

## A PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM OF JOHAN LIEBERT IN NAOKI URASAWA'S "MONSTER" MANGA

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### Abstrak

#### Keywords:

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*In recent years, scholars have recognized that literature extends beyond mere written text to include visual storytelling. Manga, a medium known for its artwork, unique narrative, and diverse variety of genres. It is also capable to portray human emotions, social realities, and psychological struggles and this ability to depict psychological tension becomes significant when exploring distorted psyche, manipulative behavior, and emotional disturbance. This study aims to examine Johan Liebert's psychological construction through Sigmund Freud's tripartite psyche, while also revealing his manipulative behavior and emotional detachment using Paulhus and Williams' Machiavellianism theory and Anna Freud's ego defense mechanisms. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the data were collected from Johan Liebert's utterances in Monster through close reading and categorization. The utterances were classified into five psychoanalytic categories: id, ego, superego, manipulation, and emotional detachment. The findings show that Johan's utterances are predominantly driven by the id, reflecting destructive impulses, while the ego functions to regulate actions strategically. Manipulative behavior and emotional detachment are consistently present, whereas superego utterance appear limited and mainly associated with his attachment to his twin sister. These results indicate that manga can function as a literary medium for understanding complex psychological mechanisms and distorted human psyche.*

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars have recognized that literature extends beyond mere written text to include visual storytelling. Modern narratives often add images with words



to convey complex meanings (Nikulina, 2024). Graphic novels, this type of narratives, have also become a popular genre for writers and readers alike (Maity, 2022). In Japan, the specific term for it is known as manga (Shawmi & Swarna, 2024), a medium of expression known for its high-quality artwork, unique narrative, and diverse variety of genres which lead to become the main entertainment among young readers (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Abd Razak & Ibnu, 2022). Beyond entertainment, it is also capable to portray human emotions, social realities, and psychological struggles, making it a reflection of the human condition (Santofimio Rojas, 2023). This ability to depict psychological tension becomes particularly significant when exploring distorted psyche, manipulative behavior, and emotional disturbance which resonate not only in fiction but also in real-life psychological cases. Thus, this research is important because it help demonstrate how manga, as a form of literature, can function as a medium for understanding complex psychological realities.

The object of this study is a critically acclaimed Japanese manga written by Naoki Urasawa titled *Monster*, a psychological thriller literature that explores moral ambiguity, identity, and the good and evil of humanity (Karim, 2023). The manga tells the story of Dr. Kenzo Tenma, a talented neurosurgeon who saved the life of a young boy named Johan Liebert, only to discover that the boy grew up to become a remorseless killer (Raney, 2021). This study uses Sigmund Freud's Tripartite Psyche (1923) as the grand theory to analyze Johan Liebert's character by examining how his utterances reflect the functions of the id, ego, and superego. In addition, Paulhus and Williams' Machiavellianism (2002) will be used to reveal the psychological conflicts that shaped his manipulative behavior and Anna Freud's ego defense mechanisms (1936) will be used to uncover his emotional detachment. Furthermore, these theories will reinforce psychoanalytic concepts about how the character functions, both as a representation and a symbolic embodiment of a distorted human psyche.

The study of human psychology has increasingly focused on destructive impulses, moral ambiguity, and detached emotions (Sadeh & Bredemeier, 2021). These are intertwined with Sigmund Freud's Tripartite Psyche, in which he divided the human psyche into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego (Freud, 1923). Each represents a different aspect of human motivation and moral reasoning, in which these aspects work together and often against each other to shape behavior (Freud, 1929; Dobie; 2011; Conolly, 2018; & Bloom 2023).

- The Id

This is the repository of libido, the source of our psychic energy and our psychosexual desires. The id represents the instinctual drives of human beings, such as desires, impulses, and pleasure-seeking tendencies that demand immediate satisfaction without moral consideration. It operates without any thought of consequences, anxieties, ethics, logic, precaution, or morality. In other words, it is unconscious. Demanding swift satisfaction and fulfillment of biological desires, it is lawless, asocial, and amoral. The id can be a socially destructive force. Uncontrolled, it will aggressively seek to satisfy desires without any concern for rules, customs, or values. It can even be self-destructive in its drive to have what it wants. In many ways, it resembles the devil figure that appears in some theological and literary texts, because it offers strong temptation to take what we want without considering normal restraints, taboos, or consequences.

- The Ego

The ego is what we can call reason and prudence. It represents the rational and realistic part of the mind that balances between the id's urges and the superego's moral constraints. This is in contrast to the id, which contains passion or desire. It operates according to the reality principle. Its function is to make the id's energies nondestructive by postponing them or diverting them into socially acceptable actions. It is the closest of the three parts of the psyche to what we think of as consciousness. Nevertheless, it is not directly approachable. We come closest to knowing it when it is relaxed by hypnosis, sleep, or unintentional slips of the tongue.

- The Superego

The superego represents internalized social norms and moral ideals, directing behavior according to what is right or wrong. It provides additional balance to the id. Similar to what is commonly known as one's conscience, superego operates according to the morality principle, for it provides the sense of moral and ethical wrongdoing. Consequently, the superego works against the drive of the id and suppresses socially unacceptable desires back into the unconscious. The balance between the license of the id and the restrictions of the superego produces a healthy personality. But when unconscious guilt becomes overwhelming, the individual can be said to be suffering from a guilt complex. When the superego is too strong, it can lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the self.

In literary analysis, Freud's Tripartite Psyche allows researchers to explore how characters' conflicts often mirror the struggle between these three mental forces. For instance, Autiero (2017) analyzed the novel *Peter Pan* using Sigmund Freud's Tripartite Psyche, and she concluded that Peter Pan and Captain Hook embodied the uncontrolled id. The characters of Mr. and Mrs. Darling were the result of an overly influential superego. Meanwhile, Wendy and the lost boys, including her brothers, were the embodiment of the ego.

Furthermore, Johan's manipulative behavior can also be interpreted through Machiavellianism theory, a concept associated with Italian Renaissance political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. In this study, Machiavellianism is treated as a one-dimensional construct representing Johan's tendency to exploit, deceive, and control others for personal or ideological gain (Jahangir et al., 2025). This embodies the traits of a Machiavellian manipulator who uses intellect as a weapon rather than a tool for empathy (Duradoni et al., 2023).

Moreover, Johan's emotional detachment enhances his psychological complexity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this detachment can be seen as a part of defense mechanisms where the ego suppresses emotional vulnerability and guilt to maintain inner stability (Di Giuseppe, 2021). These mechanisms are unconscious processes that protect the mind from feelings of guilt, anxiety, shame, or trauma by distorting reality or redirecting emotions (Bailey & Pico, 2023). This can be understood through Anna Freud's (1936) concept of ego defense mechanisms, which outlined ten primary defense mechanisms. However, in context of Johan Liebert's character, this study is intended to focus on a few selected mechanisms namely repression, intellectualization, and rationalization, as these are evident in his actions and aligned with the theoretical focus of this research.

- Repression

Repression is an unconscious defense mechanism where an individual blocks distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings from their conscious awareness to protect

themselves from emotional pain. It consists of an unconsciously motivated forgetting or unawareness of external events or of internal impulses, feelings, thoughts, or wishes. The forgetting associated with repression is unique in that it may be accompanied by a subjective sense that the repressed is not really forgotten or by symbolic behavior such as shaking one's fist while saying that one is not angry. Repression can also be expressed as unawareness that one's behavior is at odds with one's conscious intentions, or unawareness of the impact of one's behavior on others. It may also involve unawareness of how others will interpret one's actions or restriction from awareness of certain fantasies or feelings. Repressed memories may appear through subconscious means and in altered forms, such as dreams or slips of the tongue.

- Rationalization

Rationalization is a psychological defense mechanism in which apparent logical reasons are given to justify behavior that is motivated by unconscious instinctual impulses. It involves the denial or distortion of reality to reduce emotional discomfort and the person often believes their own rationalizations. It involves the construction of seemingly logical and reasonable explanations for behaviors, thoughts, or feelings to avoid acknowledging the true, often more distressing, underlying reasons, and to disguise or distort the true motivations. In rationalization examples, people provide logical sounding explanations or justifications that make their behaviors seem more acceptable, such as a person who cheats on their partner might insist that loneliness or the partner's neglect drove them to it. These rational explanations deflect from acknowledging their own impulsive desires by creating acceptable reasons for their actions. The primary benefit of rationalization is that it shields a person from immediate emotional pain. It relieves feelings of distress, allowing a person to carry on without becoming overwhelmed by negative emotions. By explaining away failures or questionable behavior, people avoid feelings of worthlessness, guilt, or shame. This defense mechanism acts as an emotional buffer; it allows someone to maintain a positive self-image even when something bad happens.

- Intellectualization

Intellectualization is a defense mechanism in which reasoning and abstract thinking are employed to avoid confronting uncomfortable emotions or unconscious conflicts, thereby creating emotional distance from distressing events. It refers to thinking as a special and limited variety of doing, as a mode of controlling affects and impulses by thinking them instead of experiencing the feelings associated with them, thus distancing the person from emotional experience. In this mechanism, the individual focuses on intellectual aspects of a situation while consciously or unconsciously disregarding any emotional attachment. The person employing intellectualization uses the thinking process defensively, as a substitute for and protection against emotion and impulse. As a result, the person emphasizes reason, devoid of affect, and tends to give blandly logical explanations of internal and external conditions. The person may acknowledge that feelings exist, but discusses them in such an emotionless, overly abstract way as if they are not fully experienced. In intellectualization examples, people use abstract thinking, technical language, and excessive analysis to avoid feeling emotions, such as a person might discuss a mother-daughter relationship theoretically without recognizing or feeling their emotions, discussing cancer statistics instead of feeling afraid, analyzing attachment theory instead of feeling heartbreak, or researching grief stages instead of experiencing sadness.

Previous studies have explored psychological and narrative analyses of manga and anime. For example, research conducted by Campos (2022) examined metafiction and genre hybridity in a storybook by Naoki Urasawa entitled “The Nameless Monster”, revealing how narrative self-awareness shaped readers’ perception of horror and morality in his work. Furthermore, Taek Berek (2023) analyzed nihilism in the character of Johan Liebert in the *Monster* anime, uncovering philosophical dimensions of despair and moral collapse. Similarly, Izzulhag (2024) explored nihilism in the same anime adaptation but emphasized thematic existentialism. Another research by Hajek and König (2024) examined the psychological effects of anime and manga consumption on adults in Germany, emphasizing social isolation and well-being rather than internal character analysis. Lastly, Rehan (2025) discussed narrative shifts and storytelling innovations in anime, identifying how anime aesthetics influenced modern audience engagement.

It appeared that earlier research has focused primarily on philosophical theme like nihilism, narrative structure, or the cultural psychology of audiences. Analysis of the human psyche through Sigmund Freud’s Tripartite Psyche, followed by perspectives of Anna Freud’s ego defense mechanisms, and Machiavellianism manipulative behavior received little attention. This gap indicates the absence of a focused study that interprets Johan’s manipulative behavior and emotional detachment through psychoanalytic theory. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its psychoanalysis with behavioral and personality perspectives to interpret a complex manga character as a representation of human psychological conflict.

This research aims to identify parts of Sigmund Freud’s tripartite psyche of a manga character, Johan Liebert. It further seeks to reveal his manipulative behavior using Paulhus and Williams’ Machiavellianism theory and uncover his emotional detachment using Anna Freud’s ego defense mechanisms. Together, these analyses illustrate how the character functions, both as a representation and a symbolic embodiment of a distorted human psyche. The findings of this research are expected to provide an alternative solution to the burning issue discussed earlier, by showing that literature can serve as a reflective tool to comprehend and critique the psychological mechanisms of a human mind.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This specific research paper used a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach to analyze the psychological layers of Johan Liebert. This approach is fitting in behavioral science, where the goal is to discover the underlying motives of human behavior (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019). This approach allows the researcher to interpret Johan Liebert’s psychological expressions as represented in Naoki Urasawa’s *Monster*.

The object of this research is the utterances found in the manga *Monster* that reflected Freud’s tripartite psyche, Machiavellian manipulation, and emotional detachment mechanisms performed by Johan Liebert. The data are the selected utterances taken from the manga, which are then classified based on the categorization of the id, ego, superego, manipulation, and emotional detachment according to the psychoanalytic and psychological frameworks applied in this study.

The research instrument consisted of categorization table and checklists based on the relevant theories presented above. The checklist served as a coding guide to patterns that corresponded to the theories. Meanwhile, the categorization, as presented in the table,

presents the categories applied and observable interpretations that served as a guide to ensure that each selected data point aligned clearly with theoretical indicators.

The data collection applied was close reading technique. According to Morgan (2022), any paper containing text is a potential source for qualitative analysis. The data source was obtained from Naoki Urasawa's *Monster* manga, focused on Johan Liebert's utterances that indicated his sign of tripartite psyche, manipulative intent, or emotional detachment. The researcher conducted multiple readings of the manga to identify and select parts containing Johan Liebert's utterance that represented aspects of the id, ego, superego, manipulation, and emotional detachment. After that, the data were analyzed using deductive content analysis using the framework proposed by Elo & Kyngäs (2008). The process involved three main stages:

- Preparation Phase

The researcher identified and selected utterances relevant to the research focus such as manifestations of the tripartite psyche, Machiavellianism, and emotional detachment.

- Organization Phase

Each selected utterance was classified into one of the theoretical categories and entered into the categorization table for analysis.

- Result Phase

The researcher interpreted the meaning of each utterance based on psychoanalytic and psychological perspectives, describing how the evidence reflected Johan Liebert's distorted psyche, manipulative tendencies, and emotional suppression.

In summary, this research utilized a qualitative descriptive approach supported by close reading and deductive content analysis to investigate Johan Liebert's psychological complexity in *Monster*. The methodological framework consisting of data categorization, theoretical checklists, and interpretation allowed the researcher to identify textual evidence that embodied Freud's tripartite psyche, Machiavellian manipulation, and Anna Freud's ego defense mechanisms.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study consist of 23 utterances produced by Johan Liebert that reflected five psychoanalytic categories identified through qualitative content analysis. Each utterance was assigned to a category based on its most evident psychological function. The analysis reveals that the dominant category is id, followed by manipulation and emotional detachment. An example of Id utterance can be seen in "What am I doing? I'm executing him." (Chapter 8), which demonstrates Johan's violent instinct without moral restraint.

The findings reveal that id is the most dominant category, followed by manipulation and emotional detachment, while superego is almost nonexistent. These patterns indicate that Johan's utterances are primarily driven by instinctual impulses and psychological control, with limited expressions of moral restraint. The categorized findings are summarized in a table, while further interpretation and theoretical discussion are presented in the following section.

**Table 1. Categorization Table**

No	Utterance	Indicator	Chapter
1	"What am I doing? I'm executing him."	Id	8

2	“I did go by that name once. But it wasn’t my real name.”	Ego	8
3	“My dear Dr. Tenma. Look at me! Look at me! Look how enormous the monster inside of me has grown!”	Id	17
4	“Your fate has already been decided.”	Id	17
5	“The monster inside of me is going to explode!”	Id	31
6	“Don’t you hear them? Listen carefully.”	Manipulation	50
7	“Why, are you trying to forget or are you lying? Are you lying to everyone or just to yourself? Does lying about it absolve you of your guilt?”	Manipulation	56
8	“Yes, this is great... but it might be a bit too grown-up.”	Ego	64
9	“I thought I’d reached the darkest place possible... but in fact, I went beyond that. I saw an even deeper darkness.”	Emotional Detachment	65
10	“It’s a full house. This place is swarming with people... all here for <i>you</i> .”	Manipulation	72
11	“Crawling all over each other... can you feel it? Their fear...”	Emotional Detachment	72
12	“Once upon a time, there was a monster who had no name. The monster desperately wanted to have a name of its own.”	Emotional Detachment	89
13	“My greatest fear is that I’ll forget Anna... please let me keep just this one memory.”	Superego	95
14	“Being born isn’t all that common, you know. There is more death than life in the universe... as far as the universe is concerned, a life born in some little corner of this planet is just a momentary blip. Death is the norm.”	Emotional Detachment	98
15	“She must have abandoned you because she didn’t love you, don’t you think?”	Manipulation	98
16	“You’ll know when you see her, and your mother will know you when she sees you. But, if no one approaches you... it means that nobody wanted you.”	Manipulation	98
17	“Burn it all...”	Id	117
18	“They are all for you, Anna.”	Ego	118
19	“Today is the day that the monster came to take us away.”	Id	118
20	“Shoot me in the head. After you shoot me, run away so the monster can’t catch you.”	Id	118
21	“You’re right. The world doesn’t need people like that.”	Manipulation	134
22	“What am I? The monster inside of me wasn’t inside... it was outside.”	Emotional Detachment	137
23	“Dr. Tenma, you believed that all lives were equally valuable. That’s why I came back to life. But you understand now, don’t you? We’re all only really equal in death.”	Emotional Detachment	159

Utterances categorized as id demonstrate Johan Liebert’s domination by instinctual drives associated with aggression, death, and annihilation. Statements such as “What am I doing? I’m executing him.” (Chapter 8), “The monster inside of me is going to explode.” (Chapter 31), “Burn it all...” (Chapter 117), and “Shoot me in the head. After you shoot me, run away so the monster can’t catch you.” (Chapter 118) demonstrate Johan’s submission to instinctual drives that prioritize aggression and annihilation with little regard for morality or consequence. These utterances indicate the drive where destruction is directed both outward and inward.

According to Freud (1923), the id operates on the pleasure principle and seeks immediate discharge of instinctual energy. Johan’s repeated references to the “monster

inside” suggest an internalization of these destructive impulses as an essential part of his identity. The dominance of id-related utterances supports the portrayal of Johan as a character driven by instinctual psychological forces rather than ethical reasoning.

While the id dominates Johan’s psyche, ego-related utterances reveal his capacity to adapt behavior to social contexts. However, Johan’s ego does not act as a mediator between instinct and morality; instead, it serves as a calculating mechanism that enables his survival and manipulation within society. Utterances such as “I did go by that name once. But it wasn’t my real name.” (Chapter 8) and “Yes, this is great... but it might be a bit too grown-up.” (Chapter 64) demonstrate controlled speech that allows Johan to navigate social interactions without exposing his true intentions.

The ego operates based on the reality principle, negotiating between internal desires and external demands. Johan’s ego fulfills this function by masking his violent impulses behind politeness, adaptability, and social intelligence. Rather than restraining the id, the ego refines it, allowing Johan to channel his destructive desires into socially acceptable forms. This explains how Johan can appear composed and harmless while simultaneously arranging violence. The ego becomes an instrument that supports the id rather than counterbalancing it.

The findings also show that superego is the least represented component in Johan’s psyche. Its presence is rare and appears only in relation to his twin sister, Anna Liebert. The utterance “My greatest fear is that I’ll forget Anna... please let me keep just this one memory” (Chapter 95) reflects an internal moral boundary rooted in emotional attachment rather than societal ethics. Unlike conventional representations of superego, which embody internalized moral rules, Johan’s superego is highly selective and emotionally personalized.

This suggests that Johan’s moral consciousness does not extend to society at large but is limited to his bond with Anna. His fear of forgetting her functions as a fragile moral anchor, preventing complete psychological break down. Freud conceptualizes the superego as the internalized authority of parental and societal values; however, in Johan’s case, these values are absent or fractured due to childhood trauma. As a result, the superego fails to regulate his destructive impulses, reinforcing the imbalance within his psyche.

The findings further demonstrate that Johan’s manipulative behavior is systematic and deliberate, reflecting ego-controlled aggression rather than impulsive violence. Utterances such “Why, are you trying to forget or are you lying? Are you lying to everyone or just to yourself? Does lying about it absolve you of your guilt?” (Chapter 56) and “She must have abandoned you because she didn’t love you, don’t you think?” (Chapter 98) show deliberate verbal strategies aimed at intensifying guilt, insecurity, and existential fear. These reveal Johan’s ability to exploit psychological vulnerabilities through calculated questioning and emotionally charged statements. Johan destabilizes others’ sense of self, inducing guilt, fear, and despair. His way of manipulation demonstrates how Johan weaponizes language to dominate others psychologically.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, manipulation functions as an extension of ego activity serving id-driven goals. Rather than acting impulsively, Johan uses calculated speech to destabilize others, allowing destruction to occur indirectly. This pattern aligns with Machiavellian traits, where manipulation is used to dominate others without direct physical force. Johan’s manipulation often replaces undisguised violence, allowing him to maintain control while appearing detached. The ego plays a role in this process by

selecting language and timing that maximize psychological impact. Consequently, manipulation becomes an extension of Johan's id-driven desire for control and destruction.

A significant number of utterances reflect emotional detachment, which can be understood through Anna Freud's (1936) ego defense mechanisms, particularly repression, rationalization, and intellectualization. Emotional detachment emerges as a significant psychological pattern in Johan's utterances, such as "Being born isn't all that common, you know. There is more death than life in the universe... as far as the universe is concerned, a life born in some little corner of this planet is just a momentary blip. Death is the norm." (Chapter 98), "Dr. Tenma, you believed that all lives were equally valuable. That's why I came back to life. But you understand now, don't you? We're all only really equal in death." (Chapter 159), and "Once upon a time, there was a monster who had no name. The monster desperately wanted to have a name of its own." (Chapter 89) demonstrate Johan's tendency to abstract violence and suffering into philosophical or symbolic narratives. By framing death as a universal constant, Johan distances himself emotionally from the consequences of his actions.

Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms explains this detachment as a protective strategy. Intellectualization allows Johan to avoid emotional pain by focusing on ideas rather than feelings. His repeated abstract philosophical or symbolic concept on death indicate a persistent avoidance of emotional vulnerability. Repression related to identity loss and memory preservation suppresses his personal guilt and emotional pain. Rationalization further enables him to justify destruction as inevitable or meaningless. These mechanisms collectively shield Johan from emotional vulnerability, reinforcing his image as an emotionally detached character.

Previous studies focused primarily on Johan Liebert as a symbol of nihilism and psychological trauma. However, this study extends earlier research by systematically categorizing Johan's utterances according to Freud's tripartite psyche, explicitly distinguishing manipulation, and emotional detachment as functional psychological strategies. This approach highlights how language itself becomes a tool for expressing instinctual drives, ego defense mechanisms, and manipulation, contributing to a deeper understanding of Johan's characterization and offering originality in method and analysis.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, these reveal a consistent psychological pattern showing that Johan Liebert is an antagonist character dominated by the id, supported by a strategic ego, restrained by a minimal superego, and reinforced by manipulation and emotional detachment. The imbalance within his psyche reflects the broader theme of *Monster*, which explores how trauma and loss of identity can ruin ethical consciousness.

In conclusion, these findings reinforce the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in literary analysis and confirm that manga can serve as a powerful medium for exploring psychological distortion and moral collapse. These also address the burning issue of understanding extreme psychological violence by demonstrating how literature can represent mental mechanisms that mirror real-world psychological disorders. By portraying Johan's psyche through psychoanalytic constructs, *Monster* offers a reflective literary space for examining how fractured identities and suppressed trauma can manifest as destructive behavior. Additionally, this analysis may assist future researchers in understanding how psychological disorders are constructed through dialogue in narrative

fiction. Therefore, this study contributes to broader discussions in psychoanalytic literary criticism. Despite its contributions, this study possesses a limitation in which the analysis focused solely on Johan Liebert's utterances, excluding non-verbal actions and visual elements of the manga that may also convey psychological meaning. Future research is encouraged to expand this study by incorporating visual analysis and narrative structure to complement dialogue-based interpretation.

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