

FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS OF CONNOR, RISA, AND LEV IN NEAL SHUSTERMAN'S *UNWIND*

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Abstract

This article examines the psychological issues of the significant characters in Neal Shusterman's dystopian novel *Unwind* (2007) through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework, focusing on the id, ego, superego, and defensive mechanisms. The research looks at Connor Lassiter, Risa Ward, and Lev Calder to see how they cope with the trauma of "unwinding," a procedure in which kids' organs are extracted in the name of conserving their parts for others. To deal with anxiety and keep their identity in a dehumanizing society, each character adopts distinct defensive mechanisms such as displacement, rationalization, sublimation, denial, and response construction. The results highlight the characters' psychological endurance and the applicability of Freud's theory to contemporary literature, offering light on subjects such as identity, morality, and survival. This research highlights the significance of psychoanalytic literary criticism in comprehending dystopian young adult novels and their reflections on contemporary social issues.

Keywords: *character analysis, psychoanalysis, Unwind*

INTRODUCTION

Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007) shows a scary dystopian future in the United States, where the Bill of Life was created after a second civil war over reproductive rights. This law makes abortion illegal, but it lets parents "unwind" their kids between the ages of 13 and 18 and take their organs for donation. People think that the procedure is okay because the youngster is "alive" while their parts work in other people. This makes teens always terrified of losing their freedom and lives. This oppressive system brings up severe moral and mental health issues about the value of human life and personal identity. Vizzini (2008) said in *The New York Times* that *Unwind* is a "science fiction thriller" that looks at controversial topics like abortion and stem-cell research from a dystopian point of view, which makes it a strong case for Freudian analysis.

The story is around three teens, Connor Lassiter, Risa Ward, and Lev Calder, who are all looking for ways to relax for different reasons. Connor is a rebellious kid, so his parents pick him because he is disruptive; Risa is a ward of the state, so they pick her because they do not have enough money; and Lev is being raised as a religious "tithe," so he will be given as a sacred sacrifice. The characters' physical efforts to avert this fate are linked to a deeper psychological struggle to keep their sense of self, which makes *Unwind* a serious meditation on identity, morality, and tenacity. Scholes and Ostenson (2013) assert that dystopian young adult literature, exemplified by *Unwind*, captivates readers by tackling genuine societal worries and difficulties, while simultaneously offering a medium for the exploration of psychological and ethical dilemmas.

This study employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly his structural model of the mind, which encompasses the id, ego, and superego, to analyze these psychological conflicts. Freud (1923) characterizes the id as the origin of instinctual drives, the ego as the cognitive mediator between the id and external reality, and the superego as the ethical conscience that upholds societal norms. People typically feel anxious when various parts of themselves are in conflict, and they deal with this uneasiness by using protective methods like repression, denial, and sublimation.

This theory provides a robust framework for comprehending how Connor, Risa, and Lev navigate their traumatic experiences, along with insights into their psychological resilience.

This study enhances the discourse on psychoanalytic literary criticism by illustrating the applicability of Freud's theories to modern dystopian literature. It also aligns with the growing interest in dystopian young adult fiction as a genre that mirrors contemporary anxieties around social control and personal autonomy (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). By focusing on *Unwind*, this study underscores the novel's relevance to ongoing inquiries over ethics, identity, and survival in oppressive regimes, as well as literature's ability to mirror human psychological challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis technique, utilizing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007). The emphasis is on the psychological growth of the novel's three central characters, Connor Lassiter, Risa Ward, and Lev Calder, exploring their ideas, behaviors, and emotional reactions. Freud's structural model of the psyche (id, ego, superego) and his idea of defense mechanisms provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the characters' coping techniques and psychological development (Freud, 1923).

Key sections from *Unwind* are chosen to demonstrate how each character's conduct is consistent with Freud's conceptions. The study examines the novel's dystopian environment, particularly the social constraints of unwinding, to understand its impact on the protagonists' psychology. By combining literary evidence and psychoanalytic theory, this research examines the characters' inner lives and trauma reactions, providing insights into their resilience and the development of their identities. Critical assessments from sources such as Vizzini (2008) and Scholes and Ostenson (2013) are utilized to contextualize the novel's themes and location within the dystopian genre, adding academic rigor to the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The psychoanalytic reading of Connor, Risa, and Lev demonstrates how Freud's structural model—the interplay of id, ego, and superego—clarifies their coping strategies and psychological resilience. Each character in *Unwind* embodies a distinct psychological orientation, and their development throughout the novel reflects Freud's notion that personality is shaped through the constant negotiation of inner conflicts and external pressures.

Connor's journey illustrates the transformation from id-driven impulsivity to ego-guided leadership. At the beginning of the novel, his actions are dominated by instinctive outbursts and uncontrolled anger, aligning with Freud's conception of the id as the source of immediate gratification. His frequent fights with authority figures and his rash decisions show a lack of ego mediation. However, as the story progresses, Connor develops a stronger ego, particularly when he takes on the role of protector for other unwinds. This shift is visible in his ability to plan, negotiate, and lead rather than act purely on impulse. Freud's (1923) understanding of the ego as a mediator between instinct and reality resonates here, as Connor learns to channel his aggression into productive action. His use of defense mechanisms also evolves: initially relying on displacement and rationalization, Connor gradually adopts more adaptive coping strategies that reveal his growth through hardship and responsibility.

Risa, in contrast, consistently exemplifies Freud's idea of sublimation—the redirection of potentially destructive impulses into socially constructive outcomes. Unlike Connor, her psychological orientation is marked by stability and composure even under extreme duress. When she faces paralysis after an accident, Risa does not succumb to despair; instead, she channels her frustration into caregiving and problem-solving for others. This response underscores Freud's belief that sublimation allows individuals to transform negative emotions into sources of creativity and resilience. Risa's calm rationality, especially when contrasted with Connor's volatility and Lev's instability, highlights the strength of her ego. She maintains her sense of identity despite systemic oppression, and her capacity to sublimate

becomes a survival tool in the dystopian world of *Unwind*. Freud's notion of ego strength is embodied in Risa, as she remains a consistent figure of resilience who adapts without losing her psychological balance.

Lev represents the dangers of an overactive superego, showing how excessive moral rigidity can undermine psychological well-being. Raised to be a "tithe," Lev internalizes an idealized moral code that equates self-sacrifice with religious duty. His obedience to this belief system demonstrates Freud's warning that the superego, when excessively dominant, can produce guilt, repression, and anxiety. Lev frequently employs denial and reaction formation, rejecting his own survival instincts to maintain the appearance of purity and moral correctness. However, these defense mechanisms eventually collapse under the weight of reality, leading to a psychological breakdown. Lev's recovery, however, illustrates Freud's view that psychological growth is possible when the ego successfully mediates between conflicting inner forces. By eventually questioning his indoctrination and accepting the legitimacy of his own desires, Lev moves toward a more integrated self. His trajectory demonstrates how the reconciliation of id, ego, and superego can enable personal transformation, even after deep internal conflict.

Together, the results reveal how Shusterman's *Unwind* employs character psychology to dramatize Freud's structural model of the psyche. Connor embodies ego development through lived experience, Risa represents ego strength and sublimation as strategies for resilience, and Lev exemplifies the dangers of an uncompromising superego. These character arcs underscore how psychoanalysis can uncover the hidden psychological dimensions of literature, showing how individual coping strategies mirror broader existential dilemmas in dystopian contexts.

Discussion

The psychoanalytic study of Connor, Risa, and Lev in *Unwind* demonstrates how Freud's structural model exposes their psychological resilience in a dystopian society. Each character's trip depicts different parts of the id, ego, and superego, revealing how they interact under great stress. Connor's transition from id-driven impulsiveness to ego-driven leadership exemplifies the ego's function in bridging instinct and reality, which aligns with Freud's (1923) theory that the ego converts the id's intention into action as if it were its own. His use of displacement and rationalization initially saves him from emotional pain. However, as he grows, he develops more adaptive coping strategies, mirroring the novel's subject of human progress in the face of hardship (Shusterman, 2007).

Risa's persistent ego strength demonstrates Freud's theory that the ego serves as a reasonable mediator. Her use of sublimation and intellectualization enables her to transform anxiety into strategic acts, such as preserving the infant or working in the medical department (Shusterman, 2007, pp. 45-260). This is consistent with Freud's (1923) conception of sublimation as a constructive defensive mechanism that redirects unwanted urges into socially helpful tasks. Risa's resilience, even in the face of physical pain, demonstrates the ego's ability to sustain identity and agency under repressive situations, making her a fascinating example of psychological stability in dystopian fiction (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013).

Lev's battle with an overactive superego exemplifies the psychological toll of strict moral standards. His initial denial and repression, followed by response construction, are consistent with Freud's (1923) warning that an overwhelming superego might cause shame and worry. Lev's breakdown and eventual reintegration demonstrate the potential for progress in resolving these conflicts, as he develops a stronger ego to balance his moral and instinctive desires. This voyage reflects Freud's theory that self-awareness may lead to a healthy psychological structure, providing a complex depiction of identity creation in a dystopian setting (Shusterman, 2007).

The characters' experiences in *Unwind* are consistent with broader social themes, such as the devaluation of youth and loss of agency under authoritarian regimes. The novel's dystopian setting emphasizes these concerns, making it an effective lens for exploring real-world analogies, such as ethical arguments over organ donation or societal control over human bodies (Vizzini, 2008). This approach, which applies Freud's theory, not only enriches our comprehension of the characters but also emphasizes the novel's relevance to modern concerns about identity and morality. According to Kirkus Reviews (2007), *Unwind* takes place against a "bleak background of indifference, avarice, guilt, regret, loss, pain, and rebellion," underlining its condemnation of dehumanizing institutions.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates the long-term relevance of Freud's psychoanalytic framework to literary interpretation. Despite being conceived in the early twentieth century, Freud's notions remain useful for evaluating current narratives, particularly those concerning psychological resilience in dystopian contexts (Surprenant, 2002). *Unwind* is a case study on how literature may mirror universal human difficulties, providing insights into the interaction of instinct, intellect, and morality under pressure. However, some critics contend that psychoanalytic techniques risk oversimplifying complicated tales by relying too much on psychological categories (Surprenant, 2002). This research addresses such criticisms by basing the analysis on textual evidence and contextualizing it within the dystopian genre, resulting in a balanced view.

The psychoanalytic reading of Connor, Risa, and Lev reveals how Freud's structural model clarifies their coping strategies and psychological resilience. Freud's framework of the id, ego, and superego provides a useful lens for examining the characters' internal struggles in the face of an oppressive dystopian system. By analyzing the protagonists through this model, it becomes clear that their individual responses to trauma represent distinct pathways of negotiation between instinctual drives, social constraints, and moral imperatives.

Connor's journey exemplifies the transformation from id-driven impulsivity to ego-driven leadership. At the beginning of the narrative, Connor frequently acts on impulse, lashing out in ways that place him and others at risk. This behavior reflects Freud's (1923) conception of the id as governed by the pleasure principle, seeking immediate release without regard for consequences. However, as the story progresses, Connor gradually develops a stronger ego that mediates between his raw instincts and the harsh realities of survival. His leadership is not innate but forged through experience and repeated confrontation with failure, mirroring Freud's idea that the ego grows out of adaptation to reality. His initial reliance on defense mechanisms such as displacement and rationalization—blaming others or externalizing anger—evolves into more adaptive coping mechanisms, including problem-solving and strategic decision-making. This progression highlights how traumatic experiences can catalyze psychological growth, with hardship serving as a crucible for ego development.

Risa, by contrast, demonstrates remarkable ego strength from the beginning. Unlike Connor, she seldom allows instinctual drives to dictate her actions, and instead relies on rationality, restraint, and foresight. Her paralysis becomes a turning point that could have shattered her sense of self, yet instead, she channels her frustration into purposeful activity. This is a clear example of sublimation, a defense mechanism Freud considered the most mature, in which unacceptable impulses are transformed into socially constructive outcomes. Risa's role as a stabilizing force for Connor underscores the relational dimension of resilience: she embodies the capacity to preserve identity and agency even under oppressive conditions. Her psychological stability not only enables her own survival but also provides Connor and others with an anchor, illustrating Freud's notion of the ego as the mediator of reality that maintains coherence in times of crisis. Risa's resilience also resonates with feminist readings of dystopian literature, where female characters often serve as figures of endurance and moral clarity in environments that seek to erase individuality.

Lev's trajectory, on the other hand, embodies the dangers of an overactive superego. Raised to believe that his unwinding is a sacred duty, Lev internalizes societal expectations to the point that his moral rigidity overrides his instinct for survival. His denial of self-preservation, coupled with repression and reaction formation, aligns with Freud's warning that an unchecked superego can lead to paralyzing guilt and pathological anxiety. Lev's identity crisis—oscillating between religious martyrdom and violent rebellion—illustrates the destructive potential of excessive moral absolutism. His eventual breakdown, followed by a partial recovery, highlights the possibility of growth once the ego begins to reconcile the conflicting demands of the id, ego, and superego. Lev's narrative underscores the psychological cost of ideological indoctrination, while also suggesting that healing is possible through self-awareness and renegotiation of one's internal conflicts.

These individual trajectories gain further significance when read against the novel's broader social critique. *Unwind* dramatizes the devaluation of youth, bodily autonomy, and personal identity within a dystopian framework where state

power intrudes on the most intimate aspects of life. By situating Connor, Risa, and Lev within Freud's structural model, it becomes evident that their psychological conflicts mirror the societal oppression surrounding them. Connor's struggle to control his instincts parallels the resistance of youth against a system that demands conformity. Risa's sublimation reflects the resilience of marginalized individuals who transform systemic injustices into opportunities for agency. Lev's superego-driven crisis echoes the dangers of authoritarian ideologies that manipulate morality to justify control. In this sense, Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides not only a framework for individual character analysis but also a means of uncovering how personal conflicts are embedded in collective dilemmas.

Moreover, the novel engages with contemporary debates on organ donation, reproductive rights, and state authority. The commodification of the body in *Unwind* resonates with current anxieties about biopolitics and the regulation of life by institutions. As Vizzini (2008) and Kirkus Reviews (2007) note, Shusterman's narrative raises ethical questions about autonomy and consent that remain pressing today. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the novel suggests that the violation of bodily integrity creates not only physical danger but also profound psychological trauma. The characters' struggles illustrate the costs of a society that demands individuals sacrifice their identity for collective order, echoing Scholes and Ostenson's (2013) argument that young adult dystopias captivate readers by linking personal struggles with broader social crises.

Taken together, the psychoanalytic reading demonstrates that Connor, Risa, and Lev function as psychological archetypes within a system of oppression. Connor embodies the developmental potential of the ego under pressure, Risa represents the stability of sublimation and resilience, and Lev illustrates the perils of an unbalanced superego. Their intertwined journeys reaffirm the power of Freud's structural model as a tool for literary analysis while also highlighting how dystopian fiction reflects, critiques, and magnifies contemporary anxieties.

CONCLUSION

The psychoanalytic analysis of *Unwind* highlights the interplay of id, ego, and superego in Connor, Risa, and Lev, emphasizing their resilience in a dehumanizing society. Each character copes with trauma through distinct defense mechanisms—Connor through displacement and rationalization, Risa through sublimation and intellectualization, and Lev through denial, repression, and reaction formation. Their psychological journeys demonstrate Freud's relevance to literary criticism, showing how inner conflicts shape identity, morality, and survival. This article contributes to the broader field of psychoanalytic literary criticism by applying Freud's framework to contemporary young adult dystopian fiction. It demonstrates that *Unwind* is not only a survival narrative but also a reflection on how individuals preserve selfhood under systemic oppression. Ultimately, the novel raises enduring questions about identity and humanity.

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