

Psychology as a Practice: Literary Explorations Across Civilizations

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Psychology as a Practice: Literary Explorations Across Civilizations

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Abstract

Psychology, as both a discipline and a mode of understanding the human experience, has evolved significantly across time and cultures. Literature has been a crucial medium in reflecting and shaping psychological thought, offering profound insights into the human mind, social behaviours, and mental health. By analysing a classical, modern, and postmodern novel – Madame Bovary (1856) by Gustave Flaubert, Mrs. Dalloway (1925) by Virginia Woolf, and American Psycho (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis – one can trace the evolution of psychological practice as depicted in literature and understand its intersections with societal transformations.

Keywords: Mental Health, Consciousness, Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry, Introspection, Human Mind.

Introduction

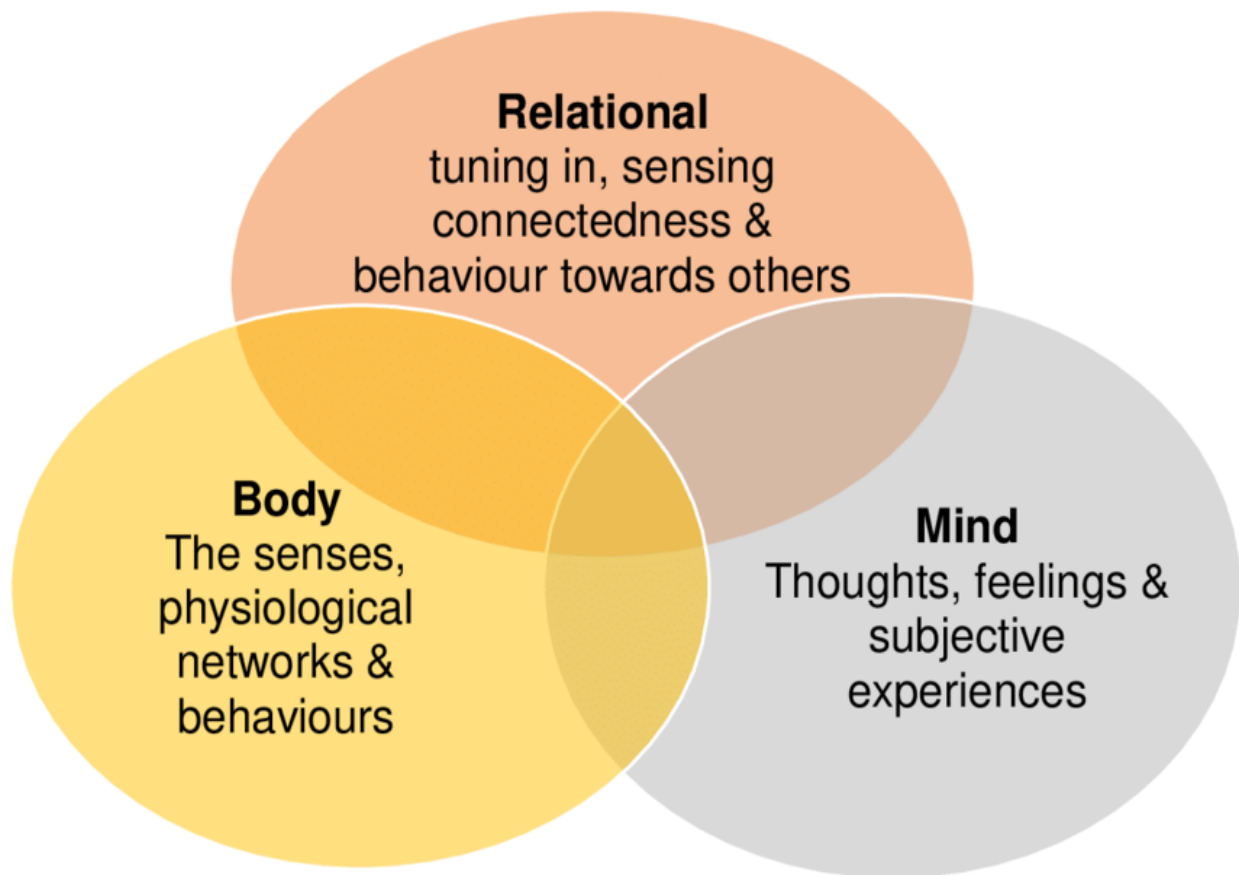
Psychology, as both a discipline and a mode of understanding the human experience, has evolved significantly across time and cultures. Literature has been a crucial medium in reflecting and shaping psychological thought, offering profound insights into the human mind, social behaviours, and mental health (for example, Bersani, 1974). By analysing a classical, modern, and postmodern novel – Madame Bovary (1856) by Gustave Flaubert, Mrs. Dalloway (1925) by Virginia Woolf, and American Psycho (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis – one can trace the evolution of psychological practice as depicted in literature and understand its intersections with societal transformations (Berman, 2001; Abel,1989).

Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary is a profound psychological novel that delves into human desire, dissatisfaction, and mental turmoil. Emma Bovary embodies emotional volatility, trapped between romantic fantasies and the dull constraints of reality (Heffernan, 2004). Her relentless dissatisfaction mirrors modern psychological distress, particularly depression and borderline personality disorder. Flaubert’s psychological realism makes

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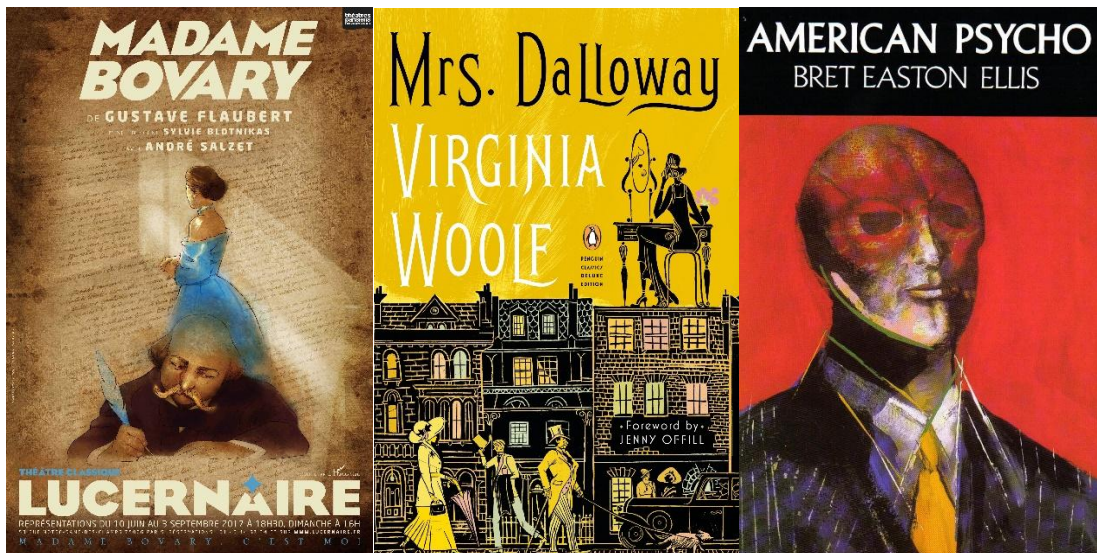
Madame Bovary a timeless study of mental health (also see Foucault, 1961), illustrating the consequences of unfulfilled dreams and the necessity of psychological understanding in society.



Psychology as Human Experience: The Three Dimensions

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a pioneering work in psychological realism, offering an intimate exploration of consciousness, mental illness, and existential introspection. Through the novel's stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf delves into the inner lives of her characters, particularly; Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, highlighting the complexities of human thought and emotion. Woolf's portrayal of mental illness is groundbreaking, critiquing the rigid and dismissive attitudes of early 20th-century psychiatry.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is a disturbing yet profound exploration of psychological detachment, consumerist nihilism, and psychopathy (Beuka, 2004; also, Hume, 1992). The novel delves into the fractured mind of Patrick Bateman, a wealthy Wall Street banker who harbours sadistic tendencies, providing a chilling study of mental illness and moral decay. Ellis uses Bateman's psyche to explore the dehumanizing effects of consumer culture, where individuals become commodities, and morality is eroded.



Together, these novels illustrate the psychological evolution from repression to introspection and, ultimately, to existential and societal critique, demonstrating literature's role in capturing the complexities of the human psyche across civilizations (Freud, 1920; 1923; James, 1890).

Classical Novel: *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) is a profound psychological novel that delves into human desire, dissatisfaction, and mental turmoil. Emma Bovary embodies emotional volatility, trapped between romantic fantasies and the dull constraints of reality.

Her relentless dissatisfaction mirrors modern psychological distress, particularly depression and borderline personality disorder. Influenced by sentimental novels, she yearns for passion and luxury, yet her affairs and material indulgences fail to bring fulfilment. Her impulsivity, mood swings, and craving for validation reveal profound psychological fragility.



Distress Psychology

A central theme is the clash between idealism and reality. Emma's romanticized expectations prevent her from appreciating real life, leading to persistent disappointment and psychological collapse. Freud's psychoanalytic theory applies to her behaviour – her

unchecked desires (*id*) override rational self-regulation (*ego*), while societal constraints (*superego*) intensify her distress (Freud, 1923; Cunningham, 2006).



Rigid 19th-century social structures exacerbate Emma’s distress. Her husband and societal figures fail to provide emotional support. Her suicide, driven by hopelessness, asserts a tragic sense of control but underscores her inescapable psychological pain.

Flaubert’s psychological realism makes *Madame Bovary* a timeless study of mental health, illustrating the consequences of unfulfilled dreams and the necessity of psychological understanding in society.

Modern Novel: *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is a pioneering work in psychological realism, offering an intimate exploration of consciousness, mental illness, and existential introspection. Through the novel’s stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf delves into the inner lives of her characters, particularly Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, highlighting the complexities of human thought and emotion (Kendall, 2007).

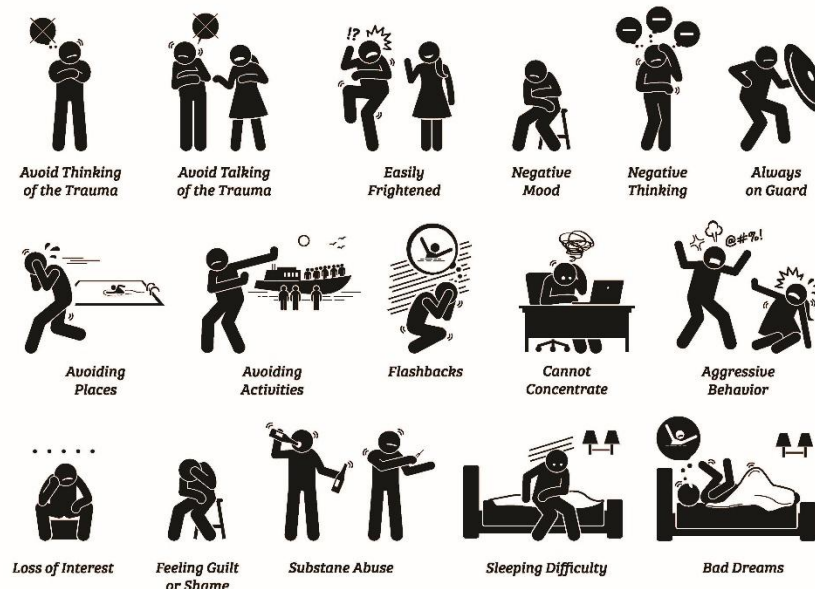
Clarissa Dalloway grapples with existential anxiety, societal expectations, and repressed emotions. Her relentless self-reflection reveals a deep-seated fear of aging, regret, and the meaning of her life. Her psychological struggles, though subtle, underscore the internal conflicts of identity and fulfilment.



Famous Realism Paintings

Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), embodies the devastating impact of war on the human psyche. His hallucinations, paranoia, and suicidal ideation depict a raw and tragic descent into mental illness, exacerbated by societal neglect and ineffective psychiatric treatment (Kendall, 2007).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



PTSD: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment

Woolf's portrayal of mental illness is ground-breaking, critiquing the rigid and dismissive attitudes of early 20th-century psychiatry (Hussey, 1995). By juxtaposing Clarissa's existential musings with Septimus's psychological collapse, *Mrs. Dalloway* presents a poignant

commentary on the fragility of the mind, mental illness, and the struggle for personal meaning in an indifferent world.

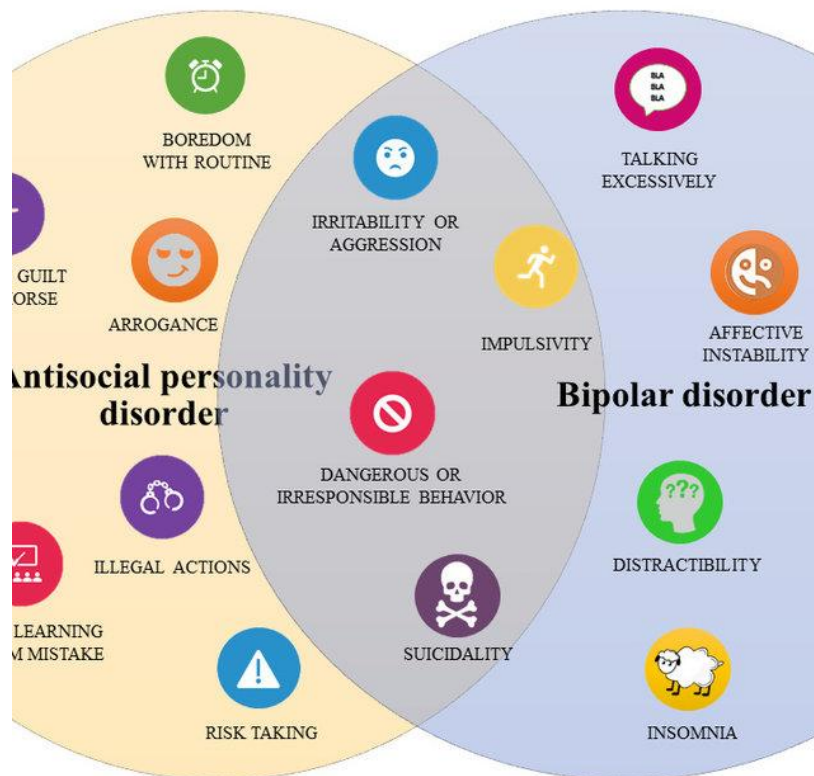
Postmodern Novel: *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis

Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) is a disturbing yet profound exploration of psychological detachment, consumerist nihilism, and psychopathy. The novel delves into the fractured mind of Patrick Bateman, a wealthy Wall Street banker who harbours sadistic tendencies, providing a chilling study of mental illness and moral decay.



Bateman exhibits traits consistent with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), including a lack of empathy, manipulative tendencies, and extreme impulsivity. His superficial charm masks an emotional void, highlighting his complete detachment from human connection. Ellis portrays Bateman’s psychopathy through his emotionless narration, repetitive lifestyle, and obsession with materialism.

The novel’s unreliable narration blurs the line between reality and delusion, reinforcing Bateman’s psychological instability. His gruesome murders may be hallucinations, questioning the reliability of his perception. This ambiguity reflects postmodern themes of fragmented identity and the elusiveness of objective truth (also see, Luckhurst, 2005).



ASPD in Bipolar Disorder

Ellis uses Bateman's psyche to explore the dehumanizing effects of consumer culture, where individuals become commodities, and morality is eroded. *American Psycho* remains a haunting psychological portrait of alienation, existential emptiness, and the terrifying potential for violence lurking beneath a polished exterior (see Kristeva, 1989).

Comparative Analysis

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) showcase the evolution of psychological exploration in literature, reflecting shifting cultural and scientific understandings of the human mind across civilizations (also see, Jung, 1953; Porter, 2002).

1. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert pioneer's psychological realism, depicting Emma Bovary's emotional instability, impulsive desires, and existential dissatisfaction. Her struggles mirror 19th-century views on hysteria and feminine neurosis, shaped by societal repression and limited psychological knowledge (Showalter, 1985).
2. By the time of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf employs stream-of-consciousness to present a more nuanced understanding of mental illness, particularly PTSD and depression. The novel reflects early 20th-century shifts in psychiatry, critiquing inadequate treatments and rigid social expectations that contribute to emotional suffering (Showalter, 1985).
3. In *American Psycho*, Ellis explores the postmodern psyche, portraying Patrick Bateman's psychopathy as a symptom of late capitalist alienation (Laing, 1960). The novel's unreliable narration and hyper-violence underscore the fragmentation of identity in an era of consumerism and moral ambiguity (Parish, 2004).



Complexities of the Human Psyche

Together, these novels illustrate the psychological evolution from repression to introspection and, ultimately, to existential and societal critique, demonstrating literature's role in capturing the complexities of the human psyche across civilizations.

Conclusion

The psychological portrayal of characters in literature has evolved alongside societal and scientific advancements, reflecting different historical understandings of mental health.

Madame Bovary:

- Highlights the limitations of 19th-century psychological knowledge.
- Portrays Emma's emotional distress through the lens of hysteria and feminine neurosis.

Mrs. Dalloway:

- Introduces a more refined psychological perspective.
- Explores PTSD and depression with a critical eye toward inadequate psychiatric care and societal alienation.

American Psycho:

- Offers a postmodern critique of identity and morality.
- Uses psychopathy and consumerist detachment to expose the fragmentation of the self in a capitalist society.

This literary progression mirrors broader cultural and psychological transformations, from repression and misunderstanding to greater introspection and existential critique.

- Literature has played a crucial role in shaping and reflecting psychological discourse.
- Readers gain deeper engagement with human emotion, trauma, and consciousness through literary exploration.
- As society evolves, literature will continue to serve as a vital tool for understanding the complexities of the human mind.
- It acts as a mirror to psychological realities across different civilizations and time periods.

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