

Original Paper

A Comparison between *A Rose for Emily* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman*—Based on Freud’s Personality Structure Theory

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Abstract

The two works Letter from an Unknown Woman and A Rose for Emily have made excellent description of woman’s love and contained profound meanings. The former is a passionate confession, and the latter is an implicit critique. This essay compares and analyzes the two heroines’ love tragedies from the perspective of Freud’s Personality Structure Theory and attempts to explore how the id, ego and superego influence the heroines’ psychology and behavior. The Psychoanalysis approach offers insight into the cause of their tragedies, it’s the imbalance of their personality structure leads to their doomed tragic fates.

Keywords

Freudianism, Psychoanalysis, Personality Structure

1. Introduction

The work of the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is the last words before death written by a spoony woman who is loyal to love. The writer recorded the love of the unknown woman with a delicate and sorrowful tone. In the story, Zweig uses psychoanalytic theory to extend the brushstrokes to the most secretive and most subtle corners of the heroine’s soul, to explore the woman’s spiritual and emotional world and to show their psychology in love.

Unlike Zweig’s subtle description of the psychology of the unknown woman, In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner never directly depicts Emily’s psychology and gives Emily little chance to speak directly. The story tells Emily’s longing for love under the pressure of traditional social values and her crazy retention of love in her struggle. Love has changed Emily’s life, once as sweet as bait but finally made her crazy.

The love psychology of the two heroines is at two extremities. Love in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is doomed to be a tragedy from the time it happens, and although she has long been aware of it, she still bears her destiny without hesitation and takes pleasure in it. *A Rose for Emily* is about Emily's longing for love under the pressure of traditional social values and her crazy retention of love in her struggle. Their tragedies are essentially clashes and conflicts of their id, ego, and superego from the psychoanalysis perspective.

2. Personality Structure Theory

Personality can be defined as consistent behavior patterns and intrapersonal processes originating within the individual (Horney, 1999, p. 4). The consistency and intrapersonal process vary from person to person thus forming different characteristics and behaviors of individuals. There are several approaches to explain personality as psychoanalytic approach, the trait approach, the biological approach, the humanistic approach, the behavioral/social learning approach, and the cognitive approach and others. Each has its effect in identifying and examining an important aspect of human personality, but the most famous and influential one is the psychoanalysis approach, the psychoanalysts represented by Sigmund Freud argue that people's unconscious minds are largely responsible for important differences in their behavior styles.

Freud's psychoanalysis tries to find out the ultimate causes that lie behind those activities by analyzing the mental activities of human beings (Zhang, 1968 p. 19). He revised his early theory after the 1920s and put forward the theory of triple personality structure. The term "structure" as applied to personality has come to connote stability and relative permanence of organization as opposed to states in flux or change which had been termed "dynamic" (Wiggins, 1968, p. 293). Freud believes that personality can be divided into three parts as a whole: id, ego and superego.

As the structure of people's unconsciousness, id is primitive and innate, and all instincts and passions originate from it. The only function of the id is to vent the excitement aroused by internal and external stimuli and to obtain the satisfaction of unrestrained instinctive desires. Under the influence of society, a part of the id differentiates into ego, which is in sharp contrast to the pleasure principle of id. Ego follows the principle of "realism" and plays a regulating role between id and reality. By suppressing and storing those things that are not accepted by society into unconsciousness, it helps the id to seek benefits and avoid disadvantages. Superego is the moral expression of personality. It is bound by social taboos, morals, ethical norms and religious disciplines. Therefore, superego pursues perfection and reality, and it exists as a dignified guardian.

The personality structure has an impact on individual's behavior. If the three parts of personality are in balance and harmony, the individual's spiritual activity is sound, he/she can effectively meet his basic needs and desires. On the contrary, if the three parts of personality are in contradiction, the individual's spiritual activity is maladjusted, he/she cannot live normally, even get neurosis (Che, 1992, p. 357). When the ego succumbs to id, the superego punishes ego and makes people feel guilty or even sin.

When the ego defeats the id, the superego rewards ego and generates a sense of honor and pride. The ego and superego are not separated from each other completely. They are used as a simple way to express the different psychological processes and spiritual motivation of one person. When the three are in a balanced state, the personality will develop normally. When the three are in contradiction, the abnormal state of spirit will be caused.

3. Id of Emily and the Unknown Woman

Id is the most primitive part of Freud's personality system, which is composed of human innate instinct and basic desire, and hides the impulse of human instinct. Among all kinds of instinctive desires, sexual instinct is the most important and powerful part. The motive behind this instinct is called Libido by Freud. In Freud's early theory, Libido was regarded as an intrinsic and primary performance of sexual instinct, which was the driving force of all human activities. The energy of the id is used to satisfy people by focusing on an object, to release or eliminate excitement and tension. This process is called energy concentration. In the id state, people are in a natural state, thus they will not consider any interfering factors from the environment. In order to obtain maximum happiness and meet the instinctive needs, people will take different ways of activities at all costs to achieve their goals, or even by all means.

3.1 Id of Emily

Emily, who was born in an aristocratic family, had never been able to get the right to love since the beginning of her love affair. She lost her mother in her childhood, but her father held a supreme position. Therefore, Emily only exists as an "object" held by her father, and she is deprived of the subjectivity of being a "person". So there is the most symbolic and wonderful picture in the story: Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door (Faulkner, 1990, p. 11). While the poor Emily could only stand behind her father and become a bystander of happiness until she was 30 years old and still a spinster.

Emily grew up under the control of her father and the restraint of traditional Southern moral principles. Her instinct desire was suppressed, but in Emily's id and deep heart, she always held a strong desire for love and a better life. Like all women in love, she fell in love with a Yankee, Homer Buron. She was like a little girl who had tasted love for the first time. Despite the comment of the townspeople and the obstruction of her relatives, she paired up with Homer and customized a complete set of toilets for him, so that the townspeople guessed that "they are going to get married" and "they are already married". The town women hated her so much and thought Emily's behavior was immoral, humiliating to the whole town and a bad example to the young people. At that time, Emily, an aristocrat Southerner, needed great courage to fall in love with a Yankee like Homer. When she knew that she couldn't marry her lover fairly, she poisoned her lover by extreme means. Her id was fully released. Emily's id is shown in her proud character. In her heart, she is an aristocrat with pride in her bones, so she refused to

pay taxes without even paying attention to the law. When buying arsenic, her pride made the arsenic seller give in, which is also the role of her pride id.

3.2 Id of the Unknown Woman

In the different life stages of the unknown woman, drove by unconscious id desire, she shows irrational passion and distorted personality. When she was a 13-year-old girl who had not yet fully developed, the mysterious, rich and knowledgeable new neighbor R had an infinite charm for her, which aroused her great curiosity. While R's handsome and unrestrained, especially his emotional and soul-stirring eyes, aroused her strong and uncontrollable passion. The unconscious id impulse makes the little girl fall in love with R, thus showing some abnormal behavior and psychology. Every day except for school, she spent all her time waiting for R's return, peeping into his daily life, habits, kissing the door handle that R touched, picking up the cigar butts he threw away in front of the door, etc. The unknown woman has a rational understanding of R, but her passion for R is not guided by reason. This is reflected on her distorted personality, which does not take into account the pros and cons of gains and losses, but blindly exercises her own desire without asking why. As Freud said, the instinctive impulse to satisfy the instinctual needs is irrational.

Through irrational passion and distorted personality on the surface of the unknown woman, we could see that the inner surge of her is a spiritual force. That is her extraordinary awe for R. As a result, the arrival of R causes a sharp contrast with the girl's past life and has a great impact on the girl's spiritual world. As a cultural symbol and spiritual power of mystery, R has formed unconsciously in the little girl's mind. It is this cultural symbol, mystery and distance that make the unknown woman unconsciously has infinite feelings of admiration, awe and worship for R. Because of a sense of distance, she is shy, timid and afraid to face R; she longs to know R, but only observes R secretly as a peeper; she longs to approach R, but she only approaches R in an imaginary way of life, such as reading hard in secret, practicing piano, caring about clothes, etc. All this shows the girl's admiration, awe and worship of R, and her desire to shorten the gap with R, and to chase her imaginary idol.

4. Ego of Emily and the Unknown Woman

Ego is located between the primitive instinct-driven id and outside world. Its function is to maintain contact with outside world and regulate the conflict between id and superego, to maintain the stability and coordination between the personality and the outside world. An important task of id is to satisfy the instinctive impulse as much as possible, but when realistic conditions do not allow, ego will restrain or delay the release of id's energy. Therefore, ego acts with the reality principles. Ego is based on the realistic conditions, wandering between id and superego, trying to coordinate the relationship between them and maintain the overall personality balance.

4.1 Ego of Emily

Freud believed that part of the id formed a mechanism of self-examination because it was constantly inhibited in the whole process of human growth. This part of the controlled id becomes ego, which is

the rational part of psychological behavior. The ego restricts and controls the id in order to find a right time to satisfy some of the requirements of the id. Emily knew that the tradition of the South does not allow woman to have lover, so after she ventures to fall in love with the Yankee Homer, she tries to marry him in order to eliminate her sense of guilt. Unfortunately, she was later abandoned by Homer. In this way, the only way to have Homer is to kill him and then marry a dead man, which not only meets her id's requirements, but also preserves the morality of women and externally eliminates the guilt in her heart, but the murder of her lover has caused great harm to her. She carries a permanent "cross" in her spirit, is always in self-reproach and uneasiness. As a proud and conceited southerner who refuses to accept defeat and cannot afford lose. Emily will never admit her guilt or let others punish her. From then on, she isolated herself from the outside world and led a life of purity and selflessness until she died in the old house.

4.1 Ego of the Unknown Woman

From her sixteen to eighteen, the unknown woman moved with her mother to a different place, but her love for R has always increased, which is the so-called unconscious id without timeliness and reality. As an instinctive impulse, once produced, it will not change with the passage of time or the change of circumstances. Because far away from the city where R lives, the love complex in girl's heart cannot be projected to ego, thus the unknown woman shows comprehensive symptoms of delusion and compulsion. She closed herself up in the gloomy world of self-torture and loneliness. She refused to associate with others, to participate in any activities, but to experience love completely in her fantasy. According to Freud's theory, the unknown woman represses the unconscious instinct impulse with a kind of illusory consciousness and makes it satisfied in a disguised and symbolic way. When she comes to a new environment, she should have adapt herself to the external reality, transfer and change her way of satisfaction, but she still insists on acting alone, not changing her infatuation to R, ignoring the value of self-existence and reality, which shows her distorted personality and morbidity.

The adolescent girl still has some childish love for R with the development of her body and the germination of her sexual desire, her passion for R becomes more intense and feminine in puberty. When she returned to Vienna at the age of eighteen, she was keen to devote herself entirely to R. She attracted R's attention actively. Driven by her strong passion, she devoted herself to R and spent nights with him in ecstasy. However, R still did not recognize that the woman in front of him was the girl next door who had always loved him. He never asked her name and after every passion, he cheated her by going out and playing with her feelings. It can be seen that R and the unknown woman have never been in a responsible relationship. The unknown woman said, when I tell you that I gave myself to you as a maiden, do not misunderstand me. I am not making any charge against you. You did not entice me, deceive me, seduce me. I threw myself into your arms; went out to meet my fate. I have nothing but thankfulness towards you for the blessedness of that night (Zweig, 2013, p. 16).

In order to satisfy her "id" desire, she lost her rationality, her ego, her self-esteem, lost the reserve and shyness that a beautiful girl should have. Why does the unknown woman distort herself and devote

herself crazily to R? It's not difficult to find that the unknown woman loves a person similar to her father in her imagination. It can be learned from the story that the unknown woman lost her father when she was a child. It can be said that she had never been loved by her father. This experience formed great trauma in her unconsciousness. The pain of her father's early death inadvertently left her a mark of need for her father, unconsciously forming a strong desire to seize all who can replace her father.

5. Superego of Emily and the Unknown Woman

Superego is the upper structure of personality system. It derives from ego. It is the representative of every moral restriction and the adviser of perfect pursuing. That is, in the personality system, the superego is responsible for monitoring the ego, restraining the instinctive impulse of the id, and making the individual's behavior conform to the social moral norms.

5.1 Superego of Emily

Superego is a psychological behavior governed by moral norms. As a descendant of the southern aristocrat, Emily is a "monumental" figure for the town people. She represents the powerful Southern planters and noble forces. The old order and moral principles exist in her superego endows her with dignity and respect in the community. When Emily's father died, the mayor exempted her from all taxes; when she died, the whole town attended her funeral. Her actions were under the supervision and judgment of the townspeople. Before her father's death, she always accompanied him. After her father's death, she firmly continued to shoulder the responsibility of defending the honor and privilege of her family. She maintained her family's special status in Jefferson Town in an almost bizarre way. Emily only gained personal freedom after her father's death. She could go to the outside world at will, make friends and do what she likes at will. But Emily was not really liberated spiritually. The traditional ethics of the South were deeply rooted in her heart. In Southerner's view, woman's morality requires woman to be pure and innocent, and a pure woman should be sexually insensitive and cold as ice. In Emily's tragic life, she has been struggling as a woman and traditional southern woman, and has been struggling with traditional ideas, but her every move has been deeply branded with the old southern traditional ideas, which makes her life have not been free from these "hidden rules" of control. As a result, she eventually could not get rid of the shackles of the traditional ideas in the South, fell victim to these traditional ideas, buried her lifelong happiness, and ended her miserable life with a sense of guilt. It can be seen that her superego lies in her spiritual contribution to family and community. Therefore, what is really admirable is that she spends her whole life to realize superego. Emily's strength of id, ego and superego is constantly changing and checking and balancing. When the three powers can't be checked and balanced, Emily's mental disorder will lead to the following weird acts of poisoning her lover and isolation from the world.

5.2 Superego of the Unknown Woman

After three nights of ecstasy with R, she had R's child. But R had already left her and forgot her. However, she believed that letting R take responsibility meant restricting and suppressing his nature and freedom. In order to raise her child and wait for R, she was willing to refuse the rich man's sincere proposal and sold herself as a mistress. People often use suffering as a means of attaining certain goals which, because of existing dilemmas, are difficult to attain otherwise (Horney, 2013, p. 259).

After another encounter ten years later, R still did not recognize her, and even regarded her as a prostitute, paying to humiliate her. The superego's sacrificing spirit and good human nature displayed by the unknown woman is in essence the superego of extreme self-abuse and self-distortion, and the superego of not asking for good and evil and morality. Knowing that R is playing tricks and deceiving, she is driven blindly by her feelings, and once again comes to seek love and devote herself on her own initiative. All these can be explained again that her personality is distorted and her behavioral psychology is against reality and morality.

But when the baby was born, the superego of the unknown woman changed. In the love with R, the unknown woman realized her happiness by R's recognition. After the birth of their child, there is another way to realize her self-ideal, that is, by striving to realize the value of their child and improve his living condition to reflect her self-value. This approach is very similar to the traditional "mother's honour increases as her son's position rises" model in China. And the principle of "all for child" coincides with the form in which id regard child as a substitute for sexual desire.

The superego in the personality of the unknown woman does not act according to social moral norms. It is a moral restriction confined to the world of her and R. She can abandon her boyfriend in an instant to satisfy the happiness of R. She can also sell herself in order to provide a good environment for their child to grow up. Fame and shame are hollow concepts to her. It is obvious that all laws, customs, virtues and public opinions in the social sense are not comparable to the happiness and emotional response from R.

6. Conclusion

From the above analysis, Freud's theory of personality structure offers evidence for Emily and the unknown woman's tragedy. It was the conflict in their spiritual world and hid in their subconscious. The confrontations of their id, ego, and superego caused them great pain and distortion. The development of their personality has both gone through three stages: disillusionment of superego, struggle of id but ultimately become slaves of ego. The two heroines were even unaware of it still less to say solve it. At the same time, the tragedies of the two heroines epitomized the lives of countless historical and even realistic figures. Everyone would encounter setbacks or difficulties, the key is the attitudes towards the problem and how to solve it and adjust oneself. Only by having a strong and healthy ego can we better regulate the restless id under stimulation, so as to better adapt to society.

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