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English 305: Essay 3 Draft 3

March 24, 2020

Sigmund vs Edna:

Freudian Repression in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

“She was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world,” (Chopin 79). 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, and 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. While Edna is constantly “casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment,” she is demonstrating a person becoming more in-tune with her desires, while paying less attention to the presence of her superego. In balancing her own desires and society's expectations, choosing, in the end, to give in to her desires, Edna Pontellier demonstrates the Freudian idea of repression, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

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 and repression of these desires. 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 “rational, pragmatic part of our personality... It's what Freud considered to be the ‘self,’” (Boundless). Edna's ego is all of her actions that are tangible to the world. . The id is the “most primitive of

the three structures, is concerned with instant gratification of basic physical needs and urges,” (Boundless). Edna’s id is present in all of her desires, repressed or otherwise.. The third part of Freud’s neurotic trio is the superego, which is “concerned with social rules and morals—similar to what many people call their ‘conscience,’” (Boundless). Edna’s superego is what suppresses all of her desires deemed immoral. A desire repressed by the superego is buried deep in the subconscious, where it will need an outlet or it will make itself known in the form of a Freudian slip (Pennington). The repression of Edna’s desires causes conflict between her id and superego, and the struggle with her unconscious desires illustrates Freud’s main ideas of repression in *The Awakening*.

The Freudian idea of repression can be seen in *The Awakening* through Edna’s id, ego, and superego. 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. This repression of Edna’s desire illustrates Freud’s idea of repression through the inward battle between superego and id. .

The Freudian idea of repression is further represented when Edna discusses her feelings for Robert 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. The fact that Edna represses her feelings for Robert because her conscience deems them immoral is a classic example of Freudian repression and its appearance in *The Awakening*.

Along with the repression itself, Freud’s idea of how repression is handled is also present in *The Awakening*. Freud believed that all repressed desires need an outlet. According to Freudian logic, “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 for her repressed desire 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 Edna 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 repression in the novel. .

While the ending to *The Awakening* may seem as though it is the opposite of desire repression, Freudian thought can still be interpreted through Edna’s tragic end. 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). Despite the fact that giving into desire is not commonly thought of as desire repression, Edna still demonstrates Freud’s idea of repression by achieving her unconscious desires.

Edna Pontellier exemplifies Freudian repression in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. The biggest examples of repression seen throughout the story 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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