

Narrating the Mind: Psychological dimensions in postmodernism

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Literature and psychology are deeply interconnected, both offering insights into human emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. The purpose of this article is to explore the intersection between psychology and postmodernism, by analysing how postmodern narratives reflect and challenge traditional understandings of human nature, identity, and morality. The pursued premise is that postmodernism paved the way to an increased literary focus on psychological states such as trauma and mental disorders. Furthermore, this article seeks to highlight the way in which literature contributes to a deeper understanding of psychological and moral dilemmas in contemporary society and its increase of books on mental health in the era of post-postmodernism, where psychological introspection and authenticity have become dominant literary concerns.

Keywords: Jung, literature, personality, psychology, postmodernism

1. Introduction

In the exploration of the field of human experiences, literature and psychology prove to be deeply intertwined. The connection between the respective fields highlights the fact that literary characters and narratives often explore complex psychological states, offering a window into the inner lives of individuals and societies. Whether one focuses on studying and understanding the human mind and behaviour through the scientific lens of psychology, or seeks to gain insights into human emotions, thoughts, and experiences through storytelling, both paths converge towards the same purpose, a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Thus, the epitome of the connection between the two fields that this article focuses on rests upon the premise that psychology examines how societal and cultural factors shape behaviour, while literature reflects and critiques these influences.

In today's cultural climate, mental health has become a central topic in public discourse. We are witnessing a growing awareness of psychological struggles such as

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anxiety, depression, dissociation and identity confusion. The heightened focus calls for a deeper understanding of the narratives that shape how individuals perceive themselves and the world. Thus, the postmodern condition offers a unique context in which the crisis of identity became particularly acute.

By bridging literary theory with psychological insights, this paper aims to explore how the postmodern narrative contributed to the current mental health discourse by showing an avenue as to how fiction can offer both a diagnosis of cultural malaise and a space for negotiation new modes for understanding of the self.

2. Analysis

It is a well-known fact that literary works often incorporate or predate psychological theories, for instance in modernism Freudian Psychoanalysis was used by some scholars to explore novels like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Within the same lens, Existential Psychology (founded by Rollo May and later developed by Irvin Yalom and Viktor Frank, aims to answer questions related to the meaning of life) became a powerful tool of understanding themes of freedom, despair, and the search for meaning in the works of Sartre, or Camus. Not to mention that postcolonial literature delved into identity and psychological struggles caused by cultural displacement. Therefore, it becomes self-explanatory that literature humanizes psychology, offering vivid depictions of the complexities of the human psyche.

Literary wise, as emphasized by scholars, postmodernism marked a profound change of pace and rhythm. The raising of boundaries between centre and periphery, the deepening of fragmentation and constant destabilization, urged the question "Who am I?" to receive new values and new possible answers in the era of postmodernism. As Harvey (1991) frames it, the internal architecture of postmodernism, with its features marked by plurality, new frontiers, crisis, rupture, discontinuity, operated on a terrain of tension while negotiating the boundaries between the pre-established structures, thus placing a strong emphasis on the issue of identity formation.

Scholars like Frederic Jameson swiftly noted that "the alienation of the subject, in postmodernist aesthetics is replaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (Jameson 1991, 14). As a result, the literature debating the subject emphasizes a focus directed towards a prevalent state of schizophrenia, rather than towards alienation or paranoia, (considered a background state in modernism.). In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey discusses the emergence of concerns regarding the instability of language and discourse, as well as continuous fragmentation, within postmodernist thought. He notes that a "preoccupation with

the fragmentation and instability of language and discourses carries over directly, for example, into a certain conception of personality" (Harvey 1991, 57). In his view, this particular issue has paved the way towards the collapse of concepts of identity formation under the lens of an inability to unify the past, the present and the future. Consequently, it has been pointed out that the problem of postmodernism converges towards the Subject itself, thus allowing the mechanisms of identity formation to occupy a central place.

Therefore, postmodernism as a philosophical and cultural movement, as emphasized by Harvey, acknowledges the complexity of human experiences. Thus, the echo reflected an ascending trend in literature to portray psychological states such as trauma, grief, love, joy, and mental disorders, allowing readers a means to empathize with others' experiences.

In this sense, in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale examines the ways in which postmodern literature disrupts conventional narrative structures and challenges the notion of absolute truth. He outlines a transition from modernist to postmodernist fiction, marked by a shift in dominant themes and narrative strategies. McHale highlights how postmodernist texts often draw attention to their own ontological status, prompting readers to question the nature and reality of the fictional worlds they present. This self-reflexive approach gives rise to fragmented narratives and diverse viewpoints, departing from the unified and coherent realities typical of earlier literary traditions (McHale 1987).

In the postmodern era, the increasing preoccupation with questions of identity and belonging reflects a deeper existential anxiety, rendering the problematization of identity a pervasive condition of contemporary life. This phenomenon underscores a fundamental shift in how the self is conceptualized, namely no longer as a stable or coherent entity, but as one subjected to fragmentation, fluidity, and social dislocation.

Robert G. Dunn, in his seminal work *Identity Crises* (1998), articulates this transformation, asserting that "the crisis of the subject defining the postmodern condition calls for a mode of analysis that situates the problem of identity and difference in the realities of social and cultural disintegration and change" (Dunn 1998, 7). Here, Dunn identifies the disintegration of traditional social structures and norms as a core influence on the destabilization of identity. The postmodern individual navigates a world in which the boundaries of self and society are increasingly porous, leading to identity being shaped less by collective anchors and more by individual experience and subjective need.

This shift brings about a profound psychological tension, as Dunn further observes: "The stage at which the search for identity collapses into the construction of narrowly personal meaning poses the problem of how the social self survives in a

society and culture that, while promising new forms of community, have become ominously fragmented and attenuated, and correspondingly narcissistic" (1998, 10). Thus, the psychological dimension of postmodern identity is marked by isolation, internal conflict, and a struggle to reconcile the self with a fragmented and often incoherent social reality.

Literary representations of identity in postmodernism reflect this psychological turmoil. Aesthetic principles such as plurality, indeterminacy, and fragmentation dominate postmodern literature, mirroring the instability and uncertainty that characterize the individual's inner world. Language itself, once a presumed vessel of meaning, becomes unreliable, giving rise to "double readings" and demanding active engagement from both authors and readers in constructing significance. This destabilization of meaning parallels the dissolution of a unified self, as postmodern texts frequently depict identity as divided, decentred, and constructed rather than innate.

Postmodern authors approach identity from various psychological vantage points, some through relational dynamics (the Me–Other dichotomy), others through subjective experience and memory. Despite these diverse approaches, a shared thematic concern persists: the challenge of forming a coherent self in a cultural landscape increasingly defined by ambiguity, contradiction, and disconnection from previous norms. The literary exploration of identity thus becomes a reflection of a broader psychological endeavour, namely one that seeks to navigate the complexities of selfhood in a postmodern world where the very notion of the "self" is under constant negotiation.

A specific example which explores this perspective is Daniel Keyes, in his works *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) and *The Minds of Billy Milligan* (1981), who delves into the aspect of trauma through different lenses, examining its effects on cognition, identity, and human relationships. Both works have significantly contributed to the broader understanding of the wide public of trauma and mental health. *Flowers for Algernon* poignantly illustrates the emotional and psychological struggles faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. The book underscores the need for empathy, dignity, and societal acceptance and the role of ethics in medical experiments. In contrast, *The Minds of Billy Milligan* brings attention to dissociative disorders and the long-term psychological consequences of childhood trauma. Together, these works have stimulated critical conversations among readers around medical ethics, mental health care, and society's moral obligation to protect and support vulnerable people.

Another noteworthy example is Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), a novel that powerfully critiques psychiatric institutions and the dehumanizing practices often associated with them during the mid-20th century. Through the character of Randle McMurphy and his defiance against the

authoritarian rule of Nurse Ratched, Kesey sheds light on the tension between institutional control and individual freedom. The novel not only exposes the psychological suffering caused by oppressive systems of care but also raises ethical questions about the use of treatments such as electroshock therapy and lobotomy. In this way, Kesey's work played an important role in shaping public debates about mental health reform and the dignity of psychiatric patients.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) likewise offers a profound exploration of mental illness, specifically depression, from a subjective perspective. Plath's narrative depicts the protagonist Esther Greenwood's descent into psychological crisis, exposing the challenges faced by women in a society marked by rigid gender roles and limited avenues for self-realization. Plath's novel foregrounds the inner dimensions of mental suffering and invites readers to empathize with the struggles of individuals battling invisible illnesses, thereby contributing to broader awareness of depression and the need for compassionate care.

Furthermore, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) offers a stark portrayal of personality disorders, particularly antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), within the context of a fragmented, consumer-driven postmodern society. Through the protagonist Patrick Bateman, Ellis presents a chilling exploration of narcissism, lack of empathy, and moral disengagement, illustrating how extreme individualism and cultural emptiness can exacerbate psychological instability. The novel is not only significant for its controversial and graphic content but also for the way it challenges readers to confront the blurred boundaries between sanity and pathology in a society obsessed with appearances and materialism. By doing so, it extends the postmodern literary exploration of identity, morality, and the destabilization of the self into the realm of psychopathology.

In this respect, the moral aspect of personality disorders in postmodernism becomes an aspect of high value within the discourse, as it reflects a nuanced interplay between philosophical, psychological, and cultural perspectives in postmodernism. On the one side postmodernism emphasizes subjectivity, suggesting that what constitutes "moral" behavior might be contingent on individual and cultural perspectives. On the other side, personality disorders often described in terms of deviance from social norms, are reinterpreted in postmodern contexts as varied expressions of identity rather than universal pathologies.

In this sense, professor of psychiatry Mircea Lăzărescu mentions that, from a traditional point of view, both at the level of personality disorders and at the level of psychopathy, the central aspect is occupied by "a disturbance, a lack of acquisition, a distortion of moral consciousness and consequently, a frequent and varied unethical behavior of a person who continues to carry out his daily life in the middle

of a community life”² (Lăzărescu 2007, 405). On a general level, he mentions that the parameters that individualize a man within the morals of a community are found in the moral characteristics. Therefore, the aspects that characterize personality disorders are attitude and moral behavior, along with what is understood by character (2007, 399). Taking this filter of moral evaluation of personality disorders, Lăzărescu postulates the fact that the insufficiency or distortion of consciousness raises the problem according to which, “the more distant a person is from the subject, the more problematic the ethical involvement”³ (2007, 405). Therefore, the structural model of virtues becomes implicitly deficient and is characterized by: manipulation, torturing the other, neglecting the other, malignant duplicity, selfishness and lack generosity, lack of feeling of shame and guilt, irresponsibility and diffusion of responsibility.

On this note, through this lens of morality, the “Me-other” relationship is highlighted, which commonly involves mutual respect, affection, support and care. In the case of personality disorders, there is a devaluation of the other as a person, and its transformation into an object. Lăzărescu mentions, the other shifts from being considered an enemy, object of admiration, spectator, source of exploitation manipulation and/or criticism. Mainly, “other” becomes dehumanized and depersonalized in personality disorders (2007, 416).

Consequently, one can argue that it appears a split of moral absolutes, as the postmodernist perspective rejects binary categorizations of morality, viewing behaviour associated with personality disorders as responses to fragmented, complex social realities rather than intrinsic moral failings. What resurfaces is therefore the aspect of moral relativism on the grounds in this context that what constitutes “moral” behaviour is contingent on individual and cultural perspectives. One avenue of interpreting this aspect is that this perspective challenges the notion that traits like narcissism or lack of empathy are inherently immoral, instead placing them within specific socio-cultural contexts. Contingent to the social plane, as contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by consumerism, individualism, and rapid technological change, traits associated with certain disorders like narcissism, may be viewed as adaptive or even celebrated. Thus, it can be argued that through the postmodern lens, personality disorders are re-framed, in the sense that morality becomes a fluid and socially constructed concept. Rather

² My translation: „o perturbare, o insuficiență de achiziție, o distorsiune a conștiinței morale, și în consecință, un frecvent și variat comportament anetic al unei persoane care continuă să își desfășoare viața de zi cu zi în mijlocul vieții comunitare.”

³ My translation: „cu cât o persoană e mai îndepărtată sufletește de subiect, cu atât și implicarea etică e mai problematică.”

than casting individuals with personality disorders as morally deficient, it encourages a deeper understanding of the cultural, historical, and relational contexts that shape these conditions. This perspective fosters empathy and challenges simplistic moral narratives, urging society to address the systemic factors contributing to psychological distress.

It is important to clarify, however, that drawing a parallel between postmodernism's fragmented worldview and the lived experiences of individuals with personality disorders should not be understood as a direct equivalence. The notion of fragmentation in postmodern literature refers primarily to aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical perspectives on identity and morality. By contrast, personality disorders are clinically defined conditions that involve persistent patterns of maladaptive thinking, behavior, and emotional regulation, often resulting in significant distress and dysfunction. The purpose of engaging with postmodern concepts in this context is therefore not to conflate cultural theories with clinical diagnoses, but to highlight how literature and philosophy have reinterpreted the moral and social dimensions of behaviours traditionally labeled as pathological.

Moreover, while postmodern interpretations may reframe personality disorders as expressions of fragmented identity or as products of shifting social and cultural contexts, it is crucial to distinguish between the literary-philosophical lens and the clinical reality of these conditions. As Mihai Aniței et al. reminds us, "the issue of personality disorders is not a recent one, as there is evidence dating back to Antiquity regarding the Egyptians' interest in the spectrum of psychopathology. The early Egyptians were fascinated by the connection between the uterus and emotional disorders. This connection was later termed by the Greeks as 'hysteria'." (Aniței et al. 2016, 302)⁴. Thus, such historical continuity demonstrates that personality disorders have long been recognized as forms of psychological suffering, not merely as cultural constructs.

Florin Tudose also emphasizes the clinical foundation of these disorders, defining them as "personality traits that show maladaptive persistence and inflexibility. Personality traits are understood as patterns of thinking and relating to the social environment and to oneself" (Tudose 2011, 99).⁵ He further clarifies that

⁴ My translation: „problematika tulburărilor de personalitate nu este una recentă, existând dovezi încă din Antichitate referitoare la interesul egiptenilor în ceea ce privește spectrul psihopatologiei. Primii egipteni erau fascinați de legătura dintre uter și tulburările emoționale. Această legătură a fost denumită ulterior de greci isterie.”

⁵ My translation: „tulburările de personalitate sunt alcătuite din trăsături de personalitate, care arată o persistență maladaptativă și inflexibilitate. Trăsăturile de personalitate sunt înțelese ca modele de gândire și de relaționare cu mediul social și cu propria persoană.”

pathological manifestations “actually represent a rupture in the algorithm of the patient’s connection to the environment [...] which leads to a distorted, abnormal ideation” (2011, 103)⁶. underlining the real suffering and distress caused by such conditions and the significant dysfunction that disrupts daily functioning and relationships.

At the same time, Tudose’s broader reflection that “human personality constitutes, directly or indirectly, the intersection ground of many scientific disciplines; it is a universe that constantly incites to knowledge, one that can never be fully exhausted”⁷ (97), invites us to consider both the scientific and cultural dimensions of personality. Thus, while postmodern literature may reinterpret traits such as narcissism or detachment in light of social change, psychology reminds us that clinical diagnoses such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) or Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) are severe and involve profound pain and dysfunction. Clarifying this distinction allows for a balanced perspective, namely that literature can illuminate the moral and cultural imagination surrounding identity, while psychology anchors the discussion in diagnostic reality and the lived suffering of patients.

In shaping a deeper understanding of the matter, it is imperative to incorporate Jung’s views upon literature as a manifestation of human psychology and an expression of the tension between the conscious and the unconscious as presented in his work *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (2001). By analyzing the relationship between psychology and literature, he provides a profound perspective on how literary works are not merely a form of entertainment but also a reflection of the collective human soul. Thus, writers and readers together participate in the process of exploring the mysteries of the unconscious. Jung describes literary creation, especially visionary literature, as a meeting point between the conscious and the unconscious. The role of the conscious mind, regarded as the rational part of the mind (where planning and analysis take place) in literature, helps structure and refine the work, but not as the primary source of inspiration (Jung 2001, 171).

The unconscious mind in Jungian theory, however, is regarded as the place from which powerful symbols and images originate. In visionary creation, Jung mentions, the author is often overwhelmed by material emerging from the unconscious and must find a way to integrate it into a coherent form (2001, 173). Furthermore, archetypes (essential elements of the collective unconscious) are

⁶ My translation: „reprezintă de fapt o ruptură în algoritmul conectării la mediu a respectivului pacient [...] ce determină o ideeție deformată, anormală.”

⁷ My translation: „personalitatea umană constituie direct sau indirect terenul de intersecție al multor discipline științifice, este un univers care incită permanent la cunoaștere, dar care niciodată nu poate fi epuizat”.

present in visionary literature and give it the power to transcend individual experiences. In Jungian theory archetypes are universal patterns that appear in dreams, myths, and stories across all cultures. Examples include the hero, the shadow, the mother, the divine child, or the mentor, all figures that consistently emerge in literature. Pertaining to their role in literature, it is often argued that archetypes give the literary work universal significance and allow it to deeply resonate with readers from different eras and cultures. Moreover, we are presented with the fact that by using archetypes, literature becomes more than just a simple story; it becomes an expression of the collective human soul, a space where readers recognize their own struggles and aspirations.

Jung emphasizes that literature is not only an act of expression but also one of communication between writer and reader (2001, 180). He also highlights that the power of a literary work lies in its ability to awaken emotions and thoughts in the reader. Through the images and symbols used, the author activates the reader's unconscious, prompting a state of reflection on their own psychological state. Hence, according to Jung, readers do not resonate solely with the story or characters but also with the symbolic dimension of the work as the readers are met with a reflection of their individual struggle to discover their potential. In this sense, Jung distinguishes between psychological and visionary creation. Psychological Creation (or-psychological novel) in Jung's perspective is more anchored in the author's individual experiences. The writer expresses personal emotions, conflicts, and perspectives, making the work a window into their own psychology. According to Jung, an autobiographical novel or a poem exploring the author's emotional suffering falls into this category. Furthermore, Jung mentions that this creation is conscious and intentional, resulting from a controlled process of thought and introspection acting within the array of human consciousness, where everything is self-explanatory. In Visionary Creation, on the other side, the writer is no longer merely expressing personal experiences but becomes a channel for greater, unconscious forces. This type of creation, according to Jung, seems to transcend the author, giving rise to images, themes, and symbols that are universal. The content has a foreign and hidden nature, sparking a de-construction of human values. Jung illustrates this phenomenon with works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Goethe's *Faust*, where the text evokes cosmic dimensions and transcendent realities (2001, 185). While the first moves between the boundaries of what is humanly possible, the second dissolves the human shapes of the artistic configuration.

Additionally, Carl Jung discusses the process of individuation extensively in several works. He elaborates on individuation as a process of integrating unconscious elements into consciousness, ultimately leading to a more unified self: "Individuation means becoming an 'in-dividual,' and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our

innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as 'coming to selfhood' or 'self-realization'" (Jung 1928 [1953], 173). This process is fundamentally oriented toward wholeness, reconciliation of opposing aspects of the psyche, and the development of personal meaning.

In this respect, pertinent to the tropes of postmodernism one can argue that the process of dehumanization in postmodernist literature and Carl Jung's process of individuation can be seen as opposing psychological and philosophical trajectories aiming towards a holistic understanding of the whole. While the process of individuation seeks to integrate and actualize the self, the theme of dehumanization in postmodernism shows the aspect of the fragmented self. In a dichotomic perspective Jung's individuation presents itself as a journey toward wholeness, where the individual reconciles different aspects of their psyche (conscious and unconscious). Hence the process of integration of the Shadow underlines the dissolution of the mechanism of projection, which implies that we cease to reject parts of our personalities and find ways to accept them and integrate them into our daily lives and ultimately unlock the wisdom they contain. The Postmodernist aspect of dehumanization, on the other hand, often depicts characters whose identities are disjointed or deconstructed by societal, technological, or linguistic forces. Thus, this interplay of opposing perspectives proves to be an essential tool towards a holistic understanding of principles of: integration versus fragmentation, personal meaning versus existential void, archetypes versus hyperreality (Baudrillard). Therefore, in the postmodern image canvassing individuals losing their humanity to external forces (capitalism, media, war, bureaucracy), the incorporation of Jungian principles (individuation, archetypes, shadow, persona) proves to be a powerful means of broadening one's perspectives about reclaiming humanity through self-awareness and integration, much needed in modern, contemporary times.

3. Conclusion

Through this lens it becomes evident that, once more, literature becomes a tool for self-discovery in different ways, a means through which readers can explore their own existence and gain a deeper understanding of the world around them. In the context of postmodernism, where fragmentation, multiplicity, and subjective realities dominate, Jung's perspective on literature as a manifestation of the unconscious offers a compelling framework for understanding the interplay between literature, moral values, and personality disorders. Postmodern narratives often challenge traditional moral structures, embracing ambiguity and exploring the

fluidity of identity, much like Jung's concept of the dissociated self and the archetypal struggles within the unconscious. Moreover, just as Jung argues that literature serves as a space for self-discovery and integration of the unconscious, postmodern literature often mirrors the complexities of personality disorders, where identity is unstable, and moral values are subject to deconstruction.

By blurring the lines between reality and fiction, postmodern literature not only challenges rigid ethical frameworks but also invites readers to engage with the psychological depth of its characters, much like the psychodynamic therapeutic process of confronting the unconscious. In this way, literature becomes a means of navigating the psychological and moral dilemmas of the postmodern condition, offering both a reflection of and a response to the fragmentation of identity in contemporary society. A contemporary society which has seen a proliferation of books on mental health in the era of post-postmodernism, where psychological introspection and authenticity have become dominant literary concerns.

It is important to emphasize that presenting Jungian individuation and postmodern fragmentation as opposing trajectories is intended primarily as a metacognitive framework. This dichotomy serves as a conceptual lens to gain a broader understanding of identity, morality, and psychological experience in postmodern contexts. In this sense, the contrast functions as a bridge: it highlights the tensions and intersections between psychological theory and literary expression, providing one of many possible pathways to approach postmodernism through a psychological lens. Ultimately, this perspective invites critical reflection, allowing the reader to appreciate both the disorienting effects of postmodernity and the potential for self-awareness, ethical engagement, and individuation.

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