



## *The Representation of Unconscious Feelings and Regret in Passenger's "Let Her Go": A Psychoanalytic Study*

### Representasi Perasaan Tidak Sadar dan Penyesalan dalam Lagu Passenger "Let Her Go": Sebuah Studi Psikoanalitik

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#### Abstrak

Lagu populer sering kali mencerminkan kondisi psikologis manusia yang kompleks, namun kajian linguistik terhadap representasi perasaan tidak sadar dalam lirik lagu masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi perasaan tidak sadar dan penyesalan dalam lagu "Let Her Go" oleh Passenger melalui teori psikoanalitik Sigmund Freud. Penelitian ini menerapkan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan sumber data utama berupa lirik lagu "Let Her Go," yang dianalisis menggunakan konsep psikoanalitik Freud, meliputi perasaan tidak sadar, penindasan, dan konflik emosional. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa narator dalam lagu mengalami realisasi emosional yang tertunda, di mana cinta baru sepenuhnya dipahami setelah perpisahan terjadi; gambaran simbolis seperti kegelapan, cahaya, dingin, dan kesepian memperkuat representasi penderitaan psikologis tersebut. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa lirik lagu dapat berfungsi sebagai representasi psikologis dari penyesalan dan kesadaran diri manusia, serta memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian kritik sastra psikoanalitik, khususnya dalam analisis lirik musik populer.

**Kata kunci:** Lirik Lagu; Psikoanalisis; Perasaan Tidak Sadar; Penyesalan; Symbolisme

#### Abstract

Popular songs frequently reflect complex psychological conditions of human beings, yet linguistic studies on the representation of unconscious feelings in song lyrics remain limited. This study aims to analyze the representation of unconscious feelings and regret in the song "Let Her Go" by Passenger through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. A qualitative descriptive method was applied, with the lyrics of "Let Her Go" serving as the primary data source, analyzed using Freud's psychoanalytic concepts including unconscious feelings, repression, and emotional conflict. The findings reveal that the lyrical narrator experiences delayed emotional realization, in which love is fully understood only after separation occurs; symbolic imagery such as darkness, light, coldness, and loneliness further reinforces the representation of psychological suffering. This study concludes that song lyrics can function as a psychological representation of human regret and self-awareness, contributing to the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism, particularly in the analysis of popular music lyrics.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis; Regret; Song Lyrics; Symbolism; Unconscious Feelings

#### INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the creative media used to express human emotions, experiences, thoughts, and psychological conditions. According to Wellek and Warren (1956), literature represents human life through imagination and emotional expression. Literary works are not only found in novels, poetry, and drama, but also in song lyrics (Barradas & Sakka, 2022). Therefore, song lyrics can be analyzed as literary texts because they portray emotional and psychological aspects of human life

Psychology and literature have a close relationship because literary works often represent human behavior, emotions, and mental processes. One of the literary approaches frequently used to analyze psychological aspects in literature is psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a theory that focuses on unconscious feelings, repression, anxiety, desire, and emotional conflict. Freud explained that human behavior is strongly influenced by unconscious experiences hidden in the human mind (Otgaar et al., 2021).

Music is one of the most influential forms of emotional expression in modern society. According to Abrams (1999), literary expression can be found in various artistic forms, including music and song lyrics (Warmbrodt et al., 2022). One of the popular songs that portrays emotional suffering and regret is "Let Her Go" by Passenger. The song was released in 2012 and became internationally popular because of its emotional lyrics and meaningful message (Talamini et al., 2022). The lyrical speaker—the narrator within the song—realizes the importance of love only after separation occurs. This emotional realization reflects unconscious feelings and psychological conflict that can be analyzed through psychoanalytic theory. The song "Let Her Go" contains many expressions related to emotional suffering and regret (Matarazzo et al., 2021). For example, the lyric "Only know you love her when you let her go" shows the speaker's realization of love after experiencing loss. Freud explains that unconscious feelings often emerge through emotional experiences and suffering. In addition, the repetition of emotional expressions in the song indicates psychological pressure and inner conflict experienced by the speaker. Therefore, the lyrics provide significant material for psychoanalytic analysis.

Several previous studies have analyzed psychoanalytic aspects in literary works and song lyrics. For example, Saidah et al. (2025) examined defense mechanisms in Olivia Rodrigo's album SOUR using Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Barradas and Sakka (2022) investigated the relationship between song lyrics and emotional expression from a psychological perspective. In addition, O'Shiel (2021) discussed Freud's concept of internal emotions and unconscious psychological processes. However, most previous studies focus on defense mechanisms, emotional expression, or psychoanalytic interpretations in general. Few studies specifically examine the representation of unconscious feelings and regret in popular song lyrics through Freud's psychoanalytic perspective. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing unconscious feelings and regret in Passenger's "Let Her Go."

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method because the data are analyzed in the form of words, phrases, and song lyrics rather than numerical data. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on understanding meanings and interpreting human experiences. The primary data source of this research is the lyrics of "Let Her Go" by Passenger. The researcher analyzes the lyrics by identifying expressions related to unconscious feelings, regret, emotional conflict, and psychological suffering based on Freud's psychoanalytic concepts. Finally, this study is expected to contribute to psychoanalytic literary criticism, especially in the analysis of song lyrics. This research may also help readers understand how music reflects human unconscious emotions, emotional conflict, and feelings of regret.

## **THEORY REVIEW**

### ***Psychological Theory***

Psychological theory is commonly used in literary and musical analysis to examine human emotions, behavior, and mental processes reflected in a work. According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, human emotions are influenced by unconscious desires, memories, and experiences (Rabeyron, 2022). Psychological criticism focuses on how feelings such as regret, loneliness, and emotional conflict are represented through language and symbolism (Gullestad, 2022).

In the song "Let Her Go" by Passenger, the lyrics portray the speaker's emotional realization after losing someone meaningful. The repeated line, "Only know you love her when you let her go," reflects regret and delayed awareness of affection. This emotional condition can be analyzed through psychological theory because the speaker experiences inner conflict caused by the loss of love and the inability to appreciate it beforehand.

Furthermore, the song illustrates emotional suffering through melancholic imagery such as darkness, coldness, and isolation. These images symbolize the speaker's psychological state and reinforce the theme of loneliness. Through psychological analysis, the song can be interpreted as a reflection of human vulnerability and the tendency to recognize the value of something only after it is gone.

### ***Freud's Concept of the Unconscious***

One of the most important concepts in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the unconscious mind. Freud (1963) argues that human behavior is not entirely controlled by conscious awareness. Instead, many thoughts, desires, emotions, and memories exist at the unconscious level of the mind. These unconscious

elements influence an individual's actions, feelings, and decisions even when the person is not fully aware of them. According to Freud, the human mind consists of three levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious mind contains thoughts and perceptions that individuals are currently aware of, while the preconscious contains memories and information that can be accessed when needed. The unconscious mind, however, stores repressed desires, hidden emotions, traumatic experiences, and unresolved conflicts.

Freud further explains that unconscious feelings often emerge indirectly through dreams, fantasies, emotional reactions, artistic expressions, and symbolic language. As a result, literary works and song lyrics can serve as valuable sources for examining unconscious psychological processes. Through language and imagery, authors and songwriters may express emotions that are difficult to communicate directly. Psychoanalytic criticism therefore seeks to uncover these hidden meanings and explain how unconscious emotions are represented within a text.

In the context of song lyrics, unconscious feelings may appear through repeated expressions, symbolic imagery, emotional contradictions, and descriptions of psychological suffering. These elements often reveal emotions that the speaker does not completely understand at the beginning of the narrative. In Passenger's "Let Her Go," the speaker gradually becomes aware of the importance of love only after experiencing separation. This delayed realization reflects the process through which unconscious emotions move into conscious awareness. Therefore, Freud's concept of the unconscious provides an appropriate framework for understanding the emotional conflict and regret represented throughout the song.

### *Symbolism Theory*

Symbolism theory examines how symbols and imagery are used to convey deeper meanings in literary and musical texts. According to Perrine (1974), symbolism refers to the use of words, images, or objects that represent meanings beyond their literal sense. Symbols help authors and songwriters communicate emotions, ideas, and psychological conditions indirectly. Through symbolism, abstract feelings such as love, regret, loneliness, and suffering can be expressed more effectively.

In "Let Her Go," several symbolic images appear repeatedly, including "light," "snow," "dream," and "home." The symbol of "light" represents happiness, warmth, and love, while "darkness" symbolizes sadness and emotional emptiness. Similarly, "snow" reflects coldness and loneliness, emphasizing the speaker's emotional distance after separation (Abrams, 1999). These symbols strengthen the song's central theme of regret and emotional realization.

By applying symbolism theory, the lyrics can be understood not only as expressions of heartbreak but also as representations of universal human experiences related to love, loss, and self-reflection.

## **METHOD**

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method because the data are analyzed in the form of words, phrases, and lyrical expressions rather than numerical data (Creswell, 2014). The research was conducted through textual analysis of song lyrics, with no specific time or location constraints given the nature of literary research. The data source is the full lyrical text of "Let Her Go" by Passenger, released in 2012 on the album *All the Little Lights*, obtained from the verified lyrics platform Genius (genius.com) to ensure accuracy. The population of this study is the entire lyrical text of the song, while the sample consists of five lyrical expressions selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the representation of unconscious feelings, regret, and symbolic imagery (Sugiyono, 2019).

The research procedure involves three stages. First, the lyrics are read in full and five relevant lyrical expressions are identified based on their emotional and symbolic weight. Second, each expression is analyzed using Freud's psychoanalytic concepts, including the unconscious, repression, mourning, and ego defense mechanisms (Roussel, 2025). Third, the symbolic imagery in the lyrics is examined through symbolism theory, focusing on how recurring images of light, darkness, cold, and warmth externalize the speaker's psychological condition (Perrine, 1974). Data were collected through documentation, namely reading and recording the relevant lyrical expressions from the primary source.

Data were analyzed using a close-reading technique combined with psychoanalytic and symbolic interpretive frameworks. Each selected lyric was first read for its literal meaning, then interpreted in relation to Freud's concepts of unconscious feeling and repression, and finally examined for its symbolic dimensions. The findings were organized based on recurring psychological and symbolic patterns found across the sampled lyrics. To ensure credibility, all interpretations were consistently grounded in theoretical sources rather than personal assumption (Tyson, 2006; Machin, 2010).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Passenger's song "Let Her Go" reveals several lyrical expressions that represent unconscious feelings, regret, emotional suffering, and psychological conflict. Through Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, the speaker's emotions appear gradually after the experience of loss. The song emphasizes that emotional awareness often emerges only after separation occurs. In addition, symbolic imagery such as darkness, light, coldness, and loneliness strengthens the psychological meaning represented in the lyrics. The findings are presented in the following table.

**Table 1**  
*Psychoanalytic and Symbolic Analysis of Selected Lyrics in "Let Her Go"*

No.	Lyric	Psychoanalytic Concept	Freudian Interpretation	Symbol/ Imagery
1	"Only know you love her when you let her go"	Unconscious feeling; Delayed emotional awareness	Love suppressed beneath conscious awareness surfaces only after the experience of loss (Freud, 1915)	Light = love/warmth; absence = awakened awareness
2	"Only miss the sun when it starts to snow"	Return of the repressed; Emotional contrast	Happiness recognized only in its absence; unconscious association of warmth with love (Freud, 1915)	Sun = love/warmth; Snow = coldness/separation
3	"Only know you've been high when you're feeling low"	Ego defense; Repression of positive affect	Appreciation of well-being is blocked during the experience; recognized only retrospectively (Freud, 1923)	High/low = emotional instability; fluctuation of affect
4	"Staring at the bottom of the glass"	Repression; Internalized suffering	Emotional pain is not expressed outwardly but turned inward; psychological isolation (Freud, 1917)	Glass = emotional distance, isolation, self-reflection
5	"Dream beneath the underlights"	Unconscious desire; Wish fulfillment	Fantasy as retreat from loss; unconscious longing for an unattainable object (Freud, 1900)	Dream = unfulfilled desire; underlights = ambiguity between reality and fantasy

### Data 1

The lyric "Only know you love her when you let her go" represents the speaker's delayed emotional realization after experiencing loss. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this lyric reflects unconscious feelings that remain hidden until a painful event brings them into awareness. According to Freud, unconscious emotions often emerge through suffering, anxiety, or emotional conflict. In this lyric, the speaker does not fully recognize the value of love while the relationship still exists (Voutilainen & Koivisto, 2022). However, after separation occurs, the speaker becomes aware of his true feelings. This condition demonstrates the psychological process in which emotional understanding develops only after the object of affection is lost. Therefore, the lyric can be interpreted as a representation of unconscious affection that transforms into regret and self-awareness through emotional suffering.

### Data 2

The lyric "Only miss the sun when it starts to snow" illustrates emotional emptiness and longing through symbolic imagery (Andriani, 2024). Psychoanalytically, the speaker unconsciously associates love and happiness with warmth, represented by the symbol of the sun. The appearance of snow symbolizes emotional coldness, loneliness, and separation. The contrast between these two symbols suggests that the speaker becomes aware of the value of happiness only after it disappears. Freud argues that unconscious emotions may be revealed indirectly through symbols and emotional experiences. Thus, the lyric reflects the speaker's psychological suffering as well as his realization that comfort and affection are often appreciated only after they are lost.

**Data 3**

The lyric *"Only know you've been high when you're feeling low"* reflects the speaker's psychological conflict and delayed appreciation of happiness (Listiwati et al., 2024). Through Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, this lyric suggests that individuals often fail to recognize positive emotional experiences while they are occurring. The realization of happiness emerges only when it is replaced by sadness or emotional suffering. The contrast between the words *"high"* and *"low"* symbolizes emotional instability and the fluctuation of human feelings. This condition demonstrates how unconscious awareness operates within the human mind, where certain emotions remain unnoticed until a contrasting emotional state brings them into consciousness. Therefore, the lyric represents regret and self-reflection resulting from the speaker's inability to fully appreciate happiness before experiencing loss and disappointment.

**Data 4**

The lyric *"Staring at the bottom of the glass"* portrays the speaker's emotional suffering and psychological isolation after experiencing loss. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this expression may indicate emotional repression, in which painful feelings are not openly expressed but are instead internalized. The image of staring into a glass suggests a moment of deep self-reflection and loneliness, as the speaker appears trapped within his own thoughts and emotions. Freud argues that unresolved emotional experiences often create psychological tension that influences an individual's behavior and perception. In this lyric, the speaker seems unable to escape from memories and feelings associated with the lost relationship. Symbolically, the glass represents emotional distance, isolation, and an attempt to find temporary relief from psychological pain. Thus, the lyric reflects the speaker's inner conflict and emotional vulnerability.

**Data 5**

The lyric *"Dream beneath the underlights"* represents unconscious desires and emotional fantasies that remain unfulfilled. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, dreams often function as manifestations of hidden wishes, repressed emotions, and unconscious thoughts. In this lyric, the speaker appears to retreat into imagination and fantasy as a response to emotional loss and dissatisfaction. The word *"dream"* symbolizes hope, desire, and longing for something that can no longer be attained in reality. Meanwhile, the imagery of *"underlights"* creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and emotional distance, emphasizing the gap between desire and reality. Through this symbolic expression, the lyric illustrates the speaker's unconscious attempt to cope with feelings of regret and loss. Therefore, the lyric can be interpreted as a representation of emotional longing and psychological yearning that persist despite the end of the relationship.

Based on the data above, the most dominant theme found in the song is regret caused by delayed emotional realization. The repeated lyric, *"Only know you love her when you let her go,"* becomes the central representation of unconscious feeling in the song. Freud explains that unconscious emotions often emerge through painful experiences and emotional conflict. In this case, the speaker unconsciously ignores the value of love until separation forces him to confront his feelings.

Furthermore, the symbolic images in the lyrics strengthen the psychological atmosphere of the song. The contrast between light and darkness reflects the emotional transition from happiness to loneliness. Similarly, the imagery of snow, coldness, and isolation represents emotional emptiness after losing someone meaningful. These symbols function as external representations of the speaker's internal psychological condition.

The findings indicate that regret functions as the central emotional theme throughout the song. Regret emerges because the speaker fails to recognize the value of love and emotional connection before losing them. This condition reflects a common psychological experience in which individuals become fully aware of their emotions only after separation, disappointment, or suffering occurs. Freud's psychoanalytic theory suggests that unconscious feelings may remain hidden until a significant emotional event forces them into consciousness. In the song, the experience of loss becomes the catalyst that transforms unconscious affection into conscious realization.

The repeated structure of the lyrics also contributes to the representation of psychological conflict. The recurring phrase *"Only know..."* emphasizes the pattern of delayed awareness that dominates the speaker's emotional experience. Repetition functions not only as a musical element but also as a psychological device that reflects obsession, reflection, and emotional fixation. The speaker repeatedly returns to the same realization because the emotional wound remains unresolved. This repetitive pattern mirrors the tendency of individuals to revisit painful memories while attempting to understand their emotional experiences.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the symbolic images found in the song may also be interpreted as manifestations of unconscious desires and emotional memories. Freud argues that the unconscious mind frequently expresses itself through symbolic forms rather than direct statements. In this regard, the recurring symbols in the lyrics function as indirect representations of the speaker's hidden emotions. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that *"Let Her Go"* is not merely a song about heartbreak, but also a psychological representation of unconscious feelings and regret. Through psychoanalytic and symbolic approaches, the

lyrics reveal the complexity of human emotions, particularly the emotional suffering that emerges after loss and separation (Kaesari & Sakinah, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Passenger's "Let Her Go," this study concludes that unconscious feelings are represented through the speaker's delayed emotional awareness, in which love, happiness, and emotional attachment are only fully recognized after separation and loss occur; regret is portrayed through lyrical patterns that repeatedly contrast presence and absence, with the central line "Only know you love her when you let her go" serving as the clearest expression of this condition; and symbolic imagery such as sunlight, snow, darkness, and dreams reinforces the speaker's psychological suffering by externalizing his inner emotional state. Through psychoanalytic and symbolic analysis, the findings demonstrate that song lyrics can function as a meaningful literary medium for representing complex psychological experiences, contributing to the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism and confirming that emotional awareness often emerges only through loss and suffering (Marpaung et al., 2025; Mukin et al., 2025; Aulia et al., 2025).

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