



An Analytical Study of Character Psyche in Melissa Payne's *The Secrets of Lost Stones*

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Abstract

Melissa Payne's *The Secrets of Lost Stones* presents a psychological portrait of grief, trauma and emotional recovery through the life of its protagonist. This paper offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel, applying Sigmund Freud's concepts of the unconscious, repression, guilt and defense mechanisms to explore the deep psychological conflicts within the central character. The analysis demonstrates how Payne constructs a narrative in which buried emotions and psychological repression manifest through both the protagonist's behavior and the novel's supernatural motifs. The study illustrates how Payne throws light upon the psychoanalytic ideas into a journey of transformation, wherein catharsis is achieved not by forgetting trauma but by confronting and integrating it into one's identity.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, unconscious, trauma, repression, guilt, catharsis

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Grief when unresolved often becomes an internalized emotional struggle that shapes one's perception, behavior and relationships. In Melissa Payne's *The Secrets of Lost Stones*, grief takes center stage through the character of Jess, a woman haunted by the loss of her son. The emotional depth and psychological consequences of this trauma align closely with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories. Freud's framework offers an avenue to understand how trauma influences the unconscious mind and how unresolved guilt can act as an internal tormentor. This paper uses psychoanalytic criticism to examine the hidden motivations and repressed memories that

shape the characters' actions and Payne's use of symbolism to represent inner psychological states. It also argues that *The Secrets of Lost Stones* is a profound representation of emotional healing through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis, as proposed by Freud, emphasizes the influence of the unconscious on human behavior. According to Freud, traumatic experiences that are not processed consciously are often repressed and may resurface in symbolic or disruptive ways (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 152). Literary texts, particularly those centered on psychological distress, frequently externalize this internal turmoil through



narrative structures, symbols, and characters. Payne's novel is no exception. She presents trauma not merely as an event but as a psychological landscape that the protagonist must navigate. "In her experience, there were no days off, no holidays, no sick leave, and definitely no celebrating a barrel falling through the ice when she could be working" (Secrets 9). Jess's story encapsulates the Freudian idea that suppressed emotions, especially guilt, can lead to emotional paralysis, compulsive repetition and self-sabotage.

The protagonist Jess is deeply affected by the accidental death of her young son, Chance. The external details of the tragedy are not elaborated upon excessively, the internal consequences for Jess are made clear. She exhibits emotional numbness, social withdrawal, and a persistent self-blame, hallmarks of psychological trauma. Freud's notion of unconscious guilt, the kind of guilt that resides beneath conscious thought but exerts significant behavioral influence is central to Jess's characterization. As Freud notes, "Unconscious guilt is at the root of many neuroses, functioning independently of any real wrongdoing" (The Ego and the Id 56). Jess, unable to forgive herself, manifests this guilt through self-isolation and an ongoing sense of worthlessness.

Jess does not express her grief openly. Instead, her pain becomes a silent force controlling her emotions and decisions. She leaves behind her former life and seeks refuge in a small mountain town - Pine Lake, a geographical manifestation of her psychological need to hide from her past. However, the novel's events suggest that emotional repression does not offer permanent relief. Rather, it deepens the pain and delays recovery. Jess's guilt is not merely an emotional reaction, rather it becomes a core aspect of her psyche, shaping her perception of self and others.

Freud identifies several mechanisms by which the psyche defends itself from psychological harm. Repression, denial and displacement are some among them. Jess's journey reflects each of these in varying degrees. Her repression is evident in her reluctance to talk about Chance's death or reflect on the circumstances that led to it. She often deflects when asked personal questions or steers conversations away from emotionally sensitive topics. Denial is also apparent in her inability to acknowledge that her life needs change or that she deserves healing.

She continues to function, yet she avoids emotional vulnerability and authentic relationships.

Displacement, another Freudian concept, is present in Jess's tendency to redirect her anger inward rather than acknowledging the complex circumstances surrounding her son's death. Rather than attributing some of the blame to the one who caused the accident or acknowledging the limitations of human control, she carries the full weight of guilt herself. In *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud defines displacement as the redirection of emotional impulses from a threatening object to a safer substitute. Jess's emotional reactions illustrate this pattern, showing how her psychological defenses prevent her from processing grief in a healthy manner.

Freud's concept of Thanatos or the death drive suggests that individuals possess a destructive force within, that seeks a return to an inanimate state. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud theorizes that this drive exists alongside Eros, the life drive, and that it manifests through repetition, self-harm and regressive behaviors. Jess's suicidal ideation, though never fully acted upon in the text is a recurring theme. Her sense of purposelessness, her desire to retreat from the world, and her resignation to fate suggest an unconscious yearning to escape the pain of existence.

Payne subtly incorporates these Freudian dynamics through Jess's emotional behaviors. The protagonist's recurring thoughts of guilt and grief operate as manifestations of the death drive. The presence of Star, a foster child with her own wounds triggers Jess's nurturing instinct, thereby activating Eros. Through caring for Star, Jess rediscovers the possibility of human connection and emotional resilience, suggesting that the life drive can overcome destructive impulses when the unconscious is brought to light.

One of the most pervasive Freudian concepts in the novel is repetition compulsion, the unconscious tendency to recreate traumatic experiences in order to gain mastery over them. Jess repeatedly finds herself reflecting on the night of her son's death, replaying scenarios in her mind, and wondering what she could have done differently. This circular thinking reflects a subconscious attempt to undo the trauma or make sense of it. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* argues that repetition compulsion is not simply



memory but an enactment of unresolved conflict.

Jess's interaction with Star becomes a turning point. Star represents a younger, emotionally wounded version of Jess, and their bond becomes therapeutic. "Jess wanted to comfort her; she felt it in the way her arms tingled from an instinct to wrap the girl in a hug" (*Secrets* 161). Through helping Star navigate her own grief, Jess begins to reprocess her own experiences, recognizing patterns and initiating change. This relationship serves as both a mirror and a guide, illustrating Freud's belief that healing often involves symbolic reenactments of trauma that allow for new emotional outcomes.

The presence of ghostly elements adds another layer to this novel. The reappearance of Chance's spirit serves as a metaphor for the return of the repressed. Freud's essay "The Uncanny" describes how familiar things, when repressed and later reencountered, evoke discomfort and fear. Chance's ghost is not terrifying in a traditional sense, but he unsettles Jess precisely because he embodies her deepest guilt and unresolved emotions. His presence demands confrontation and ultimately leads to transformation. Rather than dismissing the supernatural as purely fictional or symbolic, Payne uses it to externalize Jess's internal conflicts. The spectral visitation operates within the realm of psychoanalysis, representing the persistent nature of repressed memories. "Red sweatshirt, dark jeans. From his size he looked to be about seven or eight" (*Secrets* 6). Chance's ghost is a narrative device that forces Jess to acknowledge what she has tried to forget, paving the way for reconciliation.

Psychoanalytic healing is not about forgetting trauma but integrating it into the self. According to Freud, catharsis occurs when repressed emotions are brought into consciousness and dealt with directly. Jess's eventual forgiveness, both of herself and of those indirectly involved in her son's death, marks a turning point in her psychological journey. This shift does not happen suddenly, but through gradual self-reflection, interaction with others and acceptance of her own limitations.

Catharsis, in this context, is not dramatic release but quiet transformation. Jess learns that healing does not mean the erasure of pain but the ability to live with it without being consumed. This resonates with Freud's assertion that "the goal of psychoanalysis is to transform neurotic misery into ordinary human unhappiness" (*Studies on Hysteria* 305). Jess's story reflects this idea, her sorrow remains, but it no longer dominates her existence.

Melissa Payne's *The Secrets of Lost Stones* offers fertile ground for psychoanalytic interpretation. Through the lens of Freud's theories, the novel can be read as a psychological case study in trauma, repression and healing. Jess's emotional journey from unconscious guilt to conscious forgiveness illustrates the enduring relevance of Freudian thought in understanding human behavior. The novel uses narrative, symbolism and even supernatural motifs to dramatize the inner workings of the mind, ultimately suggesting that emotional healing is possible when individuals confront their inner worlds with honesty and compassion.

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