

Emotional States and the Portrayal of Psychoanalytic Conflicts in the Song “Watch the World Burn” by Falling in Reverse

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Abstract: The song “Watch the World Burn” by Falling in Reverse expresses emotional and psychological struggles such as trauma, depression, and internal conflict. This study aims to analyze the emotional states and psychoanalytic conflicts depicted in the lyrics, using Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and literary psychology. Employing a qualitative descriptive method and content analysis, the study examines the interplay of the id, ego, and superego, as well as defense mechanisms including repression, projection, sublimation, denial, and intellectualization. The data were drawn from the official song lyrics and analyzed based on Freudian psychoanalytic categories. The findings reveal that the lyrics metaphorically portray intense emotional turmoil, psychological fragmentation, and internal battles, particularly through expressions of repressed trauma, projected hostility, and sublimated aggression. The study concludes that the song illustrates how unconscious conflicts are externalized through symbolic language, highlighting the use of defense mechanisms as strategies to cope with inner psychological pain. This research emphasizes the function of contemporary song lyrics as powerful psychological texts that reflect the complexities of mental and emotional resilience.

Keywords: *emotional states, psychoanalytic conflicts, defence mechanisms, song lyrics.*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, mental health issues such as trauma, depression, and internal psychological conflicts have become increasingly prevalent, exacerbated by social isolation and cultural pressures (World Health Organization, 2023). The urgency of exploring these issues through accessible media like music is critical, as songs often reflect and influence emotional well-being (Jones, 2018). Previous research has

shown that song lyrics can reveal unconscious conflicts and defense mechanisms, providing insight into the artist’s psyche (Surbakti, Soethama, Laksmi, and Malini, 2024; Priyoto and Ramadhan, 2020). However, there remains a research gap in analyzing how contemporary rock music specifically articulates these psychoanalytic conflicts. This study fills that gap by focusing on Falling in Reverse’s “Watch the World Burn”, offering

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novel insights into the psychological expressions within this genre.

Using metaphors and symbolism such as “voices in my head,” “swimming with sharks,” and “lifting the bar into the stars,” the song conveys complex internal conflicts and psychological defense mechanisms including repression, projection, sublimation, denial, and intellectualization (Sigmund Freud, 1923; Boeree, 2006; Surbakti et al., 2024). The interplay of vulnerability and aggression in the lyrics reflects the ego’s ongoing effort to manage impulses and societal expectations. By focusing directly on the song’s content, this research provides a deeper understanding of the psychological expression embedded in contemporary music.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to defining key psychoanalytic concepts, previous studies have applied these theories to song lyrics, establishing a strong foundation for this research. Surbakti, Soethama, Laksmi, and Malini (2024) analyzed Cancer by My Chemical Romance, revealing symbolic expressions of anxiety and mortality. Zenodo (2023) examined Billy Joel’s Vienna, highlighting metaphorical language that conveys unresolved emotional tensions. The Psychological Perspective of the Songwriter in the Lyrics of Baskara Putra’s Album (2023) demonstrated how lyrics reflect psychological struggles and coping mechanisms, particularly defense mechanisms such as repression, projection, and sublimation. Priyoto and Ramadhan (2020) psychoanalytically studied Labrinth’s Jealous, further illustrating how lyrics articulate complex emotional states like jealousy and self-deception.

Contemporary psychoanalytic literary criticism also incorporates theorists like Eagleton and Lacan, emphasizing language and symbolism in unconscious expression (Botha, 2012). Psychological research on music and

emotion (Barradas & Sakka, 2022; Jones, 2018) complements literary approaches by highlighting how lyrics mediate between artist and listener emotional experience, facilitating catharsis and emotional regulation. Together, these perspectives provide a robust foundation for analyzing “Watch the World Burn” as a psychological and literary text expressing deep psychoanalytic conflicts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory as its primary theoretical foundation to analyze the emotional states and psychoanalytic conflicts expressed in the lyrics of Watch the World Burn song by Falling in Reverse. Freud’s structural model of the psyche, comprising the id, ego, and superego, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the internal psychological dynamics reflected in the song (Freud, 1923). The id represents the unconscious reservoir of primal desires and instinctual drives that seek immediate gratification without consideration of social norms or consequences. The superego embodies the internalized moral standards and societal rules that impose restrictions and ideals on the individual’s behavior. The ego functions as the rational mediator that negotiates between the demands of the id, the prohibitions of the superego, and the realities of the external world.

In the context of Watch the World Burn song, the lyrics portray a vivid conflict between the id’s aggressive and rebellious impulses and the superego’s moral and social constraints. The ego’s role is seen in the oscillation between vulnerability and defiance, as the artist struggles to maintain psychological balance amid trauma, depression, and external hostility. This triadic conflict is central to understanding the song’s emotional intensity and symbolic language.

Complementing Freud’s structural model is the concept of defense mechanisms, which are unconscious psychological strategies employed

by the ego to manage anxiety and internal conflict arising from unacceptable impulses or traumatic experiences. Classic defense mechanisms such as repression, projection, and sublimation are particularly relevant to this analysis (Boeree, 2006; Surbakti et al., 2024).

a. Repression involves pushing distressing thoughts and memories out of conscious awareness, as suggested in the lyric “trauma that I’m burying.”

b. Projection is evident when the artist attributes hostile feelings or fears onto others, for example, in references to enemies and obsessive critics.

c. Sublimation is demonstrated by channeling destructive impulses and emotional pain into creative expression, such as aggressive and confrontational lyrics.

These defense mechanisms allow the artist to cope with psychological distress and are encoded symbolically in the lyrics, consistent with Freud’s view that unconscious conflicts often manifest indirectly through metaphor, symbolism, and poetic language (Surbakti et al., 2024; Zenodo, 2023).

The study also draws on literary psychology, as articulated by Minderop (2010), which emphasizes the psychological dimensions of literary texts and their capacity to reflect the author’s mental states and coping strategies. Literary psychology bridges psychoanalysis and literary criticism by interpreting texts as psychological artifacts that reveal repressed emotions, unresolved conflicts, and defense mechanisms. This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing song lyrics, which often function as autobiographical narratives or emotional confessions.

Further theoretical support comes from contemporary psychoanalytic literary criticism applied to song lyrics, as demonstrated in studies such as Surbakti et al. (2024) on Cancer by My Chemical Romance. Their research uses Freud’s theory to decode the symbolic and emotional content of the lyrics, revealing the protagonist’s anxiety and confrontation with

mortality. Similarly, Zenodo’s (2023) analysis of Billy Joel’s Vienna highlights how metaphorical language expresses unresolved emotional tensions and ambivalences, reinforcing the applicability of psychoanalytic theory to modern song lyrics.

Moreover, the psychoanalytic concepts of symbolism, condensation, and displacement are essential for interpreting the figurative language in Watch the World Burn. Freud explained that unconscious material is often expressed through:

a. Symbolism: repressed desires or fears are represented in disguised forms;

b. Condensation: multiple thoughts or feelings are combined into a single image or metaphor;

c. Displacement: anxiety or impulses are transferred onto a substitute object or image.

The song’s metaphors such as “voices in my head,” “swimming with sharks,” and “lifting the bar into the stars” exemplify these processes, encoding complex emotional states and conflicts in vivid imagery.

Finally, psychological research on music and emotion (Barradas & Sakka, 2022; Jones, 2018) highlights the dual role of lyrics as both reflections of the artist’s psychological state and as facilitators of emotional catharsis and regulation for listeners. This underscores the importance of analyzing lyrics not only as literary texts but also as psychological expressions that impact emotional processing.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive content analysis approach. The primary data source is the official lyrics of “Watch the World Burn.” Data was collected through document analysis by thoroughly reading and interpreting the lyrics. Relevant lines were categorized based on Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and analyzed to uncover psychological conflicts and defense mechanisms. The researcher acted as the primary instrument, ensuring rigor through repeated reading, coding, and triangulation with existing theories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the foundational framework to analyze the emotional and psychological themes embedded in the song “Watch the World Burn” by Falling in Reverse. Freud's theory, which emphasizes unconscious conflict, defense mechanisms, and the dynamic interplay between id, ego, and superego, provides a useful lens to interpret the rich metaphorical and symbolic language in the lyrics. The song reveals the artist's intense internal struggles with trauma, depression, identity, and social confrontation.

Emotional states and psychoanalytic conflict

The song “Watch the World Burn” vividly portrays a turbulent emotional landscape characterized by inner turmoil, anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of conflict both within the self and with external forces. The opening lines (Stanza 1):

“Yeah, I got voices in my head again, tread carefully / And I don't medicate, it helps me temporarily.”

reflect the artist's struggle with intrusive thoughts and mental unrest, highlighting feelings of vulnerability and isolation. This emotional state is compounded by a reluctance to rely on medication, suggesting ambivalence toward coping mechanisms and a desire to confront pain on his own terms.

The lyric (Stanza 2):

“I battle depression, I'm back with a message / I'm asking the question that if you hate me, why are you acting obsessive?”

expresses a dual conflict internally with depression and externally with perceived hostility from others. This tension illustrates the psychoanalytic conflict between the unconscious emotional pain and the pressures or judgments imposed by social reality. The artist's emotional state oscillates between despair and defiance, revealing a complex interplay of vulnerability and aggression.

Further, the line (Stanza 4):

“I'm living the life that I've always wanted, but it comes at a cost / They're licking their chops, they're fixing to rip me apart, I'm swimming with sharks,”

Symbolizes the paradox of success shadowed by anxiety and threat, reflecting feelings of being surrounded by danger and betrayal. This metaphor captures the emotional conflict of desiring achievement while simultaneously fearing its consequences, a classic representation of internal ambivalence and external pressure.

Defense Mechanisms: Repression, Projection, and Sublimation

Repression is the unconscious process of pushing distressing thoughts, memories, or feelings out of conscious awareness to avoid psychological pain. This defense mechanism is prominently reflected in the lyric (Stanza 5):

“Trauma that I'm burying, I think I need some therapy.”

Here, the metaphor of “burying” trauma illustrates the artist's effort to suppress painful emotional experiences. The admission of needing therapy suggests an awareness of this repression but also highlights the difficulty of confronting deeply rooted pain. This repression creates an internal tension, as the trauma remains active beneath the surface, influencing the artist's mental state without full conscious processing.

Further evidence of repression appears in the opening lines (Stanza 1):

“Yeah, I got voices in my head again, tread carefully / And I don't medicate, it helps me temporarily.”

The “voices” symbolize intrusive thoughts or unresolved unconscious conflicts that break through repression, causing distress and instability. The refusal to medicate suggests a reliance on temporary coping rather than fully facing these internal struggles, consistent with Freud's view that repression protects the ego from overwhelming anxiety but can lead to persistent psychological conflict.

The lyric (Stanza 2):

"I battle depression, I'm back with a message,"

also reflects the ongoing struggle with repressed emotional pain manifesting as depressive symptoms. The artist's "battle" is an internal conflict between the conscious self and repressed unconscious material.

Projection

Projection involves attributing one's own unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts onto others. This defense mechanism is clearly demonstrated in the song through the artist's depiction of enemies and critics. For example (Stanza 3):

"I can feel your energy, you are not a friend to me."

"I got people that don't like me in the industry."

"You started a battle, but bitch, I'm a finish it."

These lines reveal how the artist displaces internal hostility, fear, and mistrust onto external figures perceived as threats. By projecting these feelings outward, the artist manages internal anxiety and conflict, protecting the self from direct confrontation with painful emotions. This externalization also frames the artist's struggle as a battle against external adversaries, which may serve to justify defensive or aggressive behaviors.

The lyric (Stanza 4):

"They're lickin' their chops, they're fixin' to rip me apart,"

further illustrates projection by personifying abstract fears and insecurities as predatory enemies. This vivid imagery externalizes internal vulnerability, making the intangible threat more concrete and manageable psychologically. Projection here functions not only as a defense but also as a narrative device that dramatizes the artist's psychological turmoil, intensifying the emotional impact of the song.

Sublimation

Sublimation is a mature defense mechanism whereby unacceptable impulses or painful emotions are transformed into socially acceptable or productive activities. In "Watch the World Burn," sublimation is evident as the artist channels inner rage, trauma, and emotional pain into intense, aggressive musical expression.

For example, the lyrics (Stanza 6):

"I'm a lyrical typical supervillain, I'm venomous / And I'm never gonna stop until they put me on top of the list,"

reflect the transformation of unconscious rage into creative output. The artist adopts the persona of a "supervillain," embracing the darker aspects of the self and using them as fuel for artistic performance and identity.

The repeated affirmations of resilience and self-assertion, such as (Stanza 7):

"I'm picking it up, picking it up / Lovin', I'm livin', I'm picking it up,"

demonstrate conscious emotional regulation through sublimation. The artist actively chooses to rise above trauma and channel pain into empowerment and productivity.

Moreover, the lyric (Stanza 8):

"The fear is what keeps you alive / Break the fucking chains, take back your life,"

serves as a call to transform fear and pain into motivation for liberation and self-empowerment. This reflects the ultimate goal of sublimation—redirecting destructive emotions into constructive and healing forces.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of "Watch the World Burn" reveals a multifaceted portrayal of emotional states and psychoanalytic conflicts that deeply affect the artist's psyche. The lyrics vividly express internal fragmentation, trauma, depression, paranoia, and aggressive impulses, reflecting the dynamic tension between the id, ego, and superego as theorized by Freud. The artist's use of defense mechanisms such as repression, projection, sublimation, denial, and intellectualization illustrates complex coping strategies to manage overwhelming psychological distress.

Symbolism and metaphor in the lyrics serve as vehicles for expressing unconscious conflicts and emotional turmoil, while the oscillation between vulnerability and grandiosity highlights the fragile nature of the ego's mediation. The song's existential themes of fear, mortality, and control further enrich the psychological narrative, portraying a struggle to reclaim agency amid chaos.

This study contributes to literary psychology by demonstrating how contemporary music lyrics can function as profound psychological texts that articulate deep psychoanalytic conflicts and emotional states. It underscores the value of integrating psychoanalytic theory, literary psychology, and music psychology to understand the intricate relationship between artistic expression and mental processes.

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