

Analysis of the ego development of the main character in adapting to social reality in the short story the child's story by charles dickens: a psychoanalytic approach by freud

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis perkembangan ego tokoh utama dalam cerpen *The Child's Story* karya Charles Dickens melalui pendekatan psikoanalisis Freud. Fokus penelitian ini adalah bagaimana ego berfungsi sebagai mekanisme adaptif dalam memediasi dorongan id, tuntutan superego, dan realitas sosial eksternal sepanjang tahapan kehidupan. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, analisis menunjukkan bahwa ego tokoh berkembang secara bertahap dari masa kanak-kanak hingga usia tua, menyeimbangkan dorongan instingtual dengan tuntutan sosial. Temuan penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa ego

memungkinkan tokoh untuk menginternalisasi nilai-nilai, menunda pemuasan, mengelola konflik emosional, serta beradaptasi dengan perubahan realitas. Narasi simbolik Dickens menggambarkan perjalanan psikologis tidak hanya melalui konflik batin yang eksplisit, tetapi juga melalui tahapan kehidupan yang direpresentasikan dalam transisi antar tokoh. Penelitian ini menegaskan relevansi teori ego Freud dalam analisis sastra untuk memahami pembentukan identitas dan proses adaptasi. Selain itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan integrasi kerangka psikologi lain, seperti teori psikososial Erikson, guna memberikan perspektif yang lebih luas terhadap pengaruh sosial dalam perkembangan ego.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the ego development of the main character in Charles Dickens' short story *The Child's Story* through Freud's psychoanalytic approach. The research focuses on how the ego functions as an adaptive mechanism in mediating the impulses of the id, the demands of the superego, and external social reality throughout different stages of life. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the analysis reveals that the character's ego gradually develops from childhood to old age, balancing instinctual drives with social expectations. The findings show that the ego enables the character to internalize values, delay gratification, manage emotional conflicts, and adapt to shifting realities. Dickens's use of symbolic narrative structures illustrates the psychological journey not merely through explicit inner conflicts but also through life stages represented by transitions between characters. This study highlights the significance of Freud's theory of the ego in literary analysis for understanding identity formation and adaptation. Furthermore, it suggests that integrating other psychological frameworks, such as Erikson's psychosocial theory, may provide a broader perspective on the social influences of ego development.

Introduction

In literary studies, the psychoanalytic approach plays a vital role in revealing psychological dimensions in texts. (Hossain, 2017) states that psychoanalysis explains characters' motivations through Freud's personality structure id, ego, and superego which illustrate inner conflicts and social pressures (Bowman et al., 1928). This research



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focuses on ego development as an adaptive mechanism that mediates instinctual drives and moral demands, enabling the character to adjust to social reality. The ego operates based on rational consideration of external conditions (Niaz et al., 2019) and delays gratification of the id until the right time (Al-Abbasi & Canli, 2024). In literary criticism, ego dynamics reflect the interplay between personality and narrative, as well as the character's adaptation to social values (Hossain, 2017). In line with this, (Illa & Surur, 2024) emphasize that unconscious experiences, especially in childhood, shape the individual's personality in adulthood, which supports the role of ego in mediating between past experiences and present social adaptation.

Several studies have explored psychological conflicts in literary and film texts from various theoretical perspectives. For example, (Basid & Agustin, 2019) analyzed *Suffragette* through Kurt Lewin's lens and found that the protagonist Maud Watts encounters *approach-approach conflict*, *approach-avoidance conflict*, and *multiple approach-avoidance conflicts*, influenced by social pressures and moral dilemmas. However, none of these studies examines how ego develops as a mechanism of adapting to social reality, which is the focus of the present study. (Mutrayani et al., 2024) examined the characters in *The Tragedy Paper* and found that the id, ego, and superego are reflected in the form of pleasure drives, emotional expression, and morality, yet they did not specifically explore the role of the ego in social adjustment. (Amalia et al., 2023), in their study of the novel *Laut Bercerita*, showed that the ego balances emotional drives and reality, although political and cultural pressures were not explored as contexts for ego development. (Pramesti et al., 2023) highlighted the dominance of the id in the character Tania, but their focus remained limited to internal dynamics without addressing the process of social adaptation. Meanwhile, (Cahyani et al., 2024) mapped the personality structure of the character Ove using Freud's theory but did not specifically discuss the ego's development in confronting social realities.

From these four studies, it can be identified that research on ego development as a mechanism for adapting to social reality remains limited and has primarily used novels as the object of study. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the ego development of the main character in the short story *The Child's Story* by Charles Dickens, using Freud's psychoanalytic approach to understand the character's process of adaptation to the symbolic social realities throughout his life. This study uses Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on ego development, to analyze how the character in *The Child's Story* adapts to social reality throughout life. The ego mediates between unconscious id drives, superego demands, and external reality (Nurul Azmi, 2023), shaping behavior influenced by unconscious dynamics from childhood (Adam & Kamaruddin, 2024). This theory is relevant for understanding the character's psychological adaptation to social changes from childhood to old age. The chosen object, Dickens' *The Child's Story* (1852), depicts the human life journey with rich social and psychological dynamics, making it ideal for examining ego development.

Based on this background, the research questions in this study are as follows:

1. How is the development of the main character's ego depicted through the stages of life he experiences in Charles Dickens' *The Child's Story*?

2. What psychological mechanisms are reflected in the main character's efforts to adapt to the ever-changing social reality in each stage of his life?

Theoretical Framework

The main concept of this research is ego development as an adaptive mechanism within the personality structure, as proposed by (Bowman et al., 1928). The ego mediates between the id's drives, the superego's demands, and internal and external realities, allowing individuals to manage conflicts between personal needs and social norms. (Bowman et al., 1928) illustrated this with the analogy of a rider controlling a stronger horse: "in its relation to the id it is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse" (p. 25). This emphasizes the ego's role as an active agent negotiating unconscious drives with reality. In literary studies, the ego is also seen as a narrative representation of a character's identity negotiation with social and cultural structures, aligning with Freud's view of ongoing internal and external conflicts (Adam & Kamaruddin, 2024). The concept of the soul has also been compared across disciplines. (Maulani & Sholeh, 2025) show that while Ibn Rushd emphasizes rationality and spirituality, and Freud highlights unconscious drives and internal conflicts, both view the soul as a dynamic system. This comparison enriches the theoretical basis, but Freud's psychoanalytic framework—particularly ego development—is used as the main foundation of this study.

Based on this framework, Freud's concept of ego development is used to analyze how the main character in *The Child's Story* adapts to shifting social realities. The ego enables the character to balance internal impulses and external demands, responding to social pressures through mechanisms such as delayed gratification and compromise. Freud's rider-horse analogy clarifies how the character adjusts behavior to survive in varying conditions. This framework helps explain the process of ego development and the adaptive strategies the character uses throughout the story.

Analysis and Applications

The development of the main character's ego in *The Child's Story* is depicted through a symbolic journey from childhood to old age. In the early phase, when the character plays with the Little Child, the dominance of the id is evident as it seeks pleasure. This is reflected in the quote, "So, he played with that child... everything was beautiful." However, the emergence of enjoyment in the rain and snow, as seen in "When it rained... to listen to the hush upon the paths and roads," indicates that the ego is beginning to form as a balance to experience. When meeting the Boy who studies, the character's ego develops within social and intellectual realms. He begins to adjust his personal drives to the demands of learning and social structures, as illustrated in the quote, "So he learned with that boy about Jupiter and Juno... for he soon forgot a great deal of it." The next phase involves personal relationships when the character is with the Young Man in love. In the quote, "Well! he was teased sometimes... and were engaged at Christmas-time...", the character faces emotional conflict and learns to negotiate personal desires with social expectations, a key function of the ego mediating between the id and the superego.

As a busy Middle-aged Man, the ego demonstrates maturity. The character faces the loss of his children with composure, as reflected in, “Sometimes, they came to several avenues at once... the child who went to Heaven, rose into the golden air and vanished.” This shows that the ego is capable of withstanding internal pressure while fulfilling social responsibilities. Finally, in old age, the character sits with the Old Man who “always remembered.” In the quote, “And at last he came to the tree... and the elder who watched and waited,” the ego is portrayed as having reached psychological integration. The character accepts all phases of life as part of himself, reflecting the ego’s role in unifying conflicts and achieving harmony.

Discussion and Interpretation

The results of the analysis indicate that the main character in *The Child’s Story* undergoes significant ego development through a symbolic journey that reflects the phases of human life. This journey not only illustrates biological aging but also reveals complex psychological dynamics, where the ego functions as a mediator between unconscious drives (id), moral and social demands (superego), and the ever-changing external reality. In the initial stage, the character displays the dominance of the id with impulses to play, enjoy nature, and live in pleasure. However, as the journey continues, the ego begins to play a crucial role in adjusting these impulses to the social environment. This is evident when the character starts to learn, interact, love, work, raise children, and deal with loss. Each of these experiences requires not only psychological adaptability but also emotional integration with the social values embedded in every stage of life. The character’s ego development is dynamic and progressive. He learns from past experiences, delays immediate gratification, and manages emotional conflict in various forms. For example, when losing his children and wife, the character does not show extreme emotional denial or escapism, but instead continues his life journey. This reflects the ego’s maturity, which enables an individual to face reality with awareness and resilience, in line with Freud’s (1932) concept of the ego as a realistic control center, as well as (Bowman et al., 1928) explanation.

Moreover, Dickens’s symbolic approach in this short story demonstrates that ego development is not always portrayed through explicit internal conflict or dramatic inner dialogue. Instead, the narrative moves through symbols and transitions between characters that represent the stages of life. This expands the application of psychoanalytic theory in literary studies, as the ego is not only present as an internal psychological structure but also as a narrative element that shapes the representation of a character’s identity within a socio-cultural context. This shows that in literature, the ego’s function does not always appear as explicit inner turmoil, but rather as a symbolic structure that reflects the process of adaptation to the social world.

The reconciliation between the character’s subjective experience and the objective reality of the surrounding world becomes the core of the ego development process. The character changes not only psychologically but also socially from a child who plays, to a teenager who learns, a young adult who loves, an adult who works and grieves, to an elderly person who accepts the end of life with peace. All of this portrays the ego as a structure capable of integrating past and present, personal desires and social norms, fantasy and reality. Thus, a psychoanalytic reading of *The Child’s Story* enables a deeper

understanding of how literary characters act not only as fictional individuals but also as reflections of real human beings who constantly strive to balance inner life and social reality. The representation of the ego in this story not only affirms the presence of conflict but also emphasizes the importance of acceptance and adaptation as part of the psychological journey of human life. Freud's ego development theory effectively explains the character's psychological dynamics through symbolic life stages, highlighting the ego's role in balancing inner drives and social reality. However, this approach pays less attention to the socio-cultural context shaping identity. Integrating Erikson's psychosocial theory could complement Freud by addressing social influences and crises, offering a fuller understanding of ego development.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This study finds that the ego development of the main character in *The Child's Story* by Charles Dickens is symbolically portrayed through the stages of life experienced by the character, from childhood to old age. Each phase reflects complex psychological dynamics, where the ego functions as a mediator between the impulses of the id, the demands of the superego, and external reality. The character undergoes a process of internalizing social values, adapting to reality, and emotionally integrating life experiences. Dickens's symbolic narrative shows that the ego does not only operate through explicit conflicts, but also through symbolic structures and narrative transitions that gradually and holistically shape the character's identity.

Implications and recommendations

These findings affirm the relevance of the psychoanalytic approach, especially Freud's theory of the ego, in literary studies for deeply understanding character development. The text's symbolization of the ego illustrates the human struggle to balance inner needs and social norms, expanding the narrative space for interpreting psychological conflict. Psychoanalysis thus bridges psychology and literary construction, particularly in representing identity and personality dynamics. Future research may explore ego representation in other symbolic or realistic works, integrate theories like Erikson's or Jung's, and analyze supporting or collective characters to examine ego dynamics in broader social contexts. These findings offer a model for in-depth literary analysis.

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