggles or deep feelings, Nora normalizes the concept of mental health and says that everyone is normal if they have mental problems.

Data 7

“I, um, gave it up (swimming). Was more into music...at the time. Then life happened.”

In this quote, Nora tries to rationalize her past decision to quit swimming and join the Olympics. The sentence “Was more into music..at the time” shows that her decision at the time seemed logical, and she took it consciously based on her interests at the time. The continuation of “Then life happened” shows how Nora's Ego tries to create a narrative that relates to the choices she has made in the past, then neutralizes them with her life limitations. Nora tries to understand her own choices, that life as an external factor caused her to deviate from the path of her original interest, swimming.

In this sentence, we can also see Repression. When Nora said that she was more interested in music and then something called “life” hit her, it could imply that Nora is repressing her deep feelings of loss or regret for quitting swimming and distracting herself with music and the external factor of life. By shifting the focus to music and incorporating external factors, she avoids the deeper emotional impact of her failure to become a swimmer. The real feeling about quitting swimming that Nora felt was regret, the fear of failure if she tried something new. However, she downplayed it with a more neutral explanation. Nora also tried to convince herself that quitting swimming was just one phase of life and not part of her deeper struggles or choices. By saying “life happened” she tried to deny the emotional weight of the decision she made to avoid feeling uncomfortable about her past.

Data 8

“That was it. No one needed her. She was superfluous to the universe.”

This quote comes after Mr. Banerjee, Nora's neighbor, he told her not to bring any more medicines for him because a Chemistry student had just moved in nearby and he would bring the medicines for her. After that Mr. Banerjee went inside his house. Here Nora thinks to herself that no one needs her and she feels useless in this universe.

Here we can see that there is a Superego. In this context, Nora's Superego plays a crucial role in her "useless" perception. Nora feels that she has a purpose to care about others and be useful to her neighbors. When Mr. Banerjee says that he does not need her help anymore, her superego enforces a harsh judgment on her, in the sense that she is not fulfilling her moral or social role as a responsible person to others. This superego drives Nora to feel guilty for not meeting the expectations of others. She believes that she is useless and her deeply held belief that her value comes from being needed by others, in this case, Mr. Banerjee.

This expression also has a side of Repression. Nora, who is lonely and likes to isolate herself, tries to suppress her own feelings. By saying "superfluous", Nora tries to let out what she feels in an external form and avoid more painful emotions. Nora here suppresses her fear of being unworthy in a broader sense, which is the feeling of emotional wounds and many deeper bad experiences. Instead of dealing with complicated emotions, she simplifies them with the words "No one needed me" which is more manageable for the mind (although painful).

Data 9

"If I felt it was possible to stay, I would. But I don't. And so I can't. I make life worse for people. I have nothing to give, I am sorry. Be kind to each other. Bye, Nora."

It is the most powerful statement from letter written by Nora before she decided to die. In this statement, Nora has the urge to escape from the suffering she has experienced so far. "I made other people's lives worse" shows her emotional reaction which is in line with Id's desire to escape from the suffering she feels. In Id, Nora wants to be free from her emotional and psychological torment and sees death or suicide as the last resort. She wants to end her life to be free from all the regrets and pain she has experienced.

In this statement there is also the superego. The superego here is reflected in Nora's feelings of guilt and feelings of worthlessness. "I made other people's lives worse" shows that she judges herself very harshly. She believes that she fails in her role as a social being and does not deserve love or support from anyone. Nora also has a very high standard of perfection (perfectionist) that she cannot meet so she feels that she is a burden.

Three aspects of Defense Mechanism play a role in this statement. The first is Repression. The emotional distress Nora experiences comes from her unmanageable grief and regret, such as losing her brother, her failed career, her dead cat, or not being a good piano teacher. Nora chooses to use external outputs for her distressing feelings rather than facing them directly.

Then, there is also Projection. The statement "I make life worse for people" is an example of projection, where Nora projects her feelings of inadequacy and failure onto others. Nora thinks that others view her in the same negative way that she views herself. She feels she is a burden in this life, often giving others a hard time, which is not necessarily true. Nora cannot reconcile her feelings of worthlessness with the reality of her relationships.

Finally, there is also Displacement. Nora's overwhelming guilt and frustration towards herself makes her feel that she "makes life worse for people". This is Nora's way of transferring her feelings of failure to the people she loves. Nora directs her frustration to others and believes that her decisions are harming them, rather than recognizing that her emotional pain is rooted in her own inner conflict.

Data 10

"And there really were quite a lot of things she hadn't become. The regrets which were on permanent repeat in her mind. I haven't become an Olympic swimmer. I haven't become a glaciologist. I haven't become Dan's wife. I haven't become a mother. I haven't become the lead singer of The Labyrinths. I haven't managed to become a truly good or truly happy person. I haven't managed to look after Voltaire."

This quote is found when Nora has just entered The Midnight Library. Here we can see that there is an unconscious desire and pursuit of pleasure (Id). Nora wants to be a swimmer, a glaciologist, a singer, these are desires driven by the Id. Here Nora longs for an alternative version of herself where her desires and wishes are fulfilled.

Then, there is also the Superego. The regret of not being a “really good or really happy person” is a clear sign that Nora feels that she fails to meet the moral standards of society. She feels that she is not living up to expectations both in her own eyes and in the norms of society. Her Superego imposes moral perfection, making it seem as if she fails in important aspects of life.

After that, there is one defensive mechanism, which is Displacement. Nora's unfulfilled desires are a displacement of the emotional frustration she feels about other aspects such as her failure to benefit others or her failure to find happiness. Rather than addressing the emotional pain of loss, regret, and unfulfilled dreams, Nora focuses on external goals that she did not achieve and that were never really in her grasp. The way Nora conveys her unattainable goals and regrets may serve as a more massive emotional displacement, such as anger, guilt, or unresolved grief that she is unwilling to face directly.

Data 11

“That’s what I want. I want to be dead. I would be dead because I want to be. That’s why I took the overdose. I want to die.”

This quote is found in the part when Nora is already at the Midnight Library. She had already attempted suicide. Mrs. Elm (the keeper of the midnight library) wants Nora to explore other lives in the midnight library to give her the possibility of seeing as many lives as she wants. But Mrs. Elm says that if Nora loses the will to keep searching, she will be gone forever (dead). Nora replies with quotes above. Here we can see a very strong Id emerging from the quote. As the Id is a basic instinctual drive and desire that seeks immediate gratification and acts without consequence, here Nora's desire to die is an extreme response driven by Nora's desire to escape the overwhelming sense of regret and pain. Nora does not think about the long-term effects or solutions to her problems and only focuses on the immediate relief of her suffering. Her emotional pain had consumed her, leading her to choose death as the final step to her problems.

Again, there is repression in this quote. Nora repeatedly represses the pain she faces by thinking of suicide rather than facing her problems head on. The grief and guilt associated with her brother's death and the failure of her career have dissolved her into the conclusion that death is the last resort.

There is also a bit of projection in the quote. Nora, disappointed by her own decisions and circumstances, projects these negative emotions onto the concept of death itself. By saying that she would be dead because she want it, she externalizes her internal suffering. Nora does not acknowledge that her pain comes from sadness, fear, guilt, and unfulfilled desires. Here, Nora instead projects the pain outward as a simple ultimate desire to die. Death becomes a simple solution to the problems she should be facing.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that Nora, the protagonist of The Midnight Library, undergoes a profound psychological journey shaped by internal conflicts between her id, ego, and superego. Her superego reflects the societal and personal ideals she feels pressured to meet, while her ego struggles to mediate between these expectations and the harsh realities of her life, resulting in despair and a sense of failure. Nora's use of defense mechanisms such as repression and displacement illustrates how she copes with overwhelming emotions. Applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory to the novel provides a deeper understanding of Nora's mental and emotional struggles, particularly her search for identity and meaning. The narrative ultimately highlights the psychological complexity of human behavior and the significance of self-

acceptance in overcoming emotional turmoil.

Despite its insightful findings, this study has certain limitations. It focuses solely on one character from a single novel and relies heavily on Freud's classical psychoanalytic theory, which may not encompass all modern psychological perspectives. Future research could benefit from incorporating other psychological theories or comparing multiple characters or literary works for a broader analysis. The implications of this study suggest that literature can be a valuable medium for exploring mental health issues, making it useful in educational and therapeutic contexts. It is recommended that further studies examine how literary characters' psychological experiences can be used to promote emotional resilience and awareness among readers, particularly in educational settings where mental health is increasingly emphasized.

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