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The Shattered Reflection of the Human Psyche in Shakespeare's *King Richard II* and *King Lear*

The human mind has baffled humanity for centuries as it constitutes our very essence and is what uniquely separates us from other creatures. The Oxford dictionary defines it as the “seat of awareness, thought, volition, feeling, and memory...the mental faculty of a human being... constituting a person's character or individuality” (OED). Throughout history, many individuals, such as the famed Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, have attempted to understand the processes of the human mind. Though scientists, aimed to analyze and understand the human mind, many other individuals, such as the likes of William Shakespeare, aimed to capture the different facets of the human mind and its contents through their writing. For Shakespeare, his portrayal of both King Richard and King Lear are perhaps two of the most prominent displays of the human psyche throughout his plays. Through the use of his dramatic writing, Shakespeare depicts both of these characters as incredibly deep and complex; much like the human psyche itself. Therefore, by comparing the psyches of both King Richard and King Lear through a psychoanalytic lens, their character development throughout the play can be better understood, subsequently demonstrating how the human psyche, if left unchecked, can have a detrimental impact on one's life.

In order to properly analyze the psyche of both Richard and Lear, a brief explanation of the psychoanalytic theory – specifically the three divisions of behavioral psyche – must first be given. Freud initially founded psychoanalysis in the early 1890's with the intent of being able to

cure certain mental illness through means of bringing elements of one's unconscious thought, to their more conscious mental processes. Eventually, he began to develop his theory further and deduced that the human psyche is divided into three separate parts: the id, ego and superego. In his book entitled *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, Anthony Storr defines the id as "the oldest part of the mind from which the other structures are derived... the primitive, unorganized and emotional: the realm of the illogical" (Storr, 60). The impulsive nature of the id is often correlated to one's instincts and immediate gratification. The ego, on the other hand, is defined by Storr as "the part of the mind representing consciousness... that is, reason, common sense, and the power to delay immediate responses to external stimuli or to internal instinctive promptings" (Storr, 61). Freud argued that the ego works by reason as opposed to the id which is inherently chaotic and unreasonable. In his book entitled *The Ego and the Id*, Freud states that the ego actually a part of the id which "has been modified by the direct influence of the outside world" (Freud, 25). Freud's final division of the human psyche is the superego. Storr defines the superego as the part of the unconscious that watches the ego and "decides whether or not the ego has conformed to, or fell short of, the ego-ideal" (Storr, 63). This ego-ideal or self-idealization, prompts the psyche with thoughts such as "you ought to be like this" or the inverse, "you may not be like this" (Freud, 34). Freud also stated that the superego has the innate function of convincing the ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones and to strive for perfection. According to Freud, these are the three parts of the human psyche which all humans develop from an early age. Knowing how these three parts relate to the human psyche, one can now proceed to properly compare and analyze the psyches of Shakespeare's two tragic kings.

In Shakespeare's *King Richard II*, King Richard displays multiple instances in which his brashness and irrationality are made manifest. In Act II, scene 1, King Richard demonstrates his

first major act of irrational action as he selfishly and pridefully rebukes the advice given to him by the dying Gaunt. Before Richard arrived, Gaunt utters his hope that Richard would listen to him stating that “Though Richard my life’s counsel would not hear, my death’s sad tale may yet undeaf his ear” (*King Richard II*, II.i.16). Upon arriving at Gaunt’s bedside, Richard initially appears concerned with the health of his friend and mentor, yet upon hearing the blunt reality of his actions as king recited to him by Gaunt, his demeanor immediately changes. Gaunt expresses how Richard has ruled England as a landlord rather than a king. This, provokes Richard to lash out on Gaunt stating: “This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders!” (*King Richard II*, II.i.122-23). Later on, after hearing that Gaunt has in fact died, King Richard nonchalantly states “His time is spent... so much for that” (*King Richard II*, II.i.154-55). Through his actions in this scene, King Richard’s mental operation from the psychoanalytic id, is made apparent. His irrational selfishness in listening to the advice given to him by Gaunt combined with his quick aggression, demonstrate how Richard’s subconscious id has made itself manifest. Harold Bloom, in his book entitled *Shakespeare: The Invention of Human*, states that Richard was a “foolish and unfit king, victimized as much by his own psyche and its extraordinary language as he is by Bolingbroke” (Bloom, 249). Bloom’s statement perfectly sums up the tragic self-imposed aspect of Richard’s psyche, yet other scholars have gone a step further, pinpointing specific qualities in his character as a result of his psyche. In his article entitled *Richard and His Shadow World*, James A.S. McPeck states that Richard’s character throughout the play is inherently narcissistic (McPeck, 196). His constant arrogance and eventual self-imposed “martyr status” following his disposition, show how Richard truly only cares for himself. The narcissistic nature of the id is not only specific to Shakespeare’s King Richard, it can also be seen in the psyche of King Lear as well. King Lear, similarly to King

Richard, is demonstrated as being a very irrational king. His irrationalness is clearly demonstrated by his decision to split the kingdom in thirds between his daughters; an aspect that some of his closest advisors are strongly against (*King Lear*, I.i.1-6). Lear then proceeds to, like Richard, unconsciously manifest his id by angrily banishing his youngest daughter, Cordelia and his most loyal courtier, Kent. In her article entitled *The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare*, Lynda Boose argues that Lear's decision to banish Cordelia is the "attempt of the man who is both king and father to substitute the illegitimate transfer of his kingdom for the legitimate one of his daughter" (Boose, 332). If one views the scene from a psychoanalytic approach however, one realizes that Lear's psyche during this scene is operating not solely from the id and its inherent aggressive tendencies, but from the secondary facet of the id; immediate gratification. His unconscious need to be praised and loved by his daughters, is the root for his anger towards Cordelia. Had she too praised her father like her older sisters, Lear would have not to unconsciously shift his id toward its inherent aggressive nature. In other words, during his long fit of rage, Lear, under the unconscious influence of his id, inadvertently spurs the action of the play which results in his subsequent downfall. Though both kings operate from the id at the very beginning of the play, their ego goes under drastic transformations throughout their respective self-titled plays.

In *King Richard II*, Act I, scene 3, Richard is depicted as being a judge between the ongoing accusations of Mowbray and Bolingbroke. When the two decide to settle their quarrel in a duel, Richard becomes the mediator for the event. In this scene, Richard briefly operates from the ego division of the human psyche. His use of sound reasoning by stopping the duel between the two, shows that though Richard primarily operated from his id towards the beginning of the play, his ego, and subsequently his superego, are strong enough to be able to momentarily still

hold the id at bay. In his book entitled *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton, in discussing the nature of psychoanalysis, states that Freud himself sloganeered a particular phrase in regards to the id and the ego, stating: “where id was, there shall ego be” (Eagleton, 139). This concept can starkly be seen in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II* as Richard himself initially operates from the unconscious id heavily yet he hangs on to a bit of the reasoning that stems from the more conscious ego. Similarly, Lear also operates from his ego. During the iconic storm sequence in Act III, scene 2, Lear realizes the extent of the damage he has done and comes to accept his fate. Later on, in the same scene, Lear, states that “his wits have begun to turn” thus symbolizing his ego’s loss of strength in attempting reign back his id as this event marks the implied beginning of Lear’s psychotic episodes (*King Lear*, III.ii.68). George W. Williams, in his article entitled *The Poetry of the Storm in King Lear*, supports this claim stating that Lear’s speeches in scene 2, “show the last traces of his already vanishing sanity, and in scene 4 he is ‘far gone, far gone.’” (Williams, 57). This interestingly proves that Lear’s ego in act III, scene 2 is losing control to the psychotic lunacy that stems from the id, however, the very fact that Lear himself realizes that his “wits have begun to turn” shows that he is still reasoning and therefore still operating, however weakly, from his ego.

Throughout *King Richard II*, Richard tends to not operate from his superego as often as the other two parts of Freud’s theory. Being that Shakespeare wrote *King Richard II* as a tragedy and the fact that the titular character resembles that of a villain instead of a hero, shows how Richard does not seem to operate from the superego much, if at all. According to Freud, the superego is also responsible for feelings such as guilt and satisfaction. Richard, however, does not seem to feel much guilt throughout the play, as he dies cursing the murderers at the end of the play. One could argue that Richard operates from his superego during his famous speech in

Act V where he reflects back on the events that have taken place. Though he does reflect, his attitude seems to be more of regret rather than actual guilt. Richard states: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me" (*King Richard II*, V.v.49). Upon first glance, the argument could be made that Richard in this line demonstrates his guilt of his actions and therefore utilizing his unconscious superego however, according to Freud, the superego deals with the ideal self. Freud argued that the ideal self was what one's psyche believed that they should be – though this heavily depended on society's outside force (Freud, 28). The superego only deals with guilt when the individual fails to achieve their "ideal self" thus feeling guilty that they have not attained it (Storr, 63). Therefore, being that Richard in this sequence is not truly guilty for his failure to attain his ideal self, one cannot infer that he is operating from the superego. One could however, make the argument that Lear, towards the end of the play, operates from the superego. In Act IV, scene 7, Lear demonstrates how the superego has taken back its control of the irrational id by repenting for his wrongs. In an exchange between him and Cordelia, he begs his daughter to "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (*King Lear*, IV.vii.85-86). This quote shows how Lear is operating from the superego as he repents and feels guilty that he did not demonstrate nor achieve his ideal-self towards his daughter Cordelia. Interestingly, in his acclaimed book *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, Roy Battenhouse alludes to the fact that Lear begins to reflect on his actions and repents earlier on in Act 1 (Battenhouse, 445). In Act I, scene 5, in a conversation with his trusted Fool, states, in reference to Cordelia, that "I did her wrong" (*King Lear*, I.v.20). If one follows Battenhouse's reasoning, it can be safe to infer that Lear, experienced a brief momentary surfacing of his superego as it breaks free from the bonds of the id. Though, throughout the later events of the play, Lear's id resurfaces and begins to take

control throughout most of the play, he does, however, breach it's confines before his ultimate death.

The manner in which both plays end, though similar in the sense that both of the titular characters die, bears a stark difference in regards to their psyches and their subsequent deaths. Richard's id tends to be the dominant operator in Richard's psyche throughout the play though there are instances in which his ego seems to restrain it. He never, however, appears to be able to operate from his ego for substantial amount of time and he truly never operates from his superego, reflecting the fact that he did not reach his ideal self. In the events leading up to his death, Richard is depicted as being irritable and aggressive. When facing his murderers in Act V, scene 5, Richard curses them stating "Go thou, and fill another room in hell!" (*King Richard II*, V.v.108). This line makes Richard's psyche all too apparent as he has clearly remained under the hardened grasp of his id which implies that his ego and superego have been forever defeated. On the other hand, Lear, despite suffering the same unfortunate fate, does not die under the influence of his id as Richard does. Nathan Lefler, in his article entitled *The Tragedy of King Lear: Redeeming Christ*, suggests that Lear throughout the play is "unable to sustain simultaneously his reason and his love for his fellow human beings" (Lefler, 223). This aspect of Lear's character can be seen most prominently towards the tragic end of the play. In Act V, scene 3, upon discovering that both his daughter Cordelia and his trusted Fool have been killed, Lear, in his final moments reflects on the injustices of life. In reference to his dead, trusted friend, the Fool, he questions why creatures such as rats should have life but his Fool "no breath at all?" (V.iii.306). Shortly afterwards, he proceeds to faint and utter his last words: "Break, heart, I prithee break" (V.iii.313). In Lear's death, there are no damning curses nor aggression shown to anyone in his proximity but merely a broken heart. Lear, towards the latter end of his life, allows

his ego to embrace the superego and ultimately resist the id. Though both Richard and Lear suffered greatly at the hands of their unconscious id, one decided to remain a slave to his irrational self-gratifying id, while the other aimed to rid himself of its grasp, embracing both the ego's and superego's suppression of it. Just as Lear eventually reeled back his id, so to should we aim to hold back our aggressive tendencies and operate from sounder reason. Though certainly not the easiest goal to attain, we as Christians have the hope that through God's help, our shattered reflections in the mirror of life, can be restored to be as clear as crystal glass.

Annotated Bibliography

Battenhouse, Roy. *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*. Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1994.

In his book, Battenhouse, former professor at the University of Indiana, argues that Shakespeare used Christianity profusely throughout a majority of his plays. I chose to focus on his views on *King Lear* and how he infers that Lear initially repented of his wrongs towards Cordelia earlier on than what is most commonly the consensus. I found this information beneficial to my psychoanalytic approach to Lear's psyche.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York, Riverhead Books, 1998.

Harold Bloom, Sterling professor at the University of Yale, discusses the tragicness of Richard's character throughout Shakespeare's play. Bloom discusses the way Shakespeare chose to write *Richard II* as an extended metaphysical lyric despite it being a historical play. I chose to focus more on his insights towards the manner in which he portrays the tragicness of the fact that Richard's psyche is the cause of his deterioration.

Boose, Lynda E. "The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare." *PMLA*, vol. 97, no. 3, 1982, pp.

325–47. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/462226. Lynda Boose, a professor of English from Dartmouth College, discusses the relationship between Lear and his daughters throughout the play. She compares their relationship to that of a marriage ceremony and the ritual that goes along with it. I chose to focus more on her depiction of Lear and his mental state upon transferring power over to his daughters. This element of her article, tied in nicely to the psychoanalytic lens which I utilized throughout my paper.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction by Terry Eagleton (1996–10-26)*. Wiley-Blackwell; 2nd Edition (1996–10-26), 2021. In his book, Terry Eagleton, the former John Edward Taylor Professor of English Literature at the University of Manchester, aims to

discuss and define literature and subsequently literary theory. His book is filled with interesting concepts and literary theories which can aid anyone's literary research. I primarily chose to focus on his chapter on psychoanalysis as it complimented well with the overall argument of my paper. His views on the three behavioral elements of the Freudian psyche aided me in my overall formulation of my argument greatly.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 19, New York, United States, Penguin Random House, 2001. Sigmund Freud, was an Austrian neurologist who developed psychanalysis and is considered the father of modern psychology. His findings, though certainly controversial and at times immensely disturbing, can be utilized to analyze the minds of literary characters. For this reason, I chose to use his theory of psychoanalysis to analyze the Shakespearean kings. Though the book is a compilation of all of his writings, I chose to focus mainly on his writings on the id, ego and superego.

Lefler, N. "The Tragedy of King Lear: Redeeming Christ?" *Literature and Theology*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2010. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23927236. In his article, Nathan Lefler, a professor of Theology at the University of Scranton, portrays Lear as a Christ-like figure who is redeemed towards the end of the play. Though certainly an interesting article, I did not incorporate the element of Lear's "Christ-like character" into my research as I felt that the element of Freudian psyche did not pair well with an apparently "Christ-like" king. His article did, however, aid me in seeing how Lear was unable to use his reason to prevent not only his own downfall, but the downfall of the ones he loved the most.

McPeck, James A. S. "Richard and His Shadow World." *American Imago*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1958, pp. 195–212. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26301625. In his article, James A.S. McPeck,

former professor of the University of Connecticut, wrote on how Richard's character was heavily narcissistic and selfish. He notes that Richard's narcissism is the root from which all his other attributes throughout the play stem from. This concept naturally, paired well with my paper as it demonstrates how Richard almost solely operated from the id throughout the play.

"Mind." *Oxford English Dictionary*,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/118732?rskey=tFMTDj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.

Accessed 6 Nov. 2021. I chose to incorporate an executive definition of the word "mind" as I felt that it would aid the reader in attempting to see its complexity and beauty.

Shakespeare, William, and Charles Forker. *King Richard II (Arden Shakespeare: Third Series)*.

3rd ed., The Arden Shakespeare, 2002. This was one of my two main primary texts which I analyzed to formulate my paper. Along with being an authoritative version of the text, this edition features many footnotes which aid the reader in providing immense historical background as well as clarification on any old English words.

Shakespeare, William, and Grace Ioppolo. *King Lear*. New York, W.W. Norton Company, 2008.

This was the second of my two primary texts of which I analyzed to formulate my paper. This edition features extensive commentary and criticism along with being an authoritative version of the text which I felt was essential for correctly analyzing a text as complex as Shakespeare.

Williams, George W. "The Poetry of the Storm in King Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 2, no.

1, 1951, p. 57. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2866729. In his article, George W.

Williams, former English professor at the University of Duke and editor for the Arden

Third Series of Shakespeare plays, describes the importance of the iconic storm sequence

in King Lear. Though he focuses primarily on the manner in which Shakespeare orchestrates the scene with intense and symbolic imagery, there were several portions that furthered and strengthened my paper. I chose to focus primarily on his commentary towards the fleeting mind of Lear as this event marks his withdrawal back into the unconsciousness of his id.