

The Memoirs of a Survivor under the Freud's Theory of Personality Structure

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Abstract: The book *Memoirs of a Survivor* is regarded as one of Lessing's most significant "inner space" books, showing the spiritual theme of individual growth. This paper aims to use Freud's personality structure theory to make an in-depth interpretation of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*. By analyzing the psychological activities and behavior of the main characters in the novel, this paper reveals the embodiment of Freud's personality structure theory in the novel, and point out the value and significance of Freud's personality theory in interpreting the book.

Keywords: The *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Freud's Theory of Personality Structure, Doris Lessing.

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing is a famous modern British woman writer. Her *Children of Violence* and *The Golden Notebook* have become classics in English literature. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is one of Lessing's later representatives [1]. She's been pursuing "a wide range of horizons and interests, that are not tied to the social stereotypes of culture, politics, ideology, race, and spirituality, nor seeking to cater to the mainstream values, showing the spiritual personality of modern, independent intellectuals, with a cultural temperament of marginal people and exiles... exploring the significance of survival and driving self-writing in the face of changes in country, race, belief, and identity" all of her life. [6]" *Memoirs of a Survivor* is Doris' most profound and imaginative work [12]. It describes not only the collapse of human civilization, but also a human disaster: the disaster in which the most primitive self in human nature is strangled by social indifference [1]. Through the revelation and criticism of various crises, the novel shows rich experimental intention and innovative spirit in a novel narrative mode [7]. In the novel, Lessing clearly explains how the survivors of the disaster win the gamble with the disaster and finally move towards a better new world [11].

The story took place in the future. Because of some kind of worldwide disaster, urban life had fallen into a disaster. As the narrator, "I" was the survivor of this disaster. I was an unknown middle-aged woman who looked at the people migrating to other villages from the window every day. One day, a girl named Emily was suddenly brought to me by a strange man and asked me to look after her. The wall in the living room began to open in front of me without warning. Through crossing the wall, "I" saw strange scenes different from the real world, witnessed Emily's childhood scenes and various rooms, and gradually realized that the real world outside the wall was not irrelevant to the scene inside the wall. Since then, observing Emily and the floating people on the road, and occasionally patronizing the world behind the wall, have become the whole of the narrator's life. Lessing depicted the inner activities and psychological experience of the heroine in the novel to find the obliterated and repressed self of women.

According to Freud's deep psychological theory, personality is composed of id, ego and superego. Id is the basic structure of personality. It is completely subconscious.

It is a biological instinct determined by heredity. It follows the "pleasure principle" and requires to meet the basic biological needs. When needs are not solved, anxiety emerges. The link between the id and the external world is managed by the ego. It should not only satisfy id's demands but also put an end to actions that go against the law, morality, and societal standards. Id is the rational part of personality structure and the balancer between id and superego. Under the supervision of superego, according to the principle of realistic possibility, the impulse from id is allowed to be limited. Superego is the inspector to supervise and restrict the irrational desires of id, and it is also the internalization of social moral norms and the moral conscience formed under the moral education and control, with rational characteristics [14].

People and incidents in the novel cannot be interpreted by the traditional realistic cognitive paradigm. This essay applies Freud's theory of personality analysis to analyze the novel's characters from the perspectives of the id, ego, and superego.

2. Analysis of The Memoirs of a Survivor under the Freud's Theory of Personality Structure

2.1. Id

The so-called id is the instinctive me. Id is the real psychological reality. It does not understand what is value, what is good and evil, and what is morality. The id is subconscious, and it is unconstrained. Its fundamental principle is the pleasure principle and beyond it. That is to say, the only purpose of id pursuit is satisfaction and happiness. Id relies on heredity to provide energy and arouse desire; It is the inner world that has existed before an individual gains experience, the center of human biological instinct, and the source of all human behavioral motivation [10]. These instincts inject energy into the id, but the id has neither organization nor unified will. It is just an impulse for the instinctive need to be satisfied according to the pleasure principle [15].

In the *Memoirs of a survivor*, the children from the subway can be seen as the embodiment of id, because they only follow the "pleasure principle", that is, to pursue happiness and avoid pain [13]. They represent the animal nature of human beings, without organization and unified will, and constantly seek to vent, "she handed them the food, and they ate it on the spot, tearing it, chewing it, and shouting at each other.". "Instead of

sitting on the floor in an orderly manner waiting for food to be handed over, they would grab food from the tray in front of them and swallow it... When there was not enough food to satisfy their aroused desire, they would scream and sneer and run all over the house and smash everything.”^[5] This demonstrates how the kids on the metro never give morals a thought. They won’t care what others think as long as they can satisfy their physiology or psychology. For food, they can roast mice and even desire to murder humans for their flesh. Similar to Freud’s id, this group of kids in the subway represents the core of a primitive urge, desire, and instinct. It is an animal characteristic. It isn’t unconscious or societal.

The id, which represents the primitive impulse and various desires, is also fully embodied in young Emily. As for her mother, Emily’s desire to be loved could not be satisfied, so she turned her eyes to her father. But her father would only play dirty tickling games with her. Emily’s desire to seek her parents’ love was never satisfied, so Emily made an amazing response. “She pulled her stool onto the brand-new, white bed, and then grabbed it. With a short scream of victory and happiness, she smeared the excrement everywhere. She smeared it on the sheets and blankets, on the wood of the shaker, and all over her body, face and hair. Then she sat down, like a little monkey, with a thoughtful expression. She was tasting and digesting it.”^[5] Her irrational action was what drove her insane since she was depressed from her constant attempts to find love and her failure to accept that love did not exist.

2.2. Ego

The ego abides by the “principle of reality” as it functions as a mediator between the id and the outside world in addition to being produced from the id. In addition to seeking out what the id requires, the ego must also take into account the need that everything it seeks cannot conflict with the superego’s ideals^[13]. Freud said, every individual possesses a logical arrangement of mental functions, which we refer to as his ego^[3]. Consciousness belongs to this ego; it controls the method of activity—that is, ego controls the exciting emission into the external world; self is the psychological force that manages all the formation process of itself. Even when he falls asleep at night, it also inspects dreams. Depression also occurs from this ego. Through repression, the ego tries to exclude some tendencies in psychology not only from consciousness, but also from other effects and forms of activities. At the same time, Freud discussed the difficult role of the ego: it should serve three strict masters at the same time, and also try to reconcile the orders and requirements of these three masters. These requirements are always different, and often incompatible; no wonder the ego often gives in because it cannot respond. These three tyrannical masters are the external world, superego and id^[15].

In the *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Emily grew up and discovered how to control her id impulse and conform to reality’s demands. She unconditionally responded to the narrator and obeyed her orders. “But as Emily, she certainly felt it necessary to please and appease others. So she covered it with a smile: she must hide and dilute her real anger and feelings.” “I won’t be a slob,” “I’ll clean it up as soon as possible.” “Emily’s hazel eyes are sharp and alert.”^[5] It is easy to conclude that Emily’s premature abuse and her parents’ lack of interest have choked Emily’s truest id in human nature. She was no longer the young child who yearned for a hug from her mother. She also acquired the skill of treating people

as they liked. It also confirms Freud’s theory of ego: Ego is the central system of personality structure and the controller and regulator of people’s behavioral motivation. It tries to reconcile the contradiction between id and superego under the pressure of both id and superego, and adopts reasonable behavior decisions according to the reality principle and the conditions of the external environment^[4]. At the end of the novel, “the two walked very fast, followed by the one who led the way in front, and she wanted to take Emily and Hugo away from the collapsed small world... After crossing another threshold, they immediately turned their faces and smiled... [5]” This scene symbolizes Emily’s progression towards psychological balance. The reason why Emily can be saved is that her psychology has gradually become mature and powerful after the hardships of life^[8]. Her personality structure finally became the ideal one.

2.3. Superego

Freud pointed out that “The impulse to pursue excellence or the noble behavior of human life is subject to the superego, which is the representative of all moral restrictions.”^[2] Since the superego is a moral id, it is separate from the id, which is in charge of keeping an eye on the id’s activities. The internalization form of reward and punishment in early childhood experiences—that is, the belief held by parents that some actions are acceptable to praise and others to suppress—is the source of superego^[13].

The long-term spiritual shock made Emily deeply imprint some of her mother’s words on her heart. “Emily, you are a disobedient girl, disobedient, disobedient, disobedient, disgusting, filthy, dirty...”^[5] As a natural guardian, Gerald provided excellent care for a group of homeless kids. Emily felt comforted with him. But the memory of her early years kept her from being brave enough to beg for love on her own. She was only able to gently and passively guard the affection she received. His strong sense of social responsibility to protect the weak prompted him to desperate to help the children in the subway. He could not tolerate the children’s previous situation, and placed them for persuasion and right and wrong education. Although his former gang members left due to the entry of the underground children’s Gang, and he and Emily were constantly attacked by the underground children, he still did not give up his influence on them. Gerald is the embodiment of “superego”^[9].

3. Conclusion

Memoirs of a Survivor is a realistic fantasy novel that reveals and criticizes various crises, demonstrating experimental intentions and innovative spirit through its narrative. In the novel, Lessing portrays how the survivors overcome the disaster and move towards a new world. From the perspective of Freud’s theory of personality structure, this journey can be interpreted as a psychological transformation. At the end of the story, Emily, along with Hugo, leaves the collapsed world and enters a new realm, smiling, which implies that she has achieved a balance among the id, ego, and superego, thus attaining a complementary personality. Emily’s ability to be saved stems from her psychological maturation and strength developed through life’s hardships. Ultimately, her personality structure becomes the ideal one, reflecting the novel’s theme of inner growth and resilience.

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