



RESEARCH PAPER

**Dilemma of Survival and Exploration in Weir's The Martian: A
Psychoanalytic Study**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to highlight the dilemma of detachment, the struggle for survival and the spirit of exploration. Using Freud's theoretical perspective, this study explores the nexus between human psychology and basic instinct of survival. This article further seeks deeper understanding of the human psyche through the journey of an astronaut who embodies resilience and ingenuity in creating a sustainable environment on another planet, Mars, and in establishing communication with earth in an effort to be rescued. The current study applies Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis to examine three different aspects of human behavior: the Id which represents the instinctive drive for survival, the Ego that reflects a problem-solving approach of human mind, and the Superego which shapes actions through moral awareness, social values, customs and norms. Moreover, the research examines survival as both a psychological and emotional process shaped by resilience and steadfastness, highlighting literature as a significant space for exploring human endurance, inner struggle, and personal conflict.

Keywords: Survival, Ingenuity, Isolation, Exploration, Technology, Martian

Introduction

Human beings have naturally designed mechanisms that they must struggle to fulfill their primal psychological needs such as breathing, food, water, sleep and homeostasis. Along with it, they also strive to fulfilling their safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualization. All these needs are driven by innate desires that enable a man to seek sustenance, safety and shelter in order to maintain a hierarchy of needs. So, survival is deeply intertwined with the psyche. The human psyche plays an important role in shaping the personality of individuals to make rational decisions and to overcome challenging circumstances. According to Freud, psychoanalytic theory attempts to explain personality motivation and psychological disorders by focusing on the influence of early childhood experiences on unconscious motives and conflicts and on the methods people used to cope with their urges. By combining basic innate tendencies and mental activities, it is evident that while survival is a physical challenge, its existence also represents the profound expression of human potential.

Nowadays, a lot of literary work has been done on an exploration of the human psyche in different circumstances and man's ability to handle the basic issues of survival. One of these works is a science fiction. The Martian (Weir, 2014) that highlights the story of the survival of an astronaut on another planet, Mars, where he had to struggle for his sustenance, alienation, and exploration. The selected work is a science fiction and debut novel written by American Novelist Andy Weir. The first published novel of the author, The Martian (Weir, 2014), aims to be as scientifically accurate as possible. The author has conducted extensive research on the conditions of planet Mars, orbital mechanics, the

history of human spaceflight, and botany through the struggle of his protagonist, Mark Watney, in the novel.

This study highlights the dilemma of isolation, the struggle for existence, and the spirit of exploration. The analysis examines the psychological aspect of the leading character, Mark Watney, who was left stranded on Mars by his crew due to a wrong interpretation. Irrespective of knowing whether he could survive or not, he spent 546 days alone on Mars. He underwent a lot of challenges such as fear of being alone on Mars with no human interaction, limited food supply, hostile environment, such as extreme cold, heavy storms and a thin atmosphere of Mars, communication breakdown with the Earth as well as with the crew and most importantly, physical deterioration as he was losing weight due to limited food and prolonged isolation. Through close reading of the novel, the current research provides insight into how to balance primal instincts, rationality, and physical deterioration as he lost weight due to limited food and prolonged isolation. The study also focuses on the moral considerations despite confronting life-threatening challenges.

The study utilizes Freud's psychoanalytic theory to investigate the unfolding of events from a psychological perspective. Psychoanalysis is one of the modern theories that explores human behavior and the interaction between the Id, Ego, and Superego. This theory places great emphasis on the role of unconscious psychological conflicts, intermingling with the struggle of how survival, sustenance and safety needs play an important role in development of a human personality, analyzed through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory to reveal the dynamic interplay of the Id, Ego and Superego in shaping the protagonist's personality. Overall, the research illuminates the psychological complexity of survival while emphasizing human adaptability, creativity, and an enduring curiosity to understand others in challenging and diverse environments.

Literature Review

The present study explores Watney's journey towards Mars and his resilience despite facing life-threatening challenges. The current focus of the review is on the psychological interpretation of Mark Watney's character and his journey in the selected work, where he exhibits resilience, flexibility, and determination against all adversities. This section focuses on the analysis of primary research papers that reinforce the current research.

In *The Spirit of Survival of Mark Watney in Weir's The Martian: An Individual Psychology Study*, Hikmah (2017) explores the protagonist's eventual strive for survival and his potential to stay firm and determined despite hurdles through the lens of Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology. The author argues that multiple factors play an important role in shaping Watney's reactions to isolation, including feelings of inferiority and superiority (e.g., self-esteem), social interest, lifestyle, and creativity. With the passage of time, hope gradually takes the place of despair. While Hikmah's work is grounded in Adler's framework, her emphasis on instinctive survival intermingles with Freud's concept of the id, providing a foundation for contemporary research.

In *The Analysis of Life Struggle in Weir's The Martian* (2018), Kaban applies the adjustment theories which were proposed by Braun, Linder, and Asimov. Their basic purpose was to explore how individuals cope with survival challenges. He asserts that stress can be managed in an effective manner through acceptance, problem-solving strategies, and defense mechanisms. This perspective highlights the role of ego in regulating survival instincts and guiding rational decision-making, which aligns with the psychoanalytic approach that was adopted in this study.

Mark Watney's struggle is also examined through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is used to analyze his efforts to secure basic necessities at the first step, such as food

and shelter and then progress to higher levels that involve fulfilling of psychological needs including belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. The analysis suggests that survival goes beyond physical endurance to include emotional and psychological fulfillment. This perspective complements Freud's concept of the Superego, emphasizing responsibility and self-discipline.

Genre-oriented studies play an important role in broadening the discussion. Abdelsattar and Keshk (2017), in *To the Mars and Back: A Study of the Rebirth of Science Fiction in Andy Weir's The Martian*, contend that the revival of science fiction lies not just in technological advancement, but in its emphasis on scientific realism and human ingenuity. This emphasis on rationality, problem-solving reflects essential qualities of the Ego, especially its adaptability and logical response to crisis.

Furthermore, Rahmi and Rifdah's study, *Mark Watney's Optimism in Andy Weir's The Martian*, highlights the crucial role of optimism in sustaining perseverance, drawing on Chang's theory of optimism. The researchers identify situational and comparative optimism as key factors in the protagonist's shift from despair to creativity and determination. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this optimism reflects the Superego's function in preserving moral consciousness and self-regulation during periods of uncertainty and despair. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the wide range of psychological and literary approaches applied to *The Martian*, each addressing different aspects of human experience, starting from instinct and adaptation to hope and ingenuity.

Material and Methods

A qualitative approach, guided by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, is employed to analyze the protagonist's psychological struggles in the science fiction novel *The Martian* (Weir, 2014). Sigmund Freud introduced psychoanalysis theory in the early 1900s, which serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Following a few years of clinical experience, Freud further developed his theory by incorporating the id, ego, and superego into the central structure of personality. All these elements are interdependent and have different effects on individual behavior. According to the id, fundamental cognitive processes are responsible for driving primitive and instinctive impulses. However, the ego works by conforming to reality principle and is responsible for making decisions. Moral principles, such as the superego, which represents social values and morality, are based on personal behavior.

Freud's topographical model of the mind including, conscious, preconscious, and unconscious is used to explain how Mark's decisions and actions arise from different levels of awareness. The iceberg analogy illustrates how the largely hidden unconscious strongly influences human behavior. Freud's concept of defense mechanisms, such as repression, rationalization, and sublimation, is also focused in the present study to explain Watney's psychological strength and inventiveness in dealing with life's challenges. Furthermore, Freud maintained that the theory of repression was the foundation of the entire structure of psychoanalysis, as he quotes, "The theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests." (Freud, 1940, p.71)

By considering these Freudian views, the present research investigates the dilemma of struggle along with Watney's spirit of exploration. His actions and demeanor are analyzed in the light of Freud's concepts of Id, Ego, and Superego that construct human personality. The present analysis delves deeper into the exploration of the human psyche, as for instance, in Watney's case whose ingenuity creates a feasible environment. He has spoken about the penalty. The id, the ego, and the superego were used to represent connections between Freudian thought about knowledge and those of Watney. The psychological analysis is also conducted on the concept of Elective Psychology. The Id represents Watney's drive for

survival; the Ego interprets his problem-solving approach, and the Superego highlights his adherence to NASA protocols along with the usage of a descriptive qualitative approach.

Results and Discussion

Psychoanalysis provides a framework for understanding the unconscious processes that influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Every human being is engaged in social interaction within society, and his existence depends upon his socially build-up relationships. He can't survive alone as Aristotle said, "Man by nature is a social animal". From a biological point of view, the human brain, especially the neocortex, is wired for complex social interactions, enabling communication, empathy and cooperation. Therefore, humans rely on collective efforts for survival. Depending on this ideology, humans should struggle to fulfill their basic needs of survival. As far as it is concerned with the current study, this book is set in a near future where manned missions to Mars have become more or less routine, centers around Mark Watney, an astronaut of NASA who becomes stranded on the red planet- Mars after an accident on the surface leads his crew to believe that he is dead. Largely told in the form of Watney's journal entries, *The Martian* follows the astronaut's struggle to survive alone in an inhospitable world, aided only by the supplies at hand and his scientific ingenuity.

This analysis focuses on the research questions which are generated from the objectives of the present study. It deals with the journey of survival of an astronaut who lived on Mars for 549 days (mentioned as Sol). Mark Watney's survival journey depends upon three phases – Id, Ego and Superego along with the defense mechanism given by Sigmund Freud which are explained according to the protagonist's diverse experiences on Mars. In the book *The ego and the id* (Freud, 1923), Freud says, "Psycho-analysis is an instrument to enable the ego to achieve a progressive conquest of the id." (Freud, 1923, p. 55).

Sigmund Freud in his paper with the title of *The ego and the id* (Freud, 1923), explained the dynamic relationship between id, ego and superego. This intricate relationship is elaborated in this article from the protagonist's experiences that shape his personality.

Delineation of Id, Ego and Superego

The start of the novel represents that the narrator is Mark Watney who narrated his Mars experience in his book when he came back to Earth. The book begins with the incident in which he is injured, the crew has gone, and he is all alone on another planet, Mars. The crew, considering him dead, would dedicate a national mourning day for him and would say that: "Mark Watney is the only human being to have died on Mars." (Weir, 2014, p. 2).

It was his inner monologue where he showed his biggest fear of how the people on Earth considered him dead. NASA was struggling to discover the galaxy and its planets. It was the mission of six astronauts including Watney himself, who were sent to Mars for a few days to analyze its atmosphere and life-supporting evidence on Mars. But the major problem started there when a violent storm came suddenly, and the crew decided to leave this red planet immediately. Due to misfortune, Mark Watney was injured and the crew mistakenly left him alone by assuming him dead.

Mark Watney narrates that it was not his mission and that "Commander Lewis was in charge." (Weir, 2014, p.3). According to Freud's concept of Id, the primal unconscious part drives basic instincts of survival. Watney's primal needs after being stranded on Mars are food, water, shelter, air, and everything which is required for the basic fulfillment of living stuff. It shows his stress and fear after being isolated on Mars. In the beginning, Mark Watney was anxious and disappointed because he knew that Mars' atmosphere was not suitable for

him, as he had limited resources to live on Mars until Ares 4 arrived on Mars. His psychological disturbance is evident in his narration.

Freud believes that Id, the unconscious part of the brain, demands satisfying behavior. In the case of Mark Watney, his Id and Ego defense mechanisms operated his unconscious level of awareness. So, he motivated himself for his journey of survival. He was a botanist and mechanical engineer. He was of the view that being a botanist would help him in producing plants and that mechanical engineering might save his life if something went wrong. At that moment, he realized his potential, as he said that he was focusing on how to survive. He believed that in about four years, there would be humans on Mars. After girding up his courage, when he found the Pathfinder, he became happy that now he could contact NASA on Earth. He felt optimistic that he would get off that planet alive.

Mark Watney's humorous nature also helped him in overpowering his fear and shortcomings. When he became able to grow plants on Mars's surface, he murmured that "he got an email from the University of Chicago. They say once you grow crops somewhere, you have officially colonized it. So technically, I colonized Mars". (Weir, 2014, p. 130). According to

Sigmund Freud's assumptions, Mark Watney's sense of humor is a sort of defense mechanism for him. In the whole scenario, his wit and humor proved to be a powerful weapon for him to fight with internal and external fears.

The psychoanalytic perspective of Sigmund Freud's theory elaborates on how Id prepares Ego to respond consciously. It operates on the principles of reality; after realizing basic instincts, the other point arises how to achieve them. The ego is a rational and problem-solving part of personality. When Watney realized that he had to prepare food, water and oxygen to live on this planet. He said, "My life is now a desperate struggle for survival... with occasional titration." (Weir, 2014, p. 178). Then the problem-solving side of his personality and his defense mechanism activated to make speculations regarding his survival needs.

Watney said that concerning the idea of food, his background in botany proved to be useful. He named his struggle story "Mark Watney doesn't Die project" (Weir, 2014, p. 14). On Mars he had to set the ground for producing plants. He searched through his food supplies and found some peas and plenty of beans. He also found potatoes. Watney's problem-solving ingenuity worked here. He brought a small amount of soil with him. He began saving his feces and mixed the compost with both soils converting it to crop soil. NASA had sent a few potatoes per crew member. Later on, in the hour of need, Watney cultivated the potatoes in the Hab and in two emergency pop-tents that were attached to the mission's rovers.

In the second step, Watney needed to make water for the irrigation of crops. For this purpose, he utilized Hab's oxygenator to transform carbon dioxide from MAV's fuel plant into oxygen. He then broke down hydrazine fuel into nitrogen and hydrogen, which he carefully burned with oxygen to produce water. Although his initial attempts to create water seemed successful, soon he discovered that not all the hydrogen had reacted. Some remained in the Hab's atmosphere, creating a dangerous and highly flammable situation that could potentially turn the habitat into a massive bomb. This is how he faced life-destroying threats. However, in the meanwhile, his Id and Ego motivated him to strive hard towards achieving his goal of making Mars a living place until he got aid from Earth. All his collective efforts highlight his struggle for survival and spirit of exploration on Mars.

Freud, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego* (Freud, 1949), says "There is always a feeling of triumph when something in the ego coincides with the ego ideal -

superego" (Freud, 1949, p. 106). It means Ego works in collaboration with Superego which relates to moral responsibility and social interaction.

Despite all these obstacles, Mark Watney showed resilience and steadfastness. He becomes successful in making communication with NASA on Earth by locating the Mars Pathfinder probe and Sojourner rover, a relic from the 1997 mission. Initially, he communicates with NASA by rotating Pathfinder's camera at letters and numbers, so NASA can interpret his messages. With NASA's instructions, he modifies the setup into text-based messages allowing two-way communication. This innovation enables NASA to remain in contact with Mark Watney, to guide him and motivate him in his survival attempt. NASA's efforts regarding Watney can be analyzed when Venkat Kapoor, who was responsible for this mission, addressed publicly and admitted that he was not sure if he could successfully rescue Watney. However, he promised that the overriding obsession of NASA team would be on either bringing Watney back on Earth or confirm his death on Mars.

This represents NASA's sense of responsibility for bringing him back. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the Superego represents the moral conscience of an individual guiding him to act responsibly and ethically. Mark Watney's efforts of creating a link with NASA, his spirit of exploring Pathfinder and modifying MAV (Mars Ascent Vehicle) and his successful attempt to dominate fears of isolation and in the end escaping from Mars, all this became possible due to his ingenuity and determination, his belief in teamwork efforts and his interaction with Earthly resources. All this reflects the guiding role of the superego in shaping behavior that aligns with societal and personal ideals.

In his last days on Mars, he speculated about everything that he did, whether by himself or with the help of NASA. Freud's concept of Superego is elaborated here as adherence of Watney to moral principles, responsibility to the mission, scientific endeavor, communication with Earth, and NASA's responsibility towards his safety. This social interaction has been justified through the psychoanalytic perspective of Sigmund Freud's theory. When Watney took responsibility for all this incident and texted to Hermes crew, "Well, guys, if you're reading this: It wasn't your fault. You did what you had to do. In your position I would have done the same thing. I don't blame you and I'm glad you survived." (Weir, 2014, p. 2). This shows his sense of responsibility towards the grappling situation. It is also a depiction of the superego side of man's psyche.

When Hermes came to know that Mark Watney was alive, they decided to save him despite all the challenges they could face in space. Commander Lewis took the consent of all crew members and informed them about all possible life-threatening hurdles and the consequences. "If we mess up the supply rendezvous, we die. If we mess up the Earth's gravity, we die. If we do everything perfectly, we add 533 days to our mission. 533 days of unplanned space travel where anything could go wrong. (Weir, 2014, p. 188). The concept of the Superego demands social responsibility and moral judgment. In the novel, not only does Mark Watney show resilience and courage, but his whole crew also takes responsibility for their actions. And their social bond with their lost crew members is also justified when Commander Lewis decides to go back to Mars to save Mark Watney. Thus, in the whole novel, the individual as well as collective efforts verify Sigmund Freud's theory of the human psyche.

Psychological dimension of the protagonist

In the novel *The Martian* (Weir, 2014), Mark Watney's personality can be analyzed through Freud's concepts of Id, Ego, and Superego. Along with these phases of the human psyche, Watney's psychological dimensions are analyzed through his resilience, optimism, problem-solving mindset, moral responsibility, and his connection with NASA – all these diverse aspects shaped his personality.

Doctor Irene Shields, flight psychologist for the Aries missions, explained Watney's psyche. He stated that Watney was very intelligent, resourceful, and a problem solver. He was a cheerful, good natured man with a great sense of humor. Further, he said that Watney was chosen for that mission because of his personality. He fitted well in any social group and was also a catalyst that made the group work better.

This study elaborates Watney's dilemma of detachment, survival, and spirit of exploration. Moreover, the psychological dimension of Mark Watney can be inspected through Dr. Shields' analysis of the protagonist's personality. He was able to survive on Mars because of his resourceful, problem-solving mindset, scientific ingenuity, social compatibility, and his humorous nature proved to be his defense mechanism.

Conclusion

An analysis of *The Martian* (Weir, 2014), from the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of personality according to which mind is made up of the Id, Ego and Superego, critically highlights the psychological dimensions of Mark Watney's experiences on Mars as well as the dilemma of his detachment and the struggle for survival along with unsurpassable spirit of exploration in a very descriptive manner. This study inspects the human drive to fulfill basic survival needs how adverse circumstances force protagonist to discover opportunities and activate problem-solving mindset despite the challenges of sustenance and safety. His Id stimulated him to struggle for survival; his Ego motivated him to realize his potential of creating resources like water and crop production, and his Superego drove him to create a communication bond with NASA to escape from Mars. Thus, the novel is analyzed through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory to reveal the dynamic interplay of the id, ego, and superego in shaping the protagonist's personality.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be built on the basis of the analysis presented in this article. Future research could explore how psychoanalytic theory is used in science fiction, particularly in stories about isolation and survival, to understand how extreme conditions shape human behavior and resilience. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the psychological complexity of Mark Watney's journey, highlighting the interplay of the Id, Ego, and Superego, alongside his demonstration of human ingenuity, adaptability, and the capacity for exploration beyond Earth. Finally, interdisciplinary studies that bring together literature, psychology, and space exploration stories could deepen academic discussion and help the public better understand how humans adapt and thrive in extreme environments.

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