



# **"The Burden of Inheritance: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Family and Power in The Godfather"**

**Sanjay Nithesh.A,**

MA English,  
Department of English,  
PSG College of arts and science,  
Coimbatore.

**Dr. E. Sukumar,**

Assistant professor of English,  
Department of English,  
PSG College of Arts and Science,  
Coimbatore.

## **Abstract**

This article delves into the psychoanalytic exploration in Mario Puzo's "The Godfather". The study examines the psychological structures that underpin character motivations, family dynamics, and moral transformations within the Corleone crime empire. The research investigates the themes of repression, authority through the lens of Freudian and Lacanian theory and the Oedipal complex as they manifest in the novel's central figure of Michael Corleone. By tracing Michael's psychological evolution from detached war hero to calculation patriarch the work reveals how unconscious drives and symbolic inheritances shape the narrative of power and identity. The paper further investigates the roles of fatherhood, masculinity, and moral duality, suggesting that the Corleone saga dramatizes the internal conflicts of the modern self-caught between personal desire and inherited obligation. In doing so, this study not only situates The Godfather within the

canon of American literature but also contributes to broader conversations about the intersection of crime, family, and the psyche.

**Keywords:** Family dynamics, psychological evolution, masculinity, fatherhood.

## Introduction:

Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* has traditionally been celebrated as a classic tale of organized crime, tracing the dynamics of power, loyalty, and family inheritance. Although frequently studied in terms of political theory, sociology, or genre analysis, the novel's unconscious undercurrents are a fertile if neglected field of study. Here, we provide psychoanalytic analysis of *The Godfather*, tracing the unconscious impulses, symbolic patterns, and internal strife that inform the psychological evolution of the novel's central character, Michael Corleone.

Taking Freudian and Lacanian approach, the paper examines how Oedipal complex, paternal authority and suppressed desires are entwined in Michael's evolution from reluctant outsider to authoritative patriarch. The Corleone family is examined as a closed symbolic system where masculinity, identity duty. Michael's character trajectory comes to reveal, in this perspective, not a simple succession story, but a psychological drama that discloses the price of becoming the father – emotionally, ethically, and symbolically.

By placing *The Godfather* in the psychoanalytic tradition, this article adds to current scholarship by bringing to the foreground the novel's preoccupation with the unconscious aspects of power, family, and identity. It argues that Puzo's text operates as much as a critique of American capitalism and criminality as it is a meditation upon the psychological dynamics that support patriarchal institutions and subjectivity itself.

## The Power Dynamics of The Godfather:

Power in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* is both a force that exists externally and one that exists in the mind. Within the Corleone family itself, power is rooted in tradition, in loyalty, and in inherited roles. It is sustained rather than exercised purely in terms of violence or as a manipulable strategy. It is sustained in deeply ingrained familial hierarchies and unspoken duties. At the centre of all this is Don Vito Corleone, whose authority is both functional and symbolic – he is the symbol of the patriarchal figurehead, eliciting deference through respect fear, and emotional domination.

Michael's transition to this world of power is accompanied by a profound psychological transformation. As a character outside the family business, Michael symbolized a possibility of the beyond crime and familial obligation. Yet as the family is attached and his father is almost killed, Michael becomes enticed to accept a role previously rejected. Freudian psychoanalysis sees this transition as a struggle with the figure of the father and symbolic assumption of his patriarchal position. For Lacan, Michael's initiation into the "Symbolic Order," that world of language, law, and identity, is achieved through internalizing the position of the father and acceptance of the codes of the family.

As Michael takes over, his approach grows increasingly cold and calculating, in contrast to his dad, who marries emotion and control, Michael disengages on the emotional level, ruling by fear and strategic elimination. This signals a change in the dynamics of power in the Corleone family – away from one rooted in individual loyalty and bargaining and toward one built upon structure and surveillance and secret keeping. Michael's rule is absolute, yet it comes at the expense of humanity, showing how power can alienate even as it ascends.

Thus, the power dynamics in *The Godfather* are then less about controlling others and more about the psychological roll of becoming a patriarchal authority figure. Through the book, we see how we both enforce and are victimized by the system of power we were born into, and how we are moulded painfully often into the roles that we are expected to inhabit.

## **Loyalty:**

In *The Godfather*, loyalty is not simply a moral or cultural principle, but also a psychological principle that ties individuals to the symbolic system of the family. In the world of Corleone, it is both the coin of survival and the basis of strength – but also a point of internal struggle. Psychoanalytically, loyalty is closely associated with the superego, which is force that represses individual in favour of duty and belonging.

Character like Tom Hagen, Clemenza, and even Kay Adams are drawn to the gravitational pull of the family, where loyalty is a psychological surrender. Michael Corleone, especially, is trapped between individual agency and inherited requirement of absolute respect and loyalty to the family. His eventual conversion to Don is less a strategic choice, though, and more a symbolic acceptance of that requirement—one that involves emotional repression and disengagement from those who challenge the authority of the family.

Betrayals, by individuals like Cario Rizzi and Salvatore Tessio, are not simply threats to the operation of the family, but fissures in the psychological order of the family that require violent remedy in order to regain balance. Through loyalty, then, *The Godfather* depicts it both as necessary and destructive – a two-edged force that shores up identity and strength while also demanding silence, sacrifice, and surrender.

### Legacy:

In *The Godfather*, familial legacy is not simply the passing of wealth, name, or social standing – it is a deeply rooted psychological system that controls the behaviour, identity, and emotional growth of each character, especially the sons of Don Vito Corleone. The family exists as a symbolic order, one that enforces strict hierarchies of loyalty, masculinity, and authority. Under this system, legacy is both birth right and psychic inheritance, structuring the lives of the Corleone children well in advance of their becoming consciously aware of their roles. From a psychoanalytic perspective, familial legacy in the novel can be considered a realization of the superego—a system of internalized laws and expectations derived from the paternal figure, which operates to repress individual autonomy in favour of family continuity and order.

Don Vito embodies and represents the origin of this legacy. He is both the patriarch in a functional sense and the symbolic hub of moral and emotional authority in the family. His actions, decisions, and morals establish the behavioural model for his children. But the legacy that he is passing on is full of contradictions: it calls for loyalty yet disciplines emotional openness, provides protection yet demands violence, promises unity yet enforces silence and

repression. It is particularly onerous for Michael Corleone, whose trajectory embodies the psychological conflict between inherited duty and individual freedom. Placed early on as the son capable of escaping the family's criminal sphere, Michael tries to build a different kind of identity beyond the patriarchal one, that of state service and moral rectitude. But the attempted assassination of his father triggers a return to the family nexus, one which is as psychological as it is tactical.

Michael's later acceptance of the Don's role marks more than a change of authority, it is the internalizing of the father's identity and the acquiescence to preordained destiny. His actions show a deepening dedication to the family tradition, but for a price: he grows distant in his emotions, ethically ambiguous, and increasingly alone. According to a Lacanian view, Michael's transition to the Symbolic Order—the world of law, language,



and social status-begins through the taking of the father's position. In doing this, he loses access to the Imaginary, the world of desire and emotional unity. The family tradition thus acts as a structuring force which requires coherence and identity, yet also necessitates the repression of individuality and feeling.

This legacy also finds expression in other characters, in varying psychological effects: Fredo Corleone, the middle brother, feels the burden of this inheritance, unable to live up to his father and brother's expectations. Being unable to possess the qualities implied in the family-strength, guile authority-fosters deep-seated feelings of inferiority, leading to betrayal and death. Connie also finds herself between traditional feminine roles in the family and a wish for independence, feeling the psychological strain of symbol of honour in the family and victim of the inflexibility of that system.

In the end, The Godfather portrays familial heritage as a potent yet perilous inheritance. It orders identity, gives societal meaning, and preserves continuity-but it also imposes strict gender roles, stifles individual need, and perpetuates violence and emotional repression.

Psychoanalytically, this heritage does not appear as a blessing, but rather as psychological baggage transmitted from father to son, generation trying the self to a role that provides certainty at the cost of inner autonomy.

### **Psycho Analysis:**

This article has illustrated how, through a psychoanalytic perspective, The Godfather is elevated above the status of a crime novel to emerge as a complex exploration of power, identity, and the psychological burden of inheritance. Through the application of Freudian and Lacanian theories, the analysis revealed the unconscious forces that propel the characters-most notably Michael Corleone – and the underlying symbolic arrangements that constitute the Corleone family's internal dynamics.

At the heart of this analysis is the recognition that Michael's transformation is less a strategic climb to power and more a psychologically charged journey into the symbolic position of the father. His slow movement away from the outsider and to the centre of family authority is a submission to the demands of the superego and the repression of individual desire in favour of inherited duty. The family burden, though idealized and necessary, comes at a deep emotional price. It required silence, the repression of vulnerability, and the internalization of violence as a means of perpetuating order. In Michael's trajectory, The Godfather portrays the cost of playing a role both culturally sanctified and psychologically suffocating.

In addition, loyalty and betrayal are reframed here as symptoms of underlying structural conflicts in the psychoanalytic reading. Loyalty functions as a binding force of the symbolic family system, which requires conformity and sacrifice, and betrayal announces rapture in danger of destroying not only the family's hierarchy, but the very consistency of the family's identity. Punishment of disloyalty, often abrupt and absolute, functions as a psychological restoration of balance by affirming the patriarchal order.

### Conclusion:

The Godfather as a psychological study of power, identity, and family legacy. Using Freudian and Lacanian theory, it shows Michael Corleone's rise as a symbolic surrender to the father's role, driven by repression and obligation rather than ambition. The emotional toll of this legacy includes isolation, suppression of vulnerability, and internalized violence. Loyalty and betrayal are interpreted as symptoms of deeper structural tensions within the family system, with disloyalty treated as a threat to identity and order. Ultimately, the film critiques the cost of upholding a patriarchal legacy through emotional sacrifice and psychological constraint.

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