

Letters from the Id: A Psychoanalysis on *Wicked Little Letters*

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Abstract

This study presents a psychoanalytic examination of the film *Wicked Little Letters*, analysing the underlying psychological dynamics and suppressed desires that drive the narrative of the protagonist, Edith Swan. Set in a 1920s conservative English town, the film juxtaposes the outward respectability of Edith with the eruption of anonymous, obscene letters that expose hidden tensions, desires, and social hypocrisies. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theory, this study examines the protagonist's internal conflicts, the symbolic function of language and letters, and the manifestation of suppression and projection. Special focus is given to the character dynamics between Edith Swan and Rose Gooding, analysing how moral panic and female sexuality are negotiated within patriarchal structures. The film employs humor and scandal to critique social repression, revealing the unconscious drives that undermine the illusion of civility. Ultimately, *Wicked Little Letters* becomes a cinematic expression of how the unconscious erupts into the public, exposing the fragile boundaries between propriety and human desire.

Keywords: Female Sexuality; Psychoanalysis; Repression; Suppression; *Wicked Little Letters*

Introduction

Wicked Little Letters (2023) is a British dark comedy mystery directed by Thea Sharrock, featuring Olivia Colman as Edith Swan and Jessie Buckley as Rose Gooding in the leading roles. Set in the 1920s English seaside town of Littlehampton, the film is inspired by the real-life "Littlehampton libels," a scandal involving anonymous, obscene letters sent to residents.

The narrative revolves around Edith Swan, a devout Christian and conservative woman who begins receiving profane letters. The immediate culprit is her neighbour, Rose Gooding, a free-spirited Irish immigrant in the town, known for her use of inappropriate language.

As the town's authorities pursue Rose, a group of women, led by police officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan), question the prevailing assumptions and seek the truth behind the letters, only to find that Edith has written those 'Poisonous Letters' to herself and to the others in the community.

This study delves into the psychological underplay of Edith Swan, whose outward social conformity starkly contrasts with her clandestine act of sending obscene letters to herself. Employing the psychoanalytic frameworks of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the research aims to unravel the unconscious motivations and internal conflicts that drive such paradoxical behavior.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, suppression is a conscious effort to avoid distressing thoughts or feelings, while repression operates without conscious intent (Freud, 1999). If the repressed/suppressed material returns in disguised forms, it can result in neurotic symptoms such as slips of the tongue. Both concepts are central to understanding how individuals manage inner conflict, especially regarding sexuality, aggression, or trauma, and they form the foundation for exploring the unconscious motivations that influence behaviour (Freud, 1999).

Lacan (2018), reinterprets Freudian psychoanalysis by positing that the unconscious is structured like a language, meaning that unconscious processes adhere to the rules of language, such as metaphor and metonymy, rather than operating solely through biological or instinctual mechanisms. This view shifts the focus from drives to signifiers, suggesting that the subject is formed through linguistic structures and that unconscious desire emerges through the play of language. Central to Lacan's framework are the three orders, namely: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary is the realm of images and illusions, where the ego is formed through identification, notably in the mirror stage. The Symbolic encompasses language, law, and social structures, shaping our sense of self and relationships through systems of meaning. The Real represents what lies beyond language and symbolization, which cannot be fully articulated or integrated into our understanding. Lacan also emphasizes that the desire of the Other always shapes desire, and that the subject is fragmented and formed through language and the unconscious. These concepts have made Lacan's theory especially influential in film, literature, and cultural studies.

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis are pivotal in analyzing diverse film genres and cinematic tropes. Notably, Alfred Hitchcock's work serves as a central point for psychoanalytic critique. His film *Vertigo* (1958) has been read through Lacan's mirror stage and theories of desire, with critics arguing that Scottie's obsession with recreating Madeleine reflects a search for a lost object of desire (Poole, 2023). Hitchcock's manipulation of point-of-view shots and subjective camera work contributes to the illusion of identification central to Lacanian film theory.

Slavoj Žižek (1992) is renowned for blending Lacanian psychoanalysis with Marxist ideology. He treats cinema as a privileged site for ideological fantasy, where unconscious desires are staged and structured. Žižek argues that film does not merely reflect reality but stages the gaps and inconsistencies in ideological structures, functioning much like dreams in the Freudian sense. In 'The Pervert's Guide to Cinema and Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture,' Žižek explores how the Real disrupts the Symbolic order in films, often through moments of trauma or uncanny repetition.

David Lynch's surrealist cinema, particularly *Mulholland Drive* (2001), has attracted Lacanian readings that emphasize the fragmentation of identity and the eruption of the Real. Žižek (2001) uses *Mulholland Drive* to illustrate the uncanny appearance of the Real, which disrupts the Symbolic order, particularly in scenes where fantasy and nightmare blur. The film's disjointed narrative and dreamlike sequences embody Freud's theory of dream work and latent content.

In contemporary media studies, the psychoanalytic approach has been extended to digital and post-cinematic contexts. Todd McGowan (2007) argues that even in postmodern film, Lacanian theory remains relevant for understanding how ideology functions through the interplay of enjoyment and disavowal. Yet others argue that the shifting dynamics of digital spectatorship, such as interactivity and

fragmentation, challenge the foundational assumptions of psychoanalytic theory, which relies heavily on the cinematic apparatus as theorized in the 1970s.

While psychoanalytic film theory has long been applied to canonical cinema, especially in the works of Hitchcock, Lynch, and Bergman, there remains a lack of psychoanalytic scholarship on *Wicked Little Letters* that examines the intersection of repression, class, gender, sexuality and religious morality through Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, especially as they manifest in the psychology of the character. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap in literature by applying a psychoanalytic lens to *Wicked Little Letters*, focusing on how unconscious desires, defense mechanisms, and the symbolic order shape the characters' behaviours and relationships. By analyzing the film through Freudian and Lacanian notions, this study explores how social norms, gender dynamics, and religious dogma contribute to the psychological turmoil and moral conflicts experienced by the protagonists. Thereby, it extends psychoanalytic film theory to an under-studied contemporary work, revealing the enduring relevance of psychoanalytic critique in understanding the socio-cultural undercurrents that inform cinematic narratives.

Materials and Methods

The study employs textual analysis through close reading of the film, focusing on dialogue, character dynamics, and symbolic imagery. The study is grounded in psychoanalytic theory, drawing on Sigmund Freud's concepts of suppression and projection, which are useful in analysing the return of suppressed impulses through symptoms such as the anonymous letters. Lacan's framework provides insight into how language and social structures shape Edith's fragmented subjectivity through the notions of the three registers: imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Additionally, his theory on the subject of desire plays a central role. These theories help illuminate the underlying psychic structures in the selected film. To supplement this framework, the contemporary Lacanian thinker Slavoj Žižek is referenced to support a more modern and nuanced application of psychoanalysis to film analysis. The film '*Wicked Little Letters*' was selected for the study as it offers a fresh and underexplored site for investigating how unconscious drives erupt into public scandal through language and performance.

The analysis meets two key research objectives: first, to explore how Freudian concepts of repression and projection are manifested in Edith Swan's psychological behaviour; and second, to examine the conflict between Edith and Rose through the lens of Lacan's theory of desire and the Symbolic order. In doing so, the research seeks to answer two questions: How are Freudian ideas of repression and projection evident in Edith Swan's behaviour? And how can Lacan's theory of desire and the Symbolic order be used to interpret the complex dynamics between Edith and Rose?

The study was conducted with certain limitations. Psychoanalytic theory is inherently interpretive and subjective; thus, the analysis may risk overlooking certain socio-political interpretations that fall outside a psychological framework. Furthermore, given the film's recent release, there is limited academic literature available, which necessitates a heavier reliance on primary textual analysis and theoretical frameworks rather than established critical discourse.

Results

Suppression and the Return of the Suppressed

Edith Swan is initially portrayed as a paragon of moral virtue, a devout Christian, a devoted daughter, and an idol of middle-class respectability. Her utterance, "We worship a messiah who suffered, so by my suffering do I not move closer to heaven?" (2.54), reflects a religious valorization of suffering. This belief reinforces her moral masochism, the idea that enduring suffering, including emotional suppression and unfulfilled desire, brings her closer to spiritual purity or divine favour. However, Edith's strict adherence to social decorum conceals a tumultuous unconscious. The content of the letters

she writes is marked by sexual innuendo and violent fantasies, which are depicted by terms such as “foxyass old whore” and “tricksy old fucker”, stand in stark contrast to Edith’s public demeanor. She writes, “Miss Swan sucks ten cocks a week,” evoking her sexual fantasy and state of despair. It is also evident from the derogatory terminology she uses to describe herself, such a “sad old stinky bitch”, that she is hyper-aware of her age and her status as a spinster.

The act of writing letters constitutes a transgression not just of language but of the Symbolic order itself, the patriarchal, religious, and moral frameworks that regulate what can be said, felt, and desired in Edith’s world. Her obscenities violate the expectations placed on her as a Christian woman and obedient daughter, thus breaching the codes of propriety, feminine virtue, and class decorum. From a Freudian perspective, the letters function as neurotic symptoms, indirect expressions of suppressed sexual desires, while from a Lacanian standpoint, they serve as signifiers of a fractured subject caught between the demands of the Symbolic (social norms and religion) and the return of the Real (unmediated desires). Hence, the letters are psychic eruptions and transgressive acts that momentarily release the pressure of Edith’s suppressed desires.

Projection and the Desire of the Other

Freud (1999) discusses projection as a defense mechanism whereby individuals attribute their unacceptable thoughts to another. Edith’s accusations against Rose can be understood as a typical case of projection. She ascribes to Rose the very desires that she cannot admit to herself. Lacan’s concept of the “desire of the Other” deepens this analysis. Edith’s identity is structured around the gaze and judgment of the symbolic Other, embodied by her father, her community, and the moral code of her religion. Lacan’s mirror stage can also be invoked here, as Edith’s constructed identity as a “pretty young Christian woman,” as praised by the judge and the local newspapers, is her ego ideal. Her suppression is not merely personal but ideological as she internalizes the prohibitions of the Symbolic order, aligning her ego with the expectations of propriety (Freud, 1999).

However, Rose disrupts this structure by embodying a form of jouissance that Edith both envies and fears. Rose’s unapologetic enjoyment exposes the repressive limits of Edith’s identity, structured by the symbolic order and its moral prohibitions. The obscene letters become a vehicle through which Edith can momentarily inhabit this forbidden jouissance without publicly compromising her social identity. Hence, it is seen that the letters serve a dual psychological purpose: relieving her internal pressure and punishing others for what she cannot allow herself to experience. Her rage is not mere moral outrage, but the return of the suppressed. Henceforth, Edith’s accusations against Rose reveal a complex interplay of psychological and ideological forces.

Edith’s actions reflect not just personal suppression but the ideological contradictions at the heart of the moral order she seeks to uphold. Lacan’s framework further exposes how Edith’s identity is governed by the Symbolic order, making her susceptible to internal conflict when confronted with Rose’s unapologetic enjoyment. Rose’s presence threatens the fragile coherence of Edith’s subjectivity, exposing the cracks in her ideological conformity. Žižek’s (1986) insight into the obscene supplement of ideology sheds light on how Edith’s momentary indulgence, through the anonymous letters, serves as a paradoxical escape and reinforcement of the very norms she outwardly upholds. Ultimately, the tension between Edith and Rose encapsulates the fraught dynamics of desire, suppression, and the ideological structures that shape the subject.

Father Figure and Patriarchal Control

The father’s dominance, particularly evident during the police interview (6.30), exemplifies the classic Freudian construct of the paternal superego, the internalized figure of authority that enforces order through intimidation, guilt, and suppression. In this scene, his unyielding control over the room exposes the power he exerts not only in public domains but also within the private sphere of the family. Edith’s

silence during these moments is not mere compliance; it suggests castration anxiety, the internalized fear of punishment and invalidation by the father, which results in submission.

Edith's entire sense of identity is shaped under the shadow of this paternal authority. Her emotional fragility becomes especially visible in the fleeting moments when she lights up under external approval, such as the brief affirmation she receives from the judge, highlighting a desperate hunger for validation denied to her at home. In stark contrast, Edith's domestic environment is saturated with emotional neglect and open humiliation, as symbolized by the brutal moment when the food she cooks for the father is thrown away in disgust (59.59), making her efforts invalid even within the supposed acceptance of the home.

The father's refusal to allow her to marry her lover, Sydney, is another assertion of his control, enforcing the patriarchal logic that her autonomy, particularly her romantic agency, must be subordinate to his consent. Rose disrupts Edith's symbolic identity as the dutiful daughter. Edith's collapse begins when she admits, "I liked both of them, Sydney and Rose" (1.19), a Lacanian moment of the Real, a revelation that destabilizes her constructed self. Her father's retort, "You don't know what you like," tries to restore symbolic control. This prohibition reinforces Edith's infantilization. Her loyalty and sense of duty are deeply intertwined with the very force that suppresses her free will. Her identity is shaped through a love-hate dynamic with her father, where duty masks suppression.

Her final outburst, when she screams at her father and laughs horrendously in relief, marks a moment of catharsis. Edith finds the symbolic space to voice "I'm not coming back home to you ever!" followed by filth. It is a breaking of the superego's hold, a regression into chaos that paradoxically liberates her. In psychoanalytic terms, this is a reclamation of agency through abjection. By vocalizing her pain and anger in that visceral moment, Edith challenges the authority that has defined and confined her, signaling the possibility of psychic emancipation.

Social Transgression vs. Moral Conservatism

Rose and Edith function as symbolic binaries within a Lacanian framework, embodying opposing realms of psychic experience. Rose represents the Real and the Imaginary. She is instinctive, chaotic, and emotionally unfiltered, epitomizing social transgression. Her behavior resists logic and embraces the libidinal, aligning her with the Imaginary's fluid self-images and the Real's disruptive, inassimilable truths. In contrast, Edith embodies the Symbolic Order. She is structured, dutiful, and constrained by law, language, and Christian morality, epitomizing decorum. She adheres to the codes of the father, both literally and symbolically, striving for moral clarity and social approval. Their binary opposition dramatizes the internal psychic conflict between desire and repression, freedom and duty, chaos and control.

This binary also reflects Lacanian topology as Edith's moral rigidity and suppressed emotions can be read as attempts to maintain her position within the Symbolic order, while her projections onto Rose may reflect unconscious disavowals of her desires and shame. Rose, in contrast, may represent the disruptive force of the Real, impossible to contain within the narrow confines of social respectability.

Conclusion

From a Freudian standpoint, Edith Swan's actions can be interpreted as manifestations of suppressed desires surfacing through neurotic symptoms. The act of writing and receiving obscene letters may serve as a mechanism for Swan to navigate internal conflicts between her id-driven desires and the superego's moral constraints, resulting in a compromise formation that allows partial expression of suppressed content.

Lacanian theory further enriches this analysis by emphasizing the role of language and the symbolic order in shaping subjectivity. Lacan's assertion that "the unconscious is structured like a language" suggests that Swan's letters function as signifiers within a linguistic framework that both reveals and conceals her desires. The letters can be seen as 'sinthomes', a unique, personal symptom that provides a form of enjoyment by linking the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic in a way that stabilizes the subject's identity.

In summary, *Wicked Little Letters* is more than a dark comedy. It is a psychoanalytic case study of suppression, desire, and the fragility of constructed identities. Edith Swan's respectable exterior conceals a tumultuous unconscious, governed by the logic of Freudian repression and Lacanian lack. Through her, the film stages the eruption of the Real into a Symbolic order steeped in patriarchal and religious dogma.

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