



RESEARCH PAPER

Psychoanalytic Analysis of Ambrose Bierce's *The Boarded Window* (1891)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Ambrose Bierce's "The Boarded Window" through psychoanalytic analysis, based on the seminal writings of Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna Freud. The study goes into the protagonist, Murlock's, psychological subtleties, studying parts of the conscious and unconscious, dreams and reality, as well as protective mechanisms. The analysis reveals the impact of Freudian notions on Murlock's behavior through qualitative research and paying close attention to textual reading, elucidating themes of repression, regression, and displacement. The main goals are to investigate the essential features of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis in the short tale and to examine the significance of Anna Freud's defense mechanisms to the narrative. The results show a complex interplay of unconscious processes, dreams as a portal to suppressed realities, and the expression of defense systems in Murlock's mind. This study adds to our understanding of how psychoanalytic theories benefit literary interpretation, particularly in the context of Ambrose Bierce's terrifying narrative.

KEYWORDS Defense Mechanism, Regression, Repression, The Boarded Window. Unconscious

Introduction

Sigmund Freud explained numbers of ego defenses which reflected throughout his written works. His daughter Anna Freud, (1936) elaborated these developed ideas and also added ten into it, which we simply known as defense mechanisms. After that, many psychologists further added their concepts into it. Defense mechanisms are the weapon that helps human mind to cope up with anxiety that arises from unacceptable or traumatic thoughts and incidents. As Freud (1933) says, defense mechanism is distortion of reality for facing what's ahead.

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) is famous for his dark wit as Edger Allan Poe. His stories based on civil war and death with bizarre darkness of lifelessness and inclination towards mental instability and the horror of meaningless world. In his life, Bierce was famous journalist in California, because of his intellectual activity he was known as "the wickedest man in San Francisco" (Foundation, 2021).

The boarded window by Ambrose Bierce is a short story that was first published in 1891. This story talks about supernaturalism and it's supposedly a horror story but the state of mind of the protagonist leads us towards the psychological themes in it. Though researcher counts it mainly as a horror story but it cannot be denied that the darkness that is creating some sort of psychological impact on the reader also creates certain psychological impacts on the character. We can also say that this work has supernatural

elements but the way Bierce portrayed that into words, looks more like unstable psychological condition of the character rather than some supernatural impact.

This story is about a man named Murlock who lives in a virgin jungle along with his wife, isolated from the society and survives by trading animal skin. Murlock made a hut in the middle of the jungle and he only owns an axe and gun. One day when he returns from his hunting he found out that his wife is sick. He tries to get help from other people but because of the jungle all around, he was unable to do so and decided to nurse his wife all by himself. After few days, she dies. This causes an unexplainable impact on the character that we could only feel while reading it, due to this; he sometimes gets conscious and sometimes unconscious, sometimes somewhere but not there, sometimes see things which may or may not be true, sometimes say things which may or may not be true.

Literature Review

Critics agree that most of the psychological approaches are effective by the theoretical framework of an Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalytic criticism is very old and effective since the time of Aristotle, people use this technique to analyze human behavior as well as in these light critics analyze literature (Habib, 2008). Barry (2017) says psychoanalytical criticism is a type of criticism which uses some tools to understand literary text. To him psychoanalysis is a tool for treating mental disorders. Freud invented this technique for treating the patients of hysteria. (Habib, 2008) He draws a compelling comparison between a psychologist and a patient with hysteria on one hand, and a critic and a literary work on the other. According to him, Freud's approach to treating a patient mirrors the way a critic approaches a literary text. In the treatment of illnesses, particularly hysteria, Freud advised patients to sit in solitude and freely express their thoughts. He would then discreetly listen to their speech and analyze it, mirroring the critic's method of scrutinizing a literary work (Habib, 2008). Waugh thinks similar as he says human psyche is not limited but it has vast approach that even envelope literature in it (Waugh, 2006). Adams advocates for the application of psychoanalytic techniques in literature, asserting a profound connection between psychology and literature (Adams & Baker, 1994). Additionally, Tyson firmly endorses this viewpoint by suggesting that if psychoanalytic techniques can enhance our comprehension of human behavior, they are equally poised to illuminate our understanding of literary texts, which serve as reflections of human behavior (Tyson, 2014). So, psychoanalysis is a form of analysis that helps us to understand text in a whole lot of different way. Understanding literary text through this method is much more effective than structuralism, formalism and narratology (Brooks, 1987). Other literary technique discusses about the either characters, text or author but this approach directly peeps into the mind of author, character and text (Mahesar & Mashori, 2018). As Erdem, 2010 says that psychoanalysis is the only way that we go closer to the work than any other methodology. The literature is an artistic expression of the unconscious power of mind of an author, reader and critic (Tyson, 2014). As Kevin Corstorphine worked on blank darkness in this story, as Paul Manning worked on eco gothic elements of this story many worked on childhood issues on his other short stories but not on the boarded window and not implemented the specific elements of defense mechanism which this paper follows to bring in to the light.

Notably, Erdem posits that psychoanalysis stands as the primary methodology to approach literary works, emphasizing its unparalleled proximity to the intricacies of the creative process. As evident gaps in existing studies on Ambrose Bierce's "The Boarded Window" were identified, this research aims to bridge the void by focusing specifically on Sigmund Freud's defense mechanisms, such as unconsciousness, consciousness, dream,

repression, regression, and reaction formation, within the context of this intriguing short story.

Conceptual Framework

Researcher applies the theory of psychoanalysis on the short story the boarded window. Sigmund Freud (1846-1939) considered as the father of modern psychology, he is professionally a doctor, gave multiple theories on psychology but rather than its implementation on psychology it works best on literature and that is why researcher is applying this theory. Sigmund Freud believed in psychoanalysis theory, which is a theory focusing on the role of the unconscious mind in affecting conscious behavior. Actions and behaviors that seem basic, can be identified and analyzed by psychoanalytic theorem this shows how even the most mundane of behaviors and thoughts of a subject can be considered reflections of psychoanalytic concepts. Psychoanalysis can allow for people to understand more about why people do what they do. Most people behave a certain way due to past experiences that subconsciously govern their minds and lead them to do specific things (Tyson, 2014). On the other hand we have the proposed theories of Anna Freud (1895-1982), daughter of Sigmund Freud on the topic of defense mechanism, as she defined; defense mechanism as “unconscious resources derived by the ego” for decreasing stress ultimately. Like denial, repression, displacement, projection, reaction formation, sublimation and many more (Freud, 1937). Various elements of psychoanalysis we found in this work *The Boarded Window by Ambrose Bierce*.

Material and Methods

This paper follows the qualitative method of research in the form of close textual reading. Textual analysis is an educational guess, by the help of text; we interpret its meaning (McKee, 2001). Defense mechanism is a tool that mind generates in order to prevent anxiety that came from unacceptable thoughts or feelings (McLeod, 2023). By the use of psychological condition of the character Murlock of the short story *The Boarded Window* from Ambrose Bierce. Research that requires systematic and rigorous style for implementation of the study, qualitative research is concerned with the subjective meaning, description of social context and lay interpretation (Fossey et al., 2016).

Results and Discussion

Textual Analysis

According to Freudian (1937) theory, defense mechanism involves distractions of realities in certain way that causes to cope better with situation. In this story we found that the character created some defenses to cope up with the death of his wife. We have created our own reality around the things which we are afraid to see if we examine them too closely---are served as our defenses (Tyson, 2014). Various elements of defense mechanism and psychoanalysis we find in this story are as follows:

Unconsciousness

The human psyche encompasses both the conscious and unconscious aspects in their entirety (Hillman, 2013). The fundamental and pivotal concept in Freudian Psychoanalysis is the unconscious (Habib, 2008). (Tyson, 2014) He advocates for the perspective that the unconscious holds a central position in relation to all other concepts within psychoanalysis. Barry (2017) characterizes the unconscious as a component of the mind situated beneath consciousness but exerting significant influence, steering human actions. Additionally, he affirms that the unconsciousness lies at the core of Freudian

psychoanalysis. Freud introduces a compelling analogy likening the human mind to an iceberg to enhance the comprehension of the conscious and unconscious concepts. Much like an iceberg, where the majority remains submerged and concealed underwater, only about 10% is visible above the surface; Freud suggests a parallel with the human psyche. Debatable and conscious aspect is comparably small, while the hidden and unexplored unconscious constitutes approximately 90%, according to Freud. In his view, the conscious personality represents merely a fraction of the human psyche, with the vast expanse of the unconscious remaining concealed and unknown (Westen, 1999).

“One day he was found dead, as I was lad so I heard or should be heard that he was died through natural causes as news reported” (Bierce, 2017).

When narrator narrates his perspective related to the story of Murlock, it shows that; the things which are unsaid and unheard is that only 10% of the insights that were available through very small group of people about Murlock, those insights were supposedly more of a rumor rather than reality. Actually, nobody knows what had happened to Murlock but him. People mechanically assumes about other people from how they look or live and that created their core reality in the society. The inquiry emerges regarding how one can ascertain human behavior and define the contents of the unconscious if it is indeed the powerful and propelling force. Tyson elucidates that the unconscious harbors concealed fears, desires, conflicts, and urges of which we remain unaware (Tyson, 2014).

“When Murlock got convinced that she died, he was sensed enough that dead must be buried and prepared for the grave... and robotically tried to performed some rituals for the dead body” (Bierce, 2017).

These lines shows that conscious mind was working logically whereas putting other things into the 90% iceberg of unconsciousness as many critics says that when we got hurt, we become artistic or do something creative in order to release that frustration in another way that’s what Murlock was also trying to do but the heights of sadness turned him into half conscious and half unconscious, similar to a medicine that could’ve numb the feelings and emotions. Freud, the concealed becomes the unconscious until it transitions into consciousness (Freud, 1955). Literary critics explore the unconscious aspects not only of the authors themselves but also delve into the unconscious dimensions of the characters within their works (Barry, 2017). Freud employs the term "latent content" to refer to the unconscious mind. To comprehend the unawareness, it is essential to examine the occurrence of certain processing within the human mind, encompassing the dynamic interplay of forces that Freud identifies as dreams and reality.

Dream and Reality

The process of dreams is very essential in Freudian psychology. Because it’s the only portal for suppressed realities (Freud, 2001). According to him, dreams are one of those few ways through which we understand unconsciousness. As Tyson (2014) explained that when we sleep our defenses are not much active as we awake, so some repressed desires slip itself in our dreams. When we sleep unconscious bound itself to popup through dreams. Dreams are the tool which we can peep inside what is hidden in our unconsciousness (Abu-Arja, 2008).

“His heart neither know what it was nor his imagination conceive it. He was so hard struck that knowledge came later after very later/ in that moment came through the open window wailing

sound if crying of a child or it might be a wild beast, not sure it was true or dream, as Murlock might have fallen asleep" (Bierce, 2017).

These lines symbolize the unconscious state of mind where Murlock approximately unable to feel whether he's dreaming or awake because the shock of the death of his wife has caused him deep wound. This condition sounds similar to sleep where we cannot control our unconscious as tightly as we do while we are not sleeping. The same happens to Murlock, he doesn't know whether it's true or just he's hearing or seeing the light through the window. Dreams are similar to creative writing as they both are the product of repressed emotions. Barry (2017) says that dreams are as like literature as they don't make clear statements and oblique to anything, it is more become pain or pleasure like a good or bad book.

Repression

Freud's ideas says that repression is the product of unconsciousness. History of human civilization is the history of repression (Habib, 2008). Ideas are sent by the suppression from unconscious is called repression (Freud, 1955). Conflicts, traumas, incidents, that are undesirable, permitted out from consciousness to become unconscious are repression (Barry, 2017). Freud defines that in order to fulfill the position of social being; we suppress desires and try to sustain conformity, by creating an artificial behavior. For this, he derived the term "defense" that means keep the repressed, repressed (Tyson, 2014).

"He tried vainly to speak dead woman's name, because he was terrified above death as he leans his hands above the table to double check as she was there. His throat was powerless, body like lead. Suddenly a violent stump shook the whole cabin. Again he flung his whole hands on the table, nothing was there!" (Bierce, 2017)

Murlock tries to repress his conscious unconsciously he thinks that trying to call the dead women's name is better than seeing something like ghost or beast that would be deadly for him. He tries to manifest something familiarly dangerous rather than surprisingly terrible. But repression could not conceal itself behind unconscious for so long. It's like a time bomb and the more it takes time, the harder it blasts. Repressive thoughts are like unsettled business in the realm of human psychology, today or tomorrow you must have to face it. Sooner or later unconscious turns itself into conscious. And this phenomenon is called "return of repressed" (Freud, 1937). According to Habib (2008), three ways that could happen in order to shift unconsciousness to consciousness. First, it could be through dreams. Second, through writing, literature; excludes the frustration on paper. At last through parapraxes, if it doesn't make exit on time. Could be the reason of trauma or hysteria and at last would be insufferable like Murlock.

Regression

Type of defense mechanism that helps to provoke the anxiety of the situation by sending human mind to an earlier situation. Age doesn't matter in this, could happen with a child or an adult. The only evidence of regression is that the victim of it starts behaving inappropriate or immature according to the situation (Lokko & Stern, 2015).

"He was a bit ashamed that he didn't even shed a single tear, then he said 'tomorrow' out loud, 'tomorrow, I shall cry' then start behaving and thinking like that she's dead now and what could go wrong, I can manage all alone, I can live by my own self" (Bierce, 2017).

This is the clear evidence how immaturity he is behaving while he is unable to cope with the idea of losing his wife that heart doesn't believe, whereas mind believes but not enough to mourn over the death. According to Anna Freud, regression is a more immature defense mechanism because in this a person can be able not cope with the reality as well as they don't behave in an age-appropriate way (Freud, 1937).

Displacement

According to APA, displacement is a transfer of negative feelings from one thing to another. Especially the theory of displacement says that transfer of negative emotions like fear or anger to something non-threatening person is called displacement (S. Lener, 2023).

"Murlock grabbed the loaded rifle and shot the shot. Gunshot lit the dark room, and in this glance he saw vivid image of Black Panther dragging his wife to the throat into the boarded window to his log" (Bierce, 2017).

This is a sign of displacement as he is already unable to face the reality of the death of his wife and on the other hand deep down with the sense of grief and regret of not helping her out at her last times also caused him to feel numbness of emotions, as in the beginning of this story narrator explains that Murlock spent all his life in hunting and trading animal skin and with the help of axe and rifle he created and survived all his life. The core reason that he is unafraid of deadly beast like panthers or jaguars instead he is afraid of losing someone he only loves and relate to in this lonely world. His mind created a non-threatening image of panther as a displacement of the thought of being him the reason of the death of his wife, as he didn't go out to the town to ask help for the cure of his wife. As Freud (1937) says, it is an unconscious defense mechanism. The person may not realize of what they are doing.

Discussion

In this work Ambrose Bierce talks about the horror and tragedies of the protagonist in the meantime a bit of aloofness with lots of loneliness, isolation and alienation with internal and external conflict (Manning, 2023). The character Murlock is insufferable state of terror fear and grief as this story is similar to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe but more in deadly shape with goose bump effect to the reader. The impacts of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis we find in this Murlock deals with the inner and outer circumstances. As they say when inside becomes critic it becomes hard to live in own body (Corstorphine, 2015). Same happens to the Murlock because of the way he used to live, outside the town, in the jungle, only with his wife as well as the way people used to perceive his aura people used to think him as separate of human kind as they created stories and rumors about him, all these situations leads him towards madness and defense mechanism to the height of self destruction. Life becomes hard for him with the death of his wife, as the narrator explains that he does all the things absentmindedly-alone! (Bierce, 2017). His unconscious was working at its best for to avoid what's in front of him what's going ahead without his wife, in simple words; unconscious mind was preventing him from getting anxious. The ending of this short symbolizes the ambivalence of the writer in order to give judiciary to the reader, a gap in order to be filled by the reader where we are unaware of how he dealt with the trauma and gave us some psychological guess in order to apply our desired framework on it. The repression's outcome was indeed 'the death of the Murlock' as narrator explains in the very beginning of this short story but we also imagine the loneliness before the arrival of his death. Those suppressed tears, those unheard mourns, those sad feelings, those needs for the shoulder, which a person always wants in the weak movements leads a repressed one towards their death (Vinney, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper is the qualitative approach to the Ambrose Bierce's short story *The Boarded window* in the investigation of defense mechanism perspective given by Sigmund and Anna Freud in their psychoanalytic theory. This story starts by an unnamed narrator who clarifies that he's not a reliable narrator because when this story had happened in real, he was just a lad and he heard all this story from his grandfather and the grandfather filtered many things from the story in order to make digestible to the young mind of his grandson, as he explains the story he also uses "may and might and would've, could've" type of words in his narration that indicates unreliability of the speaker; On the other hand, this is the true story, according to the narrator. At the same time it is all rumor based because this story has spread from mouth to mouth in to the town 'Cincinnati.' This story is full of psychological elements from beginning to an end. The gothic element of this story creates psychological impact on the reader as well as the way Bierce's style of writing makes it more unnervingly psychological. Sigmund Freud proposed psychoanalytical theory on the behavior of people, on sexuality, on consciousness and unconsciousness, and on reaction formations of an individual according to their experiences and their traumas.

In this paper, we found the psychoanalytical theory by the concept of Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism in the behavior of the Murlock's character the way he behaves under the stress (repression and regression) this character works by suppressing his desires of crying, asking for help from other people, live with other people, become deaf as other talks about him, but records everything in his subconscious and that become the part of his (unconscious) mind causes negative impact on his personality that leads him towards quietness, even when he needed someone from town for saving the life of his wife when she was on her death bed.

On the other hand we apply Anna Freud's concepts over ego defense mechanism that; we see the profession of Murlock which shows his fearlessness towards giants and beasts as he earns by selling the coat of animals in the market by hunting. He is the man who only has one relation, one person family. The only thing he is afraid in the world is losing someone he loves, when he loses his wife, the inability to see the reality took him to an almost dreamy state where he doesn't know what to do, either he has to cry or not, either he is sleeping or awake, either its day or night. On the other hand, we see that the Black Panther came out from the window and grabbing his wife in his jaws by the throat and Murlock is not afraid of this beast instead he is firing rifle on it, shows the (displacement) of the grief towards less painful less threatening subject. These are the element that justifies the presence of the concepts of Sigmund Freud and proposals of Anna Freud by the implementation of unconsciousness, dreams, repression, and regression on *The Boarded Window by Ambrose Bierce*.

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