

Freud as a Tool of Literary Criticism: Unbalanced Personality Structures in Shel Silverstein's the Giving Tree

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*Abi Zaky Mashuri, Krisna Sujiwa^{ab} 

¹²English Literature Departmen, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: abizaki01putra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

While Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* is widely interpreted as a story of unconditional love and selfless giving, such interpretations may pay less attention to the unequal relational dynamics between the Boy and the Tree. Previous studies have predominantly examined the story from ethical, moral, or ecofeminist perspectives, leaving limited analysis of psychological dependence, personality structures, and unhealthy relational patterns between the two characters. This study addresses this gap by applying Freudian psychoanalysis as a framework for literary criticism. Using a qualitative descriptive method and in-depth textual analysis, the study examines the characters' relationship through Freud's concepts of personality structure (Id, Ego, and Superego), defense mechanisms, and instinct theory. The findings indicate an imbalance in personality structures: the Boy is predominantly driven by the Id and pleasure principle, while the Tree demonstrates a weak Ego and an excessive Superego through continuous self-sacrifice. Their interaction develops into a repetitive pattern of psychological dependence in which the Tree's unconditional giving reinforces the Boy's dependence. The study concludes that *The Giving Tree* can also be read as a representation of unhealthy relational dynamics and the psychological consequences of idealized self-sacrifice.

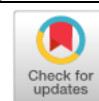
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INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is often considered to be a simple entertainment for young readers. However, developmental psychology research and literary analysis indicate that children's stories have an important role in shaping cognitive, emotional, and social development. With stories, children are introduced to human behavior, relationship patterns, moral considerations, by managing emotions that can influence their understanding of themselves and others. Symbolic narratives are also a psychological space for children to process unconscious conflicts with emotional experiences that occur indirectly. Therefore, children's literature is not just a neutral cultural product, but is related to ideological, ethical, and psychological messages that can shape views and leave a long-term impression on children's development.

One of the most popular children's literature works to read and often problematic is *The Giving Tree* by Silverstein (1964). The story indicates a lifelong relationship between a boy and a tree. Some parts of the tree continue to be given in fulfilling the wishes of the Boy who appear over and over again. In popular interpretation, this story is often understood to be a parable related to unconditional love, generosity, and self-sacrifice that is considered noble and praiseworthy. In the discussion of education or the general public, Tree is often idealized as a moral figure, while the behavior of Boys who continue to receive without giving back is rarely questioned. With this analysis, excessive selflessness is positioned as a policy that does not seem to have to be criticized. This results in an unbalanced relationship between the giver and the direct recipient considered normal. However, this general moral interpretation can

simplify the relationship between the two characters as if the story only has one meaning and does not contain more complicated and diverse relational problems.

The Giving Tree indicates that there is an imbalance in the relationship that makes the traditional moral interpretation of this story questionable. The boy demands the fulfillment of his desires without indicating reciprocity, reflection, or emotional development. Instead, the Tree continues to sacrifice its well-being in fulfilling every request. As a substitute for indicating a caring relationship, this story indicates a pattern of dependence, exploitation, and one-sided feelings that are getting worse. If the pattern of giving without limits and receiving without control is constantly presented to children, unhealthy relationships can be considered normal, which is especially in terms of emotional dependence, personal boundaries, self-esteem, with reciprocal responsibility.

Previous research related to The Giving Tree has used several interrelated viewpoints where the analysis of ecofeminism emphasizes the symbolic relationship that occurs between humans and nature, specifically about environmental exploitation and gender-based sacrifice. Ethical analysis focuses on the value of kindness and generosity in children's literature, while psychological analysis discusses the influence of stories on the development of empathy with children's morals. However, most of these studies still have limitations in ethical and thematic discussions on the surface, so the psychological mechanisms in the relationship between characters have not been extensively analyzed. In fact, the relationship between psychoanalysis and children's literature has long been discussed theoretically (García-González & Véliz, 2023; Kidd, 2004). Children's stories often contain the dynamics of subconscious relationships with characters, conflicts, and narrative structures (Coats, 2001; Cocks, 2023; Sujiwa et al., 2023). Although both fields have a mutually influential scientific history, critics often prioritize one by not discussing the ideological and disciplinary relationships between the two (Kidd, 2004). Nodelman (2008) also indicated that children's books can contain adult ideologies related to morality with implicit social relationships. According to Lesnik-Oberstein (1994, 2019), it indicates that psychoanalytic criticism of children's literature needs to conduct an analysis related to how childhood is shaped in fictional works so that children should not be judged as passive recipients, but as active interpreters whose understanding is caused by narrative structure.

Despite this rich theoretical tradition, within children's literature scholarship few studies have examined how the characters' interactions in The Giving Tree might reflect internal psychological conflicts, personality structures, or pathological relational patterns from a Freudian perspective. This constitutes a gap in children's literature research, as it does limit our understanding of how narratives like The Giving Tree may unconsciously offer relational models to young readers. Without this analysis, it is not certain whether the child reader will consider that an unbalanced relationship, for example the relationship between the Tree and the Boy, is normal and acceptable. The Freudian psychoanalytic approach can be used to reveal hidden layers in the story, specifically the inner conflict with the psychological dynamics between the two characters. Therefore, research inequality in children's literary analysis can be limited, not only by psychological interpretation in general.

To answer this inequality, therefore, this study uses two main questions, the first of which is related to how Freudian psychoanalysis indicates the dynamics of the relationship between Boys and Pohin in The Giving Tree. Second, what subconscious personality structures can shape the relationship between the two characters and how can those structures form patterns in *codependency*? To be able to expand the context of the research, in which The Giving Tree is positioned in the analysis of America, which has viewed cultural texts as a reflection of social values, ideologies, and the historical experience of American society. In American analysis, literary works are not only considered as aesthetic objects, but also as cultural documents containing dominant views related to individualism, morality, and human relations. Therefore, children's literature in the United States has helped shape cultural values regarding responsibility, self-identity, and the ethics of care. The popularity of The Giving Tree indicates how necessary it is to carry out an analysis on the story related to selfless giving with unquestioned sacrifice, whose relationship in particular is altruism, moral virtue, and

hope in social relationships. By combining psychoanalytic analysis with an American analytical view, the relationship between Boys and Trees is understood not only as a psychological dynamic, but also as a cultural narrative that can indicate and enhance views on sacrifice and dependence in American culture. These results were then associated with idealized values of individualism and self-sacrifice (Hooks, 2000; Lasch, 1979; Riesman et al., 1950).

This study is of the opinion that the Freudian psychoanalysis framework is effective in filling in the inequality of deeper research. Freud's personality model consisting of Id, Ego, and Superego can be used in analyzing desires, moral obligations, and the formation of personal boundaries, and inner conflicts in literary figures. Psychosexual developmental theories with self-defense mechanisms can also encourage explanations in patterns of dependence, fixation, and self-destructive behavior in relationships. The concept of psychoanalysis has long been used in literary criticism (Coats, 2020; Cocks, 2023), but in its systematic implementation in children's literature still has limitations where the latest analysis indicates that a psychoanalytic approach with cognitive can reveal the way narrative shapes the understanding of relationships with children's emotions (Coats, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2012, 2013, 2014). With its implementation on *The Giving Tree* where Freudian readings can indicate related to the psychological structure hidden behind the moral message of the seemingly simple story. Rudd (2001) indicates that psychoanalytic analysis can reveal desires and subconscious fears in texts but must also keep in mind the literary characteristics of children. García-González (2023) indicates the support of *childist literary criticism* that is based on affective in understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions in children's texts.

Although Freud's theory is often used in literary analysis, its systematic implementation in *The Giving Tree*, which specifically discusses the *Codependency* and pathological giving behavior, still has limitations. This deficiency indicates conceptual inequality because it limits the understanding of how children's stories can unconsciously show unhealthy psychological patterns. Analysis on the normalization of self-sacrifice with power imbalances is important because stories can shape expectations related to relationships and ethical understanding of young readers (Coats, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2012, 2018). In the analysis of children's literature, where the debate is still ongoing between a moral-philosophical approach that considers selfless giving to be an ideal value and a critical approach that questions the psychological impact on children. Gubar (2013) indicates that children's literary criticism often forms an idealized childhood stage and does not necessarily match the real experience of children. Ethical analysis also has a tendency to praise the sacrifice of the Tree as a form of altruism without questioning the possibility of normalizing dependence with the loss of personal boundaries. Children's literature to strengthen the ideology of selflessness with sacrifices that have the potential in terms of influencing the development of young readers' identities (Zipes, 1982). Therefore, the emotional and psychological responses arising from the narrative must be analyzed more deeply (Vaughn & Massey, 2022).

This study steps into that discussion, kind of, by giving a psychoanalytic reading that challenges the main moral interpretation, and in the process contributes mostly to children's literature scholarship, not just applying psychoanalytic ideas to a children's text. Such critical attention is essential because uncritical readings of texts depicting extreme self-sacrifice may inadvertently reinforce imbalanced relational schemas in children's developing sense of self and others (Cocks, 2023). By answering the research questions posed above, this study aims to investigate how the relationship between the Boy and the Tree reflects unbalanced personality structures and codependent relational dynamics through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens. Analyzing the Boy as a dominant Id with oral-stage fixation and the Tree as a manifestation of a weak Ego and an unhealthy Superego, this research repositions the story not as a simple moral tale of selfless love, but as a narrative that dramatizes psychological conflict and relational pathology. By doing so, this study ends up contributing to children's literature studies sort of, by questioning more idealized takes on sacrifice, it also does psychoanalytic literary criticism, extending Freudian ideas into kids stories and narratives. And then in educational discourse, it points out the relevance of mediating, not just passing along, the

psychological messages that are embedded in these texts for young readers, which honestly is crucial.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literary research design using interpretive textual analysis to examine the psychological and relational dynamics between the Boy and the Tree in Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964). The analysis was guided by Freud's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the structural model of personality consisting of the Id, Ego, and Superego (Freud, 1923/1961), supplemented by the concepts of defense mechanisms and instinct theory. The primary data were drawn exclusively from *The Giving Tree*, while relevant secondary sources, including previous literary studies and theoretical works on Freudian psychoanalysis, were used to support interpretation and contextualization.

The analysis included both the verbal and visual elements of the picturebook because meaning in children's literature may be constructed through the interaction between written text and illustrations (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). The units of analysis consisted of narrative episodes involving interactions between the Boy and the Tree, particularly the Boy's requests, the Tree's responses, the characters' actions, and the progressive physical transformation of the Tree. Eight major interaction episodes were identified chronologically, covering the Boy's development from childhood to old age. Data were selected purposively because each episode represented a significant change in the relationship, including a new request, an act of giving, a response to that request, or a transformation in either character.

Data analysis was conducted through repeated close readings of the primary text and illustrations. Two researchers independently identified and coded relevant interaction units according to predetermined psychoanalytic indicators. The Id was identified through behaviors involving immediate gratification and instinctive demands; the Ego through attempts to negotiate desires with reality and establish boundaries; and the Superego through moral considerations, self-sacrifice, and internalized obligations. Defense mechanisms, particularly rationalization, denial, and repression, were identified from patterns of justification or avoidance of conflict, while Eros and Thanatos were examined through behaviors associated with preservation, attachment, growth, and progressive self-destruction. The researchers subsequently compared their coding and discussed differences until reaching interpretive consensus. The coded data were then grouped into thematic categories and examined chronologically to identify recurring patterns in the Boy-Tree relationship. Direct textual and visual evidence was used to support each interpretation. The analysis was interpretive rather than clinical; therefore, Freudian concepts were applied as literary analytical tools and were not used to diagnose the fictional characters. The findings were subsequently interpreted in relation to psychological dependence and relational imbalance within the narrative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate how the relationship between the Boy and the Tree in *The Giving Tree* reflects unbalanced personality structures and codependent relational dynamics when analyzed through a Freudian psychoanalytic framework. The results of the study are formed in four main findings obtained through a qualitative content analysis of the main text where before the results are presented, a chronological summary related to the Boy's request with the sacrifices made by the Tree at each stage of his life is first indicated to indicate a pattern of relationships that continue to experience repetition.

Table 1. Life Stages of the Story

Life Stage	The Boy's Request	The Tree's Sacrifice
Childhood	"Can I pick your apples?"	Gives apples, branches for swinging
Adolescence	"Can you give me some money? I want to buy things and have fun."	Gives all apples to be sold
Adulthood	"Can you give me a house?"	Gives all branches to build a house
Adulthood (later)	"Can you give me a boat?"	Gives trunk to be made into a boat
Old Age	"I need a quiet place to sit and rest."	Gives stump for sitting

Table 1 indicates a chronological summary related to the Boy's demands for the sacrifice of the Tree at each stage of his life. The story is classified into five main phases, including childhood, adolescence, adulthood, late adulthood, and old age. In each stage where the Boy's request for material or physical sacrifice given by the Tree has been clearly identified. This chronological division is used as the basis for the next psychoanalytic analysis because the increase in the demands of boys with the gradual decline of the condition of the tree can be clearly indicated so that the two patterns form a *cycle of codependency* that is analyzed in the next section.

Dominance of the Id in the Boy Character

Based on the analysis of 8 interaction episodes, the Boy consistently demonstrates a dominant Id. Table 2 summarizes the three key manifestations of oral-aggressive fixation in the Boy's behavior.

Table 2. Oral Stage Fixation

Aspects of Oral Fixation	Manifestation in Boy Behavior	Supporting Quotes
Extreme Dependence	Always returns to the Tree to meet all physical and emotional needs.	"Can you give me...?" (repeatedly)
Operation	Takes everything the Tree has (apples, branches, trunk) without regard for the consequences.	"I want to buy things and have fun."
Inability to Give	There is not a single scene where the Child gives anything to the Tree.	-

The three key manifestations of oral-aggressive fixation in the Boy's behavior. As shown in the table, the Boy consistently returns to the Tree to meet all his physical and emotional needs, as reflected in his repeated question, "Can you give me...?". Table 2 illustrates that the Boy takes everything the Tree has (apples, branches, and trunk) without regard for the consequences, as seen in his statement, "I want to buy things and have fun." Finally, table 2 highlights that there is not a single scene in which the Child gives anything back to the Tree, underscoring his complete inability to reciprocate.

Dysfunctional Ego and Pathological Superego in the Tree

The Tree exhibits a psychological paradox, a weak Ego and an exaggerated, pathological Superego. Table 3 summarizes the structural imbalance in personality organization between the two characters.

Table 3. Personality Structure

Character	Personality Structure	Event	Psychologic
The Boy	Id.	Asking for apples, money, houses, boats, and seats without ever thanking or considering the condition of the Tree.	Unhealthy (dominant and fixation)
The Tree	Ego (Weak)	Always giving in to the boy's requests without being able to refuse, think about the risks to the boy, or negotiate a solution that does not harm him.	Unhealthy (fails to perform Ego functions properly)
The Tree	SuperEgo (Unhealthy)	Saying "I am happy" after every sacrifice, and justifying self-destruction as a virtue.	Unhealthy (pushing himself)

Table 3 indicates that there is an imbalance in personality structure between the two characters where based on the table, boys are indicated to have a dominant Id. This is indicated by the demands that continue to occur repeatedly without any gratitude or concern for the state of the Tree. Instead, a weak Ego is indicated from the Tree through its inability to refuse the Boy's request or offer options that are not too detrimental to itself. The tree also has an unhealthy Superego because self-destruction continues to be justified as a good deed. This justification is indicated by the statement, "I am happy," which is always uttered after every sacrifice is made.

Defense Mechanisms as Regulators of Anxiety

The analysis indicated that both characters used mechanisms in self-defense to maintain an unbalanced relationship by lowering anxiety. A tree that specifically rationalizes by considering its physical suffering to be happiness. Deviant altruism and denial are also used to ignore his self-destruction. Rationalization is indicated in the repeated phrase, "and the Tree is happy." After giving the apple and its twigs, the Tree is still declared happy. Even after only stumps remained, the Tree still said, "The tree is happy... but it's not." The repetition becomes a psychological protection that can help the Tree in denying the pain by believing that sacrifice equals happiness.

Conversely, where the Boy uses regression by returning to dependence, for example, is a young boy in the face of the pressures of adult life where he has suppressed the guilt indicated by the absence of remorse throughout the story. He never apologized or acknowledged the suffering of the Tree. The conversation is always a request, an example of which is "Can you give me...?" Even in old age, when the Tree has nothing left, the Boy still thinks only of himself. He said, "Now I don't need much... just a quiet place to sit and rest. I'm so tired." There is no apology or thank you for all the sacrifices of the Tree. This absence of guilt indicates that his moral consciousness is deeply suppressed. The defense mechanism has been embedded in the personalities of the two characters, so that an unhealthy relationship is never realized. This is because inner conflict is constantly avoided, the cycle of giving and receiving the pathological continues throughout their lives.

Instinctual Imbalance and the Triumph of Thanatos

In the beginning, where the attentive behavior of the Tree indicates Eros or the instinct of life, which is indicated through growth and the giving of some resources to the Boy. However, due to the weak Ego and the deviant Superego, the impulse that originally drove the life slowly turned into a self-destruction mechanism. Any action that is considered to be a form of "love" can actually gradually eliminate the physical existence of the Tree. The Boy complements this dynamic by manifesting outward-directed Thanatos, characterized by a systematic stripping of the Tree's body that symbolizes a passive-aggressive form of destructiveness. By the narrative's conclusion, both characters reach a state of stagnation where the Tree is reduced to a stump and the Boy is left in a state of existential exhaustion. This final state supports the symbolic dominance of Thanatos over Eros, resulting in a

symbolic psychological death where neither vitality nor the potential for mutual growth remains.

Table 4. Dynamic of Instinct and Victory for Thanatos

Appearance	The Tree (Enabler)	The Boy (Dependent)
Initial Push	Eros: giving out of love	Eros: accepting because of need
Distortion	Eros turns into self-sacrifice	Eros turns into exploitation
Mechanism	Weak ego, unhealthy SuperEgo (cannot say "no")	Dominant id, oral fixation (always feeling inadequate)
The final result	Physical destruction (only the root remains)	Emotional devastation (loneliness, exhaustion)
Irony	Claiming to be "happy" (rationalization)	Not really happy

Table 4 illustrates the transformation of Eros into Thanatos across the two characters. As shown in the table, the Tree begins with Eros (giving out of love), but this drive becomes distorted into self-sacrifice due to its weak Ego and unhealthy Superego. The Boy, on the other hand, starts with Eros (accepting because of need), but this turns into exploitation driven by his dominant Id and oral fixation. The table also indicates that the final result is physical destruction for the Tree (only a stump remains) and emotional devastation for the Boy (loneliness and exhaustion), with the irony that the Tree claims to be happy while the Boy is not really happy.

Structural Codependency Pattern

The interaction between the Boy and the Tree can be read as something like a repetitive and pathological relational loop that starts when a need shows up, then it moves into a kind of asking for immediate gratification, followed by sacrificial compliance that feels obligated, and then this brief bit of fulfillment, before it all drifts back to that emotional emptiness again. Therefore, the pattern of repeated relationships is in accordance with the clinical picture of *codependency*. Trees have a role in supporting unhealthy behaviors by forming identities through excessive self-sacrifice, while the emotional development of Boys is stopped in dependence like a child. Therefore, their relationship does not indicate a balanced bond, but indicates an unequal personality structure that maintains a detrimental pattern. The normalization of the behavior of giving without limits by receiving without control makes the relationship a form of emotional inequality and a way of dealing with unhealthy problems. This pattern inhibits healthy development and reciprocal relationships.

Table 5. Cycle Internships

Cycle Internships	Boy Role (Dependent)	Tree Role (Enabler/Codependent)
Demand/Need	Facing life's problems (need money, a home, escape).	-
Request	Returning to the Tree and asking for a solution ("Can you give me...?").	Listening to the Boy's request.
Sacrifice	-	Offering part of oneself (apple, branch, trunk) as a solution.
Fulfillment & Rationalization	Taking what is offered and leaving.	Rationalizing the sacrifice with the statement "I am happy."
Emptiness & Return to Stage	The problem is not fundamentally resolved, dissatisfaction remains.	Self-resources dwindle, awaiting the next request.

Table 5 indicates the structure of the repetitive relationship indicated in the story. Based on the table where the cycle begins when the Boy faces a problem or need of life or called (*Demand/Need*), then he returns to the Tree to ask for the statement "I am happy" (*Fulfillment & Rationalization*). The cycle then ends in a hollow state where the Boy's problem has not been completely resolved with the Tree's resources dwindling while waiting for the next request (*Emptiness & Return to Stage*).

Based on the analysis, there are three main findings. First, Boys are trapped in the fulfillment of desires without empathy that indicates oral-aggressive fixation. Second, the Tree continues to sacrifice itself while considering the destruction to be happiness. Third, the

relationship between the two in forming a cycle of dependence that ends in mutual destruction.

This results indicate that *The Giving Tree* can not only be understood as a moral story about unconditional love, but also as a narrative that indicates an imbalance in the relationship and unhealthy relationship patterns. Children's literature analysis has long recognized that stories carry implicit psychological messages that can shape the way young readers understand themselves and others (Coats, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2012, 2014). Therefore, the following discussion focuses on the interpretation of results, critical analysis, with its implications for scientific analysis.

Personality Structure and Developmental Arrest

The results regarding oral-aggressive fixation in boys indicate inhibition related to psychological development where in Freud's theory, fixation at the oral stage can lead to excessive dependence or exploitative tendencies in adulthood (Freud, 1905/1953). This condition indicates the failure of the Ego by balancing internal impulses with external reality (Freud, 1923/1961). At the end of the story, where at the time of growth with no pure life remained, which indicates the dominance of Thanatos or the death instinct over Eros or the life instinct (Freud, 1920/1955). The Boy's persistent attitude of demanding without giving back or thanking also characterizes the failure of the Ego and Superego in forming self-control and moral judgment. So, his behavior is not just selfish, but indicates an imbalance in personality structure. If read without critical understanding, then this story can normalize the assumption that receiving without giving back is normal. Therefore, the pattern of unconscious dependence in children's literature needs to be analyzed critically (Cocks, 2023).

Stunted development Boys can be analyzed by looking for American cultural values, especially individualism. American culture has long emphasized independence and personal freedom as important values. However, these values can develop into hyperindividualism when personal satisfaction is pursued without taking into consideration the needs, feelings, or circumstances of others. Under such conditions, individual freedom no longer forms healthy independence, but instead leads to behavior that is detrimental to social relationships. To understand this more clearly, the Boy's request at every stage of his life needs to be analyzed on the basis of the text, taking into account the words he says and, just as important, the things he never conveys.

When I was a child, the Boy asked me "May I pick your apples?" The tree agreed with pleasure. The boy picks up the apple and leaves without saying thank you or acknowledging in the giving of the Tree where the same pattern repeats itself when he was a teenager. He has asked for money to buy things and have fun. This is because he only has apples, Tree tells him to pick and sell the fruit in the city in order to earn money by feeling happy. The boys return to pick it up, sell it, and then disappear without having a word of thanks. As an adult, he asked for a house. Trees give their branches which are then cut to build houses. After that, the Boy left without saying thank you. When he asked for a boat, the trunk of the tree was given, then cut down and made into a boat to sail. Again, there was no saying anything. In old age, he returned to the Tree that was left only as a stump. He said he just needed a quiet place to sit and rest because he was very tired. The stump offered itself again, and the boy sat on it. The most visible thing in each meeting is the expression of gratitude, concern, reply, or apology from the Boy. He never asks if the Tree is okay or admits the damage it has caused. In fact, his last words still had a center on his exhaustion, not on the sacrifice of the Tree. This pattern indicates the concept of "expressive individualism" in American culture described by Bellah et al. (1985), which indicates that the view that personal happiness is the ultimate goal with relationships is only used as a tool in its attainment. The Male Tool treats the Tree as a resource, not a party to the same relationship. In a reciprocal relationship, there should be a sense of gratitude, acknowledgment of the other party's suffering, or doubt before taking more. However, he never showed any of that. The demand continues to increase, while the emotions remain flat. He never felt guilty, doubted, or tried to negotiate. He just kept taking and taking.

American society where this pattern is indicated in several areas where the Culture of consumption favors people in taking what they already want without much concern for the producer, the workers, or the environment. The gig economy treats labor as a transactional service, not a relationship based on shared obligations. Social media supports individuals in seeking attention with recognition in the absence of genuine reciprocity. The behavior of boys who continue to take without having gratitude, guilt, or recognition of the sacrifices of the other party is not just a childhood fantasy. Behavior indicates culture by teaching that personal desires should take precedence, that happiness is an individual right, and that the question "Can you give me...?" is considered sufficient. Individualism is not the main problem. The problem arises when individualism is carried out without reciprocity, guilt, with the ability to understand the moral value of the sacrifices of others. The story never openly criticizes the boys' behavior. This silence can indicate cultural hesitancy in questioning individual desires. Similar attitudes are indicated in debates related to personal responsibility with shared concern in health, the rights of the poor and homeless in housing, as well as personal comfort and the sustainability of the earth in environmental justice. Therefore, the stunted development of boys not only indicates personal psychological failure but also indicates culture by justifying the dissolution of one-sided happiness at the expense of others. The oral-aggressive fixation is not just an individual disorder, but a cultural phenomenon that loses the value of gratitude, reciprocity, and mutual obligation. Children are taught to ask, "What can you give me?", but not, "What can I give you?" Therefore, *The Giving Tree* is a cautionary tale about codependency as well as the erosion of relationship ethics in an individualistic society.

Altruism and Superego Distortion

The Tree's self-sacrifice indicates the pathology of the Superego which is at the moment the moral demands have turned into a self-destructive punishment in which in its place the balancing of personal needs with those of others in which the Tree's Superego demands total surrender until the entire limit of itself is removed. This pattern indicates that love with self-esteem can only be obtained with complete self-sacrifice. In the view of psychoanalysis, this state includes moral masochism because the identity of the Tree is formed by the existence of suffering. He continues to give and continues to declare himself happy, even though happiness is not real. Oakley et al. (2011) indicate that it is pathological altruism, which is an effort to improve the welfare of others that actually causes losses for the giver. This pattern occurs when sacrifices are made excessively and often have to do with codependence, depression, burnout, and the inability to recognize personal needs as legitimate. The tree clearly indicates this pattern so that the gift is no longer a form of affection but an act that can destroy oneself. The loss she experienced was not only physical with the loss of apples, branches, and stems, but also psychological because her suffering was constantly suppressed behind the recognition that she was happy.

This pattern is in line with the ideal norm in American culture which is specifically the concept of "intensive mothering" from Hays (1996), which is the view that mothers have full responsibility for their children and must always be attentive, sacrificial, and emotionally ready. The latest analysis indicates that these demands are also caused by race, social class, and structural inequality so that they are not experienced equally by women (Minnotte, 2023). The tree that is often seen as a mother figure indicates the image where she continues to give, does not demand anything in return, and still indicates her happiness even though she is increasingly depleted. In an American society where these kinds of demands can make stress, fatigue, and depression in caregivers. The concept of "the second shift" from Hochschild & Machung (1990) indicates that emotionally unpaid housework is done by women after completing formal work. This burden is often taken for granted, invisible, and rarely appreciated, for example the sacrifice of the Tree that is never acknowledged. Hooks (2000) also indicates a culture that equates love with self-sacrifice. Women are socialized to continue to give affection regardless of what they receive and judge themselves based on their ability to ignore personal needs. The tree indicates this fallacy tragically in that he considers self-

destruction to be a virtue, while the repeated sentence "and the Tree is happy" indicates the cultural pressure to keep the caregiver indicated to be happy despite having lost a lot.

The pathological altruism of the Tree not only indicates personal psychological problems, but it also indicates social demands on the caregiver so that the story never questions whether the sacrifice is healthy, does not give him the opportunity to say "no" or set boundaries, and does not offer a different ending. If read without critical assistance, then the story can make children think that love means continuing to give, while one's own needs are not important. Self-destruction can even be indicated as a virtue. In fact, this story is not only a lesson in generosity, but a picture of fatigue, codependence, and the slow loss of self-identity. Coats (2020) indicates that stories of excessive sacrifice can unintentionally normalize the loss of personal boundaries. Zipes (2018) also indicates. That children's literature often strongly encourages the dominant ideology of sincerity with self-sacrifice. This has a devastating impact on child readers, especially when there are no adults who can help them understand the story critically.

Defense Mechanisms and Relational Blindness

The constant use of rationalization with repression has shaped the way both characters understand the relationship to their emotions. Rationalization makes every loss of the Tree considered to be happiness so that the true condition is never questioned. Meanwhile, the repression of guilt can make the Boy continue to take without moral awareness, so that the suffering of the Tree becomes unindicated. Both defense mechanisms have formed a closed system that leaves them unaware of the damage in the relationship they are experiencing. This inability indicates a failure of mentalization which is the ability to understand oneself with others through the thoughts, feelings, and goals that underlie actions. Nikolajeva (2012, 2014) indicates that children's literature can be used to indicate how the inner conflicts of characters have been manifested with relationship patterns. Pullinger (2019) also indicated that children's books often indicate signs of "childness" that contradict to show the complexity of children's development. However, that complexity is simplified in *The Giving Tree* with the Boy's emotional development stalled.

The need for this relationship indicates that the social conditions in modern American culture. Lasch (1979), through *The Culture of Narcissism*, has indicated that American society conducts personality formation with weak self-identity, fear of relying on others, and difficulty feeling guilt with deep empathy. This is indicated in the last words to the Boy, "I don't need much now... just a quiet place to sit and rest. I'm so tired." There was no apology, guilt was suppressed, with the suffering of the Tree not acknowledged. According to Lasch, narcissistic personalities are actually very dependent on outside support and recognition, but cannot reciprocate. The boys kept returning to the Tree for help without ever giving anything in return. This attitude is not only an inability to be grateful, but an inability to recognize the Tree as an individual who also has needs. Lasch attributes this condition to a culture of competitive individualism by teaching everyone to pursue his or her own interests. The sense of guilt is suppressed because acknowledging the loss caused will demand change. Therefore, there is no remorse from the Boy is the result of the defense mechanism by protecting him from the awareness of the damage that has been done. The rationalization of the Tree through the sentence "and the Tree was happy" also masks its own suffering. These two mechanisms have formed a closed circle that makes them unable or unwilling to see the reality of the relationship.

This dynamic is indicated in exploitative relationships, consumption culture, and social media. In an unhealthy relationship where one party continues to give while the other party takes without feeling guilty, then the situation is justified into love or obligation. Consumerism also supports people to enjoy products without having to think about the production process with the waste. Social media also makes attention with confessions taken without any real mutual connection. Lasch indicates that narcissistic culture can weaken intimacy with shared responsibility. If read without a critical attitude, *The Giving Tree* can normalize relationships to be one-sided by eliminating guilt so that the absence of remorse in Boys is not only a weakness

of the character, but also indicates a culture that prioritizes personal desires rather than relationship ethics.

In American society, these issues are indicated in debates about health care, housing, and environmental justice, which are private interests with shared responsibility. *The Giving Tree* indicates the conflict with the attitude of the Boy who keeps asking without having to think about the consequences. Therefore, this story must be read critically so that children understand how important guilt, gratitude, care, and reciprocal relationships are. Discussions such as "What did the Boy never say?" can help readers to improve their ability to understand the feelings of others and form healthier relationships.

Implications for Children's Literature and Psychological Mediation

Children's literature can shape children in understanding relationships, but stories that indicate sacrifice without boundaries with taking behavior without retaliation can normalize unhealthy relationships. Therefore, *The Giving Tree* must be read with critical assistance so that children do not consider love to be a self-sacrifice that is done continuously or accept an attitude of not knowing how to say thank you. Parents and teachers can invite children to discuss the inequality of relationships, understand the feelings of the two characters, by imagining a story ending that emphasizes more concern and respect. This assistance can make an increase in emotional intelligence by helping children in recognizing unhealthy patterns of dependence. Cognitive and psychoanalytic approaches indicate that stories exert an influence on the emotional development and morals of the reader (Nikolajeva, 2012, 2013, 2018). However, children are still interpreted as active meaning-forming so that their interpretation is not always the same as that of adults (Gubar, 2013). Attention to emotional responses with psychology also supports the importance of such critical mediation (Vaughn & Massey, 2022). Therefore, this research is aimed at helping adults accompany reading, not to determine children's interpretation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* can be interpreted not only as a story of unconditional love and selfless giving but also as a representation of an asymmetrical psychological relationship between the Boy and the Tree. Through Freudian psychoanalytic analysis, three findings emerged: the Boy is primarily oriented toward fulfilling his desires through repeated requests and dependence on the Tree; the Tree demonstrates excessive self-sacrifice and weak relational boundaries by continuously meeting the Boy's needs; and their interaction develops into a repetitive, asymmetrical pattern of dependency. These findings encourage a critical reading of unconditional sacrifice in children's literature and demonstrate the usefulness of Freudian psychoanalysis in examining psychological and relational dynamics in picturebooks. Educators and parents may use guided discussions to help children reflect on reciprocity, boundaries, and healthy relationships. However, the study is limited by its qualitative nature and reliance on a Freudian framework. Future research may apply alternative perspectives to broaden interpretation.

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