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Exploring The Psychological Dimensions And Conflicts Of The Main Character In The Movie *The Greatest Showman*

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the psychological dimensions and internal conflicts of film characters is important in examining how emotions, motivations, and behaviors shape character development. While film character analysis is well established, a gap remains between psychological theory and its applied use in analyzing character transformation (specify this gap more clearly). This study examines the psychological dimensions and conflicts of Phineas Taylor Barnum in *The Greatest Showman* (2017). Using a qualitative analytical approach, this research applies psychological theory and conflict theory to analyze Barnum's internal drives and emotional struggles. Data were collected through close viewing of the film, using documentation and note-taking techniques, that reflect Barnum's psychological traits and conflicts. The scenes were analyzed by classifying them according to five psychological dimensions (list or briefly define) and two types of conflict, internal and external. The findings show that Barnum's personal development is influenced by ambition, emotional needs, and the desire for social acceptance (this is expected—add a more specific insight). These psychological aspects create narrative tensions that drive his transformation throughout the narrative. The study concludes that Barnum's character is shaped by dynamic psychological negotiation and conflict resolution, providing insight into character construction in fil. This research contributes to discussions of psychological analysis in cinematic narratives.

Keywords: character development, conflict, movie analysis, psychological dimensions, the greatest showman

1. Introduction

Understanding the psychological dimensions and internal conflicts of literary or cinematic characters provides insight into the complexity of human behavior and motivation. One such compelling character is Phineas Taylor Barnum, the central figure in *The Greatest Showman*

(2017) movie, a musical biographical film that portrays his journey from obscurity to fame. Despite the film's colorful presentation and uplifting musical numbers, it also reveals profound emotional and psychological struggles faced by Barnum as he seeks acceptance, recognition, and success.

Previous studies have explored psychological conflict in various literary and cinematic works using different theoretical lenses. (Yuliani, 2025) examines *The Whale* using Kurt Lewin's theory of psychological conflict and valence, revealing how emotional motivations influence conflict resolution. Similarly, Lailiyah (2024) analyzes the novel *Me and Mr. Booker* using the same framework, identifying approach–approach and approach–avoidance conflicts experienced by the protagonist. These studies highlight the importance of psychological interpretation in understanding character arcs. However, *The Greatest Showman* presents a distinct case where the pursuit of fantasy and spectacle becomes a psychological battleground. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the internal mechanisms and emotional decisions that shape Barnum's identity to psychological and film narrative analysis.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the psychological dimensions and conflicts of P.T. Barnum using (Bernhardt, 1953) psychological framework and (Kenney, 1966) conflict theory. This analysis aims to uncover how Barnum's basic desires, emotions, attitudes, and social motives contribute to the conflicts he faces and influence his personal transformation throughout the film. By categorizing his struggles into internal and external domains, the study highlights the dynamic relationship between psychological traits and character development.

In line with this, the guiding research questions are: (1) What specific internal and external conflicts are experienced by the main character in *The Greatest Showman*? and (2) How do the psychological dimensions of the main character influence his personal growth and transformation? These questions are addressed through qualitative analysis of the film script and selected scenes. This article contributes to character studies by offering an explore of how ambition and social motives can lead to personal conflict, particularly in the pursuit of success and validation. The study also emphasizes the relevance of applying classic psychological theories to modern cinematic narratives, bridging literary theory with media analysis.

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2. Methods

The method section constitutes a systematic inquiry and serves as the skeleton of the study. It describes, explains, predicts, and controls the observed phenomenon by outlining what was studied and how the data were obtained and analyzed.

This study focuses on the main character, Phineas Taylor Barnum, in the 2017 film *The Greatest Showman*, directed by Michael Gracey. The purpose is to analyze how Barnum's psychological dimensions and internal and external conflicts are portrayed throughout the movie and how they influence his personal development. The study is grounded in Karl S. Bernhardt's

(1953) psychological theory, which identifies five key dimensions: organic needs, wants, emotions, attitudes, and social motives. Additionally, William Kenney's (1966) theory of conflict is used to categorize and understand the nature of the conflicts experienced by the character.

The data in this study were obtained directly from the movie The Greatest Showman, which served as the primary source. A qualitative descriptive method was applied, with the data collected using the documentation method and observing technique. The researcher watched the film repeatedly and systematically, paying close attention to significant scenes, character expressions, behavior, and dialogues that reflect psychological and emotional struggles. To support the observation, a note-taking technique was employed to record key moments that illustrate Barnum's psychological dimensions and conflicts. These observations were then categorized based on the theoretical framework.

The analysis was conducted through several systematic steps. First, the researcher identified scenes in *The Greatest Showman* that clearly portrayed the psychological dimensions and internal or external conflicts experienced by the main character, Phineas Taylor Barnum. These moments were then classified based on Bernhardt's five psychological dimensions, which include organic needs, wants, emotions, feelings and attitudes, and social motives, as well as Kenney's classification of internal and external conflicts. Each identified scene was closely analyzed to examine how Barnum's psychological traits influenced his decisions, behaviors, and personal transformation throughout the narrative. To ensure accuracy, the researcher applied a verification process by checking, rechecking, and cross-checking the selected data. Finally, the findings were concluded into concise and coherent explanations, aiming to present a comprehensive insight into the psychological complexity and character development of P. T. Barnum in the movie.

3. Findings and Discussion

To provide a clearer understanding of the psychological dimensions and conflicts experienced by Phineas Taylor Barnum in *The Greatest Showman* movie. The following table presents categorized data derived from key scenes in the movie.

No	Scene	Psychological Aspect	Type of Conflict
1	Barnum imagines building a grand show as a child after facing rejection by upper clas	Wants, Organic Needs	Internal Conflict
2	Barnum recruits unique performers and gives them a stage	Social Motives, Feelings	External Conflict

3	Barnum excludes performers from high-society event	Attitudes, Emotions	Internal & External Conflict
4	Jenny Lind praises Barnum and flirts subtly during press tours	Emotions, Social Motives	Approach-Avoidance Conflict
5	Charity leaves after repeated neglect	Feelings, Attitudes	External Conflict
6	Barnum reflects and reconciles with family and team	Organic Needs, Attitudes	Resolution of Internal Conflict

The table presents a summary of the key observational data collected from *The Greatest Showman* movie. Each entry includes a significant scene involving the main character, Phineas Taylor Barnum, which was analyzed based on (Bernhardt, 1953) psychological dimensions and (Kenney, 1966) classification of conflict types. The table is designed to provide a clear and structured overview of the connection between Barnum's psychological traits, the nature of the conflicts he experiences, and how these elements contribute to his character development. This data serves as the foundation for the detailed explanation and interpretation in the subsequent discussion.

[Data 1]

In this scene, From a young age, Barnum experiences rejection and humiliation from the upper class, which leaves a deep emotional imprint on his self-perception. This moment marks the beginning of his psychological journey, as he internalizes a strong desire to rise above his circumstances. The dreams he imagines are not simply fantasies, but psychological responses to his unmet needs for security and belonging (organic needs). His ambition is to create something extraordinary stems from his craving for success and recognition (wants). He believes it will help him escape poverty and earn respect.

The conflict arises in this scene occurs entirely within Barnum's mind (internal conflict). He is torn between accepting his social position or chasing a dream that feels far from reach. This tension continues to influence his personality as he grows older, driving many of his future choices. The experience shapes his identity as someone who is constantly reaching for something greater, not just to succeed, but to heal from early emotional wounds.

[Data 2]

As Barnum begins recruiting performers considered outcasts by society, his desire to build a unique show intersects with his need to be different and impressive. On the surface, this

seems to stem from compassion and inclusion, but it also reflects his ambition to use their uniqueness for fame (social motives**).** His interactions with these performers also awaken a sense of connection and emotional fulfillment (feelings), as he momentarily gives them the dignity and attention they've long been denied.

However, society's reaction to the show triggers strong opposition and protests, marking this situation as an (external conflict). Barnum must deal with critics who see his circus as exploitative, which places him between social backlash and his performers' expectations. His motives are tested, whether they are genuinely inclusive or secretly selfish. This conflict not only affects his reputation, but also challenges his self-image as a savior of the misunderstood.

[Data 3]

When Barnum intentionally leaves his performers outside a prestigious event, he demonstrates a major shift in his view of them. His desire to be accepted by elites leads him to feel ashamed of the very people who helped him succeed (attitudes). At the same time, he experiences internal emotional tension, such as embarrassment and fear of judgment (emotions), which push him to prioritize image over loyalty.

This situation reflects both an (internal conflict) and an (external conflict**)**. Internally, Barnum struggles with his identity: is he a defender of the outcasts or a man desperate for approval? Externally, the confrontation with the performers reveals a break in their relationship. This moment is crucial in highlighting Barnum's moral dilemma and the consequences of abandoning his core values for social status.

[Data 4]

During his press tour with Jenny Lind, Barnum receives not only professional recognition but also subtle emotional affection. This fuels his sense of pride and accomplishment (emotions), and aligns with his desire to be accepted by upper-class society (social motives). Jenny represents everything Barnum wants to become: elegant, respected, and elite. Her presence fills a void in him that his humble beginnings never could.

This moment presents an (approach-avoidance conflict). Barnum is tempted by fame and validation, but he risks alienating his family and his values. The emotional attraction to success clouds his judgment, making him unaware of the personal losses piling up. His psychological turmoil at this point shows how desire and fear can exist simultaneously, pulling him in opposite directions.

[Data 5]

Charity's departure is the result of Barnum's obsession with fame and his emotional distance from home. His shifting priorities reflect his misplaced (attitudes), as he chooses public image over personal connection. Meanwhile, his disconnection from emotional intimacy reveals

how fame has numbed his understanding of genuine love and care (feelings). Charity's decision to leave becomes an emotional turning point that exposes the emotional cost of his choices.

This event constitutes an (external conflict), where the clash between Barnum's ambition and Charity's emotional needs erupts into separation. For the first time, Barnum is forced to face the tangible consequences of his internal imbalance. The loss serves as a mirror that reflects his psychological flaws and sets the stage for future self-realization. This conflict is not just about family, but about emotional responsibility.

[Data 6]

In the final act of the movie, Barnum comes to understand that fame cannot replace emotional connection and belonging. His return to his wife and performers signals a return to his foundational psychological needs: love, security, and stability (organic needs). He also reorients his priorities, choosing to value relationships over social status (attitudes). This internal transformation shows that he is no longer driven by fear or pride, but by clarity and purpose.

The resolution of Barnum's long-standing (internal conflict) brings his psychological journey to a full circle. He reconciles the ambitious dreamer with the humble family man, finally achieving balance. His willingness to step back and pass the circus to Phillip Carlyle demonstrates maturity and growth. The conflicts he faced throughout the film become tools for emotional awakening, marking his transition from illusion to authenticity.

Based on this analysis, it becomes evident that Phineas Taylor Barnum's psychological development throughout *The Greatest Showman* is shaped by a continuous interplay between his internal desires and external pressures. His early experiences of rejection and poverty fuel strong psychological wants and social motives, which manifest in his relentless pursuit of success and validation. These motivations, however, often lead to emotional instability and conflicted attitudes, particularly when he is forced to choose between authenticity and ambition. His interactions with both marginalized performers and high-society figures reflect the tension between empathy and exploitation, while his relationship with Jenny Lind highlights the psychological consequences of ambition that is detached from personal values. The presence of both internal and external conflicts reinforces Barnum's emotional complexity, as he struggles with identity, acceptance, pride, and fear. Across various turning points in the narrative, his psychological dimensions evolve and respond differently to each conflict, demonstrating a dynamic and layered character who is driven by both deep emotional needs and shifting personal goals.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the complexities of the psychological dimensions and conflicts experienced by the main character, Phineas Taylor Barnum, in *The Greatest Showman* movie,

through the application of Bernhardt's psychological framework and Kenney's theory of conflict. The integration of these two theoretical perspectives has allowed for a nuanced and layered analysis of Barnum's internal motivations, emotional struggles, and behavioral transformations. One of the principal advantages of this study **is** its systematic observation-based methodology, which emphasizes the direct interpretation of visual and narrative elements within the film rather than relying on textual script analysis. This approach provides a more contextual understanding of character psychology in cinematic storytelling. Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. As a qualitative inquiry cantered on a single character from a single narrative source, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to other characters or genres. Moreover, the interpretive nature of psychological observation introduces some subjectivity, as the identification and classification of psychological dimensions and conflict types may vary depending on the researcher's perspective.

Nevertheless, this research holds potential for broader application in the fields of film analysis, character development studies, and psychological education. The combined use of psychological and narrative conflict theories may serve as a model for future analyses of character construction in other films, theatrical works, or even literary texts. Furthermore, the framework presented here could be adapted for educational use in classrooms to facilitate critical discussions on identity formation, emotional conflict, and personal growth within narrative structures. Future studies might consider expanding the scope by comparing multiple characters or films, or by incorporating alternative psychological theories to further enrich the interpretive depth and cross-contextual relevance of the findings.

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