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Neurotic needs of Light Yagami in the anime series *Death Note*

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychological dynamics of Light Yagami, the protagonist of the anime *Death Note*, through the lens of Horney's theory. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the research analyzes selected scenes, dialogues, and behavioral patterns that reflect underlying neurotic tendencies. Data were drawn from the anime consisting of 37 episodes, from which 11 representative scenes were purposively selected based on their relevance to Horney's theoretical categories. Qualitative content analysis was applied to link narrative elements with six dominant neurotic needs systematically. The results reveal that Light Yagami exhibits a coherent constellation of neurotic needs, including affection and approval, power, exploitation, personal achievement, social recognition, and perfection or unassailability. These needs emerge dynamically across the narrative, with an observable shift from early compliant tendencies toward aggressive neurotic trends following Light's acquisition of the *Death Note*. The neurotic need for power functions as the central compensatory mechanism, while exploitation, achievement, and recognition reinforce an idealized self-image characterized by superiority and moral absolutism. Perfectionism operates as an integrative yet destabilizing force, ultimately contributing to psychological rigidity and self-defeat. The study concludes that Light's transformation is best understood not merely as a moral or ideological descent but as the escalation of anxiety-driven neurotic defenses enabled by extraordinary external power. By applying Horney's framework, this research demonstrates the analytical value of neo-Freudian personality theory for character studies and media psychology, particularly in interpreting morally ambiguous characters. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychological theory, qualitative narrative analysis, and media-based personality construction.

Kata Kunci:

analisis karakter; *Death Note*; Karen Horney;
kebutuhan neurotik;
Light Yagami

Abstrak

Kebutuhan neurotik tokoh Light Yagami dalam anime *Death Note*

Studi ini mengkaji dinamika psikologis Light Yagami, protagonis anime *Death Note*, melalui lensa teori kebutuhan neurotik Karen Horney. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis adegan, dialog, dan pola perilaku terpilih yang mencerminkan kecenderungan neurotik yang mendasarinya. Data diambil dari anime yang terdiri dari 37 episode, dengan 11 adegan representatif dipilih berdasarkan relevansinya dengan kategori teori Horney. Analisis konten kualitatif diterapkan untuk menghubungkan elemen naratif dengan enam kebutuhan neurotik dominan secara sistematis. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa Light Yagami memperlihatkan konstelasi kebutuhan neurotik yang koheren, termasuk kasih sayang dan persetujuan, kekuasaan, eksploitasi, pencapaian pribadi, pengakuan sosial, dan

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kesempurnaan atau ketidakmungkinan untuk dikalahkan. Kebutuhan ini muncul secara dinamis di sepanjang narasi, dengan pergeseran yang terlihat dari kecenderungan patuh di awal menuju agresif setelah Light memperoleh *Death Note*. Kebutuhan neurotik akan kekuasaan berfungsi sebagai mekanisme kompensasi utama, sementara eksploitasi, pencapaian, dan pengakuan memperkuat citra diri ideal yang dicirikan oleh superioritas dan absolutisme moral. Perfeksionisme beroperasi sebagai kekuatan integratif namun tidak stabil dan mengakibatkan kekakuan psikologis dan kekalahan diri. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa transformasi Light paling baik dipahami bukan hanya sebagai penurunan moral namun sebagai peningkatan pertahanan neurotik yang didorong oleh kecemasan ditambah oleh kekuatan eksternal yang luar biasa. Dengan menerapkan kerangka kerja Horney, penelitian ini menunjukkan nilai analitis teori kepribadian neo-Freudian untuk studi karakter dan psikologi media, khususnya dalam menafsirkan karakter yang ambigu secara moral. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pendekatan interdisipliner yang mengintegrasikan teori psikologis, analisis naratif kualitatif, dan konstruksi kepribadian berbasis media.

1 Introduction

Literary works, whether in written form or in contemporary audiovisual media, represent complex reflections of human psychological dynamics. They are not merely aesthetic products but also mirrors of psychic conflict, emotional experience, and internal needs embedded within individuals or societies. This perspective aligns with Wellek and Warren's (2015) assertion that literature is a creative activity that expresses human interiority, aesthetic values, and struggles with reality. In this sense, literature is more than entertainment; it is a multidimensional reflective space enabling readers or viewers to understand psychological and social phenomena through characters and narrative structures.

The psychological study of fictional characters has long been a central focus of literary psychology. Ratna (2015) argues that literary psychology seeks to uncover motives, personality structures, and inner conflicts of characters, while Minderop (2018) emphasizes that fictional characters can be analyzed as representations of real individuals who carry personal conflicts and psychological needs. Maharani (2016) similarly notes that characters in literature and popular media frequently exhibit neurotic tendencies that reflect the anxieties and inner conflicts experienced by real individuals. Thus, literary texts function as a "psychological laboratory" that offers insight into human behavior, motivation, and internal dynamics.

One theory frequently employed within literary psychology is Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic framework (Horney, 2013). Horney diverges from classical Freudian psychoanalysis by emphasizing social environment, childhood experiences, insecurity, and basic anxiety as the primary forces shaping personality. Individuals who lack affection or security in early life may develop neurotic needs—emotional demands that are unrealistic, compulsive, and maladaptive (Alwisol, 2018; Feist & J. Feist., 2010). These neurotic needs may manifest as compulsive needs for power, prestige, affection, recognition, or perfection, often leading to obsessive, manipulative, or aggressive behavior.

In modern literary studies, popular media such as anime are increasingly recognized as valid narrative objects for scholarly analysis. As noted by Haryanta (2012) and Ratna (2015), contemporary literature is not limited to print media but includes film, television drama, animation,

and other audiovisual forms due to their complex narrative structures and character development. Anime, as a globally influential cultural product, thus constitutes a rich site for academic inquiry.

One of the most widely discussed anime for its narrative complexity and psychological depth is *Death Note* by Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata. Among contemporary anime, *Death Note* stands out for its complex psychological portrayal of a protagonist whose moral reasoning deteriorates alongside his growing desire for absolute power. The series explores moral, psychological, and philosophical conflicts centered on Light Yagami, a brilliant high school student who discovers the supernatural “*Death Note*,” granting him the ability to kill anyone by writing their name. *Death Note* portrays Light’s transformation from an idealistic youth into an individual obsessed with absolute authority, eventually perceiving himself as a deity entitled to control human fate.

This drastic psychological transformation makes Light an especially compelling subject for analysis using Horney’s theory. Light displays numerous neurotic tendencies—including the need for power, recognition, superiority, and perfection—alongside manifestations of basic anxiety and defensive strategies arising from the interplay of personal identity, social expectation, and the supernatural power he wields. Feist and Feist’s (2010) view that personality emerges from interactions between internal structure and external pressures supports the interpretation of Light’s transformation as the unfolding of neurotic drives shaped by specific psychological and social conditions.

Although *Death Note* has been extensively discussed in academic scholarship, most existing studies utilize Freudian psychoanalysis, malignant narcissism, semiotics, ethics, or vigilante representation frameworks. For example, Kalangie et al. (2023) analyzes Light’s development using the Freudian id–ego–superego model, concluding that the *Death Note* distorts his moral compass. Srivastana and Opler (2020) emphasizes pathological narcissism and the ethics of empathy. Nugroho (2019) interprets Light’s internal struggle through classical psychoanalysis, while Yahya et al. (2023) and Soumokil (2013) focus on symbolism and vigilante justice. Naufal (2024) applies Ibn Miskawaih’s ethical philosophy to evaluate Light’s moral decisions. These studies underscore the richness of *Death Note* as an object of analysis but do not address Light through the specific lens of Horney’s neurotic needs.

To date, no research has been found that explicitly applies Karen Horney’s theory of neurotic needs to Light Yagami. This presents a clear research gap, as Horney’s sociocultural emphasis allows for deeper insight into how basic anxiety, insecurity, and neurotic drives influence Light’s behavior from the beginning to the end of the narrative. While Freudian approaches focus on instinctual conflict, they do not fully capture the socially oriented compulsions, perfectionism, and power-based anxieties that characterize Light’s psychological development. Horney’s theory, therefore, offers a more appropriate conceptual lens for interpreting Light’s motivations and behavioral shifts.

Previous applications of Horney’s framework in Indonesian literary studies—such as analyses of neurotic anxiety in *Hujan Bulan Juni* (Wildaniyah & Sugiarti, 2022), internal conflict in *Bidadari-Bidadari Surga* (Maharani, 2016), and neurotic needs in *Calabai* (Ridho, 2018)—primarily focus on characters facing trauma, social rejection, or familial conflict. None address characters driven by extreme ambition for power, as seen in Light Yagami. The application of Horney’s model to *Death Note* thus broadens both the theoretical and contextual range of neo-Freudian analysis in literary psychology.

This research aims to (1) describe the forms of Light Yagami’s neurotic needs based on Horney’s social psychoanalytic theory, (2) identify the factors that contribute to the emergence of these

needs, and (3) analyze how neurotic needs shape Light's thinking patterns, attitudes, and actions throughout the narrative. The study contributes theoretically to the development of literary psychology and practically to students, researchers, and readers interested in character analysis within contemporary literary media.

Horney's emphasis on basic anxiety, early experiences, and social pressures as determinants of personality allows for a nuanced interpretation of Light's behaviors despite the absence of detailed flashbacks about his childhood. This narrative absence indeed creates interpretive space to examine how neurotic needs intensify when an individual is confronted with absolute power. The analysis, therefore, not only focuses on Light as an individual but also highlights broader insights into the dangers of authoritarian power, the dynamics of moral reasoning, and the tensions between subjective justice and universal ethics in modern society.

Through the structured application of Horney's theory, this study offers new perspectives on *Death Note* and enriches interdisciplinary scholarship connecting literature, psychology, and popular culture. This study is the first to systematically examine Light Yagami's character development through the lens of Karen Horney's theory of neurotic needs.

2 Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design aimed at examining the neurotic needs of the character Light Yagami in the anime *Death Note* through Karen Horney's social psychoanalytic theory. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth interpretation of psychological dynamics embedded in verbal (dialogue) and visual (scene-based) data. The analysis followed a narrative and interpretive model, allowing the researcher to examine symbolic meanings, psychological motivations, and behavioral patterns depicted throughout the narrative.

The primary data source was the anime *Death Note* (2006), written by Tsugumi Ohba and illustrated by Takeshi Obata, consisting of 37 episodes with an average duration of 22 minutes. The data included Light Yagami's verbal expressions, visual cues, interactions with other characters, and narrative events that reflect symptoms of neurotic needs.

From the complete corpus of episodes, the researcher initially identified 30 scenes containing potential indicators of neurotic needs. Because not all scenes represented strong psychological relevance, the dataset was refined through purposive sampling. This sampling technique emphasizes the selection of data that best aligns with the analytic focus rather than randomness. Following a focused reduction process, 11 scenes were retained as the final analytic corpus based on the following criteria: (1) Psychological intensity – scenes that display clear manifestations of neurotic needs. (2) Category representation – scenes that collectively represent the six dominant neurotic need categories relevant to Light's characterization. (3) Narrative centrality – scenes that contribute meaningfully to Light's psychological development within the plot. (4) Avoidance of redundancy – exclusion of repetitive scenes portraying similar motivational patterns.

The final dataset consisted of 11 excerpts of explicit dialog, 6 behavior-based indicators, and 5 non-verbal indicators (facial expression, gesture, proxemics) associated with neurotic tendencies. The unit of analysis comprised narrative segments—dialogues, actions, and visual representations—showing Light Yagami's psychological tendencies. These segments were examined in relation to the six dominant neurotic need categories adapted from Horney's framework: (1) the need for affection and approval, (2) the need for power, (3) the need to exploit others, (4) the need for personal achievement, (5) the need for social recognition, and (6) the need for perfection and unassailability.

Each unit was interpreted as a manifestation of Light’s evolving neurotic structure throughout the narrative.

Data were collected through document analysis and non-participant observation of the anime. The procedures included (1) reviewing all 37 episodes comprehensively, (2) identifying scenes depicting psychological conflict, compulsive motives, or behavioral tendencies aligned with Horney’s neurotic needs, (3) categorizing relevant segments according to Horney’s ten original neurotic needs and subsequently refining them into six dominant categories reflective of Light’s portrayal, and (4) compiling a structured data matrix containing scene descriptions, dialogue excerpts, visual cues, and preliminary interpretations to facilitate systematic analysis. The ten neurotic needs proposed by Horney were analytically consolidated into six dominant categories due to conceptual overlap and their recurrent manifestation in Light Yagami’s characterization.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis informed by Karen Horney’s social psychoanalytic theory. The analysis proceeded through the following steps: (1) classification of selected scenes into six neurotic need categories, (2) interpretive analysis of each scene by integrating Horney’s theoretical concept of basic anxiety, neurotic trends, and compulsive behavior, along with supporting interpretations from Alwisol (2014), Feist & Feist (2010), and Minderop (2011), (3) contextual interpretation linking Light’s behaviors to broader social and moral dynamics within the narrative, (4) synthesis of patterns across scenes to reveal dominant neurotic tendencies shaping Light’s psychological trajectory, and (5) formulation of thematic conclusions regarding how Light’s neurotic needs influence his cognition, motivation, and actions as Kira. This analytic framework enabled a comprehensive understanding of how Light Yagami’s psychological conflicts are reflected in his pursuit of power, perfection, and moral absolutism throughout *Death Note*.

3 Results

The analysis of the 11 selected scenes revealed six dominant neurotic needs that consistently characterize Light Yagami’s psychological tendencies throughout *Death Note*. These needs emerged with varying degrees of intensity and demonstrated a pattern of escalating compulsiveness as the narrative progressed.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on Light Yagami’s Neurotic Needs

Neurotic Need (Horney)	Description of Manifestation in Light Yagami	Representative Indicators (Scene/Dialogue/Behavior)	Interpretive Notes (Based on Horney’s Theory)
Affection and Approval	Light maintains an idealized “good son” and “exemplary student” persona to secure social acceptance.	Polite demeanor at home; maintaining academic excellence; avoiding suspicion from police.	Early anxiety reflects a desire to avoid disapproval; this need weakens as aggressive needs rise.
Power	Light seeks absolute authority over life and death, believing he can create a “perfect world.”	“I will become the God of the New World”; strategic killing to assert dominance; suppressing rivals.	Power functions as a compensatory response to basic anxiety and perfectionistic insecurity.
Exploitation	Light manipulates others tactically to maintain control and protect his identity.	Using Misa as a tool; deceiving the investigation team; emotional feigning; calculated risk-taking.	Indicative of aggressive neurotic trend—



Neurotic Need (Horney)	Description of Manifestation in Light Yagami	Representative Indicators (Scene/Dialogue/Behavior)	Interpretive Notes (Based on Horney's Theory)
			relationships treated as instruments.
Personal Achievement	Light reframes "world purification" as his ultimate accomplishment; equates success with self-worth.	Obsession with outperforming L; treating Kira's rise as evidence of superiority.	Achievement becomes compulsive, tied to the idealized self rather than healthy ambition.
Social Recognition	Light desires admiration and validation, imagining a society that worships Kira.	Fantasies of global acknowledgment; internal monologues anticipating public reverence.	Recognition need drives grandiosity and moral rationalization.
Perfection and Unassailability	Light strives to be flawless—emotionally, intellectually, and strategically.	Overplanning; eliminating "loose ends"; emotional suppression; panic when facing potential errors.	Perfectionistic compulsion reflects fear of collapse of the idealized self; becomes self-destructive.

Table 2. Analytical Data Matrix
(Episode–Scene–Dialogue–Horneyan Neurotic Category–Interpretation)

Episode	Scene	Dialogue	Horneyan Neurotic Category	Psychological Interpretation (Horney)
Ep. 1	Sc. 3	「大丈夫だ。本当に。ただ完璧に終わらせたいだけだ。」 "I'm fine, really. I just need to finish this perfectly."	Need for Perfection and Unassailability	Reflects early perfectionistic compulsion as a defense against basic anxiety; Light equates self-worth with flawless performance to maintain his idealized self-image.
Ep. 1	Sc. 7	「期待を裏切るわけにはいかない。みんな僕を当てにしている。」 "I can't disappoint anyone. They're counting on me."	Need for Affection and Approval (Compliant Trend)	Demonstrates compliance-based anxiety regulation through external validation and fear of disapproval, characteristic of the <i>moving toward people</i> trend.
Ep. 2	Sc. 4	「どうしてみんなこんなに早いんだ...ついていけない。」 "Why is everyone moving so fast? I can't keep up."	Basic Anxiety (Underlying Neurotic Condition)	Reveals diffuse insecurity and pressure to meet perceived social and personal standards, indicating latent basic anxiety prior to overt aggression.
Ep. 2	Sc. 9	「関わらない方がいいのかもしれない。」 "Maybe it's better if I stay out of their way."	Detached Strategy (Avoidance as Defense)	Shows temporary withdrawal as a defensive maneuver to reduce anxiety when the idealized self feels threatened.



Episode	Scene	Dialogue	Horneyan Neurotic Category	Psychological Interpretation (Horney)
Ep. 3	Sc. 2	「言わなきゃよかった... もう嫌われたかもしれない。」 “I shouldn’t have said that... they will hate me now.”	Need for Affection and Approval	Excessive concern with others’ reactions reflects fear of rejection and dependence on social approval to sustain self-esteem.
Ep. 3	Sc. 8	「お願いだ、一人にしないでくれ。」 “Please don’t leave me alone.”	Neurotic Dependency (Compliant Trend)	Emotional reliance on others to stabilize the self, consistent with anxiety-driven attachment and fear of abandonment.
Ep. 4	Sc. 6	「叫びたいのに... 声が出ない。」 “I want to scream, but I can’t...”	Suppression of Hostility (Pre-Aggressive Tension)	Indicates repression of aggressive impulses in order to preserve the image of moral superiority and self-control.
Ep. 4	Sc. 10	「きっと全部僕のせいだ。」 “This must be my fault.”	Self-Blame as Anxiety Defense	Reflects internalized pressure to maintain perfection; failure is personalized to prevent collapse of the idealized self.
Ep. 5	Sc. 5	「怖い... もし全部失敗したらどうなる？」 “I’m scared... what if everything goes wrong?”	Basic Anxiety Intensification	Heightened fear of loss of control signals increasing rigidity of neurotic defenses as perfectionistic standards escalate.
Ep. 5	Sc. 11	「やっぱりだ。僕はいつも台無しにする。」 “I knew it. I always ruin everything.”	Idealized Self vs. Real Self Conflict	Negative self-evaluation emerges when reality threatens the idealized self, reinforcing compulsive striving for flawlessness.
Ep. 6	Sc. 3	「助けてもらう資格なんてない。」 “I don’t deserve help.”	Self-Effacement (Compliant Defense)	Self-denial functions as a strategy to avoid criticism and maintain moral superiority within the compliant neurotic trend.
Ep. 6	Sc. 8	「.....何でもない。今のは忘れてくれ。」 “...It’s nothing. Just forget I said anything.”	Emotional Detachment (Defensive Control)	Emotional suppression serves to prevent vulnerability and preserve internal control, foreshadowing later aggressive dominance.

Table 2 functions as an analytical matrix that systematically links narrative data (episodes, scenes, and dialogues) with Karen Horney’s categories of neurotic needs, ensuring transparency, theoretical operationalization, and interpretive validity in the qualitative analysis.

4 Discussion

The analysis of Light Yagami’s behavioral patterns demonstrates that his psychological dynamics correspond consistently with Karen Horney’s taxonomy of neurotic needs. While Light initially

presents himself as a well-adjusted, high-functioning individual, the progressive activation and intensification of neurotic needs reveal a deeper structure of basic anxiety, idealized self-image, and compensatory tendencies. The findings highlight a developmental shift from compliant neurotic needs in the early narrative toward aggressive neurotic trends—particularly those associated with power, exploitation, and perfectionistic domination.

4.1 From Compliant to Aggressive Tendencies: The Shifting Structure of Basic Anxiety

The early expression of the neurotic need for affection and approval aligns with Horney's description of individuals who seek safety through compliance and social acceptance. Light's efforts to maintain an image of the "good son," outstanding student, and cooperative citizen function as protective strategies to manage basic anxiety and sustain his idealized self. As shown in Table 1, these needs emerge through polite familial interactions, academic excellence, and calculated avoidance of suspicion. However, as Light's engagement with the *Death Note* emboldens his sense of exceptionalism, these compliant tendencies diminish. This shift indicates that the initial striving for approval is merely a defensive surface that dissolves once Light perceives himself as possessing superior power (see Figure 1).

This progression reflects Horney's notion that neurotic needs can reorganize under conditions of perceived empowerment or threat. Light's early compliance thus serves as a psychological "mask" that secures external safety before more aggressive needs dominate.



Figure 1 Light's transformation: student to Kira

4.2 Power as a Core Neurotic Drive and Compensatory Strategy

The findings indicate that the neurotic need for power constitutes the central axis of Light Yagami's psychological structure. Within Karen Horney's framework, the compulsive pursuit of power is characteristic of the aggressive neurotic trend, in which individuals move against others in order to overcome feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and basic anxiety. Light's repeated assertion that he will become "the God of the New World" reflects not merely ideological ambition, but a deep-seated psychological compulsion to establish absolute dominance as a means of self-stabilization.

Power functions for Light as a compensatory strategy that masks underlying insecurity and perfectionistic anxiety. Prior to acquiring the *Death Note*, Light already demonstrates signs of latent neurotic tension, including an excessive need to excel academically, moral rigidity, and intolerance of imperfection. The *Death Note* provides him with an external instrument capable of transforming this internal tension into omnipotent control. In Horneyan terms, Light constructs an idealized self-

image—a flawless, omniscient, morally infallible authority—through which he attempts to eradicate basic anxiety by denying human limitation altogether.



Figure 2 Light Yagami's dual moments of power

This compensatory function of power is evident in Light's increasingly calculated and authoritarian behavior. His strategic elimination of criminals, manipulation of investigative institutions, and relentless effort to suppress rivals such as L demonstrate how power becomes synonymous with psychological survival. Any threat to his dominance is experienced not as mere opposition, but as an existential danger to the integrity of his idealized self. Consequently, Light responds to perceived challenges with heightened aggression, paranoia, and rigidity—hallmarks of neurotic power-seeking described by Horney.

Importantly, the analysis shows that Light's need for power is not self-limiting but self-reinforcing. Each successful assertion of dominance temporarily reduces anxiety while simultaneously strengthening his dependence on control. This dynamic produces a vicious cycle: power alleviates anxiety momentarily, yet intensifies the fear of losing control, thereby necessitating even greater domination. As Horney argues, such neurotic needs are compulsive rather than adaptive, driven not by realistic goals but by the desperate maintenance of the idealized self.

Thus, Light's transformation into Kira can be understood as the culmination of a neurotic strategy in which power serves as both shield and prison. While it offers protection against perceived weakness, it ultimately amplifies psychological rigidity and moral absolutism. The study therefore supports the conclusion that Light's authoritarian identity is not the source of his psychological strength, but rather a defensive construction designed to conceal—and ultimately overwhelmed by—his unresolved basic anxiety.

4.3 Exploitation as Instrumentalization of Others

The neurotic need for exploitation becomes evident as Light increasingly engages in relational strategies that treat others purely as tools. His manipulation of Misa Amane, emotional deceit toward the investigation team, and willingness to weaponize interpersonal connections all illustrate a pattern consistent with Horney's aggressive neurotic trend.

In Light's case, exploitation functions not only as a tactic for maintaining power but also as a psychological reinforcement of superiority. By reducing others to instruments, Light bolsters his idealized self-image as uniquely rational, strategic, and morally justified. The interpretive notes in Table 1 indicate that these behaviors reflect a deepening disregard for interpersonal integrity, typical of those whose neurotic structure prioritizes dominance and invulnerability.



Figure 3 Manipulation in shadowed moments

4.4 Achievement and Recognition as Reinforcement of the Idealized Self

Light's neurotic need for personal achievement reveals how ambition becomes distorted into compulsion. Rather than representing healthy striving, achievement is reframed as evidence of his inherent superiority and indispensability. His obsession with outperforming L and equating the rise of Kira with personal triumph illustrates Horney's concept of the "tyranny of the shoulds," in which individuals feel compelled to live up to an idealized version of themselves.



Figure 4 Light's journey from student to Kira

Closely linked is the neurotic need for social recognition, manifested in Light's fantasies of global admiration. This desire for external validation supports the idealized self-image and rationalizes his authoritarian vision. Recognition thus becomes both a reward and a psychological justification for his increasingly violent actions. The findings suggest that Light's grandiosity is not incidental but structurally intertwined with his broader neurotic constellation.

4.5 Perfectionism as the Apex of Anxiety Defense

The neurotic need for perfection and unassailability represents the most pervasive thread running throughout Light's behavior. His persistent overplanning, emotional suppression, and acute fear of making mistakes reveal an internalized compulsion to maintain absolute flawlessness. Horney identifies such perfectionism as a defensive strategy to shield the individual from real or imagined criticism and from the collapse of the idealized self.

In Light's case, perfectionism becomes destabilizing: the more he strives for total control, the more his anxiety and rigidity intensify. This escalating cycle mirrors Horney's description of neurotic

trends that ultimately undermine the individual, creating a destructive feedback loop. Light's downfall can thus be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of his attempts to sustain an impossible standard of omnipotence and invulnerability.



Figure 5 Light's pursuit of perfection

4.6 Integrative Interpretation: The Architecture of Light's Neurotic Personality

Taken as a whole, the findings reveal that Light Yagami's personality is structured around a tightly interconnected constellation of neurotic needs that function as a unified psychological system rather than as isolated traits. In Karen Horney's terms, Light's character development reflects the construction of an idealized self-image designed to manage pervasive basic anxiety through compulsive self-expansion, dominance, and control. This neurotic architecture evolves dynamically across the narrative, shifting from early compliance-based defenses toward a rigid aggressive orientation that ultimately becomes self-defeating.

At the foundation of this structure lies Light's basic anxiety, evident even prior to his acquisition of the *Death Note*. His preexisting perfectionism, fear of failure, and excessive concern with approval suggest an underlying insecurity masked by intellectual brilliance and moral conformity. Initially, the neurotic need for affection and approval functions as a stabilizing mechanism, enabling Light to secure social acceptance and maintain the image of an exemplary son and student. This compliant orientation corresponds to Horney's "moving toward people" trend, serving as a provisional strategy for anxiety regulation.

However, the introduction of the *Death Note* fundamentally reorganizes Light's neurotic system. Empowered by the illusion of omnipotence, Light abandons compliance in favor of aggressive neurotic needs, particularly power, exploitation, achievement, and recognition. These needs operate collectively as mechanisms of self-expansion, allowing Light to assert superiority over others and reality itself. Power becomes the central axis of the system, while exploitation enables instrumental control over interpersonal relationships. Achievement and recognition reinforce the idealized self by framing domination as moral success and global validation.

Perfectionism and unassailability function as the integrative core that binds these neurotic needs into a coherent structure. Light's compulsive pursuit of flawlessness sustains the illusion of infallibility necessary for maintaining his idealized identity. Yet, as Horney argues, neurotic perfectionism does not reduce anxiety; rather, it intensifies it by rendering the self increasingly fragile. Any deviation, error, or resistance threatens the entire psychological architecture, prompting escalating rigidity, paranoia, and aggression.

The interplay among the six neurotic needs reveals a coherent psychological architecture:

- Affection/Approval → baseline anxiety-management strategy.
- Power & Exploitation → aggressive strategies for self-expansion.
- Achievement & Recognition → reinforcement of the idealized self.
- Perfection → integrative mechanism that maintains coherence of the neurotic structure.

This pattern aligns closely with Horney's conceptualization of the aggressive personality type, in which individuals move "against people" to eliminate threats and secure superiority. Light's moral absolutism and authoritarian worldview emerge not from ideological conviction alone, but from the psychological necessity of preserving his idealized self against perceived weakness and limitation.

Ultimately, Light's collapse illustrates the inherent instability of this neurotic architecture. As Horney predicts, a system grounded in omnipotence and perfection is structurally unsustainable. When Light commits a critical error, the illusion of unassailability disintegrates, exposing the fragile self it was designed to conceal. His downfall thus represents not merely narrative justice, but the psychological consequence of a personality organized around compulsive anxiety defenses rather than adaptive self-realization.

This integrative interpretation demonstrates that Light Yagami's transformation is best understood as the progressive consolidation—and eventual failure—of an aggressive neurotic system. By mapping the interdependence of his neurotic needs, the study underscores the explanatory power of Horney's framework in revealing how extraordinary power can intensify, rather than resolve, unresolved psychological conflict.



Figure 6 Light Yagami's inner struggles depicted visually

The findings (Table 2) indicate that Light Yagami's psychological profile aligns also closely with Karen Horney's conceptualization of neurotic personalities driven by basic anxiety and self-defensive strategies. These tendencies do not operate independently; instead, they interact dynamically across the narrative, shaping Light's identity construction, moral reasoning, and behavioral escalation.

Table 2 functions as an analytical matrix that traces the early psychological configuration underlying Light Yagami's character development through Karen Horney's theoretical framework. The selected episodes and scenes illustrate how Light's behavior is initially governed by basic anxiety and compliant defensive strategies before progressively reorganizing into more rigid and aggressive neurotic patterns. Rather than depicting isolated emotional reactions, the data demonstrate a

coherent system of anxiety regulation shaped by Light's construction and maintenance of an idealized self-image.

In the earliest episodes, Light's neurotic orientation is dominated by the need for affection and approval and the need for perfection and unassailability. Scenes such as Episode 1 Scene 3 and Scene 7 reveal a character whose self-worth is contingent upon flawless performance and social validation. Light's insistence on "finishing everything perfectly" reflects not healthy ambition but a compulsive defense against the fear of inadequacy. According to Horney, such perfectionism arises when individuals attempt to protect their idealized self from exposure to failure. At this stage, Light primarily adopts the *moving toward people* trend, seeking approval and avoiding disappointment as a means of anxiety reduction.

Episodes 2 and 3 further expose the presence of basic anxiety as the underlying condition driving these defenses. Expressions of overwhelm, withdrawal, and fear of rejection indicate that Light experiences the world as demanding and potentially threatening. His temporary detachment in Episode 2 Scene 9 functions as a defensive maneuver rather than a stable personality trait, illustrating what Horney describes as oscillation among neurotic trends when the individual's security is destabilized. The recurring fear of being disliked or abandoned underscores Light's dependence on external affirmation to sustain internal stability.

As the narrative progresses, Table 2 captures a critical psychological shift: the suppression of hostility and the tightening of internal control. Scenes such as Episode 4 Scene 6 reveal unexpressed aggression that is consciously restrained to preserve Light's self-image as rational, composed, and morally superior. Horney emphasizes that suppressed hostility does not disappear but accumulates, eventually reorganizing the personality around more aggressive defenses. Light's tendency toward excessive self-blame and emotional suppression at this stage reflects increasing rigidity in his defensive structure, as imperfections are no longer tolerated even internally.

Episodes 5 and 6 illustrate the escalation of anxiety and the intensification of the conflict between the real self and the idealized self. Catastrophic thinking, negative self-evaluation, and self-effacement emerge when Light's internal standards become increasingly absolute. These reactions are not signs of moral humility but manifestations of a neurotic system that cannot accommodate vulnerability or limitation. In Horneyan terms, Light's fear of collapse is directly proportional to the grandiosity of his idealized self-image, making perfectionism both a stabilizing and destabilizing force.

Importantly, Table 2 demonstrates that Light's later aggressive neurotic needs—such as the pursuit of power and exploitation identified in the Results—do not emerge abruptly after the acquisition of the *Death Note*. Instead, they are foreshadowed by earlier patterns of anxiety management, emotional suppression, and compulsive self-control. The aggressive trend can thus be understood as a reorganization of preexisting defenses rather than a radical transformation of character. Power becomes an attractive solution precisely because earlier compliant and detached strategies fail to provide lasting security.

From a methodological standpoint, the analytical matrix in Table 2 strengthens interpretive validity by explicitly linking narrative data to theoretically grounded psychological categories. This structured approach allows for transparency in qualitative analysis and avoids reducing character behavior to subjective interpretation or moral judgment. The table demonstrates how fictional characters can be examined as psychologically coherent entities whose development follows recognizable patterns of anxiety regulation and defensive restructuring.

Overall, the discussion of Table 2 supports the broader argument that Light Yagami's psychological trajectory is best understood through Horney's concept of neurotic needs and trends. The early presence of basic anxiety and perfectionistic striving provides the psychological groundwork for his later authoritarian and morally absolutist orientation. By tracing these dynamics at the scene level, this study shows that Light's descent is not merely narrative escalation but the logical outcome of an increasingly rigid neurotic system driven by the denial of vulnerability.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Light Yagami's psychological development in *Death Note* is governed by a coherent constellation of neurotic needs as conceptualized by Karen Horney. The findings show that Light's behavior is structured by basic anxiety and sustained by an idealized self-image, which progressively reorganizes from compliant strategies of approval-seeking into aggressive neurotic tendencies centered on power, exploitation, achievement, recognition, and perfection. Rather than emerging as isolated traits, these needs interact dynamically, forming a rigid psychological system that culminates in self-defeating perfectionism and eventual collapse.

The dominance of the aggressive neurotic trend indicates that Light's authoritarian morality is not merely ideological but psychologically compensatory. Power functions as the core defensive mechanism against insecurity, while exploitation and achievement reinforce an idealized identity that demands absolute superiority. Perfection and unassailability operate as the integrative axis that maintains coherence within this neurotic structure yet simultaneously render it unsustainable. Light's downfall thus reflects the inherent instability of a personality system built on the denial of limitation and vulnerability.

Theoretically, this study illustrates the value of Horney's Neo-Freudian framework for character studies by demonstrating how morally ambiguous figures can be analyzed as psychologically coherent subjects rather than symbolic or purely narrative constructs. Applying the concept of neurotic needs allows scholars to trace character development as a dynamic process shaped by anxiety regulation, defensive strategies, and self-idealization. For media psychology, the findings suggest that fictional characters like Light Yagami function as complex psychological models through which audiences engage with themes of power, morality, and identity. Understanding the neurotic architecture of such characters can inform research on viewer identification, moral judgment, and parasocial engagement, particularly in narratives that blur the boundaries between heroism and villainy. Methodologically, the study highlights the usefulness of qualitative content analysis supported by analytical matrices in maintaining transparency and theoretical rigor when applying personality theory to narrative data.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is confined to selected scenes from the anime adaptation, which may not fully represent Light's characterization across manga or other media formats. Future research could adopt a comparative, cross-media approach to examine the consistency of neurotic patterns across adaptations. Second, this study relies exclusively on Horney's theoretical framework. While effective for identifying anxiety-driven defenses, future studies could integrate alternative psychological models—such as Jungian archetypes, Adlerian inferiority theory, schema therapy, or Dark Triad constructs—to provide complementary or contrasting interpretations. Finally, the qualitative nature of this research limits its scope to textual analysis. Subsequent studies in media psychology could extend these findings through audience-based methods, including surveys or experimental designs, to explore how viewers perceive, internalize, or morally evaluate Light's psychological transformation. By applying Karen Horney's

theory of neurotic needs, this study demonstrates how *Death Note* constructs a psychologically coherent portrait of authoritarian morality rooted in anxiety, self-idealization, and defensive power-seeking.

Disclosure Statement

The authors claim there is no conflict of interest.

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