

## Archetypal Duality of the Psychiatrist-Destroyer in Psychological Thrillers: Hermeneutic Inquiry Into the Silent Patient and the Silence of the Lambs

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### Abstract

The duality of human nature, a central theme in psychological thrillers, often revolves around the archetype of the psychiatrist-destroyer. This figure, embodying both healer and predator, presents a complex paradox in literary criticism. It blurs the lines between care and manipulation, trust and exploitation, challenging readers' understanding of moral and psychological traits. In this article, we take a unique approach by applying Hirsch's [1967] hermeneutic method to explore how this dual archetype is constructed through the characters of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988) and Theo Faber in *The Silent Patient* (Michaelides, 2019) by Alex Michaelides. Our aim is to investigate how psychiatrists with double consciousness manipulate their professions as healers to conceal their dark inner selves, destructive behavior, and deceptive relationships with patients and society. By closely interpreting the text within the theoretical frameworks of dualistic human nature and archetypal psychology (Durkheim, 1914; Frye, 1951; Jung, 1959), psychological aspects of literary interpretation (Kalaga, 2015; Szondi & Bahti, 1978), linguistic and stylistic strategies in thriller writing (Dutta-Flanders, 2017; Patterson, 2006), transgressor-centered narratives in thrillers (Horsley, 2005), and the narrative of conventional psychoanalysis (Halberstam, 1995), our research reveals how both Michaelides and Harris use narrative ambiguity, psychological manipulation, and ethical violation to create suspenseful, yet disturbing portrayals of characters with multiple personalities. Both writers' language and style disrupt traditional thriller writing's normative narrative conventions through their representations of psychological fluctuations between the identities of manipulative criminals and rational psychiatrists.

**Keywords:** archetypal duality, dual personality, psychiatrist-destroyer, psychological thriller, hermeneutic analysis

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## Introduction

Psychological thrillers have long captivated audiences with their intricate portrayals of human behavior, and few themes are as potent as the duality embedded in the figure of the psychiatrist. As both healer and destroyer, psychiatrist characters invite an analyst to delve deeply into their multifaceted roles. This research paper focuses on the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer, employing hermeneutic phenomenology as the primary analytical approach and grounding the theoretical framework in Jungian archetype theory. The two literary works under consideration, *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris, present fertile ground for this exploration through their portrayal of Dr. Theo Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter, respectively. Both narratives raise central questions about the ethical and psychological dimensions of psychiatry: How can psychiatrists be both agents of healing and instruments of destruction? What does it mean, according to Jungian (1959) theory, to embody the archetype of the Shadow, and how does this archetype manifest in the characters' actions and interactions? By examining the internal conflicts and external behaviors of both Theo Faber and Hannibal Lecter, this paper aims to illuminate the dual functions of psychiatrists in the real psychological thrillers. The target audience for this analysis includes literary scholars, students of literary theory, and researchers interested in the intersection of psychology, film studies, and narrative representation. By integrating recent interdisciplinary studies, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary research informs the interpretation of psychiatric characters in literary narratives. The discussion will draw on studies that advocate for a balance between clinical understanding and interpretative analysis, examining both the ethical considerations and the symbolic meaning embedded in the portrayal of the psychiatrist as a figure capable of both significant benevolence and profound destructiveness.

## Literature Review

The representation of psychiatrists in psychological thrillers has attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the dual roles that these figures play in narratives across literature and film. Central to this discussion is the concept of archetypal duality, wherein characters embody both constructive and destructive tendencies. According to Jungian (1959) analysis, the psychiatrist can be seen as a reflection of the Shadow archetype—a manifestation of unconscious conflict and repressed drives that simultaneously offer the possibility of healing through confrontation and insight.

Hermeneutic phenomenology has emerged as a critical methodological framework for exploring these themes. This interpretative approach emphasizes the importance of understanding lived experience and subjective interpretation, making it particularly suited to analysis of complex psychiatric characters in narrative fiction. Kalaga (2015) applied a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of men grappling with severe psychiatric illness. His research, which utilized in-depth interviews, highlighted how misinterpretation and misunderstanding by healthcare professionals often prolonged suffering rather than alleviating it. This study illustrates the importance of empathy and interpretative engagement in psychiatric practice—a dynamic tension mirrored in the relationship between psychiatrist and patient in psychological thrillers.

## Research Method

This study employs a **hermeneutic methodology** to explore the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer figure in the psychological thrillers *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides (2019) and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris (1988). Hermeneutics, as a method of textual interpretation, allows for a deep, layered reading of these narratives by uncovering the symbolic and psychological underpinnings of key characters, particularly those who occupy the dual roles of healer and destroyer.

The research follows a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in literary analysis and Jungian archetypal theory. Drawing on Carl Jung's concept of archetypes, particularly the "Shadow" and the "Wise Old Man," this study identifies and examines manifestations of archetypal duality within the psychiatrist figures—Dr. Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter. The analysis pays close attention to character construction, narrative voice, dialogue, and symbolic imagery. Data collection is limited to close readings of the primary texts and supported by secondary sources such as critical essays (Paoletti, 2012; Szondi & Bahti, 1978), scholarly articles, and psychological studies on archetypes and character pathology. Through thematic coding and comparative analysis, the study identifies patterns that reveal how these characters simultaneously fulfill therapeutic and destructive roles within the narrative structure. By employing a hermeneutic lens, the study seeks not only to decode the psychological complexity of the psychiatrist-destroyer figure but also to understand the broader cultural and philosophical implications of this duality in the psychological thriller genre.

## Results

The hermeneutic analysis of *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* reveals a consistent and complex portrayal of the **psychiatrist-destroyer archetype**, characterized by the dual function of psychological insight and manipulation. Through a close reading of the texts, several key findings emerged: Both Dr. Theo Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter exhibit a paradoxical nature—serving as agents of healing while simultaneously exerting control, manipulation, and psychological harm. This duality is central to their characterization and aligns with Jungian archetypes, particularly the fusion of the "Wise Old Man" (symbolizing knowledge and guidance) with the "Shadow" (representing repressed instincts and destructive tendencies). The narratives of both novels use ambiguous language and unreliable narrators to blur the line between therapy and coercion. In *The Silent Patient*, Theo Faber's obsession with Alicia is masked as therapeutic concern, revealing his underlying destructive impulse. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter's role as a consultant psychiatrist camouflages his sadistic tendencies, which he enacts with calculated precision. The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype elicits complex emotional responses from readers. Despite their ethical violations, these characters command fascination and even admiration due to their intelligence, composure, and control. According to Paoletti (2012), this suggests that the archetype operates as a cultural symbol of forbidden power, appealing to both fear and curiosity. Thus, both novels reinforce psychological thriller conventions—such as introspection, suspense, and identity crises—while subverting the traditional role of the psychiatrist as a moral authority. Instead, they present a corrupted archetype, who mirrors the instability of their patients, thus destabilizing reader expectations of healing and justice. In these works, therapy sessions become arenas of power struggle rather than healing. The psychiatrists use their understanding of the human psyche not to rehabilitate, but to dominate and manipulate, suggesting that therapeutic knowledge, when unchecked, becomes a tool for destruction.

These findings highlight how the archetypal duality in these texts is not merely a narrative device but a reflection of deeper anxieties about authority, identity, and the dark potential of psychological insight.

### Discussion

The results of this hermeneutic inquiry demonstrate that the psychiatrist-destroyer archetype in *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* functions as a symbolic embodiment of the tension between healing and harm, knowledge and power, order and chaos. By examining these dualities through the lens of archetypal theory, particularly Jung's concepts of the Shadow and the Wise Old Man, it becomes clear that the psychiatrist figure in psychological thrillers is no longer a neutral observer or healer—but often a mirror of the darkness they claim to treat.

In selected novels, the psychiatrist does not stand in contrast to the patient, but rather reflects the patient's internal fragmentation. Theo Faber, in *The Silent Patient*, initially appears as a savior, determined to unlock Alicia Berenson's silence. Yet his deep psychological entanglement with her reveals his unconscious identification with her trauma and rage. Theo ultimately fulfills the role of destroyer under the guise of therapist, highlighting the danger of repressed motives masquerading as benevolence.

Similarly, Dr. Hannibal Lecter exemplifies the most extreme version of the archetype. His charm, intellect, and psychiatric expertise grant him the status of authority, yet he uses these very traits to manipulate, mutilate, and kill. What makes Lecter particularly chilling is his self-awareness—he knows and accepts his duality, which paradoxically lends him a twisted moral clarity. His archetypal role pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable in a moral or therapeutic figure, subverting the reader's expectations of trust and care associated with psychiatry.

This duality speaks to a broader cultural ambivalence toward authority figures, especially those entrusted with mental and emotional well-being (Samandarova, 2024). The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype may serve as a narrative vehicle for exploring societal anxieties about the abuse of knowledge and institutional power, particularly in spaces as intimate and vulnerable as therapy.

Moreover, the genre of psychological thriller, with its emphasis on mystery, identity, and internal conflict, is particularly suited to housing such an archetype. These narratives force readers to confront uncomfortable questions: Can someone possess both healing power and destructive intent? Is insight into the human psyche inherently dangerous? Where does therapy end and control begin?

Ultimately, the dual nature of these psychiatrist characters underlines a key insight from Jungian (1959) psychology: the path to wholeness involves confronting, rather than denying, one's darker aspects. The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype, in this sense, becomes a mythic figure of confrontation—not only with the darkness of others, but with the potential for darkness within the self (Kalaga, 2015).

## Conclusion

This study has explored the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer in *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* through a hermeneutic lens, revealing a complex and unsettling fusion of therapeutic authority and destructive intent. By engaging with Jungian archetypes and literary analysis, the research demonstrates how the psychiatrist figure in these psychological thrillers subverts traditional expectations of healing, instead embodying both guidance and corruption.

The characters of Theo Faber and Hannibal Lecter serve as compelling examples of this archetype—each using psychological insight not solely for therapeutic ends but as a means of manipulation, dominance, and personal gratification. This duality not only destabilizes the moral clarity often associated with mental health professionals but also reflects deeper cultural fears surrounding the abuse of power, the unreliability of authority, and the thin boundary between sanity and madness.

Ultimately, the psychiatrist-destroyer archetype functions as a narrative device that forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that knowledge, especially psychological knowledge, can be wielded as both a tool of healing and a weapon of control. Within the psychological thriller genre, this duality amplifies suspense and deepens character complexity, inviting reflection on the human psyche's capacity for both light and shadow.

Future research may expand on these findings by exploring how this archetype evolves in contemporary media or intersects with gender dynamics, institutional critique, or real-world perceptions of psychiatry. For now, these two novels serve as powerful illustrations of how fiction can use archetypes to explore profound existential and psychological questions.

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