

STRIVING FOR SUPERIORITY AND INFERIORITY FEELING IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *MIRROR*: AN ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstrak

Keywords:

Individual Psychology,
Inferiurity Feelings,
Striving for Superiority

Body image and self-esteem issues have become significant psychological problems for women, especially under social pressure related to appearance and aging. Although Sylvia Plath's poem Mirror has been widely analyzed, most studies use a psychoanalytic or symbolic approach, so few studies apply Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. This study aims to analyze the psychological dynamics of the female character in Mirror by identifying forms of inferiority feelings and analyzing manifestations of efforts to achieve superiority through imagery, word choice, and symbolism. Using a qualitative descriptive method, fourteen relevant quotations from the poem were analyzed and classified into two categories: feelings of inferiority and attempts to achieve superiority. The results of the study show that feelings of inferiority are reflected through negative self-evaluation, dependence on external validation, anxiety about aging, and a distorted self-image. Meanwhile, attempts to achieve superiority emerge as maladaptive compensation characterized by repetitive behavior and excessive symbolic control. This study concludes that Mirror depicts an unresolved psychological cycle, in which feelings of inferiority fail to develop into healthy endeavors, resulting in persistent inner conflict and self-alienation.

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INTRODUCTION

Pressure surrounding body image has become a significant psychological concern in the digital era, especially for adolescent girls. Social media contributes to predominantly negative body perceptions (Sutini et al., 2022) and repeated exposure to idealized images increases anxiety and body dissatisfaction (Cline et al., 2023). Reports also show that girls as young as twelve feel uncomfortable with their bodies (Hill, 2023), while a UCL study (2023) associates heavy social media use with rising eating disorders. Low self-compassion further heightens vulnerability to inferiority and social



anxiety (Holas et al., 2020). These issues place adolescents at risk of emotional instability, low self-esteem, and persistent negative self-evaluation. Because such struggles are also depicted in literary works, examining how they appear in poetry is essential for understanding their emotional and symbolic depth. Therefore, it is important to explore how individuals confront inferiority and cultivate self-acceptance, a central theme in Sylvia Plath's poetry.

Plath's *Mirror* (1961) depicts a woman's emotional struggle with her own reflection, revealing the tension between reality, ideal self-image, and the effects of aging on self-acceptance. This theme remains relevant today as social media intensifies worries about appearance. Studies show that frequent social comparison on platforms like Instagram increases body dissatisfaction and sensitivity to appearance-based judgments (Atiqah & Zubair, 2025). Similar concerns appear in recent analyses of female identity and self-perception in Plath's works (Bonasera, 2019; Adhikari, 2024). Using Adler's Individual Psychology, which explains how individuals respond to inferiority by striving for self-improvement, this study views the woman's conflict as an effort to navigate physical change while holding onto an idealized self-image (Adler, 1930; McCluskey, 2021).

Several studies have applied Adler's Individual Psychology to analyze literary characters. Research on *Wonder* shows how inferiority and striving for superiority shape the protagonist's self-acceptance (Adkhiyah, 2022), while studies on *Hello Salma* and *Andrea Hirata's* novels also identify similar Adlerian dynamics (Wulandari et al., 2024; Mustaqimah & Yuniawan, 2021). Studies on Sylvia Plath's works, however, often use different approaches. *Mirror* has been examined through Freud's psychoanalytic lens to explain women's fear of aging (Adhikari, 2024) and through symbolic analysis focusing on mirrors and space as representations of female identity (Bonasera, 2019).

Based on these studies, it can be suggested that applying Adler's concepts to *Mirror* may fill a meaningful gap in existing research. Adler's ideas on inferiority feelings and striving for superiority offer a relevant framework for analyzing how individuals confront self-doubt, especially in relation to appearance. This approach may contribute to a more detailed understanding of how the poem portrays internal struggle and the search for self-acceptance in the face of societal expectations.

This study aims to examine the psychological dynamics of the female character in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror* through the lens of Adler's Individual Psychology. Specifically, the research seeks to identify and describe the forms of inferiority feelings reflected through the poem's imagery, diction, and symbolism. In addition, it attempts to analyze how the character's striving for superiority manifests in her attitudes and internal conflicts toward her reflection. By doing so, this study is expected to contribute to a broader understanding of how modern individuals negotiate self-acceptance and self-worth in the face of societal pressures. The findings may also offer a more nuanced application of Adlerian concepts in literary analysis, providing insights into the intersection between psychological theory and poetic expression.

Individual Psychology

Individual Psychology is a theory that views humans as conscious beings who intentionally act to pursue goals that give meaning to their lives, because their behavior is driven by the effort to overcome feelings of inferiority and to grow toward social contribution rather than by instincts or past experiences (Adler, 1930). Every individual

experiences feelings of deficiency or inadequacy arising from physical, social, or emotional limitations (Adler, 1954). However, these feelings can become a driving force for self-improvement (Yang et al, 2023). When directed positively, they lead to constructive development and growth; conversely, if unmanaged, they may give rise to destructive behaviors and emotional conflicts (Tjahyani, 2024). Within Adler's perspective, the tension between inferiority and the striving for superiority becomes the core dynamic that governs how a person interprets and responds to their inner experiences. Thus, this research expected to provide a foundation for understanding how characters in literary works such as in Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* navigate internal struggles between self acceptance and the drive to achieve superiority.

The Concept of Inferiority Feelings

Feelings of inferiority are a natural part of human experience that arise when a person becomes aware of their weaknesses or limitations (Adler, 1930). Although they may sound negative, these feelings are actually important for personal development. When managed properly, a sense of inferiority can become a positive driving force that encourages someone to learn new things, improve themselves, and strive to reach their full potential (Pratama & Lena, 2023). However, if these feelings are overly internalized, the impact can turn harmful leading to anxiety, hopelessness, and even self-rejection (Liu et al, 2024). The tension between feeling inadequate and the desire to be competent is a crucial aspect of human psychological development (Feist, Feist, & Roberts, 2018). Therefore, inferiority feelings have two sides: they can stimulate growth or, conversely, cause stagnation depending on how one responds to them.

The causes of inferiority feelings are closely related to personal experiences and the social environment (Smith, 1938). These feelings often take root in childhood, for example due to physical weaknesses, excessive dependence on others, or overly protective parenting (Adler, 1930 as cited in Corey, 2017). Over time, environmental and cultural factors reinforce them through unrealistic standards of perfection, in the modern context, social media and popular culture intensify this pressure by presenting idealized images of beauty, success, and popularity (Irdianti, 2025). People who frequently compare themselves to others on social media tend to have lower self esteem and decreased psychological well being because they rely on external validation (Lee, 2020). Research findings from University College London (2023) also show that prolonged exposure to idealized images on the internet increases body dissatisfaction, especially among young women. This reinforces the idea that feelings of inferiority do not arise solely from within, but are also shaped by modern social and cultural demands. Because of these accumulated pressures, inferiority feelings gradually shape how individuals view themselves and respond to their environment. Over time, this emotional tension can influence their motivation, confidence, and overall psychological well-being.

Striving for Superiority

Every human being has an innate drive to correct personal shortcomings and achieve the best version of themselves (Adler, 1930). This drive is not a desire to dominate others, but an effort to find meaning in life and develop one's potential, a view that aligns with contemporary findings showing that individuals motivated by growth and self-actualization seek exploration, purpose, and personal development rather than

power over others (Kaufman, 2018). The drive toward superiority is teleological, meaning that human behavior is always directed toward life goals perceived as valuable (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). This is also in line with McCluskey (2021) that the pursuit of superiority reflects a person's shift from feelings of inadequacy toward the process of self actualization. Thus, this concept affirms the positive view that human beings are always in a continuous process of growth, as personal development unfolds through ongoing psychological shifts that enhance well-being across the lifespan (Maurer et al., 2023).

In Adler's theory, the drive to become superior can appear in two forms: healthy striving and unhealthy striving (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Healthy striving, in particular, is characterized by intrinsic motivation, balanced emotions, and a focus on self-development and contributing to others, that align with contemporary discussions of growth processes emphasizing intrinsic goals, emotional resources, and self-transcendent forms of contribution (Marshall, 2020). Healthy striving reflects an adaptive function in which achievement is linked to self-acceptance rather than social recognition (Suryavanashi, 2024). Conversely, Unhealthy striving manifests in behaviors such as relentlessly doing more without feeling adequate, achieving notable successes yet remaining unfulfilled, and competing with individuals who pursue entirely different aims (Hill, 2021). Perfectionism often develops from appearance based social comparison, which diminishes body appreciation and self esteem, particularly among young women (Etherson et al, 2022). For example, a woman who pursues a career to develop her potential and independence embodies healthy striving (Wolontis, 2016), whereas a woman who seeks achievement solely to feel superior to others represents unhealthy striving (Dreikurs, 1989).

An individual's response to feelings of inferiority plays a role in determining whether their behavior becomes constructive or destructive (Adler, 1930). Constructive behavior reflects healthy striving, where a person turns limitations into motivation to grow, empathize, and contribute to others, showing a balance between personal ambition and communal values that aligns with recent research suggesting that socially oriented motivation can strengthen effort, efficiency, and teamwork (Grant & Shandell, 2022). On the other hand, destructive behavior arises when the drive to become superior is cut off from social interest and turns into ego-driven motives such as domination, perfectionism, or avoidance of failure (Nepon et al, 2024). This pattern described as overcompensation, when an individual covers their weaknesses with arrogance or excessive self-control, ultimately heightening psychological pressure (Feist, Feist, & Roberts, 2018). In *Mirror*, the female character exhibits this destructive pattern; her obsession with an idealized youthful image leads her to reject her true self, illustrating Adler's concept that psychological health depends on the ability to transform inferiority into constructive striving (Adhikari, 2024).

Poetic Devices for Psychological Interpretation

In literary analysis, the concepts of inferiority and striving for superiority can be identified through imagery, diction, and symbolism that reveal a character's psychological depth (Abrams & Harpham, 2009). Visual imagery is the cognitive experience of generating internal visual representations that resemble pictures in one's mind (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2019). Imagery frequently conveys internal conflict, and psychological research on divided-self metaphors (Ananieva, 2023) along

with studies showing that opposition structures reflect emotional tension (Haeyen, 2022) supports the interpretation that contrasts such as light-dark or reflection-distortion represent a character's struggle between self-acceptance and self-rejection. In *Mirror*, the imagery of the mirror and the lake reflects the character's self-perception and emotional depth, while the depiction of the "terrible fish" at the end of the poem symbolizes unresolved inferiority. Diction, defined as the choice of words especially with regard to correctness, clearness, or effectiveness (Merriam-Webster). Diction also plays a crucial role; words like *exact*, *swallow*, and *truthful* convey the mirror's cold objectivity, whereas emotional terms like *searching*, *tears*, and *agitation* reveal the character's anxiety and unhealthy striving for perfection (Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004). Drawing on Barry's view that symbols in poetry function to externalize psychological states and latent meanings, the mirror, the lake, and the fish in *Mirror* can be read as metaphors for the speaker's psychological movement from self-awareness toward emotional entrapment (Barry, 2017). In *Mirror*, this entrapment becomes evident through the woman's compulsive return to the mirror "day after day," a routine that traps her in a cycle of seeking validation yet confronting only the painful truth of her aging face. Through these devices, Plath shows that unbalanced striving and unresolved inferiority manifest in language and imagery, revealing the fragmentation between the real self with the ideal self (Tyson, 2015).

In literary works, the struggle toward superiority is often depicted through actions, dialogue, and imagery that reflect the search for self worth and identity. Female characters in particular frequently demonstrate this psychological struggle when faced social pressure and internal insecurity (Miranda & Helmita, 2019). For instance, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* displays healthy striving through her ability to navigate social expectations and achieve personal growth while pursuing genuine love grounded in mutual respect and emotional fulfilment (Diffyane & Mubarak, 2025). Conversely, in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*, the female character's obsessive relationship with her own reflection represents unhealthy striving (Wagner-Martin, 2003). Her attempt to reclaim her youth symbolizes a desperate need for validation and control. The poem's mirror imagery emphasizes this conflict, for what is reflected is not her real self but an unattainable idealization. Through this portrayal, Plath shows that the drive to become superior can turn into self-destruction when it is no longer grounded in self-acceptance, as the speaker's dependence on her reflection results in alienation rather than reconciliation with the self (Bassnett, 2005).

The psychological impact of inferiority feelings is frequently depicted in literature through characters' behavior, internal monologues, and the use of symbolism. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect symbolizes his deep inferiority and alienation. His harsh self perception and self-deprecating language illustrate how destructive feelings of inadequacy can be. Meanwhile, in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*, imagery becomes the main medium for projecting low self-esteem. The reflection of the aging woman reveals her inability to accept her true self, and the depiction of the "terrible fish" represents the emotional distortion caused by self-rejection. Through imagery, diction, and tone, Plath illustrates Adler's idea that unresolved inferiority feelings can disrupt psychological balance and hinder a person from achieving self acceptance.

Based on an Adlerian approach, Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* can be seen as a depiction of the modern human struggle with self image and fear of change, particularly those

shaped by social pressures and beauty standards. Therefore, Adler's Individual Psychology serves as the theoretical foundation of this study to analyze how the female character's inferiority and drive for superiority shape her inner conflict. This theoretical basis supports the research goal of identifying forms of inferiority and analyzing the manifestations of striving for superiority in the poem.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, as it aims to identify forms of inferiority feelings and analyze manifestations of striving for superiority in Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* through textual features such as imagery, diction, and symbols. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the data are analyzed interpretative without statistical procedures, focusing on meaning construction within a literary text (Creswell, 2018).

The subject of this research is Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror* (1961). The object of this study is the representation of two psychological aspects: (1) the forms of inferiority feelings reflected through imagery, diction, and symbols, and (2) the manifestations of striving for superiority shown through the character's attitudes and inner conflicts toward her reflection.

The primary data consist of selected excerpts from the poem that contain imagery, diction, and symbol relevant to the research focus. Secondary data include books, journal articles, and theoretical sources related to Adler's Individual Psychology, poetic devices, and scholarly discussions of Plath's works.

The data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. The poem was read repeatedly to identify textual elements that indicate inferiority feelings and striving for superiority. Imagery, diction, and symbolic expressions related to these psychological dynamics were marked and transferred into a data sheet, categorized according to the indicators formulated for the two research objectives.

To organize the data, the researcher employed a structured coding sheet adapted from a Cornell-style note taking format, which allows the separation of textual excerpts, analytical notes, and thematic indicators (Pauk & Owens, 2014). Each selected excerpts was transferred into a coding sheet and categorized based on Adlerian psychological indicators. The coding sheet includes the excerpt, the poetic device involved, the psychological category and the line number.

The instrument functions as a analytical tool to identify, and interpret textual elements that represent inferiority feelings and striving for superiority.

Data Classification for Inferiority Feelings and Striving for Superiority

Line	Excerpt	Poetic Device	Category	Indicator
1	I am silver and exact	Imagery	Striving for Superiority	Reinterpretation of Weaknesses Into Strength

The collected data were analyzed using textual analysis through several stage to examine how meaning is constructed through imagery, diction, and symbol in literary texts (Belsey, 2005). First, the selected excerpt was identified and coded according to two categories derived from the research objectives: inferiority feelings and striving for superiority. Second, each excerpts was closely examined by analyzing its imagery,

diction, and symbols to reveal how psychological aspects operate within the poem. Third, the interpretation process was conducted by relating the textual evidence with Adler's concepts, particularly the concept of inferiority feelings and striving for superiority. Finally, conclusions were drawn to explain how the poem represents the character's inner conflict.

In summary, this study applies qualitative descriptive with textual analysis to examine inferiority feelings and striving for superiority in *Mirror*. The methodological framework support the exploration of poetic devices in relation to Adler's Individual Psychology, serving as the basis for the presented in the following chapter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data classification process, this study identified a total of 14 relevant excerpts in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*. The fourteen data were divided into two main categories, namely 7 excerpts representing feelings of inferiority and 7 excerpts showing manifestations of striving for superiority.

Inferiority Feelings Reflected through Imagery, Diction, and Symbol

Based on the analysis results, seven excerpts were found in the poem *Mirror* that represent the female character's feelings of inferiority. These feelings of inferiority are reflected through various forms of psychological expression, such as negative self-evaluation, emotional dependence on external validation, anxiety about aging, and the formation of a symbolically distorted self-image. In line with Adler's (1930) view, feelings of inferiority are not merely emotional weaknesses, but rather an awareness of one's limitations that affects the way individuals view and assess their existence.

Expressions of Inadequacy

Expressions of inadequacy are evident in the line 14 "She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands." The imagery of tears and restless body movements represents the emotional tension that arises when the female character confronts her reflection in the mirror.

From an Adlerian perspective, this intense emotional reaction indicates unhealthy feelings of inferiority. Awareness of one's limitations does not serve as a catalyst for growth, but rather gives rise to anxiety and psychological instability that characterize the character's inner conflict.

Negative Self-Evaluation

Negative self-evaluation is reflected in the line 11 "Searching my reaches for what she really is," which culminates in the symbol "like a terrible fish." This symbol depicts a self-image that is alien, frightening, and unacceptable to the female character.

According to Adler, the large gap between the real self and the ideal self reinforces feelings of inferiority. The symbol "terrible fish" represents a deformation of self-image, in which the female character sees herself as flawed and repulsive. This reinforces her identity crisis and self-rejection.

Dependence on External Validation

Dependence on external validation is evident in the line 15 & 16 "I am important to her. She comes and goes" and "Each morning it is her face that replaces the

darkness.” The female character repeatedly returns to the mirror to affirm her existence and value.

In Adler's theory, this condition indicates weak psychological autonomy. The mirror functions as an authority that judges the self, replacing internal evaluation. As a result, the character's self-esteem becomes fragile and completely dependent on external visual recognition, thereby deepening the feelings of inferiority she experiences.

Fear of Aging or Physical Decline

The fear of aging is expressed through the line 17 “In me she has drowned a young girl” and “an old woman rises toward her day after day.” Aging is represented as a process of losing identity and self-worth.

In the Adlerian context, inferiority rooted in physical conditions is often reinforced by social pressure. Aging is perceived not as a natural process of life, but as a threat to identity and self-esteem. Anxiety about age becomes a source of chronic and ongoing feelings of inferiority.

Overall, feelings of inferiority in *Mirror* appear in various forms, ranging from intense emotional expressions, negative self-evaluation, dependence on external validation, to anxiety about aging and distorted self-image. All these forms of inferiority reinforce Adler's view that awareness of one's limitations is at the core of an individual's psychological conflicts.

However, Adler also emphasized that feelings of inferiority never stand alone. Inferiority inherently triggers a drive to overcome it. Therefore, the following section discusses how these feelings of inferiority give rise to striving for superiority as a psychological response of female characters to their self-reflection.

Striving for Superiority Manifested through Attitudes and Internal Conflicts

The analysis shows that there are seven excerpts in the poem *Mirror* that represent the female character's striving for superiority. However, this striving is not manifested as a healthy achievement, but rather as a compensatory effort that is manifested through repetitive attitudes, claims of symbolic control, and unresolved inner conflicts. All forms of striving are analyzed through imagery, diction, and symbolism based on Adler's Individual Psychology framework.

Effort to Overcome Shortcomings

Repeated efforts are seen in the phrases “She comes and goes” and “Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.” This repetition shows the female character's continuous efforts to overcome her dissatisfaction with herself.

However, according to Adler, healthy striving is progressive and oriented toward psychological growth. In this poem, the effort is stagnant and ritualistic, thus failing to produce meaningful personal development.

Reinterpretation of Weaknesses Into Strength

Claims of superiority are reflected in the lines 1 & 5 “I am silver and exact” and “The eye of a little god, four-cornered.” The mirror positions itself as an absolute, objective, and powerful entity.

In the Adlerian framework, this reflects overcompensation, which is an attempt to cover up feelings of inferiority through symbols of control and false superiority. This

claim of power does not resolve inner conflict, but rather reinforces the psychological tension experienced by the character.

Attempts to Regain Control over Self-Image

Attempts to control self-image are evident in the line 12 “Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.” When reflective truth is painful, the female character chooses an illusion that is more emotionally soothing.

According to Adler, avoidance of self-reality indicates a failure to deal with inferiority constructively. Striving in this context functions as a defense mechanism, not as a path to healthy self-acceptance.

Movement toward or Resistance to Self-Acceptance

The excerpt in the line 18 “rises toward her day after day” describe the passage of time without psychological resolution. The female character continues to move temporally, but remains trapped in the same inner conflict.

Instead of leading to self-acceptance, the striving experienced actually forms a maladaptive lifestyle, as described by Adler, in which the drive toward superiority is not balanced with emotional equilibrium and social interest.

These findings show that striving for superiority in *Mirror* manifests itself through repetitive attitudes, claims of symbolic control, and unresolved inner conflicts. Although female characters show a drive to overcome inferiority, this striving is unhealthy because it is disconnected from self-acceptance.

Overall, the psychological dynamics of female characters in *Mirror* form an unproductive cycle. Inferiority feelings rooted in negative self-evaluation, dependence on external validation, and anxiety about aging trigger compensatory striving for superiority.

From the perspective of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, the absence of healthy striving and low social orientation cause the female characters to fail to achieve psychological growth. The characters' self-identity remains tied to external reflections, so that inner conflicts continue to recur without resolution.

The results of this study indicate that the poem *Mirror* represents the psychological conflicts of women shaped by social pressures regarding their bodies, age, and self-image. Through the Adlerian approach, this poem illustrates how unresolved feelings of inferiority can give rise to unhealthy striving and lead to self-alienation. These findings address a pressing issue in this study by showing how social pressure on women's bodies and self-image creates psychological conflict, resulting in prolonged feelings of inferiority and maladaptive attempts to achieve superiority.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies that applied Adlerian Individual Psychology to literary characters, particularly in highlighting how feelings of inferiority motivate individuals to strive for excellence (Adkhiyah, 2022; Wulandari et al., 2024; Mustaqimah & Yuniawan, 2021). Similar to these studies, this research shows that feelings of inferiority play a central role in shaping the psychological development of characters. However, unlike previous studies that emphasize self-acceptance as a result of struggle, this study reveals that the struggle of female characters in *Mirror* remains maladaptive and fails to bring about psychological growth.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Mirror* depicts unresolved psychological conflicts, the root causes of which lie in feelings of inferiority that are constantly influenced by social pressures on women's bodies, age, and self-image. Using Adlerian Individual Psychology, the analysis shows that the female character's efforts to achieve superiority function as maladaptive compensation rather than healthy psychological growth. Instead of achieving self-acceptance, this process reinforces internal tension and self-alienation. Therefore, this poem highlights how the failure to transform feelings of inferiority into constructive efforts leads to psychological stagnation.

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