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A Psychoanalytic Study of Door Imagery and the Characterization of Alissa in Strait Is the Gate

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Abstract: Freudian psychoanalysis offers an influential framework for examining symbolic expression and psychological characterization in modern fiction. André Gide's *Strait Is the Gate* exhibits a pronounced use of symbolic imagery, particularly the recurring image of the door. This article examines how that image becomes internalized within Alissa's psychological world and subsequently reappears in her conduct, a process interpreted through an analogy with dreamwork. The door operates on three interconnected levels: a boundary between physical spaces, a figure for Alissa's emotional closure, and the religious image of the narrow gate. Shaped by childhood distress and religious repression, Alissa experiences an acute conflict between spiritual aspiration and bodily desire. Her pursuit of absolute moral purity turns withdrawal from intimacy into a course of self-sacrifice and destruction. Reading the door image alongside Freud's account of manifest and latent content clarifies the psychological continuity underlying her contradictory behavior. The analysis argues that Gide's symbolic characterization connects the fictional world's external events with the character's subjective experience, producing a form of literary truth grounded in their interaction.

Keywords: *Strait Is the Gate*, Psychoanalysis, Door Imagery, Religious Repression, Symbolism.

1. Introduction

The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud established psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he developed the concept of dreamwork, treating dreams as meaningful psychical phenomena. Dreamwork refers to the processes that transform latent dream-thoughts into manifest dream-content [1, pp. 277–284]. Although formulated within psychology, this account has also informed literary interpretation. Literary creation can, in one sense, be understood as a form of dream-making: recurring images give perceptible form to abstract themes, elusive meanings, and aspects of character that resist direct statement. Writing thus creates an analogue of the movement from latent meaning to manifest expression. Such practices became increasingly prominent in twentieth-century Western fiction. In narratives that foreground the stream of consciousness, the relation between an image and its significance may shift with the character's consciousness rather than remain fixed, bringing literary expression closer to the associative movement of dreams.

This article examines André Gide's *Strait Is the Gate* (1909), focusing on the role of door imagery in the characterization of Alissa. It asks how the recurring door image makes her psychological development and underlying dispositions legible, and how it participates in the formation of her character and the unfolding of her tragedy. Bringing psychoanalytic concepts into dialogue with close reading makes it possible to examine the psychological coherence of Gide's characterization and the artistic concerns that it expresses. The analysis also considers how recurrent imagery concentrates a novel's meanings and establishes the internal truth of its fictional world.

2. Psychoanalysis and Modern Fiction

(1) Freud's Theory and Psychoanalytic Method

Freud's psychoanalytic theory places the unconscious at the center of mental life. Liu Meidan and Zhang Xin characterize it as a theoretical system whose premises lie in an intense concern with the unconscious, whose core comprises models of the psyche and personality, and whose distinctive emphasis is sexuality [2, p. 62]. Psychoanalytic method rests on the assumption that people have thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories that are not directly accessible to consciousness. This premise underlies several related accounts of mental activity, including the distinction among the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious; the structural model of the id, ego, and superego; the theory of libido; and the account of dreamwork.

Initially developed for psychological inquiry and treatment, psychoanalysis gradually entered literary studies, aesthetics, and other fields as Freud's writings circulated more widely.

(2) The Development of Symbolism in Fiction

Psychoanalysis has had a substantial influence on literary writing and criticism. Psychological theories enable writers and critics to reconstruct the motives behind characters' actions and to investigate the processes through which their mental lives take shape. This approach shifts attention from an omniscient narrator's direct explanations toward restricted perspectives, the movement of consciousness, and the continuity of psychological experience [3, p. 79]. It thereby provides a framework for understanding forms of characterization that develop through indirect suggestion.

A recurrent feature of some twentieth-century fiction is the sustained use of particular images [4]. The sun in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and the door in Gide's *Strait Is the Gate*, for example, remain closely associated with their protagonists without being assigned a single explicit meaning. Their contribution to plot and characterization can be understood by analogy with Freud's account of the relation between latent dream-thoughts and manifest dream-content. An image condenses psychological tensions into a concrete form, allowing readers to infer an inner continuity among events and states of mind. Psychoanalysis, together with the implicit symbolic operations of mythic thought, has thus contributed to the interpretation and further development of literary symbolism [5, pp. 28–35]. Symbolism has been more

widely associated with poetry than with fiction, but symbolic fiction likewise uses images and metaphors to connect the tangible world with an imagined spiritual realm. Its suggestive, sometimes mystical orientation gives external objects meanings that exceed their descriptive function [6, pp. 16–17].

3. A Psychoanalytic Reading of Alissa

(1) Symbolic Imagery in Strait Is the Gate

Gide's novella *Strait Is the Gate* first appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1909 and was published in book form that year. Its narrative centers on the love between Jérôme and his cousin Alissa. Although their affection is mutual, Alissa's religious convictions and obsessive pursuit of perfection lead her to believe that earthly love obstructs the soul's passage through the narrow gate. She ultimately chooses withdrawal and self-sacrifice, leaving Jérôme to remember their relationship. The novella constructs a symbolic system in which concrete objects carry abstract emotions, unconscious conflicts, and intimations of fate. Alissa's garden and its carefully pruned roses, for instance, can be read as figures for worldly desire and the instincts of life constrained by religious and moral demands. The amethyst cross represents her sacralization of the lovers' bond; her removal of it marks a decisive renunciation of earthly attachment as her physical and spiritual condition deteriorates.

Alongside the explicitly religious images of Eden, the cross, heaven, and the narrow gate, Gide gives ordinary objects a suggestive role in the characters' destinies. Settings and objects consequently do more than establish a scene: they become symbolic forms through which psychological tensions and possible outcomes are intimated [7]. The juxtaposition of Jérôme's retrospective account with Alissa's diary also creates a dialogue between distinct perspectives. This narrative arrangement allows readers to compare psychological states across different moments and provides a basis for reconstructing the meanings and effects of symbolic imagery through psychoanalytic interpretation.

(2) The Internalization and Externalization of Door Imagery

Alissa's changing dispositions and mental experiences receive sustained attention throughout the novella. Existing psychoanalytic readings commonly draw on Freud's topographical and structural models to examine the conflicts among religious repression, an uncompromising ideal of spiritual purity, and the desire for love [8]. Door imagery, including the religious narrow gate, provides another important means of tracing these conflicts. Its recurrence links the stages of Alissa's characterization and makes changes in her psychological life perceptible. The image can be approached as a bearer of both manifest form and latent significance, with its psychological operation considered in relation to Freud's account of dreamwork.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud describes the relation between the manifest and latent dimensions of dreams as follows:

"The latent thoughts and the manifest content of a dream are like two different translations of the same subject matter. More precisely, the manifest dream is another text expressing the latent thoughts. Our task is to compare the original with its translation in order to discover its signs and syntactic rules. Once these signs and rules are understood, the latent thoughts become intelligible. The manifest dream, conversely, resembles a manuscript in pictographic script, whose signs must be translated individually into the language of the dream-thoughts" [1, p. 277].

For Freud, manifest content and latent dream-thoughts are internally related. Interpreting that relationship requires attention to the transformations through which condensation, displacement, and other processes reshape material from waking life and conceal unconscious wishes and thoughts [9]. The relation between door imagery and Alissa can be examined in two stages. The first concerns the incorporation of external experience into an unconscious symbolic association; the second concerns the perceptible forms through which that association returns. Together, these stages offer an analogy for the transformation of material and meaning described in dreamwork.

The first stage is the internalization of the door, through which an external object acquires latent psychological significance. It resembles the incorporation of material from waking life into a dream. Much of Alissa's childhood distress arises from her mother's sexual conduct and betrayal of the family. Witnessing that conduct generates intense fear and aversion. Her habitual retreat behind her bedroom door can therefore be read as an effort at self-protection and an escape from a distressing reality. Initially an ordinary object, the door becomes a means of shielding herself from the harm associated with her mother's behavior. Under the combined pressure of childhood unhappiness and the religious idea of the narrow gate, it gradually becomes an unconscious symbolic image. It comes to signify both a commitment to sacred purity and a decisive separation from the worldly pleasures embodied by her mother.

The second stage is the externalization of the internalized image in Alissa's behavior and surroundings. The door becomes perceptible again and helps organize her movement toward isolation and self-sacrifice. This resembles the reappearance of transformed material as meaningful imagery after the operations of condensation and displacement. As she grows older, her relationship with Jérôme increasingly awakens her desire for love. The resulting conflict between spiritual ideals and bodily desire reactivates the door's unconscious significance. Her fear of intimacy, anxiety about repeating her mother's life, and inability to accept the ordinariness of marriage become displaced onto the image of the door. The psychological boundary that it represents informs her alternating advances and withdrawals, her eventual rejection of Jérôme, and her solitary movement toward self-sacrifice.

Alissa first invests an ordinary external object with the meaning of her distressing experience, moving from the search for a safe place to an inward closure against others. That closure later becomes visible in her everyday conduct as the conflict between spirit and flesh intensifies. Her relation to the door consequently changes from a refuge adopted under pressure to a boundary she actively upholds. This change gives continuity to the tragedy of both her love and her life.

(3) Three Levels of Door Imagery in Alissa's Characterization

By tracing the door's transformation from a physical object into an unconscious image and then into a pattern of conduct, Gide establishes three interconnected levels of symbolism. The image moves from material space to psychic life and religious meaning, mapping Alissa's progression from spatial withdrawal to emotional closure and self-destruction.

First, the image retains its basis in the physical door. Doors recur as boundaries in the narrative, and Jérôme's encounters

with Alissa repeatedly involve entering, leaving, or being denied access. To approach her, he must enter her room; at other moments, she keeps him outside. The door therefore constitutes a material obstacle between the lovers and sustains narrative tension. As part of Alissa's environment, it also establishes her as someone enclosed within a bounded space and anticipates the later course of their relationship.

Second, the door figures Alissa's emotional closure. Childhood distress and religious moral discipline lead her to internalize the boundary and to regard earthly desire as a violation of spiritual purity. Only occasionally does she contemplate opening herself fully to Jérôme. For most of her life, including its final stages, she remains enclosed within her own psychological world. This enclosure conflicts with her persistent desire for love. By subjecting her feelings to increasingly severe repression, she excludes Jérôme from her inner life and enters a condition of profound solitude.

Third, the image carries an explicitly religious significance through the biblical narrow gate. Matthew 7:13–14 contrasts the broad way leading to destruction with the narrow gate and difficult way leading to life, an image central to the novella's religious framework [10, p. 17]. Alissa treats this metaphor of salvation as an absolute moral injunction. She comes to believe that complete abstinence and the effacement of her own desires will help her beloved pass through the gate to heaven. Her compulsive attachment to sacred purity converts a wish for happiness into an impulse toward martyr-like sacrifice. Pursuing an imagined condition of absolute purity, she progressively extinguishes her own will to live.

These three levels of meaning also expose Gide's reflection on the way of life and the attitudes toward religion and morality that Alissa represents. She actively embraces the closure associated with the door and ultimately dies in pursuit of moral perfection. Her death reveals a danger within the Protestant discipline in which Gide himself was raised: the abandonment of the self for the sake of God. Whether imagined as the disappearance of the door or as its permanent closure, the ending makes the cost of this attitude visible. Alissa dies within the enclosure of religious renunciation, while Gide's narrative opens a critical distance from the constraints that bind her [11].

4. Psychoanalysis and Literary Truth

Read through the concepts of dreamwork and literary daydreaming, Gide's use of door imagery gives psychological continuity to Alissa's movement from childhood fear and withdrawal to an increasingly destructive pursuit of religious purity. She emerges as a tragic figure whose religious commitments are entangled with repressed desire and unconscious conflict. The symbolic pattern makes her behavior intelligible without reducing its contradictions to a single declared motive. In this way, psychological complexity contributes to the coherence of the plot and to the internal truth of the fictional world.

A psychoanalytic reading also clarifies how *Strait Is the Gate* extends the narrative of frustrated love into an examination of childhood experience, religious discipline, and psychological change. The gradual disclosure of Alissa's motives resembles the interpretation of a dream: readers reconstruct the connections through which the door is internalized and then expressed in conduct. Gide shifts attention from direct authorial explanation toward the reciprocal effects of environment and mental life. This approach preserves the contradictions, fragmentation, and partial opacity of human experience. Alissa's choices remain consistent with her psychological condition, while that condition develops through experiences that the narrative makes traceable [12]. Plot and characterization consequently achieve coherence together. Literary truth emerges at the intersection of external events and subjective experience, with each lending intelligibility to the other.

5. Conclusion

Interpreting door imagery provides a way of reconstructing Alissa's psychological life. The door's association with withdrawal runs through her experience, changing from a refuge against family unhappiness into a constraint on her desire for intimacy. As she turns that boundary into a moral imperative, self-protection gives way to self-denial, and the pursuit of purity culminates in sacrifice and destruction.

The layered meanings of the door, considered alongside the transformations described in dreamwork, reveal how Gide connects symbolic expression with psychological development. His characterization of Alissa establishes a correspondence between the fictional world's external circumstances and its protagonist's inner experience. This relation produces a form of literary truth that depends on the coherence of both, and illustrates the possibilities of recurring imagery for representing the complexity of mental life.

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