**Workshop 07:**

**The Application of Freudian Psychoanalysis to the Analysis of Selected Literary Texts**

**1. The Narrator’s Psyche in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Black Cat***

The morbid literary style of Edgar Allan Poe permeates the short story of the *Black Cat.* The absurd nature of the narrator’s character leaves the reader perplexed and disturbed bythe illogical reasoning behind his behaviour. Using a psychoanalysis approach, we can examinethe narrator’s character development in the story in regards to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytictheory of human personalities: the id, the ego and the superego.

According to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, the id is the inherited, primitive and instinctual component of personality. In other words, id is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality that responds directly to the instincts. These instincts include the sexual instinct – the Eros, and the aggression instinct – the Thanatos. The id acts upon a pleasure principle in a selfish manner that simultaneously, does not comply with reality. Instead, it engages with illogical and irrational side of the psyche which is inherently expressed through the narrator in the *Black Cat*, as he resorts to unnatural behaviours. For instance, when the narrator came home intoxicated, Pluto is frightened by him and avoids him – much to the narrator’s annoyance as he states: “I seized him…the fury of the demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body.” Here, we can see the unconscious side of the narrator’s psyche being brought to light that conforms to Thanatos instinct. However, even though the narrator’s ego is aware that he does not recognise himself, he does not comprehend nor acknowledge his reasoning behind his impulsive and violent decisions. Instead, he accuses the ‘demon’ of possessing his soul as a justification for his abuse towards the cat. Of course, the narrator’s intoxicated state does somewhat rationalise his violent behaviour; yet, his id acts upon the pleasure principle, with that pleasure being violence and the torture of animals.

Unlike the id, the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world. In other words, the ego is the component of the personality that is responsible with dealing with the reality. This component is exemplified through the narrator’s hesitation to mistreat the second black cat as he states: “at such time, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of a former crime”. The ego of the narrator has acknowledged his crime for killing the first black cat; however, there is a perversion in his actions as this guilt has quickly diminished along with his affection for second black cat. His id’s desires for pleasure has led the second black cat to the same tragic fate as Pluto.

The superego operates as a moral conscience that incorporates the values of society and its main function is to control id’s impulses. This component can the punish through causing feelings of culpability if the ego gives into the id demands. The superego in this regard is motioned in the narrator’s psyche as the feelings of guilt from his first killing withholds him from hurting the second black cat. However, as the second black cat end up with a tragic fate; it is apparent that the narrator’s id and its urges for pleasurable satisfaction have surpassed the ego and the superego.

To summarize, the narrator’s id overruled the two other component of his personality: the ego and the superego. The narrator’s desires and demands needed to be attained and his id component was adamant that they were met regardless of his ways in doing so and whomever it hurt. It is clear that his id conforms to the pleasure principle as the narrator’s desire to hurt and torture animals increases pleasure with every attack and that alcohol ignited this perversion of events.

**2. The Oedipus Complex in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

Although Freud himself made some applications of his theories to art and literature, it remained for an English disciple, the psychoanalyst Ernest ]ones, to provide the first full-scale psychoanalytic treatment of a major literary work. ]ones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, originally published as an essay in The American Journal of Psychology in 1910, was later revised and enlarged.

Jones bases his argument on the thesis that Hamlet's much debated delay in killing his uncle, Claudius, is to be explained in terms of internal rather than external circumstances and that the "play is mainly concerned with a hero's unavailing fight against what can only be called a disordered mind." In his carefully documented essay Jones builds a highly persuasive case history of Hamlet as a psychoneurotic who suffers from manic-depressive hysteria combined with an *abulia* (an inabilitv to exercise will power and come to decisions)-all of which may be traced to the hero's severely repressed Oedipal feelings. Jones points out that no really satisfying argument has ever been substantiated for the idea that Hamlet avenges his father's murder as quickly as practicable. Shakespeare makes Claudius's guilt as well as Hamlet's duty perfectly clear from the outset-if we are to trust the words of the ghost and the gloomy insights of the hero himself. The fact is, however, that Hamlet does not fulfill this duty until absolutely forced to do so by physical circumstances-and even then only after Gertrude, his mother, is dead. Jones also elucidates the strong misogyny that Hamlet displays throughout the play, especially as it is directed against Ophelia, and his almost physical revulsion to sex. All of this adds up to a classic example of the neurotically repressed Oedipus complex.

The ambivalence that typifies the child's attitude toward his father is dramatized in the characters of the ghost (the good, lovable father with whom the boy identifies) and Claudius (the hated father as tyrant and rival), both of whom are dramatic projections of the hero's own conscious-unconscious ambivalence toward the father figure. The ghost represents the conscious ideal of fatherhood, the image that is socially acceptable. His view of Claudius, on the other hand, represents Hamlet's repressed hostility toward his father as a rival for his mother's affection. This new king-father is the symbolic perpetrator of the very deeds toward which the son is impelled by his own unconscious motives: murder of his father and incest with his mother. Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill Claudius because to do so he must, in a psychological sense, kill himself. His delay and frustration in trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for vengeance may therefore be explained by the fact that, as ]ones puts it, the "thought of incest and parricide combined is too intolerable to be borne. One part of him tries to carry out the task, the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it."

Norman N. Holland neatly summed up the reasons both for Hamlet's delay and also for our three-hundred-year delay in comprehending Hamlet's true motives:

Now what do critics mean when they say that Hamlet cannot act because of his Oedipus complex? The argument is very simple, very elegant. One, people over the centuries have been unable to say why Hamlet delays in killing the man who murdered his father and married his mother. Two, psychoanalytic experience shows that every child wants to do just exactly that. Three, Hamlet delays because he cannot punish Claudius for doing what he himself wished to do as a child and, unconsciously, still wishes to do: he would be punishing himself. Four, the fact that this wish is unconscious explains why people could not explain Hamlet's delay.

A corollary to the Oedipal problem in *Hamlet* is the pronounced misogyny in Hamlet's character. Because of his mother's abnormally sensual affection for her son, an affection that would have deeply marked Hamlet as a child with an Oedipal neurosis, he has in the course of his psychic development repressed his incestuous impulses so severely that this repression colours his attitude toward all women: "The total reaction culminates in the bitter misogyny of his outburst against Ophelia, who is devastated at having to bear a reaction so wholly out of proportion to her own offense and has no idea that in reviling her Hamlet is really expressing his bitter resentment against his mother." The famous "Get thee to a nunnery" speech has even more sinister overtones than are generally recognized, explains Jones, when we understand the pathological degree of Hamlet's conditions and read "nunnery" as Elizabethan slang for brothel.

**3. Love and Repressed Sexuality in William Blake’s “The Sick Rose”**

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|  | The Sick Rose |
|  | O Rose thou art sick.  The invisible worm,  That flies in the night  In the howling storm:  Has found out thy bed  Of crimson joy:  And his dark secret love  Does thy life destroy.  **William Blake** |

“The Sick Rose” is often interpreted as an [allegory](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/allegory) for the corrupting influence of sexual desire. That said, William Blake was actually an advocate for sexual liberation well ahead of his time. With this in mind, the poem seems to critique the way that sexual unions are so often shrouded in secrecy, darkness, and shame. The poem thus becomes an allegory not for the corrupting influence of sexual desire itself, but for the damage caused by the suppression of that desire.

A rose is a conventional [symbol](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/symbolism) of love, romance, and femininity (often linked to the vagina itself). In this context, the worm can read as a phallic representation of the male sexual organ, which here seeks to penetrate the rose’s bed (meaning both flower bed and the conventional type of bed). The poem certainly plays with these connotations, with the rose’s “bed” offering up a kind of “crimson joy.”

But though the worm represents strong desire, it can only act on this desire by remaining hidden. And despite the mention of “joy,” the union between the rose and the worm is neither openly joyful nor celebratory. The worm’s desire is “dark,” “secret,” and can only be fulfilled in the anonymity afforded by travelling during a “howling storm” at night. The worm’s desire is literally and figuratively forced underground, perhaps gesturing towards societal ideas about sex that are based on shame, guilt, and sinfulness.

The nature of the worm’s so-called love, then, is damaging and destructive. It seems that it’s the “dark[ness]” and secrecy of the worm’s love that “destroys” the rose’s life—rather than the action of loving itself. While love is usually something positive and nourishing, here is a vision of love corrupted into a deadly force. While love is usually life-affirming, here it’s a killer. And though the poem doesn’t delve too deeply into what makes this love so corrupt, it’s the worm’s distinguishing feature of invisibility that makes this union so grotesque. The rose doesn’t even necessarily know of the worm’s existence, adding another unsettling layer of seediness and secrecy.

In the unhealthy union between worm and rose, then, sex and desire cease to be joyful, (re)productive, or creative. Though sex is the method by which the human race maintains its presence on this planet, here sex—or its suppression—is a destructive, evil force. The worm is invisible, both there and not there. That is, though sexual desire is ever-present, its natural fulfillment depends upon the prevailing attitudes towards sex. Arguably, then, the sickness of the rose stands in for the sickness of repressed sexuality in general. In other words, the poem suggests that society has lost perspective on the naturalness—and innocent joy—of sex.