



Contents lists available at ASJP (Algerian Scientific Journal Platform)

Academic Review of social and human studies

journal homepage: www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/552



Identity Transformation in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

تحول الهوية في قصة «القط الأسود» لإدغار آلان بو

Nesrine ELKATEB^{1, *}, Dr. Naimi AMARA²

¹ Ph.D. student. University of Hassiba Benbouali Chlef, TICELET, Algeria

² Doctor at the Department of English. University of Hassiba Benbouali ,Chlef. Algeria

Article info:

Abstract

Article history:

Received :04-05-2023

Accepted : 21-11-2023

Key words:

Edgar Allan Poe

Identity

Psychoanalysis

"The Black Cat"

Transformation.

Identity has been a major subject of criticism for many years. Scholars had tackled the issue of identity from different angles, as it merges into a variety of disciplines and psychology is no exception. In psychology, however, identity is not examined as simple as in other fields. It is rather a complex question, for the human mind is an intricate synthesis that requires careful analysis and vigorous study. The current paper sheds light on the issue of psychological identity and the factors to its transformation. The study discusses the term identity and its components in psychoanalysis. The crux of this research is to scrutinize the mechanism of identity transformation based on Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. It also takes Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat" as an illustration of this transformation. The narrator in this gothic short story is considered as an example of when psychological identity transforms and swings between the edges of sanity and insanity.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملخص

لقد كانت الهوية موضوعا أساسيا للنقد لسنوات عديدة. عالج الباحثون مسألة الهوية من زوايا مختلفة، بحيث أنها تندمج في مجالات متعددة من بينها علم النفس. لكن في علم النفس لا تتم دراسة الهوية بطريقة بسيطة كما في باقي المجالات الأخرى، بل هي مسألة معقدة وذلك لأن العقل البشري هو تركيبة صعبة تتطلب بدورها تحليلا دقيقا ودراسة شديدة. تقوم الورقة الحالية بتسليط الضوء على الهوية النفسية والعوامل التي تساهم في تحولها ولهذا تناقش الدراسة مصطلح الهوية ومكوناتها في علم التحليل النفسي. إن جوهر هذا البحث يكمن في فحص آلية تحول الهوية بالاعتماد على نظرية التحليل النفسي لسيفغوند فرويد. كما أن البحث الحالي يستدل بقصة «القط الأسود» لإدغار آلان بو لشرح هذا التحول حيث يعتبر الراوي في هذه القصة القصيرة القوطية كمثال على تحول الهوية النفسية وتأرجحها بين حدود الصحة العقلية والجنون.

إدغار آلان بو
الهوية
التحليل النفسي
"القط الأسود"
تحول.

1. Introduction

Identity is an umbrella term that encompasses many fields and spheres as culture, society, and psychology among others. It is formed within a representation, i.e. how an individual is represented and how he/she represents him/herself. Psychological identity, however, is concerned with how people represent themselves through their actions and behaviors; and that what makes it changeable. This aspect of changeability makes them go through constant transformation. In psychoanalysis, identity transformation occurs under certain norms and circumstances. People tend to change their behaviors positively or negatively because of the control of the three dwelling forces in the mind, which are the id, the ego, and the superego. When successful, the transformation moves from the id to the superego which is the wise agent. When it is not successful, the mental control seems to be swinging from one force to another in an overlapping and confusing manner.

In these pages, things are touched on which have not yet been the subject of psychoanalytic consideration. The focus will be on negative identity transformation and its aftermath on the individual. In this paper, the researcher chose deliberately a gothic story because it better serves this study in the sense that it bears relevance to mystery, insanity, and unjustified behaviors and incidents. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat" the narrator, who is the kernel of the study, shall go through a fundamental psychological transformation. Before approaching the current study, the researcher is invited to answer the ensuing research questions:

1. How does the narrator's identity transform through "The Black Cat"?
2. Which part(s) of the mind mostly control(s) the narrator's identity in "The Black Cat"?

This study uses the analytical approach, by which psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud is used because it analyzes best the psyche of individuals, as far as Freud is considered as the father of psychoanalysis. The main aim of this paper is to examine how and why identity transforms according to Freud's logic. In this respect, the gist of this research paper is

based around investigating the relationship between psychological identity transformation and the mental trinity which are the id, the ego, and the superego, through analyzing the narrator's psychological identity in "The Black Cat."

2. The Integral Components of Identity in Psychoanalysis

Freud had introduced several new concepts and drew many conclusions in Psychology concerning the human mind and identity. According to his theory, the human mind consists of three integral parts, the id, the ego, and the superego. These three forces function according to certain norms, the id is the pleasure-seeking that operates entirely unconsciously, the superego is driven by social rules and morals; whereas the ego is a psychological system that tries to mediate between the id and the superego encompassing one's feelings, memories, thoughts, habits and actions. Hence, it is the ego that creates one's identity. Identity can be defined and understood in different ways. In most current literature the clinical psychologist Henriques (2013) assumes that the ego is the modern conception of identity.

The anatomy of mind suggests that these three elements (the id, the ego, and the superego) operate differently at the levels of the mind which are the conscious, the unconscious and the preconscious. Terrier (1998) states that "*consciousness means awareness.*" The conscious is all what a person is aware of as accessible thoughts, ideas, and images. The unconscious "*contains what the conscious is not aware of, including suppressed desires or emotions and instincts*" (Al Bistami, n.d). Although this reservoir of unpleasant events, desires, and memories is locked in the unconscious level, it still has an impact over one's behaviour. Additionally, the content of the unconscious cannot be easily brought into awareness unless through different ways like free association or dream interpretation.

Furthermore, Fodor and Gaynor (1950) say in their book "*everything unconscious that can easily exchange the unconscious condition for the conscious one, is better described as ... preconscious*" (p. 144). The writers mean that this level of mind stores information,

emotions, and thoughts in the unconscious beneath the surface of awareness, yet they can be retrieved and easily brought up to the level of consciousness whenever needed.

The constant conflict among the three dueling forces (the passions of the id, reason and common sense of the ego, and the rationalizations of the superego) results in an imbalance in the mind, and that causes in turn the so-called ego anxiety. Therefore, in order to discharge this inner tension, the mind resorts to what is called the ego defence mechanisms. Budd and Rusbridger (2005) clarify, *“Where there is conflict between the agencies of the mind [the id, the ego, and the superego], the ego has to perform the difficult task of keeping the peace – the peace of the mind, its equilibrium – as best it can. How does the ego know how to mobilize its defences? Freud came to think that anxiety was the signal that sets the defences in motion”* (p. 16).

Additionally, According to Mijolla’s (2005) definition, *“Defense mechanisms are psychic processes that are generally attributed to the organized ego. They organize and maintain optimal psychic conditions in a way that helps the subject’s ego both to confront and avoid anxiety and psychic disturbance”* (p. 376). As a matter of fact, these mechanisms are spontaneous mental tactics used by the ego. They protect the individuals from anxiety and also mediate their reaction to emotional conflicts and to internal or external stresses. These processes, however, are developed unconsciously in the mind. Between 1894 and 1896, Freud had identified several defence mechanisms that are developed unconsciously by the ego to overcome its anxiety. Then, following her father’s path; Anna Freud had come up with other mechanisms that are used by the ego. Thus, it has not been possible to avoid trenching upon some mechanisms like undoing, splitting, displacement and acting out among others.

As an example of these mechanisms, *“undoing is the defense mechanism by which individuals avoid conscious awareness of disturbing impulses by thinking or acting in a way intended to revert ... those impulses, even if only at a symbolic level”* (Costa, 2017, p. 72). This means that when someone does

something unacceptable that makes the superego interfere, and results in a feeling of guilt or shame, the ego here tries to overcome this state of anxiety by adopting the undoing defence mechanism. In this matter, the person tries to undo or unsay something unpleasant that has been done or said, not necessarily by saying sorry; but it is a form of apology. In other words, it is fixing the behaviour by atoning and making up to someone for inappropriate or hurtful feelings or attitudes.

Moreover, splitting is a term that was first described by Freud as *“a mental process by which two separate and contradictory versions of reality could co-exist”* (Freud cited in “Splitting,” n.d). This mental process takes place when there is a conflict in the mind to evaluate a person, an idea, or a feeling. So here the ego interferes to split this item into two and decide upon if it is positive or negative, good or bad. It takes on the principle of either good or bad with no in between. In this manner, *“splitting could not happen without division of the ego, classically between instincts of love and hate”* (cited in “Splitting,” n. d).

In addition to that, *“displacement is the redirection of an impulse (usually aggression) onto a powerless substitute target”* (McLeod, 2023). It occurs when someone is insulted or put in an embarrassing situation from a particular person or authority like a boss or a teacher but cannot do anything about it. So when he curbs his feelings; it then results in an anxiety. Hence, the ego resorts to displacement in which it redirects this aggressive feeling or behaviour towards someone or something else rather than the one who is responsible for it. Grohol (2016) states in his article that *“Displacement is the redirecting of thoughts feelings and impulses directed at one person or object, but taken out upon another person or object. People often use displacement when they cannot express their feelings in a safe manner to the person they are directed at. The classic example is the man who gets angry at his boss, but can’t express his anger to his boss for fear of being fired. He instead comes home and kicks the dog or starts an argument with his wife. The man is redirecting his anger from his boss to his dog or wife.”*

Acting out is another defence mechanism. A person who acts out, relies heavily on the principle of actions speak louder than words. Meaning that whenever a person has unpleasant feelings towards someone or something, or is put in unbearable situation and he cannot express his feelings in any way; he may do so to cope with stress through actions rather than words. For example, if someone is angry with another person, he may hit him/her with a book or something rather than telling him/her literally. Although some actions may seem awkward to the observers, they help the actor get relief from pressure and make him/her feel reassured and quiet (Grohol, 2016).

3. The Diachronic self: The Mechanism of Identity Transformation in Psychoanalysis

In Psychoanalysis, identity transformation is a fundamental component of a disintegrated personality. It may occur because of many reasons, such as distorted unconscious or hard childhood memories or others. And when it does, it is displayed as irrational chaotic behavior.

The most reflective levels of mind, which are the conscious and the unconscious, play a vital role in defining one's actions and motives. A person, most of the time, is regarded as conscious, aware of his decisions and behaviors. However, it should be admitted that some other times, people are controlled by their unconscious without being even aware of that. In this concern, Elliot (2004) asserts that *"all our conscious motives are superficial phenomena: behind them stands the conflict of our drives . . . the great basic activity is unconscious"* (p. 82).

Consciousness may be, therefore, characterized by latency. Certainly, a person may hold an idea or an image in mind in a certain interval, yet this idea can be latent; and move from his/her consciousness to his/her unconsciousness. In this vein, Strachey (1923) asserts that *"Psycho-analysis cannot situate the essence of the psychical in consciousness, but is obliged to regard consciousness as a quality of the psychical, which may be present in addition to other qualities or may be absent"* (p. 13). The other qualities that the researcher is referring to are the preconscious and the unconscious. In other words, a

person's behavior or identity is able to transform from a state of consciousness into unconsciousness.

The unconscious is a strong hidden power that manipulates people's choices, memories, and attitudes. Here is an aspect of how the transformation occurs in one's identity in psychoanalysis. The parts of mind change roles, and the leadership shifts from the conscious to the unconscious. Indeed, the unconscious is not a single power in itself, as it bears relationship to the id and the ego. It does not only influence them, but it also makes them malfunction and deviate from their norms, especially the ego. Strachey (1923) suggests that *"the ego is subject to the influence of the instincts, too, like the id"* (p. 40). This implies automatically that defence mechanisms are also influenced by the unconscious or similarly the id. To put it once more, in a different way, Freud attributes the name of ego to the unconscious part of the psyche, *"I am speaking of Georg Groddeck who is never tired of insisting that what we call our ego behaves essentially passively in life, and that, as he expresses it, we are "lived" by unknown and uncontrollable forces . . . The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it"* (Freud cited in Strachey, 1923, p. 23)

The id functions entirely unconsciously. Whenever it demands something from the mind, know that the unconscious is taking the role. This is why sometimes a person may ask the mind to behave in a certain way even if it is illogical behavior, and of course it is undeniable that the mind and the body are interrelated. In this vein, Groddeck claims that *"the distinction between body and mind is only verbal and not essential, that body and mind are one unit"* (cited in Balenci, 2018, p. 2). In other words, it is the case of the mind demands and the body obeys.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The narrator's Identity Transformation in "The Black Cat"

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat," the narrator has a disturbance in his behavior. His Id's desires control his mind. As he was a little child, he was known for his great love of pets, and that made him a mockery among his friends; *"My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the*

jest of my companions” (Poe, 1994, p. 310). This disturbing feeling and memory caused an anxiety, so the ego repressed them in the narrator’s unconscious level of mind. And that marked the outbreak of his mental disturbance. As a result, he hated people and favored the animals’ companionship; “*There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere man*” (Poe, 1994, p. 311). Ultimately, those repressed feelings and hard childhood memories were revealed in form of unexplained symptoms as violence and maltreatment.

In the beginning of the narrative, the narrator was a kind person who loves his wife, takes care of his pets, and pampers his black cat “Pluto.” So, his ego sustained the balance of his id and superego through this phase; but this love did not last for so long because of his addiction to alcohol; “*Our friendship lasted, in this manner, during which my general temperament and character—through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable*” (Poe, 1994, p. 312). Apparently, whenever the narrator drinks alcohol, he loses his awareness and becomes unconscious. Thus, he surrenders to his id’s extraneous desires and restrains his superego. As a result, this incompatibility in his unconscious mind among his id, ego, and superego marked the beginning of transformation in his identity.

The narrator’s id seeks only to meet its desires and selfish needs regardless to whether it is right or wrong, allowed or forbidden. Repressing his superego by alcohol, he maltreated his wife and pets verbally and physically; “*I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected but ill-used them*” (Poe, 1994, p. 312). Soon after killing Pluto, the narrator’s superego saw the light of day gradually, and he felt guilty for what he did. This inner struggle resulted in strong anxiety and mental conflict, for his ego tried to balance the aggressive pleasure drives of the id and the moral control of

the superego. As a consequence, the ego resorted to alcohol as an ephemeral defence mechanism so as to neglect that feeling of guilt. In this respect, Strachey (1923) asserts that “*the hysterical ego fends off a distressing perception with which the criticisms of its superego threaten it . . . by an act of repression. It is the ego, therefore, that is responsible for the sense of guilt remaining unconscious*” (p. 51). Poe (1994) says “*I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed*” (p. 313).

After several months, the narrator’s feeling of guilt grew even more that made his ego try to discharge its anxiety by adopting the “undoing” defence mechanism. Subsequently, he wanted to undo that terrible deed towards the poor animal through bringing another similar cat; “*I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place*” (Poe, 1994, p. 315). When the narrator took the second black cat to his house, he loved it at the beginning; but this love soon turned into hatred. He was in a permanent struggle of whether he loves or hates the second black cat. This defence mechanism is called splitting, the narrator’s ego was in a division between instincts of love and hatred; but his id controlled him again. And the narrator settled on the feeling of hatred.

The act of killing the second black cat is another defence mechanism which is called acting out. In this mechanism, when someone has an unpleasant feeling towards someone or something; he may do something to express his feeling rather than just telling him/her (Grohol, 2016). In the narrator’s case, he decided to kill the cat to get rid of his anxiety rather than throw it out of his house, for example. When he had set about killing the cat in the cellar of the building, his wife prevented him; “*I aimed a blow at the animal, which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded by the interference into a*

rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan." (Poe, 1994, p. 318).

In this phase of identity transformation, the narrator's id controlled him again, for the desire of killing wielded him and inhibited his superego; redirecting that aggressive behavior from the cat towards his wife claiming her dead as an act of revenge. In this matter, Strachey (1923) claims that "*acts of revenge can be directed against the wrong people*" (p. 45). The act of redirecting one behavior to another is a defence mechanism called "displacement." The ego resorts to this mechanism whenever the id demands a certain action, and is met with refusal. The narrator's personality is highly complex and unbalanced, his id commends him to do unacceptable things, his superego plays its role and tries to prevent him, and his ego tries to get rid of the anxiety resulted from that inner struggle. In this short story, Poe was able to create a character that deviates from all that is considered righteous due to his id's control. As a result of analyzing his fickle behavior, it is concluded that the narrator's ego shifts from a state of control to state of decontrol. Sometimes, it is present and so strong that it results in a feeling of regret and remorse. While some other times, it is passive and so weak that it cannot control his id's aggressive desires.

5. Conclusion

Psychological transformation is a significant characteristic of most horror and gothic tales. In "The Black Cat," a remarkable identity transformation occurs within the narrator's psyche. His good treatment to his wife and pets turned into maltreatment due to many reasons like the harsh childhood memories that were repressed in his unconscious and the copious consumption of alcohol. This addiction to alcohol gave the green light to his unconscious to be the leading part of his identity. And since the id and the ego are driven by the unconscious, the narrator's id, on one hand, controlled him. Subsequently, he committed disgraceful acts. On the other hand, even when his ego resorted to some defence mechanisms, those mechanisms were leading him to even worse behaviors and alternatives, and all that because of the control of the unconscious as maintained by Sigmund Freud's

theory of Psychoanalysis. Thus, his identity suffers from unfavorable psychological transformation. It might be also concluded from the aforementioned details that the narrator's identity struggles between sanity and insanity, since it was influenced by the mental conflict of the three essential elements of the human mind. With each part's endeavor to control, there was a shift of roles from the id to the superego, and then to the interference of the ego and so forth. Though the protagonist felt guilty many times, he did not show a mite of remorse when killing his wife. And that what deemed his ego and superego feeble. His id is stronger than his superego and that what led him to his death. After all, the narrator is the victim of his own unconscious.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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How to cite this article according to the APA method

Nesrine Elkateb, Naimi Amara. (2024), Identity Transformation in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," academic review of social and human studies, vol 16, number 01, Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef, Algeria, p.p:205-211