

Unravelling The Psyche: A Freudian Psychoanalytical Reading Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting"

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Abstract- Within each piece of literature, there exist clues to guide the reader to a deeper understanding of the literary work, of the author of the work, and even of the inner workings of the individual reader. Using psychoanalytical theory to analyse a work of literature allows the reader to consider how the writing represents the author's repressed desires, fears, and impulses. The psychoanalytical analysis also considers how the literature presents the author's isolation from events or even the denial of the existence of certain events and circumstances through identification of the inner workings of the mind.

This study examines the portrayal of the human psyche in Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," drawing parallels with Owen's own encounters with war. Focusing solely on Sigmund Freud's personality theory of the id, ego, and superego, the analysis delves into the psychological traumas endured by soldiers, including Owen, during World War I. By applying Freudian concepts, such as the primal instincts of the id, the rationality of the ego, and the moral dictates of the superego, this research sheds light on the inner conflicts and struggles depicted in Owen's poem. Through this lens, the study offers a deeper understanding of the psychological toll of war on individuals, providing insight into the experiences of soldiers grappling with the complexities of their own minds amidst the horrors of conflict.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Strange Meeting, Wilfred Owen.

INTRODUCTION

World War I, also known as the "Great War" from 1914 to 1918, stands as one of the most traumatic and tragic events in human history. The war completely reshaped the geopolitical scenario as well as the attitudes of people, making them vulnerable both physically and mentally. Amidst the chaos and bloodshed, a new generation of poets formed, shifting away from the rustic and lyrical themes of Georgian poetry to a realistic and gory depiction of warfare. These poets

were soldiers who used poetry to commemorate their wartime experiences, earning them the titles "war poets" or "trench poets." Drawing from the tragedies of war, their poetry provides direct insight into the human condition throughout the early 1900s' military conflicts.

During this era, notable poets such as Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Francis Ledwidge, Wilfred Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg emerged. Their poetry delved into themes such as innocence lost, grappling with mortality and devastation, trauma, and the grim realities of war. Their poetic endeavours aimed beyond mere documentation, seeking to convey the raw emotions and authentic sentiments surrounding the wartime experiences. Through their work, they aimed to teach the next generation that war is ultimately pointless and detrimental to life.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was born at Plas Wilmot, near Oswestry, Shropshire, on the Welsh border. He received his education at the Birkenhead Institute and Shrewsbury Technical School. Throughout his childhood and youth, he had sensitive health. However, he volunteered in the Artists' Rifles in October 1915 when the war broke out. During the war, he met Siegfried Sassoon, the well-known war poet, and was inspired by his poetry and pacifist beliefs. He was killed in combat on November 4, 1918, one week before the end of hostilities. Owen's favourite poetry subject was war and the pity of war. His best-known works were "Dulce et decorum est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "Strange Meeting." Owen's poems were published posthumously by Siegfried Sassoon. His verse displays remarkable originality and Auden and Spender have copied his extensive use of alliterative assonance in place of rhyme. He also used 'para-rhyme' or 'half rhyme' in his poetry since it does not disrupt the solemnity of the mood, as full-rhyme might occasionally do.

Wilfred Owen's celebrated work "Strange Meeting," which explores the theme of war, was written in 1918. The title, "Strange Meeting," was inspired by a line in P.B. Shelley's "The Revolt of Islam." Initially, the poem was published after Owen's death in 1919, appearing in Edith Sitwell's collection "Wheels: An Anthology of Verse." It was later included in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot complimented "Strange Meeting" for its novel technical qualities, describing it as a "technical achievement of great originality" and one of the most emotionally moving war-inspired verses. Additionally, Ted Hughes praised the poem's clarity of purpose. What distinguishes "Strange Meeting" is its unique use of parhyme, a term used by Edmund Blunden to characterize Owen's approach of using consonant sounds before and after vowels to create partial or slant rhymes. This style pervades the poem, adding greatly to its melancholy and dreary atmosphere, according to reviewers.

The poem "Strange Meeting" depicts a soldier's surreal encounter with a fellow soldier in the afterlife. The majority of the poem is told through the soldiers' thoughts, until the final stanza exposes the setting as hell. On one level, the poem might be seen as both a protest against deceiving future generations into military participation and a depiction of war's savagery. However, it also gently suggests the poet's personal struggle during the conflict, as communicated by the soldier.

FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS IN WILFRED OWEN'S "STRANGE MEETING"

Psychoanalysis is a theory that concentrates on how the mind functions or it can also be defined as a research method for studying the contents of the mind, and therapy for modifying those contents to make them more adaptable and conducive to a happy, fulfilling existence. Sigmund Freud is widely regarded as the founder of conventional psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the unconscious mind, which includes memories, beliefs, wants, and instincts that people are unaware of, has a substantial influence on human behaviour. He highlighted the necessity of identifying unconscious aspects such as slips of the tongue, fantasies, and dreams to properly understand psychological processes. His idea is based on the concept of the unconscious, which provides insights

into hidden meanings and the suppression of specific thoughts and feelings.

In his seminal work "The Ego and the Id" (German: "Das Ich und das Es"), which was published in 1923, he introduced the three components of personality called the id, ego, and superego. The id functions at the unconscious level and is based on the pleasure principle. Eros and Thanatos are two different biological instincts that constitute the id. Eros, or the "life instinct," controls behaviours that keep people alive, such as eating, breathing, and having sex. Eros aids a person in surviving in the outside world. Libido is the energy that results from life instincts. All people possess a set of destructive tendencies known as Thanatos, or death instincts. This energy can occasionally be expressed by others as aggressiveness or violence. Freud was adamant that Eros was more powerful than Thanatos. The ego starts to develop soon after birth, and it strives to balance the desires of the id (pleasure principle) and the realities of the outside world (objective). The ego functions according to the reality principle, in which instinctual energy is repressed to maintain an individual's security and also to help in social integration. Moreover, the ego makes decisions, directs actions, and also promotes thinking and problem-solving at a higher level. The superego represents societal rights and wrongs as taught and modelled by a person's parents, teachers, and other key figures. The superego contains the conscience, which keeps us from acting ethically inappropriately by making us feel guilty if we do wrong. The superego helps us manage the id's impulses, making our behaviour less selfish and more ethical.

This study focuses on a psychoanalytic analysis of Owen's poetry "Strange Meeting," emphasizing the importance of Freud's personality theory, namely the id, ego, and superego, in revealing the poem's underlying unconscious elements.

The id represents the fundamental, intrinsic drives and urges that reside in the subconscious. In "Strange Meeting," these drives are manifested through (i) the soldier's natural drive to ensure his survival, (ii) the portrayal of war's gloomy and futile nature, and (iii) the desire to be acclaimed as a "hero" after triumphing in battle. The poem's first lines validate the basic urge for human survival and the desire for life.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped

Through granites which titanic wars had groined
When Owen refers to "some battle I escaped," we see it as a perfect metaphor for the distressing past events that many people would rather forget. However, psychoanalysis says that whatever one wants to avoid often reappears, potentially heightened or in a different form, to teach an unlearned lesson. The battle symbolizes the narrator's inner strife, as he seeks solace "down some profound dull tunnel" dug in "granite," a nearly indestructible substance similar to gravestones. The tunnel's construction during the "titanic wars" conjures up images of Hades, the underworld, which represents the powerful id, the unconscious aspect of human identity.

Owen clearly portrays the horrors of war in his poems, particularly through lines such as:

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan
When viewed through Freud's unconscious analytical lens, these lines provide clear insight into Owen's diagnosis of "shell shock," which is now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The harsh experiences of battle have raised unresolved existential issues about the meaning of life for the soldier. Describing the fellow soldier's face as "with thousand fears" reflects the stress and fear he experienced during and after the conflict. Furthermore, the poem might be read as a conversation between Owen the poet and Owen the soldier. It expresses the awareness that every battle eventually leads to the annihilation of humanity and serves no purpose other than the desires of power-seeking politicians. Another aspect influencing the soldier's id is his uncontrollable drives and wants, which drive him to seek valour, power, and heavenly veneration upon his return from battle. In essence, he is unable to avoid the influence of his id, which causes his ego to fail to reconcile with his id and superego. Owen, originally motivated by the id, later clearly emphasizes the futility of war and opposes the recruiting of young people with false promises of heroism and financial security. Unfortunately, Owen's death on the battlefield at the age of 25, combined with the poem's depiction of the "strange meeting" of the soldiers in hell, provides a heartbreaking juxtaposition.

The superego or the moral compass of the mind is revealed through the last lines of the poem in the fellow soldier's monologue:

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . ."

Here, the poet allusively explains that he has fulfilled his soldierly duty, which required him to kill enemy soldiers without showing compassion and to fight for victory by his oath. It's possible to speculate that these warriors, despite their deadly meeting, had no idea that they would meet up with friends in the afterlife. What makes Owen's war poetry remarkable is its unconventional interpretation of conflict. While some, like Rupert Brooke in "The Soldier," glorify war as heroic and purposeful, Owen on the other hand depicts war as disastrous and futile. Owen stresses that war's meaninglessness leads to the metaphorical death of many young soldiers. Similarly, in "Strange Meeting," the soldiers' deaths are caused by the meaninglessness of their countries' conflicts; they are not adversaries by choice, but because of political manipulations. As a result, the soldier refers to his enemy as "my friend," implying that they are both innocent and victims of national animosity. They participate in battle because their impulses drive them to seek public recognition as heroes. Furthermore, social pressure forces them to sacrifice themselves for their countries, demonstrating the power of public opinion over their actions.

The 'ego' mediates between the opposing urges of the 'id' and the 'superego', eventually determining soldiers' perceptions and behaviour in the face of war's horror. Throughout the poem, the soldiers engage in a meaningful conversation that depicts their psychological conflicts and moral dilemmas. This discourse represents the ego's struggle to reconcile the competing demands of its primitive instincts and moral conscience. For example, when one soldier refers to the other as "my friend," despite having murdered him in battle, it represents an acknowledgement of their common humanity and the moral ambiguity of their predicament. This acknowledgement reveals the soldiers' empathy and moral reasoning abilities, which are typical of the ego. "Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness.

Through these lines, the narrator expresses real care for his fellow soldier, who appears to be frightened despite being miles away from the slaughter and

sadness of the war. This demonstrates the empathic side, which is acted on by the 'ego', to reconnect with reality after the battle, as well as the narrator's early realization of the nasty reality of war, which serves no purpose other than to create mental and physical wastelands. Their encounter and subsequent interaction after death signify the end of their hostility. Furthermore, an overpowering sense of hopelessness and wasted youth prevents them from enjoying life's joys. As soldiers of opposing nations are obliged to murder one another in battle, they are dehumanized as an essential aspect of their duty.

For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

These lines create a feeling of self-awareness in him, causing him to regret squandering his life on something meaningless and worthless. He also learns the ultimate truth about battle, which has been hidden from the nation: war is futile and must be discouraged. Simultaneously, his sense of self-worth is destroyed as he understands his time on Earth has come to a close, and he failed to communicate the facts of war to the people, perhaps preventing the ruin of many young lives and lands in the aftermath. "Pity" emerges as the only feeling that persists in people's brains, causing long-term suffering and disrupting mental serenity.

In the poem "Strange Meeting", there is a conflict between the 'id' and the 'superego', representing the instinctual desire to save his life from the war and the soldier's duty to fulfil their commitments. The narrator navigates both impulses but eventually finds himself in a position of futility after dying alongside a fellow soldier whom he murdered the day before. This shows the disruption of the 'ego,' which balances the 'id' and the 'superego,' is evident. Owen's purpose in creating this masterwork was to inform people about the true nature of war, contrasting the idealized picture commonly seen in periodicals or newspapers of 1914-1918, and presenting instead the dismal reality of pain and bloodshed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, applying Freudian theory of personality to the poem "Strange Meeting" provided insight into Wilfred Owen's psychological distress during World War I. The poem may be used as a basic framework to comprehend the unconscious thoughts of all World

War I soldier, including the poet. This research provided a thorough examination of the poet's "id," or primal instinct, "superego," or moral compass, and lastly, "ego," or the intermediary between "id" and "superego," as presented in the narration and composition of the poem "Strange Meeting." The struggle between the "id" and "superego," as portrayed in the poem's military imagery, alludes to the dilemma Owen encountered while fighting in the war.

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