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Sigmund vs Edna:

Freudian Repression in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier struggles with the idea of who she wants to be as opposed to who society wants her to be. Edna is constantly balancing her own desires and society's expectations, choosing, in the end, to give in to her desires. In this way, while trying to become who she wants to be, Edna exemplifies the Freudian ideas of the id, ego, and superego, and the repression of desires.

Sigmund Freud, as taught by John Pennington, believed that man is a neurotic animal, meaning driven by the libido or sexual desire. This sexual desire can also be referred to as the pleasure principle, which is in constant conflict with the reality principle, or the prohibition of these desires. In order for a person to go from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, one must repress the pleasure principle and the urges that come with it. This idea of repression is one of Freud's most well-known theories, and it is split into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. The ego is the "I," it has contact with the world and is a tangible thing. The id is the "it," it is the desires driven by the libido or pleasure principle. The superego is the reality principle and governing-societal force. The superego is in charge of repressing desires driven by the libido, and these repressed desires are buried deep in the subconscious. In the subconscious, a repressed desire needs an outlet, such as a dream, or it will make itself known in the form of a

Freudian slip (Pennington). Edna Pontellier demonstrates Freud's main ideas of repression and the id, ego, and superego in *The Awakening*.

One of Freud's topics that is most prevalent in *The Awakening* is the idea of the ego, superego, and id. In his book, *Paul Ricoeur*, Karl Simms describes Freud's psychological trio as follows:

The id is... the unadulterated collection of primitive desires that have been forgotten by the conscious mind because they are repressed. The Ego is the conscious mind, sandwiched between the id and the superego. The superego is the conscience, which acts as a brake on the Ego by doing the work of repressing the id. Occasionally the id will out, however, as it does in dreams, jokes or flashes of wit (Simms 46).

The id, ego, and superego all function differently, but they all serve one main purpose--to distinguish between acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior. Edna's id, or her desire, wants her to seek out a relationship with Robert, but her superego, her conscience, says that this desire is unacceptable. When in discussion with Edna about her feelings for Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz asks, "What will you do when he comes back?" to which Edna responds, "Do? Nothing except feel glad and happy to be alive," (Chopin 104). Edna will do "nothing except feel glad and happy to be alive" because while her id wants a life with Robert, her ego deems this desire unacceptable. Because Edna's desire for Robert is unacceptable, seeing as she is a married woman, she represses the desire. In other words, Edna's unconscious wishes to hide it from her conscious mind.

The superego buries that which society frowns upon in order to put on a socially acceptable face for the world in a process which Freud called repression, and Edna's repression

of her desire for Robert becomes clear when she discusses her feelings for Mr. Lebrun with Mademoiselle Reisz:

“It seems to me if I were young and in love I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion”

“Now it is you who are telling lies and seeking to deceive me Mademoiselle, or else you have never been in love, and know nothing about it,” (Chopin 104).

In this passage, Mademoiselle Reisz suggests that Edna is in love with Robert, to which she responds that Mademoiselle must be “telling lies and seeking to deceive [her].” Her denial of these feelings indicates that she has repressed them because her conscious mind is unable to deal with the fact that she desires a man when she should not.

Freud believed that all repressed desires need an outlet. For Freud “libidinal desire is a natural instinctive inclination, leading to the worst form of neurosis and delirium,” (Bahroun 426) that is, of course, unless it has some type of outlet. For Edna, the outlet is her affair with Alcée Arobin. What she cannot do with Robert, she does with Alcée Arobin. For Edna, “Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lip upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (Chopin 100). Alcée is not Robert, so she feels no love for him, but she simply uses him as an outlet for her repressed feelings for Robert. By using Alcée as an outlet for her feelings for Robert, Edna again demonstrates Freud’s thinking.

While the main function of the superego is to repress desires of the id deemed unacceptable, the id does sometimes win out, causing a person to give in to their desires. The ending of *The Awakening* is one such example. While swimming to what she knows is her death, Edna thinks, “‘It doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier -- but Raoul and Etienne!’ She

understood now how clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children,” (Chopin 138). Edna’s superego tells her not to kill herself because she would be harming her children by doing so; however, in the end, the Id wins out because “she would never sacrifice herself for her children.” By swimming out to the sea and to her death, Edna gives into her id and fulfilling her desires. While giving in to the desires of the id is often the socially unacceptable choice, “Freud’s thinking on the other hand is that the world would be a better place if everyone allowed themselves openly to be guided by their passions,” (Simms 48). By giving into her desires despite her superego pushing her to do the opposite, Edna demonstrates Freud’s idea of the id and how it sometimes reigns victorious over the superego.

Edna Pontellier exemplifies Freudian theory in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. The biggest examples of Freudian theory are Edna repressing her desires for Robert, using Alcée Arobin as an outlet for her repressed desires, and ultimately giving in to the desires of her id. Through these actions and others along her storyline, Edna is a consistent example of Freudian repression through the id, ego, and superego.

Works Cited

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