

# "A Freudian Psychoanalytic Interpretation Of Virginia Woolf's Orlando: Exploring Consciousness, Gender, And Identity"

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## Abstract:

This paper is an endeavor to explore the Freudian psychoanalytic theories in the novel, *Orlando* written by Virginia Woolf in 1928. The novel has gained widespread fame by many readers for its novel subject matter and gender themes. The study sheds light on conflict between conscious and unconscious, the coexistence of id, ego, and superego and gender fluidity. The protagonist of the novel find himself in a profound psychological dilemma of identity of gender. The paper analyses character's personality by applying psychoanalytic theories developed by Sigmund Freud.

**Keywords:** *Orlando: A Biography, Freud, Psychoanalysis, identity*

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## I. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is a prominent figure in British literature, known for her innovative use of the stream of consciousness narrative style and her contributions to feminism in the 20th century. "*Orlando: A Biography*", published in 1928, received considerable acclaim from both the public and literary critics for its pioneering themes and deep subject matter. The novel tells the story of Orlando, who initially fails in romantic relationships and his writing ambition. Subsequently, After an unexpected transformation into a woman, Orlando faces a significant psychological crisis. Ultimately, through determination, Orlando finds a harmonious blend of masculine and feminine traits, achieving personal redemption and becoming a celebrated poet in the modern age.

Previous studies have explored "*Orlando*" through various critical lenses, such as feminist, historical, and biographical perspectives. However, there is a notable absence of thorough analysis that combines Freudian psychoanalytic theory with Woolf's narrative techniques and thematic concerns. This study seeks to address this gap by applying Freudian psychoanalytic concepts to interpret the complexities of consciousness, gender, and identity in "*Orlando*."

Utilizing Freud's psychoanalytic theory to examine "*Orlando*" provides an intriguing perspective for understanding the novel's deeper psychological layers. Freud's ideas about the id, ego, and superego can help analyze Orlando's evolving sense of self over the centuries. The character's shift from male to female can be seen as a reflection of Freud's theory of bisexuality, which suggests that all individuals embody both masculine and feminine psychological traits. By merging Freudian analysis with Woolf's narrative style, this paper aims to reveal new insights into the psychological dimensions of the text. Additionally, the interactions between Orlando and other characters can be interpreted through Freudian concepts like transference and projection, illuminating the psychological complexities of "*Orlando*" and deepening our appreciation of this significant work in modernist literature.

## Aim/Objective:

This paper seeks to examine the psychological framework of *Orlando* and clarify its main themes and importance using Freudian analysis. The investigation will concentrate on essential Freudian ideas like the id, ego, and superego, along with the influence of the unconscious on Orlando's experiences and choices.

## Id, Ego, and Superego:

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian physician and psychologist who developed the theory of personality. Freud's theory argue that the human psyche consist of three components: id, ego, and superego, each developing at different stages of life. This framework is widely used in literary criticism to analyze character's behaviours and motivations.

Freud's theory suggests that the id is the core or foundation of our mind that is entirely subconscious. It governs our basic needs and desires, including sexual drive known as libido. It primarily works on the pleasure

principle. In the narrative, Orlando's behavior, particularly in his youth, exemplifies the workings of the id. He often makes impulsive decisions without considering the consequences, which is characteristic of the id's nature. It prioritizes immediate gratification over future implications, focusing solely on the pursuit of pleasure. Orlando's spontaneous choices to explore new experiences, alter his lifestyle, or act on his desires without delay illustrate the id in action. While these impulsive decisions can lead to thrilling adventures and personal growth, they may also result in complications that could have been avoided with a more cautious approach. This highlights the tension between the id's fundamental urges and the developing aspect of the mind that confronts reality.

The id is driven by the pleasure principle, while the ego functions according to the reality principle. The ego is the central part of our personality that makes conscious choices, balancing our fundamental desires with societal expectations. In the narrative of Orlando, we observe how the ego aids individuals in self-understanding, particularly regarding gender and social norms. As Orlando transitions from a man to a woman, their ego facilitates the adjustment to new experiences while preserving essential aspects of their identity. This illustrates the ego's flexibility and strength, enabling Orlando to thrive across various time periods without losing their authentic self. The story uses Orlando's journey to explore the interplay between personal identity and social conventions, emphasizing how the ego helps reconcile authenticity with societal conformity. As Orlando navigates through different eras, their self-awareness allows them to maintain their true identity, adapting their behaviour and appearance to align with the cultural context of each period.

According to Freud, the Superego can be defined as the conscience part of the mind because it has the ability to differentiate between reality. It distinguishes what is right or wrong. Freud believed that without this conscious part of our personality, individuals would act out with aggression and other immoral behaviours. The Superego is considered to be the "consciousness" of a person's personality. It has the capacity to suppress impulses originating from the Id. Orlando's moral values also change as they live through different time periods and experience life as both a man and a woman. In the novel, the role of the Superego is evident in Orlando's life. It develops throughout Orlando's journey, as seen in the character's evolving sense of morality and social responsibility. As Orlando experiences life as both genders, they learn about the expectations society has for men and women. Additionally, Orlando's desire to be a great writer is influenced by both their own ambitions and what society considers good literature. We see a struggle between what Orlando wants to do and what they feel they should do based on society's rules. As Orlando matures, they feel a stronger sense of responsibility towards society. Orlando learns to adapt to different cultures and time periods, illustrating how people can change their beliefs and behaviours.

As Orlando goes out into the night, disguised as a man, he finds herself adopting traditional male masculine behaviours. In the 15th century, he wears fine attire and serves as a courtier to his Queen; in the 17th century, he acquires the Turkish language and fit in himself to marvellous customs; in the 18th century, he learns how to adapt in the society, and in the 19th century, he wears women's attire and finds a husband. Throughout his journey he recognizes the necessity of change in order to survive. However, such conformity becomes stifling to Orlando. He grows tired of changing himself to satisfy those around him. In the end, when he reaches maturity in the 20th century, she resists conforming and preferring to exist in her own inner world. He finds that though she has matured, as people do, he has always been the same person throughout his life. hence, the theme of "id, ego and superego" is a dominant theme in the novel. When Orlando becomes mature, he rejects the idea of conformity with society and prefers to maintain his chosen identity.

### **Consciousness and unconscious conflicts:**

Freud's theory of mental analysis breaks down human psychology into three key components: consciousness, preconscious, and unconscious. The unconscious refers to all the aspects of our awareness that we are not actively aware of, and it serves as a major driving force behind our speech, emotions, and behaviors. This includes repressed or forgotten elements such as desires, fears, and sexual urges. The unconscious primarily seeks to fulfill its desires, significantly influencing human conduct. Consciousness, on the other hand, encompasses what we can perceive at any given moment, representing the level of psychological life that is directly accessible to us. Freud likens people's character to an iceberg floating in the sea, where the visible part above the water represents the conscious mind, while the vast majority, submerged beneath the surface, consists of unconscious elements that shape our development and behavior, including conflicts and struggles between individuals.

The clash between consciousness and unconscious knowledge has sparked a contradiction within Orlando, deepening his spiritual crisis. Orlando finds it difficult to identify as either a man or a woman, feeling instead like a feather caught in madness. At this time, the UK is a society heavily influenced by patriarchal culture, where the status of men and women is starkly unequal. Men dominate all sectors, including the military, industry, technology, and education. Orlando recalls, "As a man, I believed that a woman should adhere to three out of four moral standards, listen to the wise, and dress appropriately." Now, she seeks to embrace those who wish to pay for her transformation. Consequently, Orlando has begun to suppress her so-called feminine temperament, opting to wear pearl necklaces and satin dresses, much like a British lady. This inherent drive often manifests in

unexpected ways, leading many of us to find ourselves in situations that are beyond our control, where this unpredictability reigns.

In the novel, Orlando falls in love with a foreign princess, but the relationship ends in failure and heartache. He becomes sad and retreats into solitude. To ease his pain, Orlando decides to write. "He stood tall in the empty room, vowing to become the first poet in his family. Orlando reflected on the family legacy and consciously compared the literary greats to renowned soldiers, ultimately concluding that while battles and hunting grounds may fade, only Sir Thomas Browne and his works would endure. He viewed writers and their creations as the most sacred and profound means of self-discovery, even if they were unaware of it. This realization ignited a passion in his heart, motivating him to actively pursue writing and establish his place in the literary world. Additionally, Orlando had started working on "Oak" long ago but had set it aside; now he felt compelled to resume. This decision stemmed from his subconscious belief that after his gender transformation, everything in his life had changed except for the "Oak Tree" manuscript. He often felt lonely, yet the oak provided him with companionship and meaning. Throughout his literary journey, Orlando gradually came to understand that literature was his source of strength, allowing him to continue writing. As a result, "Oak" became a vital part of his identity. After a fire in Constantinople, Orlando transformed into a woman. There was no sign of panic. He donned the Turkish coat and trousers worn by both men and women and left Constantinople under the cover of night. He joined a Gypsy tribe and lived among them. However, when Orlando finally wore fashionable women's clothing and sat on the deck of the ship returning to China, the captain was extremely attentive, supporting him as he realized both his current identity and his sense of loss.

### **Gender role in Orlando:**

According to Simone de Beauvoir, Gender is a socially constructed code, which considers all the behaviours, actions and roles. Gender consciousness emerged in the first decades of the 20th century and many feminists' scholars have argued for an understanding of femininity and masculinity. According to gender role theory, children acquire appropriate behaviours from their family environment and the broader cultural context in which they are raised. De Beauvoir has established the boundaries of women's roles across various cultures, asserting that a woman's societal image is not determined by any biological, psychological, or economic factors. She further contends that it is society as a whole that shapes women's identities and roles.

The theme of gender roles is evident in "Orlando: A Biography." When Orlando, who begins as male, suddenly finds himself transformed into a female, she does not feel immediate distress about this change. Initially, she sees no difference between her past and present identities. However, as time goes on, societal expectations make her more conscious of her feminine role. This reflects Woolf's aim to show that gender roles are shaped by society rather than being biologically fixed. This idea aligns with De Beauvoir's perspective on gender, viewing it as a fluid and context-dependent trait rather than a static characteristic that remains constant across different eras and cultures. It also reinforces the idea that womanhood is not something inherent but rather something that is learned. "Orlando: A Biography" delves into the complexities of gender roles and identity crises while also offering a historical viewpoint through the lens of a modernist writer like Virginia Woolf.

Woolf connection to psychoanalysis is closely tied to feminist criticism. Her critiques are marked by both gender and the era in which she wrote. Her exploration of female desire and the relationship with the mother was part of the broader discussion on female sexuality that emerged in the 1920s. It is significant that starting in the 1970s, many women writers felt the need to redefine Freudian or Freudian-influenced concepts to adequately explore female identity. This has made Woolf's connection to psychoanalysis inseparable from gender issues.

In the past two decades, feminist interpretations of Woolf's work have emerged, focusing on "madness" as a central theme but reading it as an expression of a specific type of femininity and a form of protest against a dominant male society. The depiction of Woolf as a feminist social and political commentator in the 1930s has become so commonplace in Woolf studies that it is now somewhat of a cliché to note, as Alice Wood points out, that "she channeled her intellectual focus into critiquing patriarchy at this time." However, to her contemporaries, Woolf's major works from the early 1930s did not necessarily seem more politicized than her writings from the 1920s (Wood 2014).

The first part of the novel portrays Orlando as a man whose masculinity is mixed with femininity. The narrator strongly declares that Orlando is definitely a boy; "He - for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Woolf 1995). The narrator further indicates this in the description of Orlando:

*The red of his cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short tense flight, the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head. We must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and winded them; and a brow like a swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallion which his temples. (Woolf 1995)*

According to Butler and De Beauvoir, feminism challenges the idea that biology determines destiny. Instead, it provides an understanding of patriarchal culture, suggesting that masculine and feminine identities are shaped by cultural biases rather than being inherent to male and female bodies. This idea is illustrated through Orlando's journey. Furthermore, a modern interpretation of gender highlights its fluid nature. The concept of gender ambiguity is closely tied to the freedom to choose one's gender identity. The scene where Orlando undergoes a sex change is pivotal in exploring these themes. When she wakes up as a woman, Orlando calmly inspects her body in a full-length mirror before taking a bath. She shows no signs of distress regarding her transformation and initially acts the same as before. However, her experience shifts when she boards an English ship dressed in women's clothing; the skirts and the reactions of those around her lead her to feel and act differently.

### **Life and Death instincts:**

After *The instinct of life is proposed with the dead instinct*. (Freud).

According to Sigmund Freud, Human has two instincts, which can be called a living (EROS) and death instinct (Thanatos). These two instincts are Greek words, meaning "love" and "death". Life instinct represents love and strength; death instinct means to hatred and destroy, desire to die. Life instinct reflects individual life, growth and sexuality. It is the body of human psychological needs. It is the source of strength, always guarding life, representing every event in life. Life can be seen, for example, someone survived from a fire, or someone resurrected after being damaged. In short, life can be called the process of creating a miracle of life. Life can be built on the principle of pursuing happiness, that is, the principle of happiness. Freud believes that this is the driving of the so-called happiness, pursuing happiness, avoiding pain.

After meeting with the princess of Moscow, Orlando was crazy about her love, which proved her pursuit of happiness. "Skating and love make them boiling, they will wrap the big fur tart, lying down on the ice mask of Huangliu; Orlando hugs her, and feels the joy of love for the first time.". Although Orlando is more sensible, he also shows vitality and optimism from time to time, this is his life. Orlando loves nature. Woolf wrote in the book. "Love nature is a British disease in Orlando and the rest. She turned over the mountains, stroll through the canyon, and smashed the red hyacinth and purple. Iris, I can't help but I am grateful to myself." Orlando is close to nature, can truly understand the vitality and vitality of nature and life, which also symbolizes his ability to live. Death can be divided into internal and export types. When the impulse points to the inner, people limit their power, torture themselves, go to extreme, such as bias. When this impulse is out of range, it is often hurting and offering others when it is outside the range.

Freud believes that the death of this can do everything efforts to push the individual to destruction, because only there can we find calm, eliminate pressure and struggle. Life is evolved from the inorganic matter. From the moment we born, we started to run to the grave. This is an unconscious tendency. Only when we have arrived, we stopped the desire for the body or spiritual struggle. Death is the end of life, is the final steady state of life. The ultimate goals of all life are death. Woolf suffers from serious mental illness, once committed suicide. Fortunately, her husband is careful, she has to have a good life to create a work. Woolf himself has a very positive attitude toward death. In her eyes, death is not dark, nor an end, is a new beginning, it is challenge. Orlando will often fall into an inexplicable depression, and often express his views on death. Even when he is in love with Saha, he will be frustrated because of seeing an old woman with a fate. Whenever, he will face it downwards, attach the ice, stare with the frozen river in the inside, and think of death. "Death is the home of all things". When Orlando turns into a woman, she will also publish the death of death from time to time. For example, when she saw Sheldon for the first time, she said: "I am dead, Mr.!" In fact, when she said this sentence, it indicated that she had always had a desire to die. Just as Woolf said in the "Mrs. Dalloway", "death The dead is resistant. Death is an attempt to communicate. Just near alienation, ecstasy, retreat, people return to loneliness ". Orlando's desire to death is almost throughout the novel. According to Freud's death instinct, you can put this behaviour and attitude in order to explain the humanity, that is, when people encounter difficulties and obstacles, they often choose to end life. They believe that death is the ultimate home of all organisms. However, when people find opportunities, or actually When fighting with death in the sense, life can play a role. Orlando also has this feeling. He still has hope to live, realize his ambition. This is two instinct theories of novels. Performance. Births can often tend to integrate life substances into a larger overall form, while death capabilities, pushing life substances to organic states. These two power interactions and mutual resistance Continuously produce life phenomena until death. Death is the desire to return to the uterus or nature, but this is the potential psychological implies of Woolf.

## **II. Conclusion:**

Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" offers a landscape for exploring Freudian psychoanalytic ideas, especially concerning consciousness, gender, and identity. The protagonist's journey through different centuries and genders sheds light on essential Freudian theories, including the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego, the conflict between conscious and unconscious motivations, and the fluid nature of gender roles.

The analysis shows how Orlando's character growth corresponds with Freudian views on personality structure. The id manifests in Orlando's spontaneous actions and quest for pleasure, while the ego balances internal desires with external realities as Orlando adapts to various time periods and societal expectations. The influence of the superego is evident in Orlando's changing moral compass and sense of social duty across diverse cultural settings. The novel's examination of gender transformation and identity questions conventional ideas of fixed gender roles, resonating with modern feminist readings of psychoanalytic theory. Woolf's depiction of Orlando's shifting gender identity reinforces the notion that gender is a social construct rather than a biological fact, reflecting the thoughts of later feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir.

Additionally, the exploration of life and death instincts in "Orlando" sheds light on the character's psychological conflicts and the broader human condition. The struggle between Eros (the life instinct) and Thanatos (the death instinct) is mirrored in Orlando's fluctuating states of energy and despair, paralleling Woolf's own intricate relationship with existence and mortality.

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