

Overcoming Inferiority Feelings in Michael Gracey's Movie the Greatest Showman (2017): An Individual Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

This study analyzes the theme of overcoming feelings of inferiority in the film *The Greatest Showman* (2017), directed by Michael Gracey, through the lens of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. The research aims to identify indicators of the characters' feelings of inferiority, describe how these feelings are portrayed in the film, and explain why Michael Gracey addresses them in the narrative. Using literary studies, the study examines key scenes, character interactions, and musical performances to explore the psychological dimensions of marginalization and self-acceptance. The findings indicate that feelings of inferiority are portrayed through shame, low self-esteem, fear of social rejection, and sensitivity to public judgment, particularly among circus performers. This study concludes that feelings of inferiority play a central role in the film "*The Greatest Showman*" (2017), directed by Michael Gracey. The film depicts various indicators of feelings of inferiority, including shame, low self-esteem, fear of rejection, and sensitivity to social judgment, particularly among circus performers. These feelings arise from physical differences, social discrimination, and negative societal labeling. The study concludes that the film portrays feelings of inferiority not as a permanent weakness but as a driving force for psychological growth. Ultimately, *The Greatest Showman* delivers a message of resilience, self-acceptance, and the importance of community in overcoming feelings of inadequacy.

Keywords: Inferiority Feelings, Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler, Film Analysis, *The Greatest Showman*.

Introduction

Film is not only a form of entertainment but also a medium that reflects social realities and psychological phenomena. Through characterization, dialogue, and visual representation, films often portray various human struggles, including issues related to identity, discrimination, and self-worth. One psychological concept frequently reflected in cinematic narratives is feelings of inferiority, a condition in which individuals perceive themselves as inadequate, unworthy, or socially inferior compared to others.

Inferiority feelings refer to a mental condition where a person views themselves as inadequate, less competent, or inferior in comparison to others. Inferiority feelings refer to an individual's perception of being less worthy or lacking value, often accompanied by the belief that

others are more valuable, leading to subjective comparisons with others (Izzah et al., 2024). An inferiority complex is a condition in which an individual feels less than others. This arises from ongoing causes and effects of repeated events, leading the person to continually experience feelings of inferiority compared to others (Linus & Santyaputri, 2021). According to Adler, someone who isn't very attractive can still gain friends and love by being truly kind and caring. The feeling of being less than others can become a serious problem when a person feels too inadequate, leading them to feel down and unable to grow or improve (Ewen, 2003). This psychological phenomenon often leads to low self-esteem, overcompensation, or even isolation. Popular media, particularly film, serve as powerful vehicles for reflecting these inner struggles, bringing them closer to public understanding. In *Theories of Personality* (6th ed.), Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology is summarized into six major principles that constitute its final theoretical formulation: feelings of inferiority, fictional finalism, social interest, style of life, creative power, and striving for superiority or success (Feist, 2006)

The film *The Greatest Showman* has been the subject of several previous studies with different methods and focuses. According to the author, several previous studies have examined it from a sociological perspective. The study by F. A. Nugroho and Nurhidayat (2024) examine the concept of mutual respect behavior in *The Greatest Showman* (2017), a motion picture directed by Michael Gracey. (Yarni, 2019) used a semiotic analysis model to interpret the denotative meanings of signs in visual and verbal forms. (Choir Ilzya Novia Maunathul, 2023) used the psychological journey of the main character, P.T. Barnum, analyzed through Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs theory. From the third study mentioned in the research on the film *The Greatest Showman*, none of them have discussed the psychological perspective, so this study will examine this further.

Another study by M. L. Nugroho & Widiyanti (2023) applied the sociology of literature approach, combined with empowerment theory, to disability characters. (Wahana & Johan, 2021) used a sociological approach to examine social class dissimilarity in American society in the film *The Greatest Showman*. (Imani, 2019) employed a sociological approach combined with film analysis, which could be considered a method for examining how social norms and values of hard work are expressed in *The Greatest Showman*. (Daifullah, 2022) combines sociological and cinematic analysis to explore character-based discrimination in *The Greatest Showman* movie. Several previous researchers have also examined the film using Marxist theory. (Smith & Wisyaningrum, 2021) employed Marxist theory to analyze the discrimination and social class faced by the characters in *The Greatest Showman*. (Mei et al., 2022) applied Marxist analysis to examine class struggle as a response to the various forms of alienation experienced by the characters in *The Greatest Showman*. This research complements the author's previous research, particularly regarding differences in social class discrimination and disability.

A powerful depiction of this issue is presented in Michael Gracey's movie *The Greatest Showman*. This musical drama not only centers on the main character, P.T. Barnum, who battles with deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy due to his humble background and desire for societal recognition, but it also highlights the emotional journey of his circus performers, many of whom experience feelings of inferiority due to their physical differences or social exclusion. Characters like Lettie Lutz (the bearded lady), Charles Stratton (General Tom Thumb), and others are ridiculed or rejected by society, reinforcing their perception of inferiority. Gracey's directorial

intent was to challenge social norms and celebrate individuality, providing a narrative that transforms perceived “oddities” into symbols of pride and uniqueness.

Although *The Greatest Showman* has attracted academic interest in music, cinematography, and biographical storytelling, few studies have analyzed it from a psychological perspective, specifically through Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. Most existing studies emphasize its artistic and social themes while neglecting the characters' inner struggles with low self-esteem. Limited attention has also been paid to their personal growth and psychological resilience. From this gap, researchers conclude that there is a need for focused research that explores the film's depiction of mental health from an individual psychological perspective.

This study examines the theme of inferiority in Michael Gracey's film, *The Greatest Showman* (2017). The film depicts marginalized circus performers struggling with social rejection, discrimination, and self-esteem issues. Based on these concerns, this study is guided by three main questions: What are the indicators of inferiority in the film? How are feelings of inferiority depicted in the movie? And why are feelings of inferiority addressed in the movie? In line with these questions, the purpose of this study is to identify indicators of the characters' feelings of inferiority, describe how these feelings are depicted throughout the narrative, and explain why Michael Gracey emphasizes them in the film. By analyzing these aspects, this study aims to reveal how the film reflects the psychological struggles associated with feelings of inferiority and how the film's director conveys messages about self-acceptance, identity, and belonging.

Method

This research is a literary study using a psychological literary-critical approach, particularly drawing on Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. This research focuses on the psychological aspects of the characters in *The Greatest Showman* (2017), directed by Michael Gracey. This study does not involve numerical data or statistical analysis; rather, it emphasizes the interpretation of the film's characters, behavior, dialogue, lyrical soundtrack, and visual storytelling. The primary data source of this study is the film *The Greatest Showman* (2017) directed by Michael Gracey. The secondary data the author uses as a data source to interpret and analyze primary data from Google Scholar, articles, journals, and books. This study uses a document analysis method, drawing on the psychological literature, focusing on Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology as a theoretical framework. The data author collected included note-taking, image capture, and audio cutting. This study uses a hermeneutic approach to analyze how feelings of inferiority are represented by director Michael Gracey. The main objective is to explore how feelings of inferiority are depicted and the reasons why inferiority is addressed in Michael Gracey's movie *The Greatest Showman*. By applying a psychological framework to cinematic works, this study aims to reveal how psychological theories can deepen our understanding of character formation and thematic expression in movies.

Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, the author presents the analysis's findings on the feelings of inferiority experienced by the characters in *The Greatest Showman*. The analysis is based on Alfred Adler's concept of inferiority feelings, which arise from social rejection, physical differences, and low

self-worth. The results show that the characters frequently experience feelings of inferiority due to discrimination and marginalization in society.

Findings

Indicators of Inferiority Feelings

According to Adler's (Feist, 2006) theory, inferiority feelings are a state where a person feels less than others because they feel weak. Adler suggests that feelings of psychological and social weakness have always been part of human experience. Based on the analysis, several indicators of inferiority feelings are evident in the character's portrayal in *The Greatest Showman*. These indicators are reflected through their emotions, behavior, dialogue, and interactions with society. The indicator of inferiority feelings in *The Greatest Showman* is the character's shame over their physical appearance and social status. This happened in Lettie Lutz (the bearded lady). In the scene, P.T. Barnum is looking for a unique person for his circus on his daughter's advice, who says his circus lacks living things because the museum initially contained only inanimate objects or statues. While distributing flyers on the street, P.T. Barnum heard someone singing with a beautiful tone. P.T. Barnum then looked for the source of the sound, which turned out to be the home kitchen. He broke in and found the female singer who was covering her body with a white cloth. She covered her body because she felt embarrassed by the hair growing on her beard.

(Scene 00:22:55-00:23:40)



Figure 1. Lettie Lutz hides her face

- P.T Barnum : “Who is doing that singing? It’s you, Isn’t?”
Lettie Lutz : “Sir, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”
P.T Barnum : “You are so talented, blessed, extraordinary, unique. I would even say beautiful”
Lettie Lutz : “Sir, please leave me alone.”
P.T Barnum : “They don’t understand it, but they will.”

Another indicator of inferiority feeling happened in Charles Stratton, known on stage as Tom Thumb, is depicted as originating from his physical condition and society’s perception of his difference. As a person with dwarfism, Charles initially appears shy, insecure, and hesitant to present himself in public. His feelings of inferiority are reflected in his quiet demeanor, lowered gaze, and limited self-confidence before joining the circus. The scene of Charles Shartton's encounter with P.T. Barnum occurred when Barnum was looking for people with unique physical characteristics to be featured in his circus show. When Barnum arrived and offered him the

opportunity to perform on stage, Charles hesitated and remained quiet, lacking confidence. His serious, downcast expression conveyed a sense of inferiority. However, Barnum then built up his confidence by calling him a "General Tom Thumb" and giving him a noble costume.

(Scene 00:21:23-00:22:19)



Figure 2. P.T. Barnum offers him the opportunity to perform in the circus.

P.T Barnum : "Hey what's your name?"

Charles : "Charles."

P.T Barnum : "P.T Barnum. At your service. I'm putting together a show and I need a star"

Charles : "You want people to laugh at me?"

P.T Barnum : "Well, they are laughing anyway, kid. So, might as well get paid. They'll salute"

Depiction of Inferiority Feeling

Inferiority feelings in *The Greatest Showman* are depicted through cinematic elements such as character behavior, dialogue, body language, music, and social interactions. These elements illustrate how the characters perceive themselves as inferior due to physical differences. Firstly, inferiority feelings are depicted through body language and facial expressions. The circus characters often appear hesitant, anxious, and insecure when facing the public. The author found a scene in a movie in which several circus performers hesitate to step forward and avoid eye contact with the audience. Their stiff posture and nervous expressions reflected a lack of self-confidence and a sense of inferiority.

(Scene 00:26:44-00:26:53)

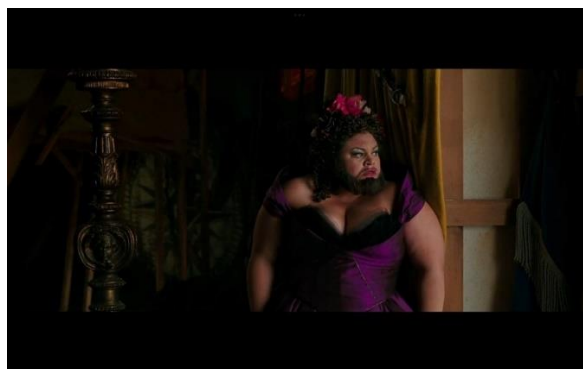


Figure 3. Lettice Lutz anxious when facing the public

P.T Barnum : "Lettie. They are waiting."

Lettie Lutz : "For what?"

P.T Barnum : "For you."

Lettie Lutz : "No."

P.T. Barnum : "They don't know it yet, but they are going to love you. Trust me."

The compensatory mechanism demonstrated by Lettie Lutz can be understood as a gradual psychological process, in line with Alfred Adler's concept of compensation. In the initial stages, Lettie experiences inferiority stemming from the social stigma surrounding her physical appearance as a bearded woman. She not only faces external rejection but also internalizes this negative perception, leading to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and a tendency to withdraw from the public sphere. During this phase, feelings of inferiority remain passive and repressive, as they have not been accompanied by active efforts to overcome them.

Change begins when Lettie enters the circus provided by Barnum. The stage becomes the initial medium for the emergence of compensatory mechanisms. On stage, Lettie is no longer positioned as an object of ridicule but as a subject possessing value and appeal. This performance allows her to reinterpret her previously perceived shortcomings, so that her physical features, once considered "flaws," become sources of uniqueness. In this context, compensation operates through performative expression, where individuals use their abilities and characteristics to mask and transform the meaning of their inferiority. In other words, the stage serves as a symbolic space for constructing a new, more positive identity.

However, Lettie's compensation doesn't stop at the performance level. The process becomes more powerful when she gains social recognition from the audience and the circus community. Positive responses, such as appreciation and acceptance, play a crucial role in shifting her self-perception from a sense of unworthiness to a sense of feeling valued. This social recognition reinforces the results of the compensation that began on stage, providing external legitimacy to the new identity she is constructing. In the musical scene "This Is Me," for example, Lettie explicitly affirms her self-acceptance and rejects the standards of normalcy that have oppressed her. This scene demonstrates that compensation has evolved from a mere adaptive strategy to a conscious and open form of self-affirmation.

The songs "Come Alive" and "This Is Me" in the film *The Greatest Showman* reflected the feelings of inferiority experienced by circus performers before they fully accept themselves. In the opening scene, the performers appear hesitant, unsure of themselves and their worth. Their body language, downcast heads, stiff movements, and hesitant expressions demonstrate a lack of confidence. This behavior suggests they have internalized society's negative judgments about their physical differences and social status.

The lyrics of "Come Alive" and "This Is Me" reinforce this psychological state. The lines describing hiding in the shadows and being afraid to shine symbolize the characters' suppressed identities. The striving for excellence or achievement serves as a compensatory mechanism for individuals experiencing inferiority or weakness. According to Adler (Feist, 2006), humans enter the world in a state of physical inadequacy and dependence. These inherent limitations give rise

to feelings of inferiority, as individuals are naturally driven toward self-improvement and psychological wholeness.

However, as the song progresses, the mood changes. Under P.T. Barnum's encouragement, the performers begin to express themselves freely through dance and performance. Their movements become more energetic and confident, symbolizing the transition from feelings of inferiority to empowerment. In Adlerian terms, this transformation reflects a process of compensation and a striving for superiority, in which individuals attempt to overcome feelings of inadequacy by developing their talents and affirming their self-worth. Thus, "Come Alive" depicts feelings of inferiority not only as a state of self-doubt but also as a starting point for self-discovery and psychological growth. The song represents the moment when the performers begin to move from insignificance and shame to confidence and self-acceptance.

(Lyrics song "Come Alive")

I see it in your eyes.
You believe that lie.
That you need to hide your face.
Afraid to step outside.
So, you lock the door.
But don't you stay that way.

No more living in those shadows.
You and me know how that goes.

(Lyrics song "This Is Me")

I am not a stranger to the dark
Hide away, they say
Cause we don't want your broken parts
I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars
Run away, they say
No one'll love you as you are
But I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious
When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send the flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised

I am who I'm meant to be, this is me

The author found inferiority feelings also depicted through dialogue that shows self-doubt and awareness of social rejection. In the scene, the performers are rejected by society. The performers are labeled “freaks” by society and critics alike. The dialogue emphasizes their awareness of being inferior. That’s negative labels influence how they see themselves, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and shame. The crowd yells mean things, shows signs of disagreement, and throws things at the performers. Society refuses to accept them due to their different looks and strange appearance. In this scene, characters like Lettie Lutz (the bearded lady), Charles Stratton (Tom Thumb), and other performers are clearly upset by the hostility. Their faces show they are feeling hurt, angry, and ashamed. Some of them look down, and others seem worried and ready to defend themselves. This public labeling shows they are aware of being treated as outsiders in society. The word "freaks" is a powerful symbol of society's disdain for people. It shows how society decides what is considered normal and pushes people aside if they don't meet those standards. According to Adler's theory, being rejected by others makes people feel worse about themselves because they start comparing themselves to those who are more accepted in society and end up feeling they aren't good enough.

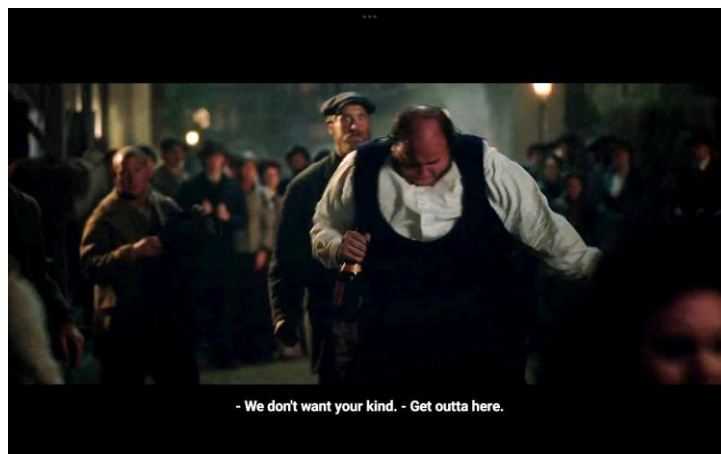


Figure 4. The protesters shout insult to circus performers

(*Scene 00:28:50-00:28:55*)

- The Protesters : “You are going to protect the bearded lady?”
P.T Barnum : “Hey, that’s enough. Inside all of you! Right now.”
The Protesters : “We don’t want your kind here. Get out of here”
The Protesters : “That’s right, you freak. Your master is calling”
P.T Barnum : “That’s enough, sir.

Reason of Addressing Inferiority Feelings

Michael Gracey, the director of the film “The Greatest Showman,” was born on January 6, 1976, in Melbourne, Australia. Before becoming a feature film director, Gracey built his career in visual effects, commercial directing, and creative visual projects. Gracey gained international recognition through The Greatest Showman. As a director is known for blending theatrical

performance with modern cinematic techniques, particularly through musical sequences that express characters' psychological development.

In several promoting *The Greatest Showman*, Michael Gracey explained that the film was never intended to be a strict historical biography of P.T Barnum. Instead, he described it as a modern story about identity, ambition, and belonging. Gracey wants the audience to feel emotional truth rather than historical accuracy. Gracey also discussed why he chose the musical format. Songs such as "This Is Me" and "Come Alive" were designed to represent moments of transformation, where the characters move from insecurity to empowerment. He explained that these musical numbers serve as a psychological turning point, showing the performers' internal growth. Gracey has stated several times that the film's primary goal is to provide hope and encouragement. She wants viewers to feel inspired to accept their shortcomings and see them as part of their unique personality. Therefore, the film's theme of inferiority is deliberately constructed as a starting point for empowerment.



Figure 5. Interview from Michael Gracey about *The Greatest Showman*

(Scene 00:06:36-00:07:10)

"I think a film like this reminds you that your differences make you special. That being unique is a wonderful thing, and it's something that you should"

Discussion

The findings reveal that inferiority feelings in *The Greatest Showman* (2017), directed by Michael Gracey, are not merely individual emotional reactions but are socially constructed through discrimination, rejection, and marginalization. According to Adler's Individual Psychology, feelings of inferiority arise from perceived weaknesses, whether physical, social, or psychological. In the film, these weaknesses are represented through the circus performers' physical differences.

The indicators identified in the Results section, such as shame, low self-confidence, fear of rejection, and sensitivity to criticism, demonstrate Adler's concept of inferiority feelings as a universal human condition. However, in the case of the circus characters, these feelings are intensified by external labeling, particularly when they are called "freaks." Social stigma reinforces their perception of being abnormal and inferior. This aligns with Adler's idea that inferiority develops not only from physical limitations but also from social comparison and environmental influences.

Furthermore, the depiction of inferiority feelings through songs such as "Come Alive" and "This Is Me" illustrates the psychological transformation from weakness to empowerment. Initially, the characters hide their identities and internalize society's negative judgments. However, as the narrative progresses, they begin to reinterpret their differences as strengths. This shift reflects Adler's concepts of compensation and striving for superiority, in which individuals attempt to overcome perceived deficiencies by developing abilities and seeking achievement. The stage becomes a symbolic space where the performers reconstruct their self-image and gain recognition.

Moreover, the character of Charles Stratton (Tom Thumb) exemplifies how feelings of inferiority can serve as a source of motivation. Initially described as insecure and doubtful, he gradually gains confidence after receiving validation and a new identity on stage. His transformation supports Adler's view that inferiority is not inherently negative; rather, it can stimulate growth when accompanied by encouragement and social support.

Overall, the film advances a coherent psychological argument: feelings of inferiority, though painful, can catalyze development when met with encouragement, opportunity, and community. By dramatizing the shift from shame to self-acceptance, *The Greatest Showman* affirms Adler's proposition that the drive toward wholeness underlies human behavior. Overcoming inferiority, therefore, is portrayed as both a personal and social achievement, an integration of self-worth, contribution, and belonging.

Conclusion

This study concludes that feelings of inferiority play a central role in the film "The Greatest Showman" (2017), directed by Michael Gracey. The film depicts various indicators of feelings of inferiority, including shame, low self-esteem, fear of rejection, and sensitivity to social judgment, particularly among circus performers. These feelings arise from physical differences, social discrimination, and negative societal labeling.

The depiction of feelings of inferiority is presented through character behavior, dialogue, conflict scenes, and musical performances such as "Come Alive" and "This Is Me." The film visually and emotionally depicts how marginalized individuals internalize societal standards of normality and struggle with self-esteem. However, feelings of inferiority are not portrayed as a permanent weakness. Instead, they serve as a driving force that drives the characters to strive for recognition and self-acceptance.

From an Adlerian perspective, these characters demonstrate a process of compensation and a struggle for superiority. Their transformation from shame and insecurity to confidence and solidarity reflects Adler's idea that humans naturally seek growth and wholeness. The circus becomes a symbolic space where social rejection is transformed into empowerment. In conclusion, *The Greatest Showman* conveys that feelings of inferiority, while painful, can lead to psychological growth when supported by acceptance, community, and creative self-expression. Ultimately, the film promotes the message of embracing differences, challenging social stereotypes, and affirming human dignity.

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