



Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, and Othello: A Study in Psychoanalysis

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Abstract:

This paper explores the psychoanalytic dimensions of Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. Using Freud's theories of the Id, Ego, Superego, and the Oedipus complex, it delves into the subconscious motivations and internal conflicts of key characters. The paper argues that Shakespeare's portrayal of these psychological elements anticipates Freudian psychoanalysis, offering deep insights into the complexities of human behaviour and the workings of the mind. By analysing the characters through a psychoanalytic lens, the paper provides a richer understanding of the plays and their enduring relevance.

Keywords: - psychoanalysis, literary psychoanalysis, psyche, id, ego, superego, Oedipus complex, repression, conflicted emotions

Introduction

Psychoanalysis, a term deeply embedded in the realm of psychological diagnosis, is equally significant in literary criticism. Developed by Sigmund Freud in the early 20th century, psychoanalysis is a theoretical model and clinical practice that concentrates on the interpretation of the human psyche, emphasizing language, sexuality, and the construction of subjectivity and gender. While traditionally associated with therapeutic practices, psychoanalysis has been extensively applied to literature, revealing the intricate workings of language and the unconscious in literary texts. By examining how characters reflect the unconscious mind, psychoanalytic criticism provides a deeper understanding of the complex human emotions and conflicts that drive narratives.

In literary criticism, psychoanalysis serves as a powerful tool for exploring the latent content of a text—what Freud referred to as the "dream-work." "The dream is the (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish." (Freud 115) Freud's work remains foundational in psychoanalytic theory, particularly in understanding the symbolic language of dreams as seen in the characters' subconscious expressions. The text,



like a dream, is a manifestation of the author's unconscious mind, replete with symbols, desires, and repressed emotions. By examining these elements, critics can uncover the underlying psychological dimensions of a literary work, offering a deeper understanding of both the text and the human condition.

Shakespeare, often regarded as the greatest playwright in the English language, created characters of remarkable psychological complexity. His plays explore the full range of human emotions—love, jealousy, ambition, madness, and despair—making them ideal subjects for psychoanalytic interpretation. Shakespeare's characters often seem to wrestle with internal demons, making choices driven by forces they barely understand. The application of Freudian psychoanalysis to Shakespeare's works allows us to peel back the layers of these characters' psyches, revealing the unconscious motivations behind their actions. Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* provide fertile ground for psychoanalytic exploration. These plays, rich in psychological complexity, depict characters driven by deep-seated desires, internal conflicts, and moral dilemmas. Freud's concepts of the Id, Ego, Superego, and Oedipus complex offer a framework for analysing these characters, revealing the unconscious forces that shape their actions and fates.

This paper aims to conduct a detailed psychoanalytic study of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. By applying Freud's theories to these plays, the paper will explore the psychological motivations of key characters, the conflicts between their conscious and unconscious minds, and the implications of these dynamics for understanding the plays as a whole. (Holland 52) argues that Shakespeare's characters vividly represent psychoanalytic principles in action, a perspective crucial for understanding the complexities of the tragic protagonists. In this paper, Freudian psychoanalysis is applied to four of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. Each play offers a unique opportunity to explore key Freudian concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, the Id, Ego, Superego, and repression. *Hamlet* will be analysed in terms of the Oedipus complex, exploring Hamlet's conflicted emotions toward his mother, Gertrude, and his stepfather, Claudius. *Macbeth* will be examined through the lens of ambition and guilt, focusing on how Macbeth's desires and moral conflicts lead to his downfall. *King Lear* provides a case study of the collapse of the Ego and the descent into madness, while *Othello* will be analysed in terms of jealousy and the destructive power of the Id.

Psychoanalysis and Literary Criticism

Psychoanalysis, as a form of literary criticism, has evolved into a rich and varied interpretative tradition since Freud's early work. Freud's definition of psychoanalysis encompasses three aspects: a method for investigating mental processes that are difficult to access, a treatment method for neurotic disorders, and a body of psychological knowledge that forms a new scientific discipline (Freud 1923). These aspects, though rooted in psychology, have been adapted into literary criticism to uncover the hidden meanings in literary texts.



In literary psychoanalysis, the text is viewed as a symbolic expression of the author's unconscious mind, similar to how dreams express repressed desires. The process of analysing a text psychoanalytically involves examining its language and symbolism to uncover the latent content—what lies beneath the surface narrative. Freud's concepts, such as the (the primal, unconscious part of the mind that seeks pleasure), the Ego (the rational, conscious part that mediates between the Id and reality), and the Superego (the internalized moral standards of society), repression, and the Oedipus complex, provide a framework for this analysis, allowing critics to explore the psychological dimensions of characters and themes.

Psychoanalytic criticism aims to reveal the underlying desires and conflicts that structure a literary work. It suggests that literature, like the human mind, is shaped by complex and contradictory forces. These forces, often repressed or disguised, can be brought to light through psychoanalytic interpretation. This approach not only enhances our understanding of individual texts but also offers insights into broader cultural and ideological phenomena.

Freud's influence on literary criticism is profound. His theories have been applied to a wide range of literary works, from classical tragedies to modern novels, revealing the psychological underpinnings of character behaviour, narrative structure, and thematic development. In the case of Shakespeare, Freud's ideas provide a powerful lens through which to examine the psychological depth of his characters, particularly in his tragedies. "Shakespeare's plays are political, psychological, and universal in their relevance." (Kott et al. 100)

Hamlet

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most studied plays in psychoanalytic literature, largely due to the apparent manifestation of the Oedipus complex in the protagonist. Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, which posits that a child harbours unconscious desires for the opposite-sex parent while feeling rivalry towards the same-sex parent, can be seen in Hamlet's complex relationship with his mother, Gertrude. (Adelman 135) provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of Hamlet's complex relationship with his mother.

Hamlet's intense attachment to his mother and his hostility towards his uncle Claudius, who has married Gertrude, suggest an unresolved Oedipus complex. "The beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art converge in the Oedipus complex." (Freud and Strachey 10) Freud's exploration of the Oedipus complex provides a framework for analyzing Hamlet's relationship with his mother. Freud's analysis of Hamlet, first discussed in his essay "The Interpretation of Dreams," posits that Hamlet's hesitation in avenging his father's murder is rooted in his unconscious identification with Claudius, who has fulfilled Hamlet's own repressed desires by killing his father and marrying his mother (Freud, 1900).



This psychoanalytic interpretation is supported by Hamlet's interactions with Gertrude. His harsh criticism of her marriage to Claudius, as seen in his confrontation with her in Act 3, Scene 4, reflects his deep-seated jealousy and resentment. Hamlet's famous line, "O, throw away the worser part of it, and live the purer with the other half" (3.4.159-161), reveals his desire to control his mother's sexuality, a clear indication of his Oedipal complex.

Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be," can also be interpreted through the lens of psychoanalysis. In this soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates suicide, revealing his deep existential crisis. However, from a Freudian perspective, this crisis is rooted in the conflict between Hamlet's Id, which seeks to fulfil his repressed desires, and his Superego, which imposes moral restrictions. "Where id was, there ego shall be." (Freud and Strachey 23) This phrase encapsulates the dynamic struggle between the primal desires (id) and the rational mind (ego), a concept crucial to understanding characters like Hamlet and Macbeth. Hamlet's oscillation between action and inaction can be understood through the lens of the conflict between his Ego and Superego. The Ego, driven by the reality principle, urges Hamlet to act rationally and cautiously, while the Superego, representing moral conscience, imposes a sense of guilt and hesitation. This internal conflict is evident in Hamlet's soliloquies, where he debates the morality of his actions and his fear of damnation. The interplay between the Id, Ego, and Superego in Hamlet's psyche results in his tragic indecision, ultimately leading to his downfall. The psychoanalytic approach thus provides a comprehensive understanding of Hamlet's character, his motivations, and the underlying psychological tensions that drive the play's narrative. "Hamlet embodies the existential crisis of modern man." (Bloom 6) Bloom's chapter situates Hamlet within the broader context of psychoanalytic and existential thought.

Dream interpretation is another key aspect of psychoanalysis that can be applied to Hamlet. The appearance of King Hamlet's ghost, for example, can be interpreted as a projection of Hamlet's unconscious guilt and unresolved Oedipal tensions. The ghost's demand for revenge can be seen as an externalization of Hamlet's repressed desires, pushing him towards actions that his conscious mind resists. Repression also plays a crucial role in Hamlet's psychological state. Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles to repress his emotions, particularly his anger and disgust towards his mother and Claudius. However, this repression leads to his eventual breakdown and descent into madness. The more Hamlet tries to control his emotions, the more they manifest in destructive ways, leading to the tragic conclusion of the play.

Critical responses to Hamlet's psychology have varied, with some scholars offering alternative interpretations. For instance, existential readings of Hamlet focus on the play's exploration of life, death, and the human condition, rather than its psychological dimensions. However, these perspectives often intersect with the psychoanalytic approach, as both explore the deep inner conflicts that drive Hamlet's actions. Freud's



interpretation of Hamlet thus provides a compelling understanding of the character's complexity, rooted in the universal human experience of conflicting desires and moral constraints (Jones 119).

Macbeth

Macbeth is a tragedy that explores the destructive power of ambition and guilt. The play's protagonist, Macbeth, is a complex character whose psychological turmoil is central to the narrative. His actions are driven by the conflict between the Id, Ego, and Superego. Macbeth's ambition, spurred by the witches' prophecies and his wife's manipulation, represents the Id's primal desires for power and dominance. From the moment he hears the prophecy, Macbeth is consumed by a desire to become king, even if it means committing heinous acts. His ambition is further stoked by Lady Macbeth, who represents an external force that encourages the Id's desires. Lady Macbeth's manipulation and taunting push Macbeth to murder King Duncan, an act that sets him on a path of moral degradation. However, his subsequent guilt and paranoia reflect the Superego's moral constraints, leading to a psychological unravelling.

Freud's theory of the Id, Ego, and Superego is particularly relevant in analysing Macbeth's character. The Id, representing instinctual desires, drives Macbeth to murder King Duncan, an act that fulfils his ambition but also triggers a deep sense of guilt. This guilt, emanating from the Superego, manifests in Macbeth's hallucinations, such as the vision of the bloody dagger and Banquo's ghost, which symbolize his internal torment, the return of the repressed.

Macbeth's famous soliloquy, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," reflects his existential despair as he contemplates the futility of life revealing the struggle between his Ego and Superego. The Ego, which mediates between the Id's desires and the Superego's moral demands, is unable to maintain control, leading to Macbeth's descent into madness. His fear of retribution and his increasing paranoia indicate the Superego's dominance, as Macbeth becomes consumed by the consequences of his actions.

Lady Macbeth's role in the play further illustrates the dynamics of the Id, Ego, and Superego. "The female body in Shakespeare is the site of power, control, and conflict." (Rutter 92) Her initial dominance and manipulation of Macbeth reflect a strong Id, driven by a desire for power. However, as the play progresses, her Superego emerges, leading to overwhelming guilt and eventual madness. Her famous sleepwalking scene, where she attempts to wash the imagined blood from her hands, symbolizes the Superego's punishment for her transgressions.

The psychoanalytic reading of *Macbeth* thus highlights the internal psychological conflicts that drive the characters' actions and contribute to their tragic fates. The interplay of the Id, Ego, and Superego in both



Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's psyches provides a deeper understanding of their motivations and the consequences of their unchecked desires.

Critics have offered various interpretations of Macbeth, with some focusing on its exploration of power, ambition, and the supernatural. However, the psychoanalytic approach provides a deeper understanding of the characters' psychological motivations and the underlying forces driving the narrative. By analysing Macbeth's internal conflicts through Freud's theories, we gain insight into the complex interplay between desire, guilt, and repression that leads to the play's tragic conclusion. Freudian analysis of Macbeth thus reveals the play as a tragic exploration of the consequences of allowing the Id to dominate unchecked, leading to the collapse of the Ego and the ultimate destruction of the self (Bloom 87; Mangan 63).

King Lear

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare explores the psychological deterioration of a king who, driven by vanity and ego, makes catastrophic decisions that lead to his downfall. Freud's concepts of the Id, Ego, and Superego can be applied to analyse Lear's descent into madness, as well as the psychological dynamics of the other characters.

Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters based on their declarations of love reflects his inflated Ego, which seeks validation and flattery. However, his inability to recognize Cordelia's genuine love and his subsequent rage when she refuses to participate in his ego-boosting exercise reveals the dominance of his Id, driven by a need for power and control. However, this decision is also driven by Lear's desire for love and validation, which can be linked to his Id—the unconscious part of his psyche that seeks gratification. Lear's demand for his daughters to publicly declare their love for him reflects his deep-seated need for affirmation, a need that ultimately leads to his downfall.

As the play progresses, Lear's Ego fails to mediate between his Id and Superego, leading to irrational decisions and a loss of self-control. His descent into madness is marked by his increasing detachment from reality, as seen in his interactions with the Fool and his rants during the storm on the heath. This madness can be interpreted as the collapse of the Ego under the pressure of the Id's desires and the Superego's moral constraints. The dynamics of the Id, Ego, and Superego are also evident in the behaviour of Lear's daughters. Goneril and Regan, driven by their Ids, betray their father in their pursuit of power and wealth. In contrast, Cordelia's actions are guided by a balanced Ego, which mediates between her love for her father and her moral principles.

The storm on the heath, where Lear rages against the elements, symbolizes his inner turmoil and the collapse of his Ego. As Lear is stripped of his power, dignity, and sanity, he becomes increasingly vulnerable to the forces of his Id, leading to a complete psychological breakdown. In this state of madness, Lear begins



to confront the truth about himself and his relationships, particularly his failure to recognize Cordelia's genuine love.

Lear's journey from power to madness reflects the collapse of his Ego under the weight of his repressed emotions and desires. The play explores the fragility of the human psyche and the devastating consequences of failing to reconcile the different aspects of one's personality. Lear's madness is not just a result of external events but also a manifestation of his internal psychological conflicts. His journey from kingship to madness is a dramatic representation of the Freudian conflict between desire and morality, where the failure of the Ego to mediate between these forces leads to self-destruction (Kermode 132; Cavell 46).

Critics have long debated the meaning of Lear's madness and the play's exploration of power and family dynamics. However, a psychoanalytic reading reveals the deep psychological currents that drive Lear's actions and his eventual descent into madness. By examining Lear's psychological state through Freud's theories, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between power, love, and madness in the play. The psychoanalytic interpretation of *King Lear* provides insights into the character's motivations and the psychological forces that drive the play's tragic events. Lear's failure to balance the demands of his Id, Ego, and Superego leads to his ultimate downfall, illustrating the destructive power of unchecked desires and the importance of psychological balance. Freudian psychoanalysis thus offers a profound understanding of Lear's tragic journey, where the collapse of the Ego under the weight of internal conflict leads to inevitable madness and death (Dollimore 109).

Othello

Othello is a tragedy that explores themes of jealousy, race, and the destructive power of the unconscious mind. The play's protagonist, Othello, is a Moorish general whose psychological conflict is central to the narrative. Freud's theories of the Id, Ego, and Superego, as well as his ideas on projection and repression, offer valuable insights into Othello's internal struggles and the play's tragic outcome. In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents a tragedy driven by jealousy, insecurity, and the struggle for self-esteem. The psychological dynamics of the Id, Ego, and Superego are central to understanding Othello's actions and his tragic downfall.

Othello's jealousy, which ultimately leads to his downfall, can be seen as a manifestation of his Id—the primal, unconscious part of his psyche that is driven by fear and desire. Othello's love for Desdemona is sincere, but it is also tinged with insecurity and fear of losing her. Othello's marriage to Desdemona and his rise to power in Venetian society represent the fulfilment of his Id's desires for love and acceptance. These unconscious fears are exacerbated by Iago's manipulations, which play on Othello's insecurities and lead him to doubt Desdemona's fidelity. However, his insecurity as a Moor in a predominantly white society triggers a



conflict between his Ego, which seeks to maintain rational control, and his Superego, which internalizes societal prejudices and moral standards.

Iago, who can be seen as a projection of Othello's repressed Id, represents the dark desires and impulses that Othello cannot acknowledge within himself. Iago's actions reflect the destructive power of the unconscious mind, as he manipulates Othello into acting on his worst fears and suspicions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Iago can be seen as an externalization of Othello's repressed emotions, allowing Othello to act out his unconscious desires in a socially acceptable way.

Othello's psychological conflict is evident in his language, particularly his oscillation between controlled, poetic speech and fragmented, chaotic utterances as his jealousy grows. This shift in language reflects the growing tension between his Id and Superego, as his unconscious fears and desires begin to overwhelm his rational mind. Othello's final speech, where he attempts to reconcile his actions and justify his suicide, can be seen as an attempt to restore balance between his Id, Ego, and Superego. However, his suicide can also be interpreted as the Superego's ultimate punishment for his moral failure.

Repression plays a crucial role in Othello's psychological state. Throughout the play, Othello struggles to repress his jealousy and fear, but these emotions inevitably resurface, leading to his tragic actions. Freud's theory of the return of the repressed is evident in Othello's behaviour, as his repressed fears and insecurities drive him to murder Desdemona and, ultimately, himself.

Iago's manipulation of Othello exacerbates this internal conflict, leading Othello to doubt Desdemona's fidelity. The Id, driven by jealousy and a need for validation, overwhelms the Ego, leading Othello to murder Desdemona. This act, which Othello justifies as a way to save Desdemona's soul from sin, reflects the Superego's influence, but it is ultimately the Id's desire for control and revenge that drives him.

Othello's final realization of his mistake and his decision to commit suicide can be seen as the Superego's punishment for the Ego's failure to mediate between the Id and Superego. Critical responses to Othello's psychology have varied, with some scholars focusing on the play's exploration of race, gender, and power dynamics. However, the psychoanalytic approach provides a deeper understanding of Othello's internal conflicts and the unconscious forces that drive his actions. By analysing Othello through Freud's theories, we gain insight into the complex psychological dimensions of jealousy, race, and power in the play. The psychoanalytic reading of *Othello* highlights the internal psychological conflicts that lead to Othello's tragic end and the destructive power of unchecked emotions. Freudian psychoanalysis thus reveals Othello as a tragedy of internal conflict, where the protagonist's failure to balance the Id, Ego, and Superego results in a catastrophic collapse of his identity and moral world (Greenblatt 256; Adelman 119).

Conclusion



A psychoanalytic study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* provides valuable insights into the characters' motivations, internal conflicts, and the psychological forces that drive the plays' narratives. Freud's concepts of the Id, Ego, Superego, and the Oedipus complex offer a framework for understanding the complexities of human behaviour as depicted in these tragedies. This paper has explored the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to four of Shakespeare's major tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. By employing key Freudian concepts such as the Oedipus complex, the Id, Ego, Superego, and repression, this study has provided a deeper understanding of the character's motivations and the underlying forces driving the plays' tragic outcomes. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are haunted by maternal figures that embody both the promise of love and the threat of destruction."

Through psychoanalytic interpretation, we can uncover the latent content of these plays, revealing the unconscious desires and repressed emotions that shape the characters' actions and fates. This approach not only enhances our understanding of Shakespeare's works but also highlights the enduring relevance of psychoanalysis in literary criticism. By exploring the psychological dimensions of these plays, we gain a deeper appreciation of Shakespeare's ability to capture the complexities of the human mind and the universal struggles that define the human experience.

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