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Psychoanalytical reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract

The psychoanalytical exploration of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* unveils a captivating journey into the intricacies of human psychology and societal dynamics. Shakespeare, renowned for his profound understanding of the human psyche, employs this seminal work to delve into the multifaceted depths of his characters' motivations, desires, and conflicts. This literary journey is a nuanced examination of unconscious impulses, familial relationships, friendship, and the pervasive impact of societal prejudices. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, we navigate the intricate web of characters such as Shylock, Portia, Antonio, and Bassanio, unraveling the hidden complexities that shape their actions and relationships. The play becomes a psychological landscape where Freudian, Jungian, and Lacanian concepts are applied to illuminate the underlying motivations and struggles of the characters. This exploration promises to shed light on the timeless relevance of Shakespeare's masterful depiction of the human condition and the intricate interplay between conscious and unconscious forces within his iconic tale. This literary analysis delves into the intricate psychological dimensions of characters in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The work of a master craftsman like Shakespeare often conceals unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, and childhood traumas within the behaviors of its characters. Employing psychoanalytical concepts proposed by influential figures such as Freud, Jung, Lacan, Adler, and Aaron Beck, this study aims to uncover the subconscious intricacies encoded within the text.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, psychoanalysis, freud, id, ego, superego, jung, collective unconscious, archetypes, lacan, unconscious structure, adler, inferiority complex, aaron beck, cognitive model, character analysis

Introduction

Unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, ambivalences, childhood traumas, fixations often mark the behavior of characters in a literary work; especially in the works of a master craftsman such as Shakespeare, there are innumerable pointers to the inner workings of those who populate his dramas. Often psychological issues are expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded, through hints, symbols, etc. all of which are found in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*.

Psychoanalytical concepts suggested by Freud (Id, ego, superego), Jung (Collective unconscious and archetypes), Lacan (Unconscious structured like language), Adler (Inferiority complex), Aaron Beck (Cognitive model), etc. are popular frames which can be used to interpret characters in this play. Shakespeare employs a subtle and sophisticated narrative technique where psychological issues are expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded through hints, symbols, and various literary devices. The characters' actions, dialogues, and reactions become significant clues that invite readers and audiences to unravel the complexities of their psychological makeup.

To interpret the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, various psychoanalytical concepts proposed by influential theorists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, Alfred Adler, Aaron Beck, among others, can be applied. Each of these frameworks provides a unique lens through which to analyze the characters' motivations, conflicts, and relationships within the play.

The Freudian concepts of id, ego, and superego offer insights into characters' impulsive actions, decision-making processes, and internal struggles with ethical dilemmas.

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Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes suggest that characters might embody universal symbols and themes, adding layers of meaning to their dynamics. Lacanian concepts, such as the unconscious structured like language, propose that characters' unconscious desires and conflicts may be expressed through language, revealing hidden meanings and motivations. The Adlerian concept of an inferiority complex suggests that characters may exhibit behaviors driven by a sense of inadequacy or a desire to compensate for perceived shortcomings.

Applying the cognitive model proposed by Aaron Beck allows an exploration of characters' thoughts, beliefs, and cognitive patterns, shedding light on the underlying thought processes shaping their actions. In "The Merchant of Venice," Shakespeare's characters become intricate psychological studies when viewed through these conceptual frameworks. Their motivations, struggles, and the intricate web of relationships within the play are enriched through the application of psychoanalytical lenses. The use of symbolism, language, and subtle cues in the text invites readers and audiences to engage in a deep exploration of the characters' psyches, revealing the timeless relevance of psychological complexity in literature.

To begin with Freud—we need to consider the division of id, ego and superego that he has specified. Id relates to the unconscious, infantile, self-motivated aspect of the human mind which refuses to take reality into account and therefore remains illogical. Ego develops from id and evolves into facing reality so that the resultant behavioral patterns are socially acceptable tropes. Delayed gratification is one aspect of this—as we see in the bond which Shylock compels Antonio to execute—though he pretends to do this in an amicable manner, as though he wants to portray himself as a very generous person who does not want 3000 ducats but is willing to settle for a pound of flesh.

The final division of Freud's framework—the superego—is the ethical dimension of human psyche which is able to distinguish between the desirable and the desired. For instance, Bassanio needs the 3000 ducats and hesitantly asks his affluent best friend Antonio for the money. But his conscience does not permit him to put the life of his friend in risk by signing away a pound of his flesh. He tries his best to stop Antonio by saying:

You shall not seal to such a bond for me!

I'll rather dwell in my necessity. (Act 1, Sc 3 line 164, 65)

In the unfolding drama of *The Merchant of Venice*, the concept of the superego becomes pronounced as Bassanio learns of Antonio's financial misfortune, compelling him to contemplate sacrificing his own life to fulfill the pound-of-flesh bond with Shylock. This critical juncture underscores the ethical considerations and moral guilt at play within Bassanio's decision-making. The looming threat of Antonio's peril and the extreme measure Bassanio contemplates bring forth the superego's influence, emphasizing the internalized societal and moral standards that guide his actions.

Further contributing to the complex interplay of emotions, Bassanio experiences a sense of guilt when Portia, disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, demands his wedding ring as payment for saving Antonio's life. This demand not only introduces a material consequence but also triggers a psychological response in Bassanio, tapping into his feelings of guilt and moral responsibility. Portia's strategic move

adds a layer of intricacy to the characters' interactions, revealing the psychological depth inherent in their relationships.

The dynamics between Portia and Nerissa, both in disguise, further unveil psychoanalytical possibilities and hidden motives. When Portia, as Balthazar, and Nerissa, as the Lawyer's Clerk, demand the rings from their husbands who fail to recognize them, it introduces a compelling exploration of the conscious and subconscious aspects of the characters' minds. The request for the wedding rings becomes a symbolic representation of the characters' fidelity, trust, and the potential consequences of their actions.

Moving to Carl Jung's collective unconscious, the inherent Christian-Jew conflict prevalent in various parts of the play takes center stage. The anti-Semitic sentiments characterizing the Christian attitude towards Shylock and Antonio's compelled agreement to Shylock's proposed bond provide rich material for a psychoanalytical reading. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious suggests that these conflicts tap into universal symbols and themes that are deeply embedded in the human psyche, reflecting broader cultural and societal tensions.

Thus, the psychoanalytical exploration of *The Merchant of Venice* reveals the intricate workings of the characters' minds, delving into the realms of guilt, hidden motives, and collective unconscious conflicts. The superego's influence on Bassanio's decisions, the symbolic weight of the wedding rings, and the broader Christian-Jew conflict all contribute to the psychological richness of Shakespeare's masterful narrative. For instance, when Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock to borrow money from him, in an aside Shylock says, "I hate him [Antonio] for he is a Christian," Before Antonio enters the scene, he shows his attitude with great clarity: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, or pray with you."

Antonio on his part expresses his prejudice which is a racial trait in this conflict between Christians and Jews

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose!

An evil soul producing holy witness

Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,

A goodly apple rotten at the heart.

O what a goodly outside falsehood hath! (Act 1, Sc 3 line 106 to 111)

In the intricate tapestry of Shakespeare's narrative, the creative genius emerges in an attempt to reconcile the deep-seated conflict present in the play. This endeavor is notably portrayed through the love story of Jessica, Shylock's daughter, and Lorenzo, a Christian youth and friend of Bassanio and Antonio. Their union stands as a poignant symbol of the younger generation's aspiration to break free from the suffocating grip of racial prejudices and archetypes that pervade the societal landscape.

Shakespeare strategically employs the relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo to illuminate the possibility of harmony and understanding across cultural divides. In this love story, the creative genius of the playwright serves as a catalyst for challenging and, to some extent, transcending the prevailing racial tensions within the narrative. It becomes a narrative device that hints at the potential for unity and acceptance amidst the overarching conflicts.

The symbolic significance of the caskets devised by Portia's deceased father introduces another layer of psychological complexity to the play. As suitors vie for Portia's hand by attempting to choose the correct casket, the psychological nuances come to the forefront. Drawing upon Jacques Lacan's exploration of linguistic experiments, especially in reinterpreting Freudian concepts, becomes relevant in understanding how the unconscious mind is unveiled through language.

The two suitors who engage in the lottery involving the gold and silver caskets provide a compelling example of Lacan's ideas. The linguistic expressions they employ before making their choices serve as windows into their innermost impulses and desires. Lacan's emphasis on the role of language in exposing the unconscious finds resonance in the characters' verbal articulations, shedding light on their psychological states and motivations. The caskets, then, become more than mere containers of material wealth; they morph into symbolic vessels that reflect the characters' psyches. Shakespeare, through his intricate use of language and symbolism, invites the audience to delve into the characters' unconscious minds. The unfolding of the suitors' inner thoughts, expressed through words, adds depth to the psychological exploration, aligning with Lacan's contention that language serves as a revealing medium for the unconscious.

Thus, the creative genius of Shakespeare shines through in his strategic use of characters and symbols to address and potentially resolve the conflicts embedded in the play. The love between Jessica and Lorenzo and the intricate dynamics surrounding the caskets exemplify the playwright's ability to navigate the complexities of human psychology and societal tensions, offering a nuanced exploration of the unconscious through the lens of language and symbolism.

The first suitor is the Prince of Morocco. His dark complexion makes him begin his introduction in an apologetic vein: "Mislike me not for my complexion...I would not change this hue/Except to steal your thoughts." But his self-image is completely hidden in this apologetic tone as we come to know when he is about to hazard his fortune. He believes that he deserves Portia but still he hazards the golden casket and not the silver one:

I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes,
In graces, and in qualities of bringing,
But more than these, in love I do deserve. (Act 2, Sc 7 line 37 to 39)

The second suitor is Prince of Arragon who rejects the gold with words that reveal the structure of his unconscious self-importance

That "many" may be meant
By the fool multitude that chose by show,
Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach,
Which pries not to th' interior, but like to martlet
Builds in the weather on the outward wall,
Even in the course and road of casualty. (Act 2, Sc 9 line 26 to 31)

He would like to highlight his uniqueness and this is again revealed by the language in which he speaks, though he is not conscious that his words reveal more than he would like to

I will not chose what many men desire,

Because I will not jump with common spirits
And rank me with the barbarous multitudes. (Act 2, Sc 9 line 33 to 35)

Next we discuss Alder, who says, "Persons are always striving to find a situation in which they excel." An inferiority complex disguised as superior creates a psychological tussle and in this play also gives rise to some humor. Shylock's servant Lancelot Gobbo's soliloquy followed by the entry of his father and the manner in which Lancelot confuses the old man are significant pointers to these complexes. Scene 2 of Act II begins with a long speech of Lancelot which has some of these frames helpful for reading his mind:

Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at my elbow and tempts me, saying to me "Gobbo, Lancelot Gobbo, good Lancelot," or "good Gobbo," or "good Lancelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away." My conscience says, "No. Take heed, honest Lancelot, take heed, honest Gobbo," or as aforesaid, "Honest Lancelot Gobbo, do not run; scorn running with thy heels."... To be ruled by my conscience I should stay with the Jew, my master, who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil and to run away from the Jew I should be ruled by the fiend, who (saving your reverence) is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to council me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly council. I will run, fiend. My heels are at your commandment. I will run. (Act 2, Sc 2 line 1 to 30)

Following this is the conversation between father and son which, in addition to humor, has a very powerful exploration of complexes-in that the son is misguiding the father, he is not revealing his identity and is also insisting that the son has become a gentleman and is no longer concerned with the "poor father"

Gobbo: Master young gentleman, I pray you, which is the way to master Jew's? Can you tell me whether one Lancelot that dwells with him, dwell with him or no?
(Act 2, Sc 2 line 37 to 44)

Lancelot: Talk you of young Master Lancelot? (Act 2, Sc 2 line 46)

Gobbo: No master, sir, but a poor man's son. (Act 2, Sc 2 line 49)

Lancelot: Well, let his father be what he will. We talk of young master Lancelot.
(Act 2, Sc. 2 line 52)

In this way language often explores what even the speaker is not aware of.

Talking next of Beck's therapeutic technique of handling patients with negative mental states, especially issues such as depression, the first speech of Antonio as soon as the play begins can be cited as a suitable example. The play begins with Antonio's inexplicable sorrow which is dissected by his friends and himself at great length, symbolically representing a premonition which has much psychoanalytical potential. Antonio says:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you.

But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
 What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
 I am to learn.
 And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
 That I have much ado to know myself. (Act 1, Sc 1 line 1
 to 7)

The therapy sessions seem to progress exactly in the manner Shakespeare has constructed this speech: the first step is question and challenge of the discomfort of the sufferer; next is to try out new ways of looking at this problem and finally apply alternative ways of thinking "to know myself" as Antonio says.

Bassanio's monetary needs and his conversation with his friend Antonio are significant "games people play"-a psychoanalytical model. The following conversation exemplifies the kind of relationship these two friends have and how this relationship is the succor of their lives:

Antonio

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
 To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
 That you today promised to tell me of? (Act 1, Sc 2 line
 126, 128)

Bassanio

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
 How much I have disabled mine estate.... (Act 1, Sc 2 line
 129, 130)

To you, Antonio,

I owe the most in money and in love,
 And from your love I have a warrantay
 To unburden all my plots and purposes
 How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (Act 1, Sc 2, line 137
 to 141)

Antonio

My purse, my person, my extremest means
 Lie all unlock to your occasions. (Act 1, Sc 2, line 145,
 146)

Bassanio

I owe you much, you much, and, like a willful youth,
 That which I owe is lost. But if you please... (Act 1, Sc 2,
 line 153, 154)

Antonio

You know me well,
 say to me what I should do
 That in your knowledge may by me be done,
 And I am prest unto it. Therefore speak. (Act 1, Sc 2, line
 160, to 167)

Bassanio

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
 And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
 Of wondrous virtues...
 O my Antonio, had I but the means
 To hold a rival place with one of them,
 I have a mind presages me such thrift (Act 1, Sc 2, line 180
 to 182)

Antonio

Thou Know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
 Neither have I money nor commodity
 To raise a present sum. Therefore go forth:
 Try what my credit can in Venice do;
 That shall be racked even to the uttermost
 To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.
 Go presently inquire, and so will I,
 Where money is, and so will I,
 To have it of my trust, or for my sake. (Act 1, Sc 2, line 185
 to 190)
 Gratiano, Lorenzo, Jessica, and most other characters in the
 play illumine

Gratiano's dialogue with Antonio

Gratiano

Let me play the fool.
 With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
 And let my liver rather heat with wine
 Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
 Why should a man whose blood is warm within
 Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
 Sleep when he wakes? And creep into the jaundice
 By being peevish? I tell thee what, Antonio
 (I love thee, and 'tis my love that speaks) (Act 1, Sc 1, line
 85 to 93)

I do know of these

That therefore only are reputed wise
 For saying nothing, when, I am very sure,
 If they should speak, would almost damn those ears
 Which, hearing them, would call their brothers fools. (Act 1,
 Sc 1, line 100 to 105)
 Lorenzo describes Jessica's virtues much as Bassanio had
 Portia's. ("Wise, fair, and true") to Gratiano

Lorenzo

Beshrew me but I love her heartily,
 For she is wise, if I can judge of her,
 And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
 And true she is, as she hath proved herself.
 And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,
 Shall she be placed in my constant soul. (Act 2, Sc 7, line 54
 to 58)
 Jessica appears on the upper stage disguised as a page boy.
 She throws down a casket "worth the pains"

Jessica

Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains.
 I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me,
 For I am much ashamed of my exchange.
 But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
 The pretty follies that themselves commit,
 For if they could, Cupid himself would blush
 To see me thus transformed to a boy. (Act 2, Sc 6, line 34 to
 40)

Shakespeare's enduring legacy lies in the remarkable roundness of his characters, characterized by multifaceted psychological depth and variety. This intricacy renders his plays timeless, as the psychology of his characters continues to resonate profoundly with people, even in the present century. The enduring popularity of Shakespeare's works is

a testament to his keen understanding of human nature and the universal aspects of the human psyche.

Conclusion

The psychological richness of Shakespeare's characters allows them to transcend the confines of their historical context and speak to the timeless complexities of the human experience. For example, the deep friendship depicted between Antonio and Bassanio in "The Merchant of Venice" is not merely a relic of the past but a dynamic representation of enduring human relationships that can still be encountered in contemporary society. The themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and the intricacies of friendship remain relatable across centuries.

Similarly, the familial dynamics portrayed by characters like Jessica and Portia in their relationships with their fathers hold a timeless resonance. The defiance of traditional expectations by Jessica or the dutiful adherence to the wishes of a deceased father by Portia can be observed in various modern contexts. Shakespeare's exploration of these familial tensions taps into the enduring and universal aspects of human relationships, making his works eternally relevant. The play's exploration of prejudices based on racial or religious differences is another facet that continues to find echoes in the fragmented times of the present. The enduring relevance of these themes highlights Shakespeare's acute awareness of the darker aspects of human behavior and societal biases. The prejudices depicted in *The Merchant of Venice* mirror the persistent challenges faced by individuals in navigating cultural and religious diversity, a struggle that remains all too familiar in contemporary society. Delving into the psychological complexities illustrated by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* becomes a fascinating journey into the evolving and static nature of human behavior throughout the ages. The play serves as a mirror reflecting the perennial themes of love, friendship, familial bonds, and societal prejudices, inviting audiences to engage in a thoughtful exploration of the intricacies that define the human experience. In this way, Shakespeare's profound insights into the human psyche continue to illuminate the shared aspects of our humanity across time and cultural contexts.

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