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## **The Burden of Psychological Self-Awareness: A psychoanalytic study of Flowers for Algernon, Frankenstein and Brave New World.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the psychological consequences of self-awareness and scientific advancement in *Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World* through a psychoanalytic lens. Drawing on Freud's structural model of the psyche and Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, the study examines how alienation, identity crises, and repression shape the protagonists' psychological trajectories. Charlie Gordon, Victor Frankenstein, the Creature, and John "the Savage" each grapple with the burden of heightened self-awareness, leading to profound personal suffering and societal critique. The analysis highlights the destructive consequences of transcending natural boundaries, revealing how the repression of desires and the failure to integrate newfound consciousness contribute to their tragic fates. By comparing these narratives, this study argues that the pursuit of knowledge often results in psychological fragmentation, reinforcing broader questions about the ethical and emotional costs of human progress.

### **Introduction**

The pursuit of knowledge and the ethical dilemmas of scientific advancement have long been central to the human experience, often prompting questions about the psychological consequences of such pursuits. Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are landmark texts that interrogate these concerns, each presenting characters whose lives are irrevocably altered by science and society.

This paper employs psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freud's structural model of the psyche (id, ego, superego) and Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, to explore how self-awareness, alienation, and repression shape the protagonists' psychological journeys. The texts collectively examine the burdens of human consciousness and the emotional cost of

transcending natural boundaries. While Charlie Gordon, Victor Frankenstein, the Creature, and John "the Savage" represent unique perspectives on these issues, their struggles with alienation and identity offer profound insights into the human condition.

This study builds on existing scholarship by offering a comparative psychoanalytic analysis of the three novels, arguing that self-awareness and the repression of desires not only lead to personal suffering but also highlight broader societal critiques. Through this lens, the paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How do alienation and identity crises manifest in the protagonists of these novels?
2. What psychological consequences arise from the pursuit of knowledge and self-awareness?
3. How do creator-creation dynamics reflect themes of repression and responsibility?

## **1. Literature Review:**

### **Psychoanalytic Theory and the Study of Human Experimentation in Literature**

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and later theorists like Jacques Lacan, offers valuable insights into human psychology and behavior. By applying psychoanalysis to literature, we gain a deeper understanding of the unconscious forces that drive characters' actions, as well as the psychological implications of scientific experimentation and societal control.

In the context of *Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World*, psychoanalytic theory allows us to examine the internal struggles of the protagonists as they confront issues of identity, self-awareness, and alienation in the face of scientific advancement. Psychoanalysis also provides a framework for understanding how these novels critique the psychological consequences of societal expectations and the exploitation of human beings in the name of progress.

### **Freudian Psychoanalysis: The Id, Ego, and Superego**

Sigmund Freud's theory of the id, ego, and superego offers crucial insights into the unconscious motivations that drive behavior. The id, representing the primal, instinctual desires, seeks immediate gratification, often without regard for social norms or moral consequences.

The ego, in contrast, acts as the rational mediator between the desires of the id and the constraints of reality. The superego represents the internalization of societal norms and moral standards, and it acts as the conscience that guides the ego's decisions.

Freud argued that "the unconscious mind is the real psychic reality; in its innermost nature it is as little accessible to consciousness as the real world is to the senses" (Freud, 1915, p. 188). This idea is particularly relevant in the analysis of *Flowers for Algernon*, where Charlie's transformation reflects the dominance of the id and the gradual development of the ego as he becomes more self-aware. Freud's assertion that the unconscious is repressed but

still powerful is reflected in Charlie's eventual breakdown as his repressed emotional trauma surfaces with his intellectual development.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein's unchecked ambition illustrates Freud's concept of the id in its most dangerous form. As Freud explained, "The id is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality; the super-ego is the most moral part, the ego is the rational, executive part" (Freud, 1923, p. 60). Victor's desire to transcend death and create life is driven by the id, unmediated by the moral constraints of the superego. His disregard for ethical responsibility in creating the Creature leads to his downfall. Freud's idea of repression is critical here, as Victor represses the moral and ethical consequences of his actions in favor of scientific progress, only to have his guilt and remorse resurface later.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* illustrates the overwhelming control of the superego over individual desires in a dystopian society. The World State creates a society where the ego is deeply constrained by the superego's societal expectations, forcing individuals into predefined roles and eradicating the possibility of independent thought or desire. This is a direct reference to the societal imposition on individuality, where the superego dominates personal desires, molding citizens into conformist roles. The inability to think independently or deviate from societal norms in the World State mirrors Freud's notion of how the superego can stifle the development of a free and authentic self.

### **Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage and the Unconscious**

Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and his concept of the real, imaginary, and symbolic orders provide a deeper psychoanalytic framework for understanding the formation of identity. Lacan's mirror stage suggests that an individual's sense of self develops through the recognition of their own image in the mirror, marking a shift from a fragmented, unconscious state to a coherent sense of identity. However, this identity is always incomplete and subject to ongoing tension.

Lacan wrote that "the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated by the child's own image" (Lacan, 1949, p. 76). This idea is crucial in understanding Charlie's transformation in *Flowers for Algernon*. His initial sense of self is fragmented, and as his intelligence increases, he begins to recognize a more coherent image of himself. However, as Lacan explained, this image is never fully whole, and Charlie's self-awareness leads to internal conflict. Lacan's theory helps us understand Charlie's psychic fragmentation—his growing intelligence intensifies his awareness of his past, creating a rift between his former self and his new identity.

In *Frankenstein*, the Creature's struggle for identity can also be analyzed through Lacan's theory. The Creature, rejected by his creator and society, is caught in a cycle of seeking recognition. As Lacan stated, "the lack of the other's gaze is the lack of the self's recognition" (Lacan, 1977, p. 91). The Creature yearns for acknowledgment from Victor, yet his appearance and the rejection he faces prevent him from forming a coherent self-identity.

His search for a mirror—a reflection of his own value—is central to understanding his internal struggle.

In *Brave New World*, Lacan's symbolic order is represented by the societal norms and values that govern the World State. As he argues, "The Symbolic is the order of the signifier and the law" (Lacan, 1977, p. 134). The society in *Brave New World* imposes a rigid structure of roles, deeply affecting individual identity. Citizens are conditioned to accept predefined identities and roles, which leaves no room for personal development or individual consciousness. This mirrors Lacan's notion of the symbolic order, where the individual is subject to societal norms that prevent the development of a true sense of self.

## **2. Psychoanalytic Criticism of Human Experimentation and Identity**

Psychoanalysis offers an important framework for analyzing the psychological and societal implications of human experimentation in *Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World*. These novels critique the dehumanizing effects of scientific and societal control over human identity, revealing the tension between the individual's desires and the forces that shape their existence.

In *Flowers for Algernon*, the experiment that increases Charlie's intelligence illustrates Freud's idea of repression. Charlie's intellectual development exposes repressed desires, memories, and emotions, especially regarding his past treatment by others. Freud emphasized, "What we do not know about ourselves can often be most powerful in shaping our actions" (Freud, 1917, p. 198). As Charlie's intelligence grows, he gains insight into his past and the trauma he endured, but this newfound knowledge causes emotional pain. His experiment represents an attempt to bypass the natural limitations of human consciousness, but the consequences are psychological turmoil, reflecting Freud's belief that the unconscious mind cannot be so easily manipulated without repercussions.

Victor Frankenstein's scientific ambitions in *Frankenstein* illustrate the dangers of unchecked intellectual pursuit. Freud's assertion that "man's need for the Other is nothing but a form of the drive for self-preservation" (Freud, 1927, p. 55) underscores Victor's obsessive drive to control life, even at the expense of his own well-being and that of others. Victor's creation of the Creature, devoid of ethical considerations, leads to a breakdown of his own psychological state, demonstrating the consequences of ignoring the psychological complexities inherent in human existence.

In *Brave New World*, the role of societal control and the suppression of individuality is vividly portrayed. Huxley critiques the psychological consequences of a society that suppresses the id in favor of a conformist superego. The citizens of the World State are conditioned from birth to suppress desires, resulting in a lack of personal fulfillment and the repression of authentic emotional experiences. As Lacan observed, "The unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 1977, p. 103). In the World State, the citizens' unconscious desires are structured and manipulated through conditioning, preventing the emergence of true individuality.

### **Self-Awareness and Its Psychological Consequences**

The journey toward self-awareness is a recurring theme in *Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World*, each exploring how newfound understanding creates a psychological burden for the protagonists. By employing Freud's structural model and

Lacan's mirror stage, this section examines how self-awareness exacerbates feelings of alienation, guilt, and despair.

### **Charlie Gordon**

Charlie's intellectual transformation in *Flowers for Algernon* provides a poignant case of the psychological cost of self-awareness. Initially, Charlie's lack of intelligence shields him from understanding his social marginalization. However, as his intelligence increases, he confronts painful truths about himself and others.

One of the most devastating moments for Charlie occurs when he realizes the condescending behavior of those he once called friends. His increasing intelligence forces him to recontextualize his memories, leading to a heightened sense of isolation:

"It's hard to tell them apart. They all seem alike... They're all pretending to be something they're not. I am just as guilty as they are. I've been pretending I was something I'm not" (Keyes, 1966, p. 152).

This moment reflects Lacan's notion of the fragmented self, where the gap between the idealized image and the actual self leads to psychological dissonance. Charlie's awareness of his own limitations, as well as his fleeting brilliance, creates a painful confrontation with his impermanence.

### **Victor Frankenstein**

Victor's self-awareness emerges as both a source of pride and torment. His scientific achievements reflect his id's desire for power and dominance, yet his superego manifests as guilt and paranoia, particularly after the Creature begins wreaking havoc on his life. Victor's obsession with transcending natural limits highlights Freud's concept of the "death drive," where the pursuit of destructive knowledge leads to his psychological downfall:

"Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley, 1818, p. 39).

Victor's self-awareness comes too late, as he fails to anticipate the consequences of his actions until they irrevocably affect his loved ones.

### **The Creature**

The Creature's self-awareness develops as a gradual realization of his status as an outcast. His initial encounters with humanity reveal his innate desire for acceptance and connection, yet these desires are repeatedly thwarted by societal rejection. The Creature's reflection on his condition captures his growing despair:

"Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?" (Shelley, 1818, p. 120).

This lament illustrates the unbearable burden of self-awareness, as the Creature's recognition of his "otherness" becomes a source of existential anguish. Lacan's mirror stage provides a framework for understanding this crisis, as the Creature's failed attempt to see himself in the eyes of others fractures his identity.

## **John "the Savage"**

In *Brave New World*, John's self-awareness sets him apart from the conditioned citizens of the World State, creating an unbridgeable gap between his values and their superficiality. His exposure to Shakespeare gives him a framework for understanding emotions, beauty, and morality, yet this awareness also isolates him:

"I ate civilization. It poisoned me; I was defiled. And then," he added in a lower tone, "I ate my own wickedness" (Huxley, 1932, p. 259).

John's eventual descent into self-flagellation and suicide reflects Freud's concept of the superego's oppressive nature, as his internalized moral ideals clash with the hedonistic reality of the World State.

## **Creator-Creation Dynamics**

The relationship between creators and their creations is a central motif in *Frankenstein* and *Flowers for Algernon*, where both Victor Frankenstein and Dr. Nemur embody the role of god-like figures whose experiments lead to unintended consequences. This section explores how Freud's concept of repression and guilt shapes the dynamics between creators and their creations.

### **Victor and the Creature**

Victor's relationship with the Creature reflects his inability to accept responsibility for his actions. Freud's theory of repression is evident in Victor's consistent denial of his role in the Creature's suffering. Victor's fear of his creation stems from his refusal to confront his own moral failings, as illustrated when he exclaims:

"Begone! I do break my promise; never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness" (Shelley, 1818, p. 147).

Victor's rejection of the Creature highlights the projection of his own guilt onto his creation, making the Creature a symbol of his repressed fears and ambitions.

### **Dr. Nemur and Charlie**

Dr. Nemur's relationship with Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon* similarly reflects an imbalance of power and responsibility. Nemur's desire to advance his career blinds him to the ethical implications of his experiment, treating Charlie more as a test subject than a human being. Charlie's realization of this dynamic is evident in his accusation:

"You've made me and the mouse Algernon smarter than a human ever was, and now I see the end... you never really cared" (Keyes, 1966, p. 193).

Nemur's inability to confront the consequences of his experiment aligns with Freud's notion of repression, as he avoids taking accountability for Charlie's suffering.

## **John's Rejection of the World State**

While John's role as a creator is less literal, his attempt to live authentically in the World State makes him a symbol of rebellion and creativity. His rejection of soma and his embrace



of Shakespeare position him as a creator of his own values, yet the oppressive forces of the World State ultimately overpower him. John's cry, "I claim them all" (Huxley, 1932, p. 240), signifies his futile attempt to reconcile his individuality with a dehumanized society.

### **Societal Critique: The Dangers of Utopian Ideals**

Each of the novels under discussion—*Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World*—offers a sharp critique of the societal structures and ideologies that contribute to the suffering of the protagonists. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, these works expose the dangers of utopian ideals, particularly the belief in controlling and reshaping human nature.

### **Flowers for Algernon: The Exploitation of Scientific Advancement**

In *Flowers for Algernon*, the novel critiques the dehumanizing aspects of scientific experimentation, particularly when it is driven by ego and a desire for personal recognition. Dr. Nemur's ambitions to further his career blind him to the ethical implications of his research. He views Charlie not as a human being but as a tool for scientific success, reflecting the way society often exploits individuals in the name of progress. Freud's notion of the ego—which seeks to control and direct actions for the preservation of self-identity—can be seen in Dr. Nemur's approach to his research, as he represses the emotional and ethical consequences in favor of personal achievement.

Charlie's eventual realization of his exploitation comes when he reflects on the inherent inequality of the experiment:

"They told me I was a man of intelligence. They were wrong. They made me smarter, but they never made me a man" (Keyes, 1966, p. 160).

This statement reveals the fragility of intellectual identity and how societal expectations can fail to recognize the complexity of human experience.

### **Frankenstein: The Perils of Ambition and Scientific Hubris**

In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein's blind ambition mirrors the societal tendency to exploit scientific knowledge without regard for its consequences. His desire to transcend human limitations leads him to create life, yet he neglects the moral and emotional responsibilities tied to creation. The Creature, as a product of Victor's unchecked ambition, embodies the societal disregard for the consequences of unchecked scientific pursuit.

Victor's statement—"I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body" (Shelley, 1818, p. 36)—illustrates his detachment from the human costs of his project. This reflection also highlights the id's unrelenting desire to assert control over nature, demonstrating the moral consequences of unfettered scientific ambition.

### **Brave New World: The Price of Stability and Control**

*Brave New World* critiques the societal drive for absolute control through genetic engineering and psychological conditioning. In Aldous Huxley's dystopia, individuality is sacrificed in favor of societal stability. People are bred and conditioned to accept their roles, denying them the capacity for self-awareness and independent thought. The World State represents an

extreme form of Freud's superego, where societal norms and expectations are internalized to such an extent that personal desire and individuality are suppressed in favor of conformity.

John's refusal to conform to the World State's ideals exposes the dangers of suppressing individual autonomy for the sake of societal stability. His rejection of soma and ultimate suicide highlight the limits of control over the human psyche:

"I want to know what it's like to feel real things. I don't want to live in a world where everything is controlled" (Huxley, 1932, p. 253).

In this statement, John expresses a profound longing for genuine human experience, which he believes is impossible in a world of preordained roles and shallow happiness.

### **Conclusion: The Psychological, Moral, and Societal Implications of Human Experimentation**

The comparative analysis of *Flowers for Algernon*, *Frankenstein*, and *Brave New World* reveals a shared thematic concern with the consequences of human experimentation, scientific ambition, and societal control. Using psychoanalytic theory as a lens, we can observe how self-awareness, the dynamics between creator and creation, and the dangers of utopian ideals intertwine to form the psychological, moral, and societal underpinnings of these works.

In each novel, the protagonists are forced to confront the unintended consequences of their creators' actions, and this confrontation results in deep psychological turmoil. For Charlie, the emotional burden of self-awareness is compounded by his intellectual isolation; for Victor Frankenstein, his refusal to take responsibility for the Creature's suffering leads to his own psychological disintegration; for John, the attempt to reconcile his individual identity with a repressive society results in his tragic death.

These narratives demonstrate the importance of ethical responsibility in scientific progress and the dangers of attempting to control or reshape human nature without considering the emotional and psychological repercussions. The critique of scientific and societal ideals in these works serves as a cautionary tale about the limits of human knowledge and the importance of preserving individuality and human connection in the face of technological and societal forces.

The psychoanalytic lens reveals how the psychological burdens of self-awareness, guilt, and alienation are intrinsic to the human experience, particularly in societies that prioritize control and conformity over individuality and emotional depth. As we reflect on these texts, we are reminded of the need for empathy, ethical responsibility, and an acknowledgment of the psychological complexities inherent in human nature.



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