

A Horneyan Interpretation of Characters' Personalities in Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times*

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Introduction

Interpreting literature from a psychoanalytic point of view has long been popular. Freud strongly believed in the links between psychoanalysis and literature, and referred to literature and art in 22 of his writings.¹ The mutual attraction between psychoanalysis and literature is also evidenced by the interest of many great writers in Freud, as well as the numerous articles, books, and seminars by literary critics on literary and psychoanalytic topics.

Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times*, originally published in 1996 under the title *Prawiek i inne czasy*, was her third novel and won her a critical success. The novel was translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.² The story takes place in Prawiek (Primeval), a fictional village in the very center of Poland, where some eccentric archetypal characters live. Beginning in 1914, the novel chronicles the lives of the residents of Primeval over a period of 80 years. It was translated into many languages and established Tokarczuk's international reputation as one of the most important Polish writers of her generation. Previous research on this novel was written mainly from the perspective of magical realism or ecofeminism, or compared it with other novels in terms of their theme. Ewa V. Wampuszyc analyzed the magical realist mode of writing in Tokarczuk's *Primeval*

¹ S. Kristiansen, "The psychoanalyst and the poet —a meeting between Sigmund Freud and Rainer Maria Rilke," *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 36, no. 1, (2013) :52–56. (Segal, 1991, as cited in Kristiansen, 2013).

² Olga Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2010).

and *Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*.³ Maciej Karasinski discussed thematic parallels in *The Legends of Khasak* and *Primeval and Other Times* and interpreted forms of spiritual oppression presented in these novels, and examined the narration, symbols, making and unmaking of the places the authors call “god’s playground.”⁴ Noemi Fregara analyzed the transgressive female characters in Tokarczuk’s four novels, including *Primeval and Other Times*, through the theoretical approaches of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Monster Studies and highlighted their challenge to the anthropocentric and androcentric viewpoints, aimed at liberating all minorities from oppression.⁵ Jarosław Anders described Tokarczuk’s mixture of lyrical realism and fantasy, and concluded that Tokarczuk’s mythopoetic designs to express the unity of human and natural world were not entirely successful, yet they produced literature expressing eclectic curiosity, imaginative daring, and earnest concern with the moral challenges faced today.⁶ Among the research on *Primeval and Other Times*, study from the perspective of psychoanalysis was limited, so this paper analyzes this novel from the perspective of Karen Horney’s psychoanalysis to enrich study of the novel.

With the help of the neo-psychoanalyst Karen Horney’s anxiety theory, this paper analyzes the three main characters Cornspike, Misia and Paweł and their anxieties in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times*. Cornspike, Misia and Paweł are trying to get rid of their anxiety, but their attempts fail except for Cornspike’s. According to Horney’s theory of anxiety, in the process of fighting against anxiety, only through the flexible application of three strategies—namely moving towards people, moving against people and moving away from people—can the individuals ultimately succeed in conquering their anxiety and maintain a harmonious relationship as well as keep the integrity and independence of their personality.

This paper finds that Paweł and Misia belong to the aggressive and compliant type respectively, while Cornspike manages to overcome her anxiety by using three defensive strategies flexibly. Paweł and Misia’s stubbornness in applying merely one defensive strategy leads to their tragic end. Although Cornspike has suffered numerous hardships, she successfully survived in a dark world full of suffering, found comfort in nature, and remained true to herself. The reasons lie behind the three characters’ anxiety and their applying different defensive strategies worthy of our exploration and attention.

1. Karen Horney’s Anxiety Theory

According to Horney, anxiety is “a feeling of being small, insignificant, helpless, deserted, endangered in a world that is out to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate, betray, envy”.⁷ Horney strongly

³ Ewa V. Wampuszyc, “Magical Realism in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*,” *East European Politics & Societies* 28, no. 2 (May 2014): 366-385.

⁴ Maciej Karasinski, “Mapping the Contours of Spiritual Oppression: Thematic Parallels of Magical Reality in O. V. Vijayan’s *The Legends of Khasak* and Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 165-201.

⁵ Noemi Fregara, “Ecological, Feminist, and Monstruous Trends Against Women and Nature’s Oppression in Olga Tokarczuk’s Works,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, no. 2 (2023): 150-166.

⁶ Jarosław Anders, “*Primeval and Other Times* by Olga Tokarczuk: The ‘Tender Narrator’ and the Perils of Myth,” *The Polish Review* 66, no. 2 (2021): 105-117.

⁷ Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (London: Routledge, 1937), 92.

emphasizes the effects of anxiety in the development of neurotic personality, and indicates that “anxiety is the dynamic center of neurosis and thus we shall have to deal with it all the time”.⁸

According to Horney, there are two important sources of people’s anxiety. One is the macro-environment, which is mainly composed of the social and cultural conditions in which an individual lives, and the other is the micro-environment, which refers to the individual’s living experiences.⁹

To protect themselves from the torment of anxiety, the individual will generate certain neurotic needs, such as the neurotic need for power, the neurotic need for affection, or the neurotic need for isolation to battle against or escape from his anxiety. These neurotic needs will drive people to apply certain defensive and rigid strategies to deal with the people around them, which are called neurotic trends.

In *Our Inner Conflicts*, from ten types of neurotic needs, Horney concludes three trends people utilize to deal with basic anxiety.¹⁰ The three trends are “move towards others” in a self-effacing solution of love and compliance, or “move against others” in an expansive solution of mastery and aggression, or “move away from others” in a resignation solution of freedom and detachment. These neurotic trends will easily give rise to the development of three kinds of neurotic personalities: the compliant type, the aggressive type and the detached type.

The three strategies cooperate with each other to help people deal with their anxiety. But the neurotic individual will find it hard to choose and flexibly utilize the three strategies, so he rigidly uses one solution almost exclusively regardless of whether or not it is adaptive, denies or represses the other two solutions.

2. Misia as the Compliant Type—Desire for Affection and Approval

Misia belongs to the compliant type formed by her family background and social environment. Horney found that a childhood marked by lack of warmth and security and a feeling of isolation and helplessness in a potentially hostile world can lead to neurosis in either males or females. In Misia’s childhood, she was lonely, had no friends to play with, witnessed her mother’s love affair, was often spanked by her mother, and lacked her father’s love until she was 5 years old. Therefore, she was easily enchanted by Paweł’s praises and compliments, dropped out of university, married him, and then started her unfortunate life. Horney effectively demonstrates that cultural factors and approved sex roles encourage women to be dependent on men for love, prestige, wealth, care, and protection. This dependence results in overemphasis on pleasing men, on the feminine “cult of beauty and charm,” and on the overvaluation of love.¹¹

⁸ Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, 41.

⁹ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (London: Routledge, 1950), 14.

¹⁰ Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 1946).

¹¹ Karen Horney, “The overvaluation of love. A study of a common present-day feminine type,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, no. 3 (1934): 605-638.

2.1 Misia's Growing Environment—the Formation of Her Anxiety

Misia's anxieties are the result of social and familial environments, that is, the unstable society caused by war and her incomplete family in her childhood. When Misia was born, her father was fighting in the war, and she lived alone with her mother. Under the influence of war, Misia's world was like the world of other people and animals, dark, full of suffering, like a murky pond overgrown with duckweed.¹² Her father returned home when she was about four years old. Due to trauma caused by war, initially after his return, Misia's father staggered as he walked and often cried at night, nestling against her mother's breasts. To Misia, the image of her father was like a child and Misia treated him as her equal. However, after her father's return, Misia also began to see the world. Before then everything had been blurred and out of focus. Misia couldn't remember herself from before her father's return, as if she hadn't existed at all.¹³

During Misia's childhood, she seemed to have no friends to play with, even when she was ten, she could only play with her dolls, or went to her mother's dressing table to play or searched for things in a drawer in the kitchen table. "Misia liked the Queen of Spades the best. She thought her the most beautiful and the saddest. The Queen of Spades had a bad husband. The Queen of Spades didn't have any friends. She was very lonely."¹⁴ The Queen of Spades was like Misia herself, sad and lonely.

2.2 The Defensive Strategy of Misia—Moving Towards People

According to Horney, "the compliant type needs to be liked, wanted, desired, loved; to feel accepted, welcomed, approved of, appreciated; to be needed, to be of importance to others, especially to one particular person; to be helped, protected, taken care of, guided".¹⁵

Because of a lack of warmth in childhood, Misia had the neurotic need to be liked and approved, so she was lost in Paweł's praise and compliment. When Paweł stared at Misia and praised her, she thought about herself: "I am a pretty girl. I have small feet, like a Chinese woman, I have beautiful hair. I smile in a very feminine way. I smell of vanilla. A person might long to see me. I am a woman".¹⁶ Misia dropped out from university because she wanted to get married. Paweł wanted to get married even if he was still at school. Genowefa was satisfied with Paweł, while Michał thought Misia shouldn't marry so soon and should continue her study and enjoy life. Michał got the impression that his Misia had been written into Poweł Boski's ambitious life plans, like an object.¹⁷

After her marriage, Misia was continuously giving birth to children because Paweł wasn't willing to use condoms. At the same time, she had to cope with a large house and doing kitchen work and laundry. During her life, she gave birth to six children, including twin sisters in her fifth parturition. She lost herself in her marriage.

¹²Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 17.

¹³Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 43.

¹⁴Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 61.

¹⁵Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 51.

¹⁶Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 87.

¹⁷Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 89.

Faced with her husband's disloyalty, poor Misia found excuses for him and thought she shouldn't resent him for that because she had been pregnant, fat and swollen, and she was then in her confinement. "After her third child she grew fat, her hair lost its shine and went straight. Now her eyes were the colour of bitter chocolate. She was pregnant for the fourth time, for the first time she thought it was too much for her. She didn't want this child".¹⁸ When she was delivering the baby, Paweł had gone on another course, so her father looked after her in her confinement. Although Misia found out her husband was unfaithful to her, she couldn't change anything and was pregnant for the fifth time, giving birth to the girls Lila and Maja. The same year her father Michał died of heart disease. Without her father's help, her life became even worse.

When their children did something wrong, Paweł would blame Misia and said she had to be tough with the children and keep them on a tight rein. Paweł was free to pursue his career and play with his friends while Misia had to take care of the house, the children and give birth to more children. Everyday Misia had lots of things to do – the cooking, the laundry, and cleaning the yard. Paweł only appeared in the evenings. Misia was unsatisfied with Paweł, but when he bought antibiotics and saved their two daughters from illness, she forgot his previous mistakes and "slid under Paweł's quilt and cuddled up to him as close as she could".¹⁹ Misia was completely subdued by Paweł.

Since Misia's marriage with Paweł, her whole life was dictated and controlled by him. Misia couldn't even choose where to be buried after her death. One day Paweł hired some men to dig the family tomb next to his father's and sister's graves, Misia asked "Why isn't it next to my parents?" Paweł mocked her, "Why, why, why, it's too cramped there".²⁰ When Misia was alive, she was dominated by her husband. Her wish to be buried next to her parents was also mocked and refused by her husband.

3. Paweł as the Aggressive Type — Madly Pursuing Power and Mastery

For the aggressive type of people, cruelty, ruthlessness and a lack of consideration for others are quite common. Paweł is a representative of the personality of the aggressive type. He develops the personality of strong egotism and aggressiveness. "He knew he would have everything he desired, that he would push forwards and on one would be able to stop him".²¹

3.1 Paweł's Growing Environment — the Formation of His Anxiety

The arrogant-vindictive people usually have a harsh childhood. Therefore, they are ferociously competitive as an adult. Bernard J. Paris, an American scholar who advocates Karen Horney's anxiety theory, believes that the arrogant-vindictive people want to "enslave others, to play on their emotions, to frustrate, disparage, and humiliate them".²²

¹⁸Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 176.

¹⁹Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 188.

²⁰Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 233.

²¹Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 83.

²²Bernard J. Paris, *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 23.

Old Boski's son Paweł was from a poor family and wanted to be someone "important". He even imagined himself to be the son of the rich Popielski, and he despised his own father and three sisters. He was afraid that if he didn't start to take action soon, he would become as "unimportant" as his father and would spend his whole life putting shingles on a roof. Therefore, when he turned 16, he got out of the house where his ugly sisters reigned supreme and found himself a job.²³

3.2 The Defensive Strategy of Paweł—Moving against People

The aggressive type of people pursue mastery crazily and has a need to control others to prove his powerfulness. Mastery attracts them most, and they tend to be hostile and aggressive. Paweł was ambitious, he desired knowledge and education. But at the same time, he was very arrogant, and disliked his poor home and his three sisters. He hated the dirt that got into the cracks in the old wooden cottage, into the floors and under his fingernails. He hated the stench of cow manure that permeated his clothing when he went into the barn. He hated the smell of potatoes being steamed for the pigs – it pervaded the entire house and everything inside it, including his hair and skin. He hated the boorish dialect in which his parents spoke and which sometimes pushed its way onto his own tongue. He hated the cloth, the raw wood, the wooden spoons, the holy pictures from the church fête, and his sisters' fat legs.²⁴

To aggressive people, any "situation or relationship is looked at from the standpoint of what can I get out of it?"—whether it is about money, prestige, contacts, or ideas".²⁵ Paweł kept gazing at Misia for several months each Sunday when she came to the church. One Sunday, he got the chance to talk with Misia and said she was dainty, like a luxury Swiss watch. He said her hair was the color of the dearest type of gold.²⁶ Paweł used "luxury Swiss watch" and "gold" to describe Misia; to him, Misia was from a better family than him, so he regarded marrying Misia as an easy way to climb up.

Through his efforts to climb upwards, Paweł finally got a job inspecting the cleanliness of shops, restaurants and bars. If he wanted, Paweł could have any shop or eatery closed down. He was important. He was given presents and treated to vodka and the freshest jellied pig's feet.²⁷ This was how he met Ukleja, the owner of a cake shop and several other, who introduced Paweł to the world of secretaries and lawyers, drinking sprees and hunting, willing busty barmaids and alcohol, which provided the courage to get as much out of life as possible.

After obtaining power, Paweł's emotion and attitude towards Misia changed. Misia knew he was squeezing and screwing all those barmaids, butcher's shop girls, and waitresses from the restaurants he monitored as a state official. One day when Paweł came home rather tipsy, Misia went up to him with all four children. "I'll kill you if you ever do it again," she said. He blinked,

²³Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 82.

²⁴Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 83.

²⁵Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 65.

²⁶Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 87.

²⁷Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 156-157.

but didn't try pretending not to know what was the matter. Then he threw his boots in the corner and laughed merrily.²⁸ Paweł has achieved his aim of being important and powerful, he didn't care too much of others' feelings and even went against his father-in-law and wife.

4. Cornspike—Flexible Application of Defensive Strategies

4.1 The Formation of Cornspike's Anxiety

"There are two kinds of learning, from the inside and from the outside. Cornspike learned the world by absorbing things from the outside to the inside".²⁹ In the novel, the society and hardships taught her how to survive. Cornspike wins her battle against her anxiety by flexibly applying the three defensive strategies, that is, moving against people, moving towards people, and moving away from people. Although Cornspike has suffered a lot of hardships and contempt from other people, she successfully survived in an unstable society, found solace in nature, and remained herself.

4.2 The Defensive Strategy of Cornspike

4.2.1 Moving towards people

Cornspike was a barefoot and pathetic girl who didn't have family members nor a house to live in. She even had no name, and people called her Cornspike because she gathered ears of corn left over after the harvest. She suffered from the anxiety of conflict between starving to death and morality. In order to survive, she applied the strategy of moving towards people. She stole potatoes and whored with men to trade for food because people are unwilling to give something for nothing, for free.³⁰ However, when having sex with men, she didn't feel inferior to them. She never wanted to lie on her back in an honest way. She'd say: "Why should I lie underneath you? I'm your equal".³¹

Influenced by war and the flu epidemic in 1918, Cornspike chose to go back to the human world to search for food to avoid being starved. She went to Genowefa's mill to search for food, she went into the cool shade ahead of her, and instantly fell to her knees to gather up scattered, single grains and the heaps of dust that had once been flour. She scooped up the grains with her slender fingers and stuffed them into her mouth. Her feet were bare and wounded, with toenails as tough as an animal's claws.³²

In addition, kind-hearted Cornspike also moved towards the pathetic and lonely Florentynka, whose husband and seven of her nine children had died, while the two children left had deserted her. Her head often ached, and she couldn't sleep at night. She often shook her fist at the moon

²⁸Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 176-177.

²⁹Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 18.

³⁰Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 17.

³¹Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 18.

³²Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 30.

and shouted at the moon. Cornspike went to Florentynka and comforted her with her dream and told her that the moon hoped she could forgive him. Convinced by Cornspike's dream, Florentynka forgave the moon. Florentynka became the mother of Cornspike and became the grandmother of Cornspike's daughter Ruta. They often went to see Florentynka and took food to her.³³

4.2.2 Moving against people

Although Cornspike was poor, she was clever enough to see through other people's bad schemes. Mrs. Popielska, the squire's wife, didn't want Cornspike to stay in Primeval; she told Cornspike she ran a shelter in Jeszkotle and distributed food and clothing before the harvest. "People don't want you here. You bring confusion and depravity. You are a loose woman you should go away from here" Cornspike fought against her bravely and said, "Aren't I free to be where I want?"³⁴

When the carpenters whistled at her and when the Parish priest told her to keep away from Primeval and Jeszkotle, and his parishioners, she confronted contempt from those men by laughing, lifting her skirt and showing them her naked underbelly. This was her way of fighting against those men who despised her.

Although Cornspike was poor her whole life, she didn't want her daughter to marry Ukleja, a rich but rude and violent man. She knew her daughter would not be happy marrying Ukleja.

4.2.3 Moving away from people

Although she couldn't find warmth and comfort from the human world, she could find companionship in the natural world, which healed her and helped her to be herself. She didn't have to cater to others' needs and lived an independent life.

While Cornspike was rejected by the people in Primeval, she didn't lose heart and chose to live in the forest. She desired freedom and envied the hare, fish and lizard. In Cornspike's cottage in Wydy-macz, she lived with a snake, an owl, and a kite. Cornspike became close to the snake and named him Goldie. "Goldie would wait for her on every path, wherever she went, following her every move. During the day she let him lie on her bed. She carried him round her neck like a silver chain".³⁵

Cornspike seemed to be integrated into the nature through the depiction of her having sex with the masterwort plant which grew in front of her cottage. She could get along well with both animals and plants in the nature. Nature comforted her wounded heart. As Maciej Karasinski noted, "In Primeval, Cornspike acts as a fairy and the soothsayer of the community, who translates reality with the help of magic and dreams. She is an outcast with psychic prowess and deep

³³Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 100-101.

³⁴Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 19-20.

³⁵Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 62-63.

insight into the problems of the village".³⁶ Cornspike also found comfort and love in her dream; she dreamed of a large woman, and from the bottom of her heart she enjoyed the woman's touch and caresses. The large woman took Cornspike in her arms and cuddled her to her breast.³⁷

Because of her capability to be flexible in applying the three strategies to deal with her anxiety, Cornspike managed to cope with her hunger, protect herself from insults, and get healed by nature.

Conclusion

The main characters Cornspike, Misia and Paweł in Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* suffer from anxieties caused by their social-cultural environments as well as their family circumstances. Their psychological anxiety shares qualities with Karen Horney's theory of anxiety. These main figures in the play have respectively resorted to one or more strategies to deal with their anxiety.

Misia and Paweł have respectively chosen one strategy as their only measure to relieve their anxiety. Paweł, in his pursuit of career success and power, shows his tendency of moving against people by despising his own parents, his sisters and almost everything in his parental house, as well as being unfaithful to Misia after he had career success. When his pursuit of love towards Misia was hindered by his father-in-law, he cunningly catered to his mother-in-law and Misia's needs. Before his success in his career, he seemed to be a diligent and caring husband. However, after attaining success, he revealed his real self, being harsh to his family members and whoring with other women. He moved against the people around him because he thought himself to be more important and superior to others. Finally, Paweł became a lonely man without any family members around him. Misia, growing up in an environment lacking warmth and disadvantaged by a male-dominated society, employed the strategy of moving towards people to pursue affection and approval. Being too obedient and dependent on her aggressive husband, she ended up dying filled with grief and regret.

Cornspike was the only person who conquered her anxiety. Because of her capability to flexibly apply the three strategies to deal with her anxiety, she coped with her hunger, protected herself from insults, and was healed by nature. She has wisely maintained her balance by adjusting the three strategies to certain situations. She applied the strategy of moving towards people when she was threatened with death by hunger; she applied the strategy of moving against people when she was insulted by other people; she applied the strategy of moving away from people when she was rejected by the human world and finally healed by nature. Her flexible use of the three strategies helped her to effectively maintain a healthy and complete personality as well as to avoid herself being hurt in a world of war and abuse.

By analyzing these three characters using Horney's anxiety theory, this paper shows how their anxieties are actually the product of their family background and social-cultural environment. It also demonstrates that only through the flexible application of Horney's three strategies for coping with anxiety can the characters maintain personal independence and security, and free themselves from their anxiety.

³⁶Karasinski, "Mapping the Contours of Spiritual Oppression," 185.

³⁷Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 24.

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KEYWORDS

Horney's anxiety theory

Primeval and Other Times

ABSTRACT:

Interpreting literature from a psychoanalytic point of view has been popular, yet little research has touched upon Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Based on Karen Horney's anxiety theory, this paper analyzes the three main characters Cornspike, Misia and Paweł and their personalities in *Primeval and Other Times*. Through analyzing the manifestations and causes of the characters' anxieties, their defensive strategies against anxieties, as well as the consequences of their struggles, this paper reveals that social and cultural environments have influenced the characters and endangered anxieties in them. Furthermore, only by flexibly applying defensive strategies can one effectively fight against such anxieties. This paper not only deals with literary values in interpreting Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times*, but also has practical significance in arousing people's awareness about building harmonious familial and social relationships.

defensive strategies

OLGA TOKARCZUK

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