

Manipulative Behaviour of the Main Character in “The Orphan” Movie (2009)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the manipulative behavior of the main character, Esther, in the film “The Orphan” (2009) through Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic perspective. Manipulation is understood not merely as intentional deception but as the manifestation of unconscious psychological conflicts shaped by trauma and unmet emotional needs. This research aims to identify the forms of manipulation exhibited by Esther and to analyze the psychological motivations underlying her behavior using Freud’s concepts of the Id, Ego, Superego, and defense mechanisms. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the primary data of this study consist of scenes, dialogues, and visual expressions taken from “The Orphan” (2009). The data were collected through repeated observation and documentation of scenes that depict Esther’s manipulative actions, emotional responses, and interactions with other characters. The analysis was conducted by identifying instances of manipulation, classifying them based on psychoanalytic concepts, and interpreting their psychological meanings in relation to Freud’s theory. The findings are presented descriptively and analytically, supported by selected dialogues and scene descriptions to strengthen the interpretation. The analysis reveals that Esther’s manipulative behavior is driven by the dominance of the Id, weak Ego control, and an underdeveloped Superego, combined with unresolved childhood trauma and fear of abandonment. These internal conflicts lead her to employ deception, emotional manipulation, and aggression as strategies to gain control over others. This study demonstrates the relevance of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory in understanding deviant personality structures in film narratives and contributes to literary and film studies by highlighting the psychological depth of character construction.

Keywords: Psychological Approach; Manipulative Behavior; Childhood Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Manipulation is a psychological phenomenon that often arises in social interactions as well as in literary works and films. In various contexts, manipulation is understood as an action taken by someone to influence, control, or direct the behavior of others through covert means, both emotionally and cognitively (Bahruz,

2023). This phenomenon is not only found in interpersonal relationships in real life, but also becomes an important theme in literary works and films that depict the complexity of human nature. Through fictional characters, various forms of manipulation can be presented more clearly as a reflection of inner conflict, past trauma, or personality imbalances that influence a person's actions (Simanjuntak, et al 2023). Modern literary studies often utilize psychological theories to understand characters, one of which is through the psychoanalytic approach developed by Sigmund Freud.

According to Freud (1923), human behavior is driven not only by conscious thoughts, but also by impulses and conflicts operating in the unconscious mind. In his psychoanalytic theory, Freud divided the structure of personality into three main components, namely the id, ego, and superego. The id is the source of instinctive drives that demand immediate gratification, the ego functions as a mediator that adjusts these drives to reality, while the superego represents moral values, social norms, and the voice of conscience that guides individual behavior. An imbalance between these three elements can cause anxiety, deviant behavior, and internal conflict in individuals (Kholis, et al 2023). In addition, Freud (1915) also emphasized the importance of the unconscious, childhood experiences, and defense mechanisms in shaping a person's responses and actions. In literary and film studies, Freud's ideas help explain various hidden motives, inner conflicts, and abnormal behaviors of characters. Through a psychoanalytic approach, it is possible to understand how unconscious drives, past traumas, and personality dynamics play a role in shaping the manipulative behavior displayed by certain characters (Kurniawan, et al 2024).

Manipulation in social interactions often appears as a form of abnormal behavior rooted in inner psychological dynamics. In psychology, manipulation is not merely understood as an act of influencing others, but also as an expression of inner conflict, unmet emotional needs, and unconscious defense mechanisms (Kurniawan, et al 2024). A psychoanalytic approach provides space to explore such behaviors more deeply by tracing the unconscious impulses that shape an individual's actions. In the context of modern literary and film studies, psychological perspectives particularly psychoanalysis are frequently used to interpret characters with complex personalities. Psychological thriller films such as "The Orphan" (2009) exemplify works that portray intense intrapsychic conflict. Through their characters, these films not only present narrative tension but also open opportunities for analysis of hidden motives, trauma, and personality structures that drive extreme behavior.

Esther, the central character in "The Orphan" (2009), emerges as an enigmatic figure who employs manipulation as her main strategy in interacting with those around her. Her actions clever, calculated, and emotionally charged indicate psychological dynamics far deeper than mere antagonism. This character offers a wide interpretive space regarding how past trauma, the need for control, and a fragile sense of identity can give rise to aggressive or manipulative behavior.

Therefore, examining Esther becomes relevant as an effort to understand human personality construction through a psychoanalytic perspective. Her manipulation does not stand alone; rather, it manifests the unconscious conflicts that shape her behavioral patterns. This analysis is crucial, as it provides a broader understanding of how emotional disturbances and traumatic experiences can influence identity formation and a character's social interactions within a visual narrative. (Rustandi, 2025).

Previous studies on "The Orphan" (2009) have been conducted from various perspectives, yet most of them tend to focus on criminal elements, violence, and the thriller components that shape the film's tension. In-depth analyses that specifically examine Esther's manipulative behavior through Freud's psychoanalytic framework particularly the dynamics of the id, ego, superego, defense mechanisms, and childhood trauma remain limited. In fact, Esther's character offers rich psychological complexity that is highly relevant to explore through a psychoanalytic approach, as her manipulative actions do not stand alone but are rooted in hidden internal conflicts and unconscious drives. This research gap indicates that a deeper psychoanalytic study of Esther's character is still greatly needed. Responding to this gap, this study seeks to address several central questions that aim to understand Esther more comprehensively: what forms of manipulation she displays throughout the narrative, how Freud's psychoanalytic concepts can be used to interpret these behaviors, and what unconscious motivations drive her to act in such extreme ways. These questions serve as the foundation for exploring the relationship between Esther's personality structure and the manifestation of her manipulative actions.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the patterns of manipulation exhibited by Esther, analyze them through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and reveal the internal psychological dynamics that shape her behavior. This approach does not merely position Esther as an antagonist, but rather as a complex figure whose actions emerge from conflicting and unconscious psychological forces. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of English literary research that employs psychoanalytic theory, particularly in analyzing film characters with complex and deviant personalities. Practically, it offers deeper insight into how films construct characters, portray abnormal behavior, and represent the psychological dynamics behind a character's actions. Through this analysis, the understanding of "The Orphan" (2009) extends beyond its thriller elements and toward the psychological dimensions that lie at the core of the protagonist's manipulative behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Approach

Sigmund Freud is the pioneer of psychoanalytic theory, which emphasizes the role of the unconscious mind in shaping human behavior and personality. According to Freud (1923), a person's behavior is influenced not only by conscious awareness but also by unconscious drives and conflicts. Freud's model of personality consists of three main components: the Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id represents instinctual desires oriented toward immediate pleasure without regard for reality. The Ego acts as a mediator that balances the demands of the Id with environmental reality and social norms through the reality principle. The Superego functions as the moral regulator, internalizing values and rules from social and familial contexts (Freud, 1923). Freud proposed psychological defense mechanisms employed by the Ego to manage conflicts and anxiety arising from the tension between the Id and Superego. These mechanisms include repression, projection, and sublimation, among others, helping individuals maintain psychological balance (Boag, 2014). Freud's theory is crucial for understanding hidden motivations and internal conflicts within an individual. In the context of film analysis, this theory is used to explore the psychological dimensions of characters, uncover hidden motives, and interpret behaviors and interactions that are not always explicitly shown (Cox & Levine, 2019).

Manipulative Behavior

Manipulative behaviour refers to actions deliberately designed to influence, control, or exploit others in a covert or indirect manner to achieve personal gain or advantage. This type of behaviour often involves deception, coercion, or emotional exploitation, where the manipulator seeks to shape others' perceptions, decisions, or actions without their full awareness. Manipulation can manifest through various tactics such as guilt-tripping, gaslighting, flattery, or withholding information. In psychological terms, manipulative behaviour is often linked to underlying motives such as the desire for power, control, or self-protection. Individuals exhibiting manipulative tendencies may employ these strategies to navigate social situations, avoid responsibility, or fulfill unmet psychological needs. While manipulation can sometimes be subtle and socially accepted in certain contexts (e.g., persuasion or negotiation), it becomes problematic when it infringes upon others' autonomy or well-being. Understanding manipulative behaviour is essential in fields such as psychology, communication, and social dynamics, as it affects interpersonal relationships and group interactions (Rizki Az Zahra et al., 2024).

Manipulative behaviour manifests in various forms commonly recognized in psychological and social contexts. One such form is guilt-tripping, where an individual intentionally makes others feel responsible or guilty in order to coerce them into compliance or agreement. Another common tactic is gaslighting, which involves undermining someone's perception or memory, causing self-doubt and

confusion, thereby allowing the manipulator to gain control. Flattery is also frequently used, characterized by excessive or insincere praise aimed at influencing emotions and winning favour. Additionally, manipulators may withhold important information intentionally to shape decisions or maintain an advantage. Deception, involving the provision of false, misleading, or incomplete information, is another strategy to mislead and control others. Playing the victim is a form of manipulation where an individual portrays themselves as wronged or helpless to elicit sympathy and sway others' reactions. Finally, emotional blackmail utilizes fear, obligation, or guilt as leverage to influence and control the behaviour of others (Rizki Az Zahra et al., 2024).

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design with a film analysis approach. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research aims to explore and deeply understand the meanings and phenomena within the film contextual. According to Moleong (2017:6), qualitative research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perception, motivation, and actions, in a holistic manner by describing them in words and language, within their natural context, and utilizing various scientific methods. The data sources in this study are divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data are obtained from the film "The Orphan" (2009), which serves as the main object of analysis. Secondary data consist of supporting literature such as books, scientific journals, Freud's psychological theory, and other relevant references that strengthen the theoretical framework and analysis. Data collection techniques refer to the method proposed by Creswell (year). The process includes document and visual analysis by carefully observing scenes, dialogues, and expressions in the film. The researcher then records and codes scenes deemed relevant and significant. Interpretation of the visual text and dialogues is conducted to understand the underlying psychological meanings within the film. The data analysis technique follows Creswell's stages, starting with organizing the collected data, followed by coding to identify patterns and forms of psychological manipulation present in the film. Next, the data are classified and grouped according to categories relevant to Freud's theory, which serves as the analytical foundation. The findings are then presented descriptively, consistent with the characteristics of qualitative research, allowing for an in-depth and systematic understanding of the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the investigation are summarized in this chapter and analyzed within the framework of the previously developed theory. The analysis focuses on Esther's manipulative behavior in "The Orphan" (2009) through specific scenes, character interactions, and psychological markers, in keeping with Creswell's (2021) assertion that qualitative analysis seeks to understand meaning within contextual evidence. In addition to revealing the deeper motivations and unconscious impulses that influence her acts, the discussion looks at how these behaviors reflect the

dynamics of Freud's psychoanalytic notions, especially the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms. This chapter also examines how Esther's manipulation affects other characters, emphasizing how her actions cause serious psychological distress, emotional strain, and disruptions in family ties.

Manipulative Behaviour in The Orphan Movie (2009)

Manipulative behaviour refers to actions used to influence or control others in a hidden or indirect way for personal benefit. This behaviour often involves tactics such as lying, guilt-tripping, gaslighting, or emotional pressure, where the manipulator seeks advantage without the other person's full awareness. Esther's character in "The Orphan" (2009) represents a complex manifestation of psychological conflict that can be examined through Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework (1923). Esther exhibits a strong dominance of the Id, the instinctual drive seeking immediate gratification and uncontrolled aggression. This is reflected in her manipulative and violent actions, such as harming the adopted family's children and using her charm and innocence to deceive adults in order to fulfill her ambitions.

Guilt-tripping

Data 1

Scene: After killing Sister Abigail, Esther appeared calm and remorseless.

Id: "Please don't leave me alone."

Esther's statement, "Please don't leave me alone," in this scene demonstrates the supremacy of the Id, which prioritizes the satisfaction of primal desires over moral considerations and functions on the pleasure principle. After killing Sister Abigail, Esther shows no signs of regret, terror, or ethical contemplation, suggesting that neither the Ego's logical judgment nor the Superego's moral norms govern her behavior. Rather, the Id's deep fear of abandonment and need for emotional stability are her main psychological motivations.

Data 2

Scene: Esther repeatedly fails to control her anger when things don't go her way.

Ego: "Why do you love her more than me?"

The tremendous impact of the Id, which expects instant emotional pleasure and reacts violently when its desires are thwarted, is demonstrated in this scene by Esther's furious outburst, "Why do you love her more than me?" Esther's jealousy arises when the Id's basic needs—such as the demand for undivided affection, attention, and emotional possession—are not met. Esther reacts impulsively, demonstrating that her Ego is unable to control the Id's strong demands, rather than digesting the situation through logical comprehension or recognizing emotional

boundaries. Her fury is more than just an emotional response; it is a sign of underlying insecurities and a fear of rejection that stems from unconscious urges.

Data 3

Scene: Esther pretended to cry to make Kate look cruel.

Id: "Mommy, please don't be mad at me... I'm trying my best."

Her words seemed gentle, but they were used to distort John's perception of Kate. This is an example of manipulation being used to mask anxiety and maintain a dominant position.

Gaslighting

Data 4

Scene: Esther pretends to be innocent in front of the parents, especially when she makes herself look like a victim.

Id: "I didn't do anything. Why is she yelling at me?"

Esther says, "I didn't do anything," in this scene. "Why is she screaming at me?" illustrates how the Id works by denying responsibility and controlling perception in an effort to defend itself and satiate its innate need for security and control. Esther automatically rejects any accusation that jeopardizes her safety since the Id operates under the pleasure principle, avoiding suffering, punishment, and anxiety at all costs. She avoids suspicion by portraying herself as an innocent victim, shifting the responsibility and unease onto Kate. This denial is driven by the Id's unconscious need to maintain emotional comfort and domination rather than moral contemplation or concern for the truth.

Data 5

Scene: After making it seem like Kate was rude to her.

Id: "Daddy, I'm scared of Mommy. She gets mad at me for no reason."

Esther says, "Daddy, I'm scared of Mommy," in this scene. "She gets mad at me for no reason" illustrates how the Id functions; when it senses a threat, it automatically looks for safety, security, and emotional comfort. The Id is motivated by the desire for comfort and the avoidance of discomfort, and Esther manipulates dread to win John's sympathy and protection. Instead of answering honestly or introspectively, Esther unintentionally puts her own security first by depicting Kate as a threat.

Flattery

Data 6

Scene: Esther tries to make herself appear “the best” by acting sweet during a tense family situation.

Id: “I just wanted everything to be nice.”

Esther's comment in this moment, "I just wanted everything to be nice," illustrates how the Id functions by using ostensibly constructive action to obtain emotional solace, approval, and a sense of control. The Id's innate need to preserve a favorable environment where her demands are supplied without resistance drives her utterances, despite their seeming gentleness and harmony. Esther uses sweetness and flattery as a tactic to shield herself from scrutiny and emotional discomfort since the Id dislikes tension, rejection, and confrontation because these circumstances jeopardize emotional security.

Data 7

Scene: Esther praises John to gain his trust and position herself as a loving, obedient child.

Id: “Daddy, you’re the best. You always understand me.”

Esther delivers this line with a soft and affectionate tone to appeal to John’s emotions. This flattery is not genuine affection but a manipulative strategy to strengthen John’s sympathy toward her while subtly distancing him from Kate. By idealizing John, Esther secures protection and authority within the family, allowing her id-driven desires for control and dominance to be fulfilled without resistance.

Withholding Information.

Data 8

Scene: Esther tries to kill Daniel in the treehouse and then pushes him off the top.

Id: “If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

Esther's threat, "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you," in this scene is the most overt and blatant manifestation of the Id, which is motivated by the need for total control, fear of being exposed, and innate hostility. Based on the pleasure principle, the Id seeks to eradicate any source of fear or danger without taking morality or consequences into account. Esther's control and false identity are seriously threatened by Daniel's possible disclosure, thus her first reaction is violent intimidation. This response illustrates how the Id reacts impulsively when self-preservation is in jeopardy, utilizing fear as a means of stifling criticism.

Data 9

Scene: After the incident in the treehouse, Daniel is terrified and tries to warn his family.

Id: “She’s not what you think... something’s wrong with her.”

Daniel's terrified remark in this scene, "She's not what you think... something's wrong with her," subtly exposes Esther's Id's ongoing supremacy, which has already established authority through violence and intimidation. Daniel's psychic state is shaped by the lasting force of Esther's Id-driven threat even though she is not physically present at the moment. By creating dread, the Id aims to preserve control and secrecy by weakening or delaying possible exposure. Daniel's cautious and disjointed warning illustrates how Esther's innate hostility was successful in stifling complete disclosure.

Data 10

Scene: After a road accident.

Id: “If you tell anyone, they won’t believe you... and I’ll be very angry.”

Esther's comment in this moment, "If you tell anyone, they won't believe you... and I'll be very angry," illustrates the deliberate but instinctive functioning of the Id, which aims to preserve emotional power, control, and secrecy following the car accident. Self-preservation and avoiding punishment or exposure are the Id's driving forces, and Esther naturally uses mistrust and terror to keep Max quiet. Max's confidence and sense of reality are undermined by Esther's claim that others won't trust her, and the risk of more hurt is introduced by the danger of anger. This reaction shows how, in situations where direct aggression may be dangerous, the Id transforms its violent urges into psychological intimidation.

No	Type of manipulation	Guilt-tripping	Gaslighting	Flattery	Flatteryng Information.
1.	Id: “Please don’t leave me alone.”	✓			
2.	Ego: “Why do you love her more than me?”	✓			
3.	Id: “Mommy, please don’t be mad at me... I’m trying my best.”	✓			
4.	Id: “I didn’t do anything. Why is she yelling at me?”		✓		
5.	Id: “Daddy, I’m scared of Mommy. She gets mad at me for no reason.”		✓		

6.	Id: "I just wanted everything to be nice."			✓	
7.	Id: "Daddy, you're the best. You always understand me."			✓	
8.	Id: "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you."				✓
9.	Id: "She's not what you think... something's wrong with her."				✓
10.	Id: "If you tell anyone, they won't believe you... and I'll be very angry."				✓

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Esther's character in "The Orphan" (2009) reveals that manipulative behaviour is not simply an intentional act of deception but a manifestation of deeper psychological conflicts rooted in unconscious dynamics. Through Freud's psychoanalytic framework, Esther's actions can be understood as the result of an imbalance among the Id, Ego, and Superego, where dominant instinctual drives, weak reality-based regulation, and a dysfunctional moral conscience shape her destructive tendencies. Her behaviour is further reinforced by unresolved childhood trauma, fixation, and maladaptive defence mechanisms, contributing to a distorted perception of love, control, and interpersonal relationships. Esther's manipulation is fundamentally driven by subconscious motivations such as the desire for control, fear of abandonment, pathological longing for affection, and severe identity conflict. In this context, manipulation functions as a psychological strategy to compensate for emotional wounds and to maintain a sense of superiority and security in an environment she perceives as threatening, reflecting the psychoanalytic view that early experiences shape mistaken beliefs and behavioural patterns.

Furthermore, Esther's manipulation profoundly impacts the Coleman family, demonstrating that such destructive behaviour extends beyond the individual and destabilizes surrounding social systems. The erosion of trust, escalation of fear, and breakdown of familial relationships illustrate how internal psychological conflicts and maladaptive defence mechanisms can inflict emotional harm on others. Variations in the frequency and form of manipulative behaviours such as the prevalence of guilt-tripping and gaslighting versus the selective use of flattery, threats, and withholding information highlight the different psychological functions and situational demands underlying Esther's actions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, these patterns indicate that manipulation operates as a flexible expression of dominant id impulses shaped by relational power, context, and unconscious motivation rather than as a uniform behavioural pattern. Consequently,

“The Orphan” (2009) can be understood not only as a thriller but also as a psychological exploration of unresolved inner conflicts and their destructive potential, offering valuable insights for literary, psychological, and social analysis.

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