Aissetou Sillah

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Alyssa Yankwitt/Elizabeth von Uhl

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The Psychoanalysis Perspective on *The Black Cat*

At some point in a person’s life, they will hear this quote or some variation of it: “We are our own worst enemy”-Una McCormack. It will be said in an effort to persuade or warn them of the potency of their mind and its impact. Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst of the 1900’s, introduced concepts of the mind that would prove just how compelling the minds is. In Edgar Allen Poe’s short story, “The Black Cat”, the narrator is sentenced to death for homicide and gives a recount of the events unfolding; initially, he commited a series of animal cruelty that gave insight on the state of his unconcscious mind. Freud proposed the idea that the essence and contents of the unconscious mind could be recognized in a person’s actions; he expressed his ideas in his *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. In “The Black Cat”*,* Freud’s theory of displacement and the transference of the unconscious mind to actions are demonstrated in the narrator’s sequence of crimes and his expression of hidden aggression.

In the third lecture, Freud implies actions are the gateway to the contents in our unconscious mind that we are not aware of, that they “give expression to impulses and intentions which have to be kept back and hidden from one’s own consciousness”(2224). For instance, one day, the narrator grabs his black cat, Pluto, and cuts one of his eyes out. But before this happens, the narrator describes the transposition of his character: “the fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer...a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame”(Poe n.pag). The narrator felt demonic and evil in the moment of stabbing his cat and didn’t recognize the malicious feeling that came over him. His unconscious malevolent intentions and thoughts were aroused when he stabbed Pluto. One could interpret the act of stabbing Pluto as a medium for the narrator’s hidden aggression. Therefore, it can be assumed that the narrator has aggression in his unconscious mind, using physical violence on Pluto as an outlet. According to Freud, this is caused by resistance: “some force that prevented them from being conscious and compelled them to remain unconscious”(Freud 2212). The mind finds ways to keep unwanted thoughts hidden in order to protect the conscious; consequently, the narrator does not recognize his sudden violence or malice. Even though the narrator was not aware of his unconscious aggression, it made its presence known through his actions.

Soon after, the narrator’s demeanor takes a drastic turn and he confesses the state of his conscience when he decided to kill Pluto. He describes his feelings as “this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself -- to offer violence to its own nature -- to do wrong for the wrong's sake only -- that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute”(Poe n.pag). This time, the narrator makes the conscious choice to hurt Pluto. The link between the two deeds is what they reveal about the unconscious mind of the narrator. He states that he felt an “unfathomable longing” for violence-this was in his unconscious mind when he stabbed Pluto and finally came to light when he hung Pluto. Freud suggests that a person’s actions can say a lot about their unconscious mind, therefore, the narrator’s actions reveals that his unconscious mind holds violent impulses and odious intentions. The narrator is a cold-blooded killer- foreshadowed by the stabbing of Pluto and substantiated by his hanging.

To add on, the narrator had an aggression toward something or someone that was imposed on Pluto. Animals are more often than not the object of misplaced anger because of the few consequences that would result from mistreating them. Freud calls this displacement: an unconscious transfer of an intense emotion from its original object to another. The motive for displacement is when the person can not express their emotions to the original cause because of the consequences, as a result, they find a substitute that has lesser status and is safe to lash out on. Based on the content of the story, the narrator’s original object of anger could be from his early childhood and the associated feelings. Wherever the origin is, there are intense emotions being lashed out on Pluto and it is not recognized by the narrator.

Ultimately, “The Black Cat”is a story that exemplifies Freud’s theory of the unconscious mind and displacement; Freud infers that what the unconscious mind holds can be revealed through our actions and knowing this helped him make connections with his patients between their unconsciousness and their actions. Psychoanalyzing the narrator’s actions connects the concept of displacement because it’s through his actions that he expresses his repressed emotions. The unconscious/repressed feelings don’t disappear or stay closed off; instead, they manifest itself in unsuspecting, unmindful forms that are overlooked from having a connection to the unconscious mind.

Work Cited

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