A Psycho-Critical Stylistic Study of Denial in Selected English Movies

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Abstract*: This work investigates a psychological approach to critical stylistics by Jeffries (2010) through examining denial as a prominent psychological defense mechanism along other related defense mechanisms textually. The methodology integrates critical stylistics (textual scheme) with Freudian theory of denial to bridge linguistic and psychological dimensions. All the textual-conceptual tools of analysis are under scrutiny. The data consists of two psychological movies 'The Others' (2001) and 'Shutter Island' (2010). The research aims at specifying the linguistic strategies and textual triggers projecting denial. Furthermore, the psychological defenses underpinning such textual choices are investigated. The study comes to the following findings: denial is manifested through all the ten textual-conceptual tool of analysis; denial is not merely a cognitive failure but a textually planned self-deception, where textual choices sustain delusions as strictly as psychological defenses; the cinematic denial is not purely psychological rather 'linguistically constructed, proposing a model of analysis for defective discourse across media. This interdisciplinary approach stresses upon the manner language and cognition team up in self-deception.*

Keywords: Critical Stylistics, Defense Mechanism, English Movies, Psychology

Introduction

Inspired by Jeffries' Critical Stylistics (CS) this study examines the possibility of implementing psychology with CS in an attempt to further investigate what language is doing and how meaning is produced textually. Both CS and psychology share interdisciplinary associations which show how the worldview is shaped through language patterns and structures.

CS and psychology meet in several points namely foregrounding theory which is projected in CS through tools and textual triggers while in psychology through highlighted attention and emotional response (Peer, 2021). The other sharing point is cognitive processing that is demonstrated in CS through transitivity model of mental and cognitive processing; similarly in psychology cognitive operations are the cornerstones (Spiro *et. al*., 2017). Ideological internalization is also recognized in CS through the linguistic cues which shape the worldview, while such internalization is perceived to happen gradually as a cognitive process in psychology (Parker, 1999).

Critical stylistics scrutinizes how textual linguistic selections carry and produce ideological positions, while psychology offers insights into how these linguistic patterns influence cognition and conduct. This intersection generates an authoritative analytical framework for perceiving the psychological power of textual structures (Spiro *et. al.*, 2017).

Since no similar prior investigation has been conducted to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this study undertakes filling the gap to provide a more observable linkage between psychology and textual cues. Text producers project textual cues and through such cues concepts and ideologies can be traced. This work is hoped to be a step towards a more precise textual investigating psychological schemes for diagnosis.

Literature Review

Numerus investigation has been conducted so far to examine the psychological aspects of language. Within the frame of Critical Discourse Analysis, Ali and Hallat (2023) explored the forms and functions of denial in interpersonal narratives narrated by Iraqi Kurds and Arabs. Van Dijk's model of denial is employed to conclude that participants project varied forms of denial in their narration. Meral (2022) examines denial of unfavorable ethnic attitudes, biases, and worries stated regularly in the public discourse of Turkey's Armenian minority.

Saedeen and Naser (2022) conducted a critical discourse analysis of denial in political context which basically examines denial in linguistic context.

This work undertakes a psycho-critical stylistic analysis to excavate the applicability of psychology in critical textual analyses. Furthermore, a more profound future model of analysis is to be proposed which carries out both textual-conceptual as well as cognitive-psychological scheme for stylistic analysis. The originality of this work lies in implementing psychological aspects to critical stylistics. Such an amalgamation has not been found among the bodies of research so far as the researched investigated.

The study aims at answering the following research questions:

- What are the textual-conceptual tools of analysis utilized to position denial?
- What psychological denial schemes are distinguished as manifestations of defense mechanism?
- How the protagonists of movies 'Grace' and 'Teddy' build alternative realities to deny traumatic realities?

Critical Stylistics

Critical Stylistics (CS) arose as a valuable method for addressing ideology in language functioning as a bridge between stylistics and critical discourse analysis. The term was first coined by Jeffries (2007) to establish a stream of stylistics which focused on ideology, demonstrating the applicability of stylistic analysis to both literary and non-literary texts. This led Jeffries to conclude that the same analytical methods are needed for all types of textual analysis. Stated differently, meaning in texts is formed in essentially the same way. Jeffries (2014) stated that stylistic analysis is the heart of the endeavor to see the power in language.

CS refers to stylistic products that study the ways in which language reflects social meanings. Critical linguistics along with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paved the way for the emergence of critical stylistic forms of study and analyses. Critical linguistics was initiated by Roger Fowler and his colleagues Gunther Kress, Robert Hodge, and Tony Trew. They investigated the ways in which social meanings like ideology and power are reflected by means of language, and the way language affects our perception of the world [(Fowler, *et al.* 1979; Fowler, 1991) cited in Nørgaard *et al.*, 2010:11)].

The textual-conceptual functions permit researchers to associate *what the text is doing* **with** *how it is doing it.* Similar to other approaches of critical linguistic analyses, CS is considered as a method which investigates the ideology in texts (Jeffries, 2014: 410). CS, however; suggests that one feature of language such as nominalization, in previous critical approaches, is only one way of perceiving how meanings are created by texts (Jeffries, 2014:413). According to Jeffries (2010: 1), a variety of instruments can be used to demonstrate how texts often influence readers to change their ideological viewpoints in order to align with the viewpoints of the texts' authors. Jeffries (2010: 3) perceives stylistics to be focusing on the choices made by the text producers. The text producers are bound to the pressure of making the exact choices suitable for expressing their intention. Those choices, whether consciously or not, are always ideologically loaded.

Leslie Jeffries' Tools of Critical Stylistic Analysis

Consistent with Jeffries (2010: 1), a variety of instruments can be used to demonstrate how texts often influence readers to change their ideological viewpoints in order to align with the viewpoints of the texts' authors. On the word of Jeffries' model (2010: 3), stylistics is concerned with the decisions made by the people who produce the text. The urge to select precisely the right words to convey their meaning is inevitable for those who write texts. Whether they are aware of it or not, their decisions are invariably fraught with ideology.

In addition to bringing together the greatest aspects of stylistics and critical linguistics, the goal of this method is to go far behind the surface of language in order to identify the stylistic decisions that shape a text's meaning. Telling "what the text is doing" is the purpose of tools. As a result, Jeffries (2010: 15) contends that the instruments offer a present-participle response to this question:

- **Naming and Describing**: theoretically based on Jeffries (2010) and Faiclough (1995); Naming serve as labels which give identity and agency; Describing, on the other hand, constructs perception through modifiers and euphemisms.

- **Presenting Actions/Events/States** examines how: Transitivity choices (active/passive voice) construct accountability; Nominalization alter actions into states; Process types (material/mental/relational) shape reality.

- **Exemplifying and Enumerating**: the former utilizes specific examples to generalize reality and the latter lists all items to construct arguments.

- **Prioritizing**: is represented through grammatical transformations: Passive voice to obscure agency; Cleft structures: Emphasis through syntactic restructuring; and Foregrounding/backgrounding.

- **Negating**: is expressed through explicit and implicit clues, as well as the presupposition negation. It is the hallmark of denial.

- **Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of Others**: Jeffries (2010) and Leech & Short (2007) classify speech/thought presentation along a continuum of faithfulness: Direct Speech/Thought (DS/DT): direct quotes; Free Indirect Speech/Thought (FIS/FIT): Blends character/narrator voices; Indirect Speech/Thought (IS/IT); Narrator's Report (NRSA/NRTA)

- **Equating and Contrasting**: is represented through oppositional or synonymous relations to construct ideological implications. Formally, it can be achieved through: Lexical opposition (using antonyms); Coordinating conjunctions (but, yet,..); Appositional equivalence (Juxtaposing noun phrases to equate concepts).

- **Implying and Assuming**: Implication (implicature) expresses meaning beyond literal wording, while assumption (presupposition) depends on mutual and unstated grounds.

- **Hypothesizing**: refers to formal schemes which: provide unverified claims as plausible; modality employment (could, might, must, etc.) to express uncertainty or necessity; shape conditional scenarios (if clause) to justify alternative narratives.

- **Presenting Time, Space and Society**: constructs a worldview through shaping temporal, spatial, and social schemes.

The toolset can be categorized in terms of linguistic approaches such as structural approach (tools 1-6) and pragma-semantic (tools 7-10). They all exhibit a mixture of scholarly contributions such as: Fowler et. al. (1979); Fowler (1991); Halliday (1994); Simpson (1993); Fairclough (1989)

The Psychological Scheme

Psychology is the scientific study of behavior and mental processes, covering: Cognitive functions such as perception, memory, etc.; motional and motivational dynamics; developmental, social, and clinical phenomena; unconscious processes, comprising defense mechanisms. It aims at describing, predicting, and modifying behavior as well as mental states by means of empirical research and clinical practice.

Defense mechanisms (DM), introduced by Freud, are unconscious psychological strategies that guard the ego from anxiety, internal conflicts, or external threats by misrepresenting reality. In this study mainly the mechanism of denial is under investigation along with those mechanisms which are closely related to it such as projection (attributing unacceptable feelings to others) or repression (unconscious forgetting).

DMs carry the following features:

- Unconsciously Operated: Automatic activation with no awareness.

- Reduce Anxiety: decreases emotional distress.
- Reality Distortion: Adjust perceptions to maintain psychological balance.

Denial as a foundational DM can be defined as refusal to acknowledge agonizing facets of reality (external or internal). It functions as a protecting self-esteem temporarily; however, it impedes long-term coping (Camper, 2015).

In this study the DM denial is operated-as a foundational mechanism-along with other related DMs. Denial is a coping mechanism holding partial or full refusal of reality to evade anxiety or distress. Other DMs as put by (McLeod, 2024) are:

Projection: attributing ones obnoxious thoughts/conducts to others; associated with denial in that both avoid self-awareness leading to blame-shifting. Freud associated projection to paranoia, where inner threats are projected and externalized to evade self-opposition

Repression: blocking painful impulses unconsciously; related to denial in that both erase distressing contents. It sustains denial through concealing evidence that might encounter the denied truth. Anna Freud observed repression as "motivated forgetting," underlying long-lasting denial.

Reaction formation: overcompensating by adopting opposite behaviors turning them socially acceptable; related to denial in that both disguise reality. Freud bound reaction formation to ethical anxiety, where the superego adapts forbidden desires into righteous deeds (Freud, 1915; Freud, 1936).

Methodology and Data Analysis

This work is descriptive qualitative textual analysis. The model of analysis is CS by Jeffries (2010) with all textual-conceptual tools part of the analytical procedures. On the psychological scheme, denial and other associated defense mechanisms (Freudian theory) are under assessment. The data consists of two English psychological horror movies entitled *"The Others"* (2001) and *"Shutter Island"* (2010). Both movies share the common themes of trauma and denial. Scene selection draws on purposive sampling (data selection based on relevance to the research objectives) (Maxwell, 1996) following the standards:

- Thematize psychological struggle through trauma
- Challenge reality perception
- Association between linguistic triggers and psychological conflict.

Using movie dialogue as primary data, the CS tools are employed to reveal systematic patterns of denial. Scenes are selected for their defensive density (e.g., Grace's rule execution, Teddy's inspective prologues) and coded for lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic denial markers. Extracts from movies are analyzed textually as well as conceptually: The former is concerned with identifying the linguistic triggers of the tool of analysis; the latter is concerned with denial as well as possible related defense mechanisms.

Movie Contextualization

The others (2001)	Shutter Island (2010)
A grieving mother (Grace) in an isolated mansion trusts her house is haunted by ghosts, only to realize in a dreadful twist that she and her children are in fact the ghosts, being murdered in a tragic infanticide by Grace.	A U.S. marshal (Teddy) inspecting a case at a psychiatric institution progressively recognizes he's actually a patient who fabricated a delusional identity to evade the trauma of his wife murdering their children, climaxing in a haunting disclosure his own insanity.
Both psychological horror movies as data candidates delve into narrative complexity, thematic depth, identity crisis and untrustworthy delusive perception.	

Data analysis

The following table organizes the data as follows: the CS tool of analysis, instances of movie scenes from the movies *The Others* and *Shutter Island*, and the psychological representations.

Layers of Analysis	Textual Scheme (linguistic cues, patterns, lexical choices)	Psychological Scheme (denial and other DM)	Conceptual Effects
1. CS tool	Naming and Describing	Projection via naming	Escaping guilt
The Others	Labelling new house residence as "intruders" meaning external threat	denies her own role as the haunting presence .	Shifts blame linguistically, mirroring Freudian projection to evade guilt Repression of infanticide
Shutter Island	Teddy adopts a false identity ("U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels") to escape his guilt as Andrew Laeddis.	The name "Teddy" (soft, heroic) contrasts with "Laeddis" (scarred, violent), reinforcing dissociation.	Construct alter self-image to evade guilt Dissociation from guilt
2. CS tool	Representing Actions, Events, and States	Projection via agency concealment	
The Others	The children must be protected from light" (passive) Omits her active role in their deaths	Projects blame onto some external threat.	Represents protection as obligation rather than guilt
Shutter Island	They are performing experiments" (active)	Projects blame onto the hospital Reaction formation: framing an opposite scenario	Shifts blame linguistically, mirroring Freudian projection to evade guilt
3. CS tool	Exemplifying and Enumerating		
The Others	Grace's lists impose order on chaos: Lock all doors at night, never open the curtains, no shouting, etc.	Reaction Formation: Rules exchange pain and grief with control	Overstressing external threat to shield her infanticide
Shutter Island	Teddy's procedural lists sustain his false identity: Interview staff, examine Ward C, find the lighthouse	Reaction formation: arrange trauma into digestive splinters	Enumeration simulates investigative logic, to disguise his self-dissociation Teddy is separate from Laeddis
4. CS tool	Prioritizing		Suppresses guilty actions through agency removal (passive)
The Others	Passive: The children must be protected	Projection: blameshifting to an external threat	backgrounds her role in their deaths
Shutter Island	Cleft sentences: "It's Dr. Cawley who's hiding the truth.	Projection: externalizing blame and shifting it on others.	Sustain delusion to shield guilt.
5. CS tool	Negating	Explicit or implicit Denial	Constructing an alternative hypothetical world of relief
The Others	Explicit negation: "These are not my children's graves!" Implicit negation: "He's (her husband) away at war."	Denial: refuses visual evidence of their deaths She keeps the delusion of his return	
Shutter Island	Explicit negation: "I am not Andrew Laeddis!"	Denies his real persona. Teddy refuses his past to deconstruct guilt	
6. CS tool	Presenting the Speech and Thought of Others		
The Others	(FIT)"Anne was sure the "intruders" were here. Why wouldn't they believe her?	Projection: Unites Grace's voice with Anne's, supporting her narrative; Grace attributes her	Grace distorts others' speech to deny her ghostly state.

		thoughts to others	
Shutter Island	Rachel whispered: "'They're experimenting on us"	Hallucinated conversation supports conspiracy delusions	Teddy creates others' speech to keep his Marshal role
7. CS tool	Equating and Contrasting		
The Others	Contrasting the Living and the Dead: Opposes "living" (Grace's family) contrary to "intruders" (actual living people)	Reaction formation: Grace represses her guilt through positioning herself as living and protective.	
Shutter Island	False Equivalence: "Andrew Laeddis is the killer" "I am the Marshal."	Equates "Marshal" with moral authority, contrasting it with "Laeddis" as a criminal	Contrasting identities to deny guilt
8. CS tool	Implying and Assuming		
The Others	"You know what happens when the rules are broken." Implying: Punishment; while in reality there are no actual consequences (as they are ghosts)	Reaction Formation: Grace's extreme rules imply safety while hiding threat	Assumption creates self-serving realisms into language
Shutter Island	Presupposed Conspiracy "How many others have they experimented on?" Assumes: Experiments take place Reality: psychosis	Projection: Teddy's presupposition implies others' hatred rather than his illness	
9. CS tool	Hypothesizing		
The Others	Grace's conspiracy theories: "Someone must be entering the house at night."	Projects her haunting onto others; "intruders" Repression of infanticide	Utilizing language as a shield to evade reality
Shutter Island	Teddy's total investigation is a hypothetical story substituting his guilt: "Rachel Solando must have left clues about the experiments."	Reaction formation: reframing reality as the original reality is denied	Sustain Marshal persona Naturalizing delusions and hallucinations
10. CS tool	Presenting Time, Space, and Society		
The Others	Absent Society: Neighbors and townsfolk are removed from discourse, supporting the narrative that the family is "alone" not "dead"	Reaction formation: Grace is hyper-maternal; exaggerating protection	Grace's falsehoods are introverted; emphasis on family zone.
Shutter Island	hierarchical space: The "C Block" for violent patients reflects Teddy's subconscious isolation of his "monstrous" self 'Andrew Laeddis'	Reaction formation: suppressing guilt through adopting delusional persona.	- Teddy's distortions are extroverted; outlined as systemic domination.

<div align="center">Table 1: Textual and Psychological Schemes of Data</div>

Results and Discussions

All the ten textual-conceptual tools of analysis prove to manifest denial as a psychological defense mechanism.

- *Naming and describing:* Both movies use this tool to: Reframe traumatic events (e.g., death as "absence"); Project blame onto others (e.g., "intruders" as threats); Strengthen delusional plots (e.g., fictional personas).

- *Representing actions, events, and states:* Omission: Key events are excluded from representation; Distortion: Events are recast through alternative framing; Passivization: Agency is obscured to avoid culpability

- *Exemplifying and enumerating:* both functions are utilized to construct and support the protagonist's delusional worldview.

- *Prioritizing:* since agency is either concealed or highly unconcealed this tool functions as a tool for suppressing distressful actions, highlighting only the pleasant or safe chronicles, and falsifying causality.

- *Negating:* the data demonstrates explicit and implicit negation in order to linguistically wipe away trauma (e.g., death, guilt); implement delusional orders (Grace's rules, Teddy's mission); Suspend climactic disclosure by resisting exposing reality.

- *Presenting the Speech and Thought of Others:* Language is utilized as a Shield in both movies; speech/thought is presented to: Construct alternative realities (e.g., delusional dialogue); implement cognitive conflict (e.g., blended chronicle); suppress trauma (e.g., imprecise reporting).

- *Equating and Contrasting:* utilized to externalize blame (opposing self with "villains"); underpin delusions (equating false personas with reality); suppress paradoxes (erasing middle-ground certainties)

- *Implying and Assuming:* Manifested through the linguistics cues to reflect Self-Deception. The data demonstrates how: Implication permits denial with no explicit falsehoods; Assumption constructs egotistical realities into language

- *Hypothesizing exposes the manner in which:* Uncertainty is stressed to deny reality; distorted logic structures delusions. Power is sustained through hypothetical chronicles.

- *Presenting time, place, and society:* Both Movies utilized spatiotemporal and social distortions to: Linguistically plan alternative worlds.

Anchor illusions in concrete settings (home/island); Suspend revelation by disrupting audience perception.

Conclusions

In '*The Others'* and '*Shutter Island'*, the protagonists utilize all ten textual-conceptual tools of critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) to reflect denial as a defensive mechanism constructing and sustaining their delusional realities. Together, these tools form a comprehensive linguistic shield in contradiction to reality, signifying how language structurally aids psychological denial. The data thus exposes denial not merely as cognitive failure but as textually planned self-deception, where textual choices sustain delusions as strictly as psychological defenses.

Utilizing *naming and describing*, Grace and Teddy redefine traumatic realities (e.g., "photosensitivity" for death; "investigation" for psychosis), whereas *representing actions/events* permits them to hide agency (passive voice) and shift blame. *Equating and contrasting* constructs false binaries (living/dead; marshal/patient), while *prioritizing* foregrounds safe information and backgrounding distress. *Hypothesizing* constructs hypothetical accounts to substitute reality, and *negating* explicitly-implicitly denies evidence ("This isn't happening"). *Exemplifying and enumerating* distracts with certain "evidences" (Grace's rules; Teddy's clues); however, *presenting speech/thought of others* shifts blame through misrepresented discourse. Lastly, *implying and assuming* inserts denial in implicit grounds, and *presenting time/space/society* manipulates spatiotemporal settings to deny reality.

Findings demonstrate that denial is textually driven: Grace's domestic euphemisms and Teddy's conspiratorial syntax follow predictable defensive frameworks. The study concludes that denial is not merely psychological rather linguistically constructed, proposing a model of analysis for variable narrations across media. This approach highlights the manner language and cognition join forces in self-deception.

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