

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytical Lens: Allegorical Reflections on Shakespeare's Selected Poetry



Aafia Firdaus

Lecturer, Department of International Qualifications, The University of Lahore, Lahore

Email: Aafia.firdaus15@gmail.com

Afifa Firdaus

Lecturer, Centre for Skill Development and Leadership, The University of Lahore, Lahore

Email: afifa.firdaus@csdl.uol.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper centers Sigmund's Freud's psychoanalytical notion of id, ego and superego to unearth the philosophical interconnectedness with regards to consciousness, employing *The Phoenix and the Turtle* by William Shakespeare as an interpretative lens. Freud's ideals maintain that id drives primal instincts, ego operates based on the reality principle while the superego is the enforcer of moral and societal ideals often resulting in psychic disintegration. The investigation posits that these tensions ultimately culminate in the degeneration of identity and raises questions about the unconscious. Utilizing *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the paper examines numerous Freudian interpretations of the poem particularly the unconscious desires and death. The allegorical figures in 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' presents a wholesome albeit self-annihilating love provides an apt narrative blueprint: the phoenix represents id's primitive impulses; the turtle reflects the superego's romanticized devoutness whilst the ego imitates their futile bond. Adopting a philosophical basis, the study employs abstract reasoning to unearth how Freud's framework connects to the symbolic structure present in the poem, supplemented by a close investigation. Findings reveal a deep rooted connection between the Freudian tripartite structure and the psychic as revealed in the disintegration of identity through the poem's examination.

Keywords: Death, Desires, Ego, Id, Identity, Superego, Psychic.

Research Background

Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id* (1923) presents his psychoanalytic theory pertaining to the Freudian tripartite structure which provides a fundamental basis for thoroughly delving into what drives the human consciousness, lending profound psychological implications to better understand human desire and identity. This investigation foregrounds Freudian tripartite structure to examine the ways in which the combination of these psychic mechanisms contribute in influencing human thoughts and experiences. By incorporating William Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle* as a narrative blueprint, the study highlights the ways through which literary allegory and psychoanalytic philosophy share an interconnectedness to form the basis of reality and identity.

The Freudian Tripartite structure proposes that the id is driven by primitive instincts and desires; the ego operates on the reality principle whilst the superego enforces societal morals and acts as a self-critical conscience, attempting to navigate the complexities between the two forces. The constant negotiations between these psychic dynamics subsequently results in intrinsic tension. (Freud, 1923, pp. 12-15). He maintains that the ego, mainly responsible for reasoning and mediating between the conscious as well as the unconscious, balances the conflicts that rise from the raw primitive desires and the moral conscious, thereby influencing human action and thought (Freud, 1923, pp. 25-28). However, internal tensions often arise which can be termed as psychic fragmentation, mainly due to ego's inability to reconcile the struggle between the id and the superego as a result of which identity faces the brunt of conflicting desires and morals. The current framework attempts to find answers pertaining to the identity and the stability within, an attempt made possible by

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

implementing Freud as a key figure.

The philosophical implication of Freud's tripartite structure finds its roots in the thorough investigation of the human consciousness as a conflicted space. This mainly arises owing to the id's primal desire when faced with rational independence, as well as the superego's moral questioning of individual's sense of agency. (Freud, 1923, pp. 40-42). The conflict between these competing forces mirror Nietzsche's investigation of the ways in which human agency clashes with societal morals and laws (Nietzsche, 1886/1966, pp. 45-50) as well as Kierkegaard's examination pertaining to individual existence, the problems associated with choice and freewill and the notion of existential angst (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983, pp. 67-70). Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) provide a further nuanced insight regarding the Tripartite structure posited by Freud, in particular his philosophical insights pertaining to the psychic turmoil (pp. 205-210) which arises as a result of the conflict between the three agencies: id, ego, superego.

A wide-ranging assessment of the current scholarship surrounding this notion brings to limelight the research gap this paper attempts to address. Psychoanalytical research employing Freudian theories as a lens has been expansively employed particularly in the literary canon for instance Jones' (1953) investigation of Shakespeare's Hamlet to uncover the influence of id, ego and superego and how the Freudian concept of repressed desires shaped Hamlet's agency and played a crucial part in the overall incidents of the play. (pp. 101-105). Albeit Freud's model has not been extensively examined using Shakespeare's poetry as a narrative blueprint allowing for the creation of a research void in psychoanalytical readings of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Shakespearean scholarship addresses the poem's themes while investigating the notion of love (pp.89-92) for instance Prince (1960). Conversely, Vendler (1995) delves into the ways in which the poem interprets the union between the two as a conflict and as a lamentation of loss in love (pp. 130- 135). Greenbalt (2004) assess the poem's relevance to renaissance ideals and conflicts, putting particular emphasis on the allegorical elements present in the play (pp. 150-155). However, there remains a significant gap in relating the poem's psychoanalytic features to the poem's allegorical elements, an attempt this paper aims to bridge through the application of Freud's tripartite structure to underscore its relevance to human consciousness.

In *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, Shakespeare utilizes the metaphorical images of the phoenix and the turtle dove in order to examine the idea of transcendent love. The phoenix and the turtle, who stand in for the marriage of pure love in the poem ultimately embrace death. Thus, the poem opens with a funeral procession of different birds coming together in order to lament the deaths of these lovers. The birds grieve the passing of this unique and ethereal connection as the poem progresses, celebrating the virtues of the phoenix and the turtle while also lamenting the lack of such unadulterated love in the world. The ability to value poetry is a skill that many people possess, and it involves knowing and understanding poetry in detail, complete with its external and internal structure. It is a word choice arrangement intended to communicate the poem's overall meaning. Poetry improves the reader's ability to listen to words as they are expressed literally. Poetry analysis delves into the language's constituent parts to comprehend literary works in their wholeness. Figurative language is one of the special components of poetry known as imagery. (Rahman, 2019). *The Phoenix and Turtle* is composed of 67 lines that sketch out the funerals of two creatures the phoenix and the turtle dove who are eternally connected by their devotion and love. (Matchett, 1965). The poem, he says, is in three parts: an introduction that is twenty lines long and

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

declares on people to the funeral; a funeral "anthem" that is thirty-two lines long and praises the love and beauty of the Phoenix and Turtle; and a final fifteen lines that serve as a funeral song or lament for the dead.

It is important that to refrain from referring to the biographical details when reading this poetry. The Phoenix and Turtle does not need to be connected to any specific individual or occasion, in contrast to the earlier critics we discussed earlier, who only associated the poem with a specific period of time when Shakespeare composed it or when it was published (Knight, 2002). He thinks the majority of Shakespeare's writings are of high quality. In this instance, The Phoenix and Turtle has a very distinct tone, and the poem is made special by the change and well-timed stanzas. Eventually, these distinctive features set it apart from all of Shakespeare's other works, including Lucrece, Venus and Adonis, and others.

The Phoenix carries multiple interpretations and differing meanings influenced by varying cultural contexts and religions. When analyzed through Egyptian mythology, the phoenix embodies deep-rooted connections to religious deities for instance the god of Sun who finds solace at night in the soothing shades of the sacred trees and rejuvenate from its own ashes. This process of generation is believed to reoccur on a cyclic basis (Muller, 1918). However, Shakespeare's portrayal of his phoenix contradicts with the depiction of the traditional, mythological phoenix who is considered an immortal being, able to find life again from its own ashes. Shakespeare describes his phoenix as being mortal who fails to rise from his own ashes, thus thwarting its regeneration (Copland, 1965). In particular, the reiteration on 'death' in stanza 15 foreshadows the fact that the phoenix meets its demise as a result of his own choice (Matchett, 1965).

Research Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative lens and the theoretical framework consists of Sigmund Freud's theory of id, ego and the superego. In particular, the technique of close-reading is employed for the critical examination of Shakespeare's The Phoenix and the Turtle in the light of Freud's notions of the Tripartite model. Through a multi-layered examination centered in Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the play's character dynamics and the stanzas will be scrutinized to unearth the ways in which these psychic forces operate to influence the incidents of the poem. Grounded in the conceptual investigation of The Ego and the Id (Freud, 1923) in which he thoroughly investigates the psychodynamics of the identity and agency, the method employees Shakespeare's poem to examine the reflection of the id (in terms of the lovers' impulses), ego (mirrored in the futile attempt at unity) and the superego (the urge to remain devoted).

In particular, the research takes into consideration the existing scholarship surrounding the poem for instance Laplanche & Pontalis (1973) who examine Freud's model. Conversely, Greenbalt (2004) thoroughly delves into the cultural aspects of the poem. The technique of close reading applies Freud's model to investigate the ways in which literary allegory and psychoanalytical theory share an interconnectedness. The methodology accounts for a philosophy centered approach, while employing The Phoenix and the Turtle as a secondary lens, thereby ensuring a comprehensive examination of the tripartite model, the human agency as well as Renaissance allegory.

Analysis:

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory provides critical insights pertaining to his tripartite structure which consists of the id, ego and the superego. His framework allows

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

for the examination of the human consciousness and identifying the factors which influence impulsive drives while also striking a balance between societal norms (Freud, 1923, pp. 12-15). This investigation aims to employ his framework in an attempt to dichotomize what drives the id's impulses which he posits is heavily influenced by the pleasure principle which faces a conflict with the superego's innate societal and moral values (Freud, 1923, pp. 25-28). The ego is thus tasked with negotiating between these contradicting psychic forces in an attempt to attain stability between primal instincts and societal norms. This cyclical process contributes to the shaping of identity and human consciousness yet still it results in internal conflict (Freud, 1923, pp. 36-39). In particular, upon ego's failure to mediate between the two conflicting forces, a hyperreal fragmentation occurs, allowing simulated identities to precede authentic essence, mirroring postmodern notion of existential anxiety of the contemporary man as well as their never-ending search for meaning (Baurdillard, 1981/1994, pp. 12-15).

This continued misbalance and instability between the psychic forces provides nuanced insights into the factors which influence human thought and action as well as the notion of self-perception (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, pp. 205-210). Further, Sigmund Freud's tripartite model, which delves into internal tensions owing to psychic clashes, resonates with Nietzsche's investigation of freewill (Nietzsche, 1886/1966, pp. 45-50). Also, it reflects Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis of the human consciousness, offering nuanced analysis on the relationship between consciousness and language (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 46-49).

The above-mentioned factors can be well-analyzed in William Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Employing the Freudian structural model of the psyche, it is revealed that the id functions as the platform for primal instincts which are majorly governed by the principle seeking pleasure. Id tries to seek immediate gratification regardless for reality or any thought to moral values or constraints (Freud, 1923, pp. 25-28). This symbolism is manifested in the poem through the union of the two lovers i.e. an allegorical Phoenix and a Turtle Dove. Presented as pure and holy, their spiritual love is reinforced by an aggressive drive that leads to annihilation; 'in a mutual flame from hence' (line 24). A vivid metaphor for the Freudian concept of the libido, the imagery of the self-consuming fire aims at eradicating individuality and self through the most absolute form of pure union.

Freud later introduced the two important key terms Eros and Thanatos in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Eros aims at unification and preservation, while Thanatos seeks to gain stasis and revert back to the inorganic. The interplay of these two phenomena is artistically fused by Shakespeare to depict the lovers' mutual destruction while paradoxically affirming their eternal unity. It is important to note here that the apparent death of the Phoenix and the Turtle are not reflecting their love's failure rather it is a sign of victory and fulfillment; a surrender to the deepest unconscious desire to become one even if it comes at the cost of self-annihilation. The id's dominance here is obvious - it orchestrates a scene in which individual boundaries melt away, satisfying an unconscious wish for merger that transcends physical and moral law.

According to the Freudian theory, the ego, being a seat of rationality, functions as a negotiation medium between the id's desires, the moral structures of the superego and the demands of reality. It operates as a decision-making apparatus under the reality principle (Freud, 1923). In the poem, the symbolism of Reason is presented as a bewildering and ultimately a defeated site; 'Reason, in itself confounded, / Saw division grow together ... Love hath reason, reason none' (lines 33-38). Fueled by unconscious

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

drives, the paradoxes presented in the poem significantly mirror the ego's disorientation in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful union. Furthermore, the destruction of reason in the poem alludes to the impending breakdown of the psychic mediation. Superseded by the force of the id and the mortal idealism of the superego, the ego remains unable to function effectively.

As stated in psychological terms, if the ego fails in maintaining its rationality, then the unconscious desires are allowed to surface unchecked; leading to distortion of perceptions and fantasy-driven narratives to take course of action. This can be seen in the poem's elevation of the mystical unity, "Two distincts, division none". It is thus a poetic celebration while simultaneously an alarming psychoanalytic threat. At this particular point in the poem, the ego is losing control as it is seduced by the id's fantasy of symbiotic fusion.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory presents the superego as the internalized voice of societal and parental authority, allowing one to govern moral judgment and the pursuit of the ego ideal. The superego's function is to critique, control and check the ego, majorly through guilt and repression (Freud, 1923). In *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, the lovers' chastity is extenuated to the level of spiritual purity: "Leaving no posterity: / 'Twas not their infirmity, / It was married chastity" (lines 62–64). Suppressing physical consummation and the desire to reproduce, this chastity can be interpreted as a defense triggered by the superego against the forbidding power of sexual desire.

In *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, love is idealized not through sensuality and passion but through moral perfection and spiritual allegiance. A classic instance of superegoic idealization, the bond between the lovers is presented as incorruptible and eternal. It serves as a defense mechanism where ego is channelizing its course to avoid guilt by transforming erotic and seductive thoughts into a sublime, asexual devotion. Moreover, the psychic tension is concealed by the superego's reconfiguration of the libidinal energy into moral virtue; reinforcing the poem's metaphysical aura.

In *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, the psychological drama is unraveled through the intense struggle between the id's passionate desire, the superego's stringent morality and the fragile attempts of the ego to harbor balance between the two. Presenting an intrapsychic conflict, the poem aims at showing lovers who are torn between unconscious longing for unity i.e., the id, and the moral transcendence i.e., the superego, which ultimately results in the inevitable collapse of the rational i.e. the ego. The line "Love hath reason, reason none" captures the psychic dilemma: love, which traditionally bridges desire and reason, here becomes irrational and self-consuming.

Freud terms the inability to reconcile the warring internal forces as compromise formation – a psychic resolution that aims to partially satisfy both the passionate desires of the id and the morally authoritative voice of the superego. However, the compromise comes in the shape of death; an inevitable annihilation that leads to the fulfillment of the compromise. Although the lovers succeed in achieving their desired unity, however, it is only in death that this success is attainable. In this situation, the ego remains powerless, unable to exercise its authority efficiently and resultantly submits to the overwhelming demands of both the unconscious impulses and the moral perfectionism. Thus, the poem explores a scenario where internal psychic balance has become irretrievable and is replaced by symbolic catastrophe.

Mourning and Melancholia, an essay written by Freud in 1917, draws a line between the two types of grief. According to him, mourning involves the conscious effort of letting go whereas; melancholia deals with the unconscious internalization of the lost

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

object or person, ultimately becoming part of the ego. This then leads to the production of self-reproach and stagnation. The Phoenix and the Turtle presents a melancholic tone; the lovers are not just remembered for their sacred love rather they are entombed in an ideal: "Beauty, truth, and rarity, / Grace in all simplicity, / Here enclosed in cinders lie" (lines 57–59). Instead of navigating through the grief and moving on, the poem builds a shrine to safeguard the mystical love of the phoenix and the Turtle, and ensures that in this place, new life or regeneration remains impossible. This statically idealized notion is suggestive of the inability to process loss. Preserved through melancholic fixation, the lovers' union remains frozen in the ashes; eternally symbolic but physically inert. According to Freudian perspective, this particular approach is not resolution but repression that has come at the cost of psychic growth (Freud, 1917)

Thanatos, Freud's theory of death drive, postulates the human urge to revert back to the inorganic state. Often disguised by Eros, this drive appears in the form of self-destruction and repetitive behaviors. In *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, this form of immortality is attained by the lovers not through reproduction but by the means of immolation and erasure: "To eternity doth rest / Truth and beauty buried be" (lines 67–68). This eternal rest manifests the poetic realization of Thanatos; a desire to flee the boundaries of time and the constant suffering that comes with yearning. A complete investment in one another, the lovers' choice to forego progeny and embrace death is emblematic of object-fixation. According to Freudian perspective, this choice is illustrative of the dominance of death drive, camouflaged as the metaphysical transcendence.

The Phoenix and the Turtle is only representative of ideal love, in fact, it is a dramatization of psychic conflict. From the perspective of Freud's psychoanalytic model, the poem's tone is rich with emotionally charged imagery. The id longs for the fusion and release, the superego stresses upon chastity and sublimation; and the ego, caught between the two, remains unable to reconcile both the forces and consequently collapses into compromise and melancholia. Thus, Shakespeare's lovers become symbols of unconscious drives, defenses and ultimately disintegration. *The Phoenix and the Turtle* depicts love that is fused in flame, elevated through annihilation and frozen in idealization. Although their love is eternal but only within the unconscious shrine of the superego and the embers of the ego's defeat.

Conclusion:

Employing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory pertaining to the id, ego and the superego, it is revealed that Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle* portrays characters like the phoenix and the turtle as grappling between their intrinsic impulses, super ego's moral ideals as well as ego's attempt at rationality, often resulting in the fragmentation of identity and agency. *The Phoenix and the Turtle* stand as an enigma to represent the allegorical portrayal of their self-dissolving union, mirroring the discord between the psychic dynamics. The phoenix's desires represent the id's impulses, the turtle's devotion mirrors superego's devotion whilst their unfulfilled union is reflected in the ego's attempt at negotiation. The current interdisciplinary methodology connects Freud's tripartite model to literary allegory, providing a nuanced understanding of the conscious and the unconscious.

The findings evidently reveal that the id, ego and the superego drive and shape the psychic reality. The poem's depiction of the lover's unfulfilled love mirrors the psychic fragmentation, a notion offered by Freud, highlighting the continued relevance of his

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

psychoanalytical model. The present study addresses a significant scholarly gap through the application of Freud's psychoanalytical tripartite model on Shakespeare's poetry rather than plays; in particular his lesser researched poem *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Further, this investigation marks a significant contribution in Freud's psychoanalytical model and its continued relevance in metaphysical allegory. Also, the current study provides nuanced and novel insights pertaining to the interconnectedness shared between psychoanalytical theories and literary studies.

The connection between psychoanalysis and literature reinforces the significance of analyzing canonical works like Shakespeare's via interdisciplinary frameworks; foregrounding the underlying mechanism of the psychic domain. The poem, though short and elusive, is suffused with intense psychological as well as metaphorical depth. The poem's depiction of the lovers' mutual immolation, its treatment of chastity and self-annihilation allows for a nuanced reading that explores how psychic resolution is attained to an internal conflict. Ultimately, surrendering to the death drive, the ego remains helpless and can no longer maintain the balance between the riding desire and the voice of morality.

Hence, the poem's portrayal of the metaphysical love between the Phoenix and the Turtle is this reconfigured as a symbolic act of sublimation which happens as a result of repressing desires and transforming them into spiritual ideals. According to Freudian lens, their denial for reproduction and their sacrifice in the form of death can also be interpreted as a melancholic defense; allowing for preservation of an ideal object in a state that remains untouched by time, decay or human intervention. The ashes from the lovers' union, and ultimate sacrifice, functions as a psychic tomb; a timeless container for a sublime union that could not survive in the reality principle governed by the ego. By applying the Freudian tripartite model to this poem, it is revealed how a literary text can be both encoded and decoded for the unconscious psychic operations. This approach grants the reader access to interpret *The Phoenix and the Turtle* not just as a metaphysical elegy but as interplay of psychic degeneration and defense – a process which renders the boundaries between self and other, reason and desire, life and death blurred. Such allegorical explorations manifest how poetry as a genre can be used as an interpretive site to understand inner conflict, psychic resolution and metaphysical transcendence, endorsing the timeless relevance of psychoanalytic criticism in literary studies.

References:

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981)
- Bloom, H. (1998). *Shakespeare: The invention of the human*. Riverhead Books.
- Bock, P. (1993). *Mythological symbols in literature*. Academic Press.
- Copland, R. (1965). *Shakespeare's allegorical poetry*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ellmann, M. (1987). *Psychoanalytic literary criticism*. Longman.
- Firdaus, A. (2024). *Consumerist Culture And Morality In Don DeLillo's White Noise: A Modernist Analysis Through Jean Baudrillard's Theory*. International

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

- "Journal of Academic Research for Humanities", 4(3), 168–176. Retrieved from <https://jar.bwo-researches.com/index.php/jarh/article/view/505>
- Firdaus, A., & Iqbal, H. M. (2025). Jean Baudrillard and the Obliteration of Truth: Theatrical Representation of the Unreal. *Al-Hikmat: A Journal of Philosophy*, 45, 55.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The ego and the id* (J. Riviere, Trans.). Hogarth Press.
- Garber, M. (2008). *Shakespeare and modern culture*. Pantheon Books.
- Greenblatt, S. (2004). *Will in the world: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton.
- Jones, E. (1953). *Hamlet and Oedipus*. W.W. Norton.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *Fear and trembling* (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843)
- Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J.-B. (1973). *The language of psycho-analysis*. Hogarth Press.
- Matchett, W. H. (1965). *The phoenix and the turtle: Shakespeare's poem*. Mouton.
- Muller, F. M. (1918). *The mythology of ancient Egypt*. In P. Bock (Ed.), *Mythological symbols in literature* (pp. 45–60). Academic Press (1993 edition).
- Nietzsche, F. (1966). *Beyond good and evil* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1886)
- Prince, F. T. (1960). *The poems of Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation* (D. Savage, Trans.). Yale University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1601). *The phoenix and the turtle*. In R. Chester (Ed.), *Love's martyr* (pp. 185–187). Oxford University Press (2002 edition).
- Strachey, J. (1961). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19). Hogarth Press.
- Vendler, H. (1995). *The art of Shakespeare's sonnets*. Harvard University Press.