

Psychoanalytic Reading of Desire for Freedom in Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun*

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 30 June 2025 Approved 05 July 2025 Published 31 July 2025 Keywords: Desire, Imaginary, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Real, Symbolic	This study explores the psychological impact of Japan's post-World War II defeat as depicted in Osamu Dazai's <i>The Setting Sun</i> (1956), using Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine characters' desires for freedom and identity reconstruction. Set against the collapse of traditional Japanese values and aristocracy, the novel reflects a society in transition from feudalism to industrial modernity. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method, focusing on close textual analysis to identify expressions of desire and internal conflict among the characters, particularly Kazuko and Naoji. Drawing on Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the study investigates how language, social structures, and unconscious forces shape subjectivity. Data were categorized using an inventorying table, enabling thematic interpretation of the characters' struggles with love, loss, autonomy, and societal expectation. Findings suggest that the characters' fragmented identities mirror Japan's cultural disorientation, highlighting how personal freedom becomes entangled with national trauma. This research offers insight into the ways literature can reflect and dramatize psychological crises, illustrating how postwar literature serves as both a cultural artifact and a means of exploring the human condition under historical rupture.

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How to cite (in APA style):

Saputra, K. R. & Anam, Z. (2025). Psychoanalytic Reading of Desire for Freedom in Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun*. *Rainbow : Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Culture Studies*, 14, 240-247. <https://doi.org/10.15294/rainbow.v14i.30056>.

INTRODUCTION

World war II had an enormous impact on Japanese society. Resulting to a cultural shift upon this fallen nation and switching from feudalism into industrialism. Japan had never suffered a major defeat before World War II. However, the war had lasting effects on

Japanese culture and traditions. The defeat and subsequent occupation by foreign powers had a profound impact on the Japanese psyche and their sense of national identity (Hulse, 1947). This predicament can be reflected through various Japanese literature, which influenced many

Japanese authors, establishing literary works with the themes of Japan deterioration (Hurley, 2008). One of the remembered Japanese novelist Osamu Dazai evoked the postwar despair in Japan through the novel, *The Setting Sun* (Brown, 1976).

Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun* (originally titled *Shayo*) is a postwar Japanese novel translated into English by Donald Keene in 1956. The story is set in the aftermath of World War II and reflects the societal collapse and existential uncertainty that Japan experienced during this time. The narrative follows Kazuko, a middle-aged woman and the novel's narrator, her mother, and her brother Naoji, all members of a declining

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p-ISSN: 2252-6323

e-ISSN: 2721-4540

aristocratic family. Their wealth has disappeared, their home has fallen into decay, and they struggle to find a new place in a society undergoing rapid transformation. Through the portrayal of this family, Dazai illustrates Japan's postwar identity crisis and the psychological consequences of social and cultural upheaval.

Kazuko, Naoji, and Mother each come from a declining aristocratic background, and their desire for freedom arises from how they respond to this collapse. Kazuko rejects traditional female roles and seeks emotional and ideological liberation through unmarried motherhood, calling it her "moral revolution." Naoji, burdened by class shame and inner conflict, turns to addiction and ultimately suicide as his only escape. Mother, unable to adapt to the new world, longs for peace in death, seeing it as release from a life she no longer understands. Each seeks freedom in a way shaped by the loss of status, identity, and stability.

The concept of desire plays a central role in interpreting *The Setting Sun* within a psychoanalytic framework. Neely (1974) critically examines the relationship between human freedom and desire using a simplified belief-desire model of human conduct. Neely argues that freedom is not simply the ability to do what one wants, since desires can themselves enslave us—particularly when they are irresistible, conflicting, or not truly representative of the self. Andrade et al. (2008), identifies desire as a conscious state, distinguishing it from underlying neural mechanisms of reward and from physiological drug withdrawal symptoms. Desire is a complex mixture of images, thoughts, and expectations combined with positive and negative emotions, whereas Webster (2004), speculates why desire might be considered as problematic, which is the relation of will and desire. Will can be seen as 'intention', the mental occurrence that leads us into action. Willed action is intentional, rather than accidental, action. Now, not all desires lead to action, but this is not a major concern, as our will – as intention – is something we often also fail to fulfil. Intentions are often abandoned, or even restrained.

Other studies employing Lacanian psychoanalysis support the utility of this approach. Septiyani et al. (2019), in analyzing the novel *Lolita*, Psychology studies mental processes—both normal and abnormal—and their influence on

behavior. Within this field, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory emphasizes desire and developmental phases. This research analyzes the character Humbert in *Lolita* through Lacanian theory, using a descriptive qualitative method focused on narrative and dialogue. The study identifies 17 desires—10 categorized as "desire to have" and 7 as "desire to be"—alongside 10 developmental phases: 3 Real, 3 Imaginary, and 4 Symbolic. Humbert's recurring desires for *Lolita* reveal a psychological progression shaped by both longing and identity formation. Similarly, Tampubolon & Arianto reveals how the protagonist's desire for perfection emerges from a lack rooted in the Real—specifically, the absence of an idealized mother figure and the burden of financial hardship. This lack fuels an Imaginary identification with an ideal self, leading the subject to believe happiness lies in external validation, such as laughter. Ultimately, the subject attempts to fulfill this desire through destructive acts, symbolizing a distorted satisfaction within the Symbolic order. Kasimbara (2020) provides a research by analyzing the story *Dengar Keluhan Pohon Mangga*, in which, the mango tree (the Indonesian nation) is in lack of condition. So that there is a desire to gain recognition for its existence as a subject. Taherifard's presents a Lacanian-feminist reading of Marsha Norman's 'Night, Mother', focusing on identity formation through the contrast between Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic Orders. Jessie is interpreted as embodying the Symbolic Order, while Thelma represents the Imaginary. The analysis emphasizes the Death Drive as a central force in Jessie's psyche, with Thelma functioning as the Other and the father figure occupying the maternal role—reflecting a reversal of traditional gender positions in Lacanian theory.

Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun* illustrates the power of Lacanian psychoanalysis in uncovering the psychological state of postwar crises. The characters' respective quests for love, autonomy, and purpose reflect the larger disintegration of Japan and the individual's need or desire. *The Setting Sun* becomes an object to understand how literature can dramatize the fundamental structures of the psyche. The novel thus stands not only as a cultural artifact of postwar Japan but also as a profound narrative of desire,

loss, and the human condition. Therefore, the Objectives of the current study are to explain the specific behaviors that are shown in the novel relating to desire for freedom and to explore the characters' desire for freedom is viewed in Lacan's theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses the concept of desire using Lacanian psychoanalysis perspective as its main theoretical framework. According to Stavrakakis (2021), The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is generally recognized as the most important and original post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorist. Conscious of the irreducible link between identity and difference, ego-formation and alienation and registering the linguistic and cultural turns in the social sciences, Lacan will advance an anti-humanist understanding of subjectivity stressing the dependence of the lacking subject on imaginary lures and symbolic structures. (Stavrakakis, 2021).

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, as discussed by De Battista (2017), In neurosis, desire is shaped through fantasy, which helps sustain it. The Name-of-the-Father links desire to law—especially the taboo against incest—and organizes the psyche around the mother's desire. This creates a structure where fantasy interprets and stabilizes desire. It provides a way to understand how the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary can be linked together, even without relying on the Name-of-the-Father.

The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

plays a pivotal role in Lacanian theory. (Geng, 2023). Lacan's idea of the three registers, as interpreted by Qazi (2025), the Imaginary is the realm of identification and illusion. It begins with the Mirror Stage, where the child misrecognizes itself in the mirror image, creating a fantasy of wholeness. The Symbolic is the order of language, law, and social structure. Entry into this order occurs with the acquisition of language and the Name-of-the-Father, which introduces loss and desire by separating the subject from the mother. The Real is what resists symbolization entirely. It is not the reality we experience but what cannot be articulated in language—what eludes both the Imaginary and Symbolic.

Lacanian psychoanalysis views subjectivity as fundamentally shaped by lack, language, and symbolic structures. Desire is sustained through fantasy and organized by the law, while identity forms through misrecognition in the Imaginary. The Symbolic introduces separation and meaning through language, and the Real marks what cannot be symbolized. Together, these three registers structure the divided self.

METHODS

The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore characters' desire for freedom in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II as portrayed in Osamu Dazai's "The Setting Sun." It emphasizes textual analysis over statistical methods, using words, phrases, and narrative elements from the novel as primary data, supported by journal articles and relevant literature as secondary sources. The research is grounded in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to interpret the characters' psychological states and behaviors that are associated to desire for freedom.

The research process involved a close reading of the novel to identify key themes, followed by note-taking and data collection. The collected data were then categorized based on the characters' expressions of desire. Through interpretation and description, the data were analyzed using Lacanian theory, focusing on how personal and societal trauma influences character development. The analysis ultimately aims to uncover how the novel reflects the psychological impact of Japan's wartime defeat on individual identity and freedom..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Behaviors of Desire for Freedom

1. *Ambition for Love*

The behaviour relating to the desire for freedom is shown in the novel through Kazuko's ambition for her love. The narrator (Kazuko) asked about how she wishes to have a child and to be the mistress of Mr. Uehara, who already has a wife and a child. "Oh, my ambition is to become your mistress and the mother of your child." (Dazai, 1956, p.97). According to Lacan (1956) in *Fetishism: The*

Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, this is categorized as The Imaginary order. Lacan argues that in the sexual plane the Imaginary appears as sexual display and courtship. (Lacan & Granoff, 1956).

So, the behavior of Kazuko towards Mr Uehara can be considered as imaginary order since the fantasy of becoming Uehara's mistress and bearing his child reflects an identification with an image of sexual display and courtship.

2. *Desire to Live an Extravagant Life*

The behaviour relating to the desire for freedom is shown in the novel through Desire to live an impractical life. The mother expresses her wish to live an impractical life, so Kazuko does not need to do hard labouring work. "Kazuko, we'll sell our clothes. We'll sell our clothes one after another and use the money just as we please, for whatever useless things we feel like. Let's live extravagantly. I don't want to let you work in the fields any more. Let's buy our vegetables even if they are expensive. It's unreasonable to expect you to spend every day working like a farmer." (Dazai, 1956, p.49).

According to Lacan as discussed by Teng (2024), this is categorized as The Symbolic order. In the Symbolic phase, the subject enters the realm of language and culture, shifting from visual to linguistic self-identification. Language shapes the subject's identity and role in family and society. During the symbolic stage, the subject's desires and sense of self are shaped by the Big Other, which represents social structures, cultural norms, patriarchy, and the system of language.

Therefore, the mother's behavior can be considered part of the Symbolic order, as her desire to live an extravagant life is shaped by social structures. Despite their financial constraints, she holds into culturally constructed ideals of freedom and former aristocratic comfort. Her statement to Kazuko, her daughter, also reflects this symbolic framework—she does not want Kazuko to engage in hard labor, as it contradicts the identity they once held within a privileged social class. (Teng, 2024).

3. *Freedom from Aristocratic Status*

The behaviour relating to the desire for freedom is shown in the novel through Freedom

from aristocratic status. Naoji said this when he had been drinking to Kazuko, Naoji rejected aristocratic dissemblance and expressed contempt for artificial social behaviors, seeking authenticity over status.

"Just because a person has a title doesn't make him an aristocrat. Some people are great aristocrats who have no other title than the one that nature has bestowed on them, and others like us, who have nothing but titles, are closer to being pariahs than aristocrats." (Dazai, 1956, p.4).

According to Lacan theory, as discussed by Driver (2017) this is categorized as The Symbolic order. The symbolic order includes all the language rules and labels passed down over time, but it's an imperfect way to express our true identity and desires. (Driver, 2017). So, the behavior of Naoji about his view on aristocratic status can be considered as imaginary order since Naoji sees titles as part of a flawed Symbolic system—they don't express real identity or value. His desire to escape this structure aligns with Lacan's idea that the Symbolic is incomplete, always leaving out something essential. Naoji longs for a more authentic self—one that isn't shaped by inherited words or roles, but by something more natural or real.

4. *Suicide*

The behaviour relating to the desire for freedom is shown in the novel through Naoji took his own life. The evidence was said by the Narrator (Kazuko) in the last sentence of chapter six 'Outbreak of Hostilities.' Naoji, overwhelmed by the pressure of circumstances (humiliation for being in an aristocratic status, unable to gain an income, and his alcohol addiction that drives him into more depression), led him to suicide. "That morning my brother Naoji committed suicide." (Dazai, 1956, p.151).

According to Lacanian theory of discourse (1994), this is categorized as The Real order. The Real, when excluded from symbolic understanding, returns in two ways: either as chaotic and destructive forces that defy meaning, or disguised within the structures of language. The death drive reflects a fundamental tension in which life turns against the self-image. In this view, the ego—formed through fixed, idealized images—is not a source of vitality but rather a frozen

representation that disrupts the natural flow of life. (Žižek, 1994, p.46-73).

Therefore, the decision of Naoji can be considered as the Real order since:

- He is trapped by the Symbolic order (aristocratic expectations, social norms).
- He cannot sustain the Imaginary image of himself as noble, strong, or dignified.
- And so, what returns is the Real: a raw, unspeakable despair that language and roles can no longer contain.

His suicide is the final result of the collapse of both Imaginary and Symbolic support, where the Real rushes in as unbearable suffering. It's not simply that he chooses death; it's that death is the only way to end the impossible contradiction between what he feels and what the world allows him to be.

5. *Freedom of Dependency*

The behaviour relating to the desire for freedom is shown in the novel through Freedom of dependence. This quotation is said by Naoji in his final letter before suicide (Testaments). Naoji refuses to profit from others or become financially dependent, even at the cost of survival. "It was in particular intolerably painful and repugnant to be entertained with money gained by another person's own efforts." (Dazai, 1956, p.159).

According to Lacan, as discussed by Acke and Meganck (2024), this is categorized as symbolic order. Every person must enter language to become a subject, but doing so means giving up part of themselves—because language, or the "Other," is foreign and always leaves a sense of lack. By joining the Symbolic order (the world of language and rules), they accept a specific identity shaped by it. However, even within this structure, they still have some freedom: they can choose which words or meanings (signifiers) define them—or refuse them. (Acke & Meganck, 2024). Therefore, the behavior of Naoji's reluctant to be dependent can be considered as symbolic order since he as the subject must constitute himself within the Symbolic order, accepting a position in language and society that inevitably alienates them. By choosing the signifier of "dignity through independence," Naoji aligns himself with a socially inscribed ideal rooted in

aristocratic pride, even as this position causes him to suffer.

The Characters' Desire for Freedom is Viewed in Lacan's Theory

1. *Why Kazuko's Ambition for Love is Categorized as The Imaginary Order*

Kazuko's passionate declaration of love and her aspiration to become Mr. Uehara's mistress can be understood through the lens of Lacanian theory as an expression rooted in the Imaginary order. According to Lacan, the Imaginary is the domain of images, identification, and fantasy. It is where the subject constructs an idealized image of themselves in relation to another. In *Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real* (1956), Lacan and Granoff describe the Imaginary in the context of sexual relations as manifesting in courtship, display, and idealized fantasies of union. "Oh, my ambition is to become your mistress and the mother of your child." (Dazai, 1956, p.97).

Her statement reflects this Imaginary identification. She does not pursue a socially legitimized bond (such as marriage), but rather imagines herself as the object of love and desire, constructing a fantasy of completeness through union with Uehara. Her desire is not guided by societal Symbolic norms (which she openly rejects), but by a deeply personal image of love as salvation.

This Imaginary structure is also supported by her confession: "The rainbow in my breast is a bridge of flames... Not even the craving of a narcotics addict when his drugs run out can be as painful as this." (Dazai, 1956, p.96). This metaphor dramatizes the intensity of her fantasy and attachment, anchoring her desire in an image of love that gives her life meaning, even as it deviates toward self-destruction.

2. *Why the Mother's Desire to Live an Extravagant Life is Categorized as The Symbolic Order*

Kazuko's mother's wish to "live extravagantly" despite their declining financial situation illustrates a deeper psychological resistance to the symbolic collapse of their class status.

"Kazuko, we'll sell our clothes. We'll sell our clothes one after another and use the money just

as we please, for whatever useless things we feel like. Let's live extravagantly. I don't want to let you work in the fields any more. Let's buy our vegetables even if they are expensive. It's unreasonable to expect you to spend every day working like a farmer." (Dazai, 1956, p.49).

As elaborated by Teng (2024), the Symbolic order shapes subjectivity through the influence of the "Big Other" — the set of cultural norms, expectations, and authority that define what one should be. Here, the mother's rejection of Kazuko's labor and her desire to maintain certain comforts express an allegiance to the Symbolic framework of prewar aristocracy. Even though their material reality has deteriorated, her identity remains bound by these social signifiers, indicating how Symbolic identification can persist despite changing conditions.

3. *Why Naoji's Freedom from Aristocratic Status is Categorized as The Symbolic Order*

Naoji's commentary on aristocratic identity reflects his deep disillusionment with the Symbolic order as defined by Lacanian theory. "Just because a person has a title doesn't make him an aristocrat. Some people are great aristocrats who have no other title than the one that nature has bestowed on them, and others like us, who have nothing but titles, are closer to being pariahs than aristocrats." (Dazai, 1956, p.4).

Through Lacan's lens, particularly as explained by Driver (2017), the Symbolic order structures human identity through language, names, titles, and societal norms. But this system is incomplete — it doesn't fully capture individual subjectivity or desire. Naoji recognizes this: the inherited label "aristocrat" no longer carries real meaning, especially in postwar Japan. Instead, it functions as an empty signifier — a title disconnected from value or substance. Rather than embracing this Symbolic identity, Naoji longs to escape it. His desire for freedom is aimed at living authentically, beyond the imposed labels and social rituals that he sees as false. "Most of what passes for the aristocracy might actually better be called 'High-Class Beggars.'" (Dazai, 1956, p.4). This reflects not only a critique of class but also a psychoanalytic revolt against Symbolic roles that alienate the subject.

4. *Why Naoji's Suicide is Categorized as The Real Order*

Naoji's suicide in *The Setting Sun* illustrates a form of desire for freedom that aligns with The Real order, as explained by Žižek, in the Lacanian theory of discourse (1994). According to this theory, The Real emerges when what cannot be integrated into symbolic meaning returns as something unbearable or destructive. It is what resists symbolization — and when both the Imaginary (ideal self-image) and Symbolic (social norms, language) collapse, the Real appears as trauma or death. Kazuko reports, "That morning my brother Naoji committed suicide." (Dazai, 1956, p.151).

According to the theory, Naoji is:

- Trapped in the Symbolic: Bound by societal expectations (his role as a failed aristocrat, son, man).
- Unable to sustain the Imaginary: He cannot uphold a stable image of himself as strong, noble, or worthy — the ego's idealized image collapses.
- Thus, The Real returns: His suffering — addiction, shame, and loss of identity — becomes inexpressible, beyond language or social repair.

This is confirmed in his suicide notes, "I cannot think of the slightest reason why I should have to go on living... It is painful for the plant which is myself to live in the atmosphere and light of this world... I am wanting." (Dazai, 1956, p.153).

And also confesses, "Life is too dreary to endure. The misery, loneliness, crampedness—they're heartbreaking." (Dazai, 1956, p.150). These statements show that Naoji's final act is not symbolic communication, but an encounter with the Real as pure loss and rupture — beyond what language, family, or roles can contain.

5. *Why Naoji's Freedom Dependency is Categorized as The Symbolic Order*

Naoji's refusal to rely on others financially, even when it leads to suffering, reflects a desire for freedom that aligns with the Symbolic order, as explained in Lacanian theory by Acke and Meganck (2024). According to them, becoming a subject requires entering the Symbolic order—the realm of language, social structures, and meaning. This process always involves a loss: the subject

must give up part of themselves to take on a socially defined position. However, within this structure, individuals have limited freedom—they can choose or reject particular signifiers that define them.

In his testament, Naoji writes, “It was in particular intolerably painful and repugnant to be entertained with money gained by another person’s own efforts.” (Dazai, 1956, p.159). This statement shows Naoji’s refusal to identify with the signifiers of dependence or passivity. Instead, he chooses to define himself through a symbolic position tied to “dignity through independence,” a value inherited from aristocratic culture. His suffering stems from the tension between this symbolic identity and the reality of his impoverishment. Even when survival requires accepting help, he rejects it, because doing so would mean surrendering the symbolic signifier he has chosen to represent himself.

Further in the letter, he says, “Even when I went drinking with Mr. Uehara, I always paid my share... not out of pride... but being paid for by other people was somehow disturbing.” (Dazai, 1956, p.159). This reinforces the idea that his refusal is not based on ego or arrogance, but on a deep symbolic commitment to a particular identity—one that maintains separation from dependency and humiliation. His decision shows that, while language and identity limit him, he exercises freedom by refusing certain meanings and roles imposed by others.

CONCLUSION

The *Setting Sun* shows how each character’s desire for freedom is shaped by the psychological structures in Lacanian theory. Kazuko expresses her longing through fantasy and love, which falls under the Imaginary order. Mother’s wish to maintain an elegant lifestyle despite poverty reflects her attachment to the Symbolic order, shaped by past social norms. Naoji struggles the most—his rejection of aristocratic labels and financial dependence reflects disillusionment with the Symbolic, and his suicide represents a collapse into the Real, where pain and despair go beyond language or social identity. Each character reveals how freedom is not just a personal wish, but a

response to the loss of status and meaning in postwar Japan.

In conclusion, *The Setting Sun* uses its characters to explore how personal freedom is shaped—and limited—by deeper psychological and social structures. Using Lacan’s theory helps reveal how fantasy, language, and trauma guide the characters’ behavior. The novel reflects Japan’s cultural breakdown after World War II and shows how individual struggles mirror larger national changes. It presents freedom not as something easily achieved, but as a complex and painful search for identity in a world where old meanings no longer hold.

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