

## Freudian Whimsy in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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### Abstract

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a play where one finds an apparently simple story of Lear, king of Britain, and his three daughters. However, it has gained immense popularity since its time of production. *King Lear* can be judged and criticized from various perspectives as researchers have applied plenty of literary theories and criticisms since the last century. From the gamut of literary theories *King Lear* can be analyzed from psychological perspectives. King Lear decides to divide his kingdom among his daughters for the cause of his old age as he claims. But the decision raises plenty of questions in the minds of thoughtful audiences, readers and researchers. Although Lear loves his younger daughter Cordelia very much, he disowns her. Very honest and noble Kent is also banished whimsically as he protests Lear's foolish thinking. From that juncture, this article ushers lights on *King Lear* from psychological perspectives especially referring to Freudian Whimsy and tries to find the answer to the research question of how does Freudian Whimsy intertwine in *King Lear* through Lear's activities and actions all through the drama. Maintaining a qualitative data analysis methodology, this article investigates the answer to the research question poses earlier. Hence, this article is a review article in which the text of *King Lear*, research articles, books assumes the role of secondary data. This article finds that Lear's actions from the beginning till end of the drama *King Lear* are an embodiment of Freudian Whimsy, i.e., the expressions of Freudian unconscious, id, ego and super-ego.

**Keywords :** Freud, id, Lear, super-ego, unconscious.

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## Introduction

The beliefs of Austrian neurologist and psychoanalytic pioneer Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) regarding the human psyche have had a significant influence in research arena (Jeffrey Erik, 2012). His frequently contentious theories have influenced everything from literature and art to television and movies. The idea of ‘Freudian whimsy’, which describes the light-hearted and even comical way in which Freud’s theories can be applied to daily life, is among the most enduring features of his work. William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is the story of a king and his three daughters. From the very beginning of the story, the king assumes the role of a funny, light-hearted king who makes the decision of dividing his kingdom whimsically in a rushed way that recalls Freudian whimsy.

Freud’s theories are viewed as a means of comprehending the unconscious urges and motives that influence our actions (Heather A, 2011). His theories on the unconscious mind, the death drive, and the pleasure principle have influenced researchers’ understanding of human nature and are now part of readers’ common language. Lear, from the very outset till the end of the drama, is guided by some unseen and hidden aspirations and desires, Freudian unconscious, that encourages him to do a series of nonsensical moves and acts in the drama.

The ability of Freudian whimsy is to examine seemingly ordinary items and activities among its most fascinating features (John, 1996). For instance, depending on the situation, a simple knife may be seen as a sign of violence or even death. From commonplace belongings to artistic creations, a broad variety of objects can be subjected and interpreted to this type of symbolic interpretation in Freudian subconscious. It means, Lear’s decision of dividing the land among his daughters; his decision of fantastic love test from his daughters; his joyous attitude after hearing from Goneril and Regan: his comment to Cordelia, “Nothing will come of nothing” (I. i. 99); his punishment to Earl of Kent; his transformation to a mad and overall his tragic death are critically interpreted and analysed from Freudian psychological perspectives in this article.

Freud’s psychological theories have important impacts on the culture, likes, and dislikes of the individuals of a society, despite the fact that researchers consider them to be too basic or even out of date (Drew, 1998). Freudian whimsy still influences literature, art, and daily life, serving as a constant reminder of the complicated and frequently contradictory nature of the human psyche (Emily, 2002). This article seeks to interpret William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* from Freudian whimsical perspectives.

## Literature Review

Amor (2020) finds two kinds of blindness of Lear such as physical and psychological blindness from the beginning to the end of the play *King Lear*. It means that at the time of dividing his kingdom among his daughters, Lear did not have physical blindness but he has psychological blindness for the reason of which Lear fails to observe the hypocrisy of his two elder daughters and fails to recognize the true love of his youngest daughter Cordelia and Earl of Kent. Amor (2020) mentions Lear’s

psychological blindness that comes from his “fear of castration” (p. 14). It indicates that a king without land and power becomes the king without the crown as that metaphorically hints the physical powerlessness.

Kate Downey (2015) finds Lear’s “loss of power” (p. 3) to be the cause of his all awkward and unwanted behaviours towards all concerned in the drama. It reads that whenever, Lear enjoys the power as the king, he behaves normally. Out of a silly and nonsensical decision, Lear took the decision of dividing his kingdom among his daughters. Next time, he observes the loss of supreme authority and becomes furious to think of his future life as a powerless old haggard. Kent revolts against Lear’s action verbally and got his punishment. However, Cordelia’s silence and meager explanation of her love for her father intensifies the situation and Lear becomes infuriated imagining himself as the powerless person who loses the very love of his dear daughter Cordelia. King Lear thinks that Cordelia loves his father’s power; she does not love him as her father without the kingship. Lear also thinks that as soon as, Lear loses his power of a king, Cordelia’s love for her father evaporates.

Diana (2014) indicates the feministic perspectives of *King Lear*. The author uncovers the patriarchal “social structure” (p. 5) through which Lear decides to divide his kingdom among his daughters. If Lear would have three sons instead of three daughters, he might not take such kind of nonsensical decision. Diana (2014) focuses on King Lear’s “paternal physical and mental abuse of daughters” (p. 5) encourages him in taking the hasty and cruel actions to Goneril and Regan. Lear’s violent exclusion and casting out of his daughters exhibits his patriarchal attitudes. In such a juncture, feminism loses its appeal in this very drama.

Reimagining of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Jane Smiley’s novel *A Thousand Acres* mentions “domination, resentment, intimidation, incest, repression, anger, violence, ingratitude, selfishness, humiliation” (p. 153) in the family multigenerational farming in Iowa (Jim, 1998). It reinforces that in case of the division of farm among next generations becomes the action of domination and violence. This indirectly puts lights of Lear’s division of kingdom that is also full of anger and ingratitude. It intensifies the idea that division of property and power becomes outwardly joyous, but inwardly expresses the repression and selfishness.

Anglo-Irish poet, lyricist, hymnist writer, and English poet laureate (1692), Nahum Tate’s (1652 – 1715) adaptation of *King Lear* as *The History of King Lear* (1681) offered happy ending assuming Cordelia’s marriage to Edgar (Sonia, 2000). Mentioning *King Lear*’s as anonymous *The Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605), Sonia (2000) calls *King Lear*’s adaptation by Tate as the “decline of tragedy” (p. 436) and “the increasing popularity of tragicomedy” (p. 436). Sonia (2000) also claims that Cordelia’s love affair with Edgar proffers women actors in Restoration stage. But this article seeks the causes of William Shakespeare’s tragi-comic ending in *King Lear*.

Australian novelist and lyricist J.R. Thorp narrates the tale of the most well-known woman in literary history, using inspiration from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Thomas G., 2025). Thorp starts Where William Shakespeare stops to pinpoint the anti-

feminist perspectives of *King Lear*. Queen Lear appears and claims for his daughters' maltreatment done by the patriarchal attitude of the society which is showcased in William Shakespeare's drama that was mentioned earlier by Sam, et al. in 2013. It goes without saying that Lear could not go against the male-dominated society and portrays the desired attitude of that society.

Analysing and reviewing the literature, this article finds the research gap and tries to critically investigate William Shakespeare's *King Lear* from Freudian and psychological perspectives. This article desires to find answers of the following research question: How and in which ways does Freudian Whimsy work in William Shakespeare's drama *King Lear*?

### Methodology

This is a review article in which secondary data is used and analysed to find answer of the research question. There are no numbers in the analysis and discussion; hence, this study is qualitative in essence. William Shakespeare's book *King Lear*, research articles, book chapters, magazines, internet sources etc., are viewed as secondary data in this research. Freudian psychological theory works as the theoretical underpinning of this very article.

### Discussion

When the play *King Lear* opens, Lear is the aged king of Britain. There is no indication of the exact age of the king but this study presumes that the king may be of an octogenarian. Lear is an old man on the verge of death. Audience don't meet the queen, even not a single character mentions the queen from the beginning to the end of the play *King Lear*. Audiences find Lear's three daughters: Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia. Gonerill is married to Duke of Albany; Regan is married to Duke of Cornwall; Cordelia is unmarried. Duke of Burgundy and King of France, these two suitors are waiting for Cordelia's hand. In such a juncture the play opens. Lear says he wants to divide his kingdom among his daughters. Questions arise to identify the reasons of King Lear's decision of disseminating his power. Readers assume that it is for the cause of Lear's old age or for any other unforeseen reasons. Actually, Bradley (1992) indicates that Lear, "meant to live with Cordelia and with her alone" (p. 214). When Lear was sent to prison by Edmund, Lear says, "We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage" (V. iii. 9). This article seeks to find out Lear's reasons to divide his kingdom among the daughters according to the proportion of their love.

King Lear has become very much old, he can't continue his responsibility. He is not in the position of taking the burden of responsibility. And so, he wants to disseminate his power among his daughters. It may be one of the reasons of disseminating his powers among his daughters as he says:

t's our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths. (I. i. 38-40)

Readers have noticed no faults in Lear's rule in the kingdom; rather Lear is very much successful in maintaining the rules and responsibilities of the country. If

audiences take it for granted that King Lear has become very much old and so he wants to divide his power, what about the way that he will divide his kingdom according to the proportion to his daughters' love. This cannot be prudent, rational and logical. A. C. Bradley says: "no sane man would think of dividing his kingdom among his daughters in proportion to the strength of their several protestations of love," and it "is much too harsh and is based upon a strange misunderstanding." (p. 212-13)

Lear could take the decision of dividing his kingdom according to the wit, knowledge and power of his daughters. It means that Lear himself is not responsible for such kind of illogical, irrational and childish decision. Generally, not only Lear, no other men in different places and setting in Lear's age are not responsible for this kind of activities. Freud (2005) claims- these are the activities of Lear's conscious mind and unconscious mind:

Thus an unconscious conception is one of which we are not aware, but the existence of which we are nevertheless ready to admit on account of other proofs or signs (p. 135-36).

Disowning Cordelia Lear exhibits the principal sign of irrationality, another term of Freudian Whimsy. Lear is also illogical, childish and insensible. Apart from the terms conscious and unconscious, there is another term called preconscious or fore conscious in Freud's theory. Normally everyone takes some preparation of presenting something before audience or listeners. Whenever an individual takes preparation of presenting something or of talking something or of doing something, various thoughts come to our mind as preconscious. In this context, every moment, an individual's mind thinks or takes preparation about the activities to be done successively. This thinking or preparation is called preconscious. Whenever the actual moment of presentation comes, preconscious becomes conscious and that person starts to edit or censor preconscious. After presentation, the remaining thoughts excluded in presentation are preserved as unconscious. When time comes, these latent thinking or desires come out spontaneously that frequently happens in sleeping and dreaming. As for Lear, he takes all necessary preparations of dividing his kingdom. He loves his younger daughter Cordelia, very much for the reason of which he sections the most 'opulent' part for Cordelia. These are called preconscious. When Cordelia couldn't make Lear happy with her praise, Lear's loves for Cordelia was suppressed in the unconscious. At the moment of Lear's madness, one kind of sleeping or dreaming, Lear starts talking from his unconscious. In Freud's (2005) words: '... a certain censorship plays a part in determining ... the rigorous censorship exercises its office at the point of transition from the unconscious to the preconscious or conscious. (p. 148-49)

So what Lear is supposed to do or express in his conscious state is edited or split up. It is not his real thinking or preconscious. Lear edits and thus suppresses his real design of mind. It happens not only to Lear but also to everybody. Freud (2005) says: "We had better assume that consciousness can be split up ... an unconscious activity which remains so and seems to be cut off from consciousness" (p. 138). These are the activities, this article finds in Lear's actions.

Lear could express his desire at the very beginning of the play. He could say that I do not want to leave Cordelia and I do not want Duke of Burgundy or King of France to marry and to take away Cordelia. But he didn't carry his thinking to consciousness and exclude his thinking. In Freud's (2005) words:

it is by no means impossible for the product of unconscious activity to pierce into consciousness, but a certain amount of exertion is needed for the task. When a person tries to do it in him or herself, s/he becomes aware of a distinct feeling of repulsion ... (p. 139) .

Therefore, the person learns that the unconscious idea is excluded from consciousness by living force that opposes its reception.

Freud (2005) makes the difference between conscious and unconscious transparent with the examples of photography. Lear's unconscious mind can be analyzed by connecting it to Freud's (2005) analogy between the conscious and unconscious. According to Freud:

A rough but not inadequate analogy to this supposed relation of conscious to unconscious activity might be drawn from the field of ordinary photography. The first stage of the photograph is the 'negative'; every photographic picture has to pass through the 'negative process', and some of these negatives which have held good in examination, are admitted to the 'positive process' ending in the picture (p. 139).

According to Freud (2005), Lear resists the unconscious at the beginning, when it gets chance of coming out at the time of his madness, audiences find the full-fledged presentation of his unconscious which "is a regular and inevitable phase in the process constituting one's psychical activity; every psychical act begins with an unconscious one, but it may either remain so or go on developing into conscious activity, according to the situation it meets which can be with resistance or not" (p. 139).

Every day, an individual constitutes the unconscious; if it doesn't get the opportunity to come out in consciousness, it comes out in dreams. Hence, Freud identifies dream as a train of thoughts that:

has been aroused by working of the mind in the daytime, and retained some of its activity, escaping from the general inhibition of interests which introduces sleep and constitutes the psychical preparation for sleeping. During the night this train of thoughts succeeds in finding connections with one of the unconscious tendencies present ever since her or his childhood in the mind of the dreamer, but ordinarily repressed and excluded from his conscious life. By the borrowed force of this unconscious help, the thoughts, the residue of the day's work, now become active again, and emerge into conscious in the shape of the dream (p. 140).

It indicates that Lear's unconscious comes out without hindrance in actions in the play, *King Lear*.

Freud compares the mental stage to an ice-berg. Everyone sees a very little portion of an ice-berg floating on water. A person can't see the huge portion of the ice-berg that is under water. If audiences put it in a ratio, they can see one-tenth of the ice-berg floating on water, and can't see the nine-tenths of the ice-berg floating under water.

In the same way audiences can see one-tenth of Lear's mentality, as Freud calls it consciousness. However ninety percent of Lear's mentality covers his unconscious or subconscious mentality. Lear's activities in the play are chiefly and mainly guided by his unconscious or subconscious mind that is Freudian Whimsy.

Human brain performs two forms of activities. When a man will be awake, his brain or mind will be in conscious stage. When a man will be sleeping, his brain will start dreaming and this stage is called unconscious or subconscious stage by Freud. In the conscious stage, human being always edits and hides their true notion of mind. What a person wants to say and do, s/he can't do and say so for various reasons. As audiences see Gonerill and Regan for the cause of their profit hide their true mentality. Freud calls it the activity of their conscious self or mind.

A man can't edit or hide the activities of his mind when he will be sleeping or dreaming. These are called the activities of the unconscious or subconscious mind. In the same manner, audiences see, Lear starts saying many real things when he is passing in a state of madness which is free from consciousness and which is one kind of sleeping and dreaming. A. C. Bradley (1992) says, "*King Lear*, as a whole, is imperfectly dramatic, and there is something in its very essence which is at war with the senses, and demands a purely imaginative realization" (p. 212).

Lear leaves Gonerill's house, travels one whole day, reaches Regan's house; Regan regrets him, it starts raining and storming, Lear goes out at night. So, Lear having no food, rest and sleep, he starts sleeping and dreaming and starts talking with the disguised mad Edgar. This is the stage of Lear's unconscious or subconscious mind. A. C. Bradley (1992) says, "the most powerful speeches uttered by Lear in his madness" (p. 210). In Lear's madness, he doesn't have the idea of self-dignity; he is not afraid of any social norms and customs; he loses the idea of Divine Right Theory of Kingship, and so his unconscious mind is exposed without any edition and repression. He starts saying that he has done wrong to Cordelia. He starts punishing Gonerill and Regan with Edgar as the Judge. In such a juncture, Sigmund Freud's theories of the psyche divide mind in three stages i.e., id, ego, superego. In Freud's words: "... 'id', which contains the passions". Ego - rational mind – maturity and Superego - rationality patented with wit and intellect (p. 450)

In case of Lear, he wants to divide his kingdom and disseminate his power among his daughters. But the way Lear follows to test the gravity of his daughters' love is truly illogical and irrational and these are the expressions of Lear's whims. It is decided earlier that which portion of the kingdom will be given to whom. Only to satisfy his childish mentality Lear has done so. As stated by Freud, Lear is guided by his id in this stage and so, he is illogical and irrational.

A one and half year old child sometimes catches books and tears; sometimes catches glass and Jug of water and spreads water all over the floor; sometimes takes medicine and swallows it without understanding that it is a pill of sleep. If the parent of that child snatches the things from the child, it starts crying illogically. A child is innocent and at the same time irrational. A child is normally guided by passions not by logic and reason. So, a person's logic and reason try to retain the passions. In case

of a child, logic and reason are defeated by passions. For Lear, his logic and reason fail to curb his passions. This logical part of mind is called 'ego'. Freud (2005) says, "[t]he ego represents what may be called reason and common sense" (p. 450).

Not only that when Kent comes to intervene Lear's illogical activities, Kent is threatened and punished by Lear and says: "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (I. i. 122). Kent is also punished.

Five days we do allot thee for provision  
To shield thee from disasters of the world,  
And on the sixth to turn thy hated back  
Upon our kingdom. If on the tenth day following  
Thy banished trunk be found in our dominions  
The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,  
This shall not be revoked! (I. i. 173-79)

So, the mental state i.e., id does not move someone childishly, but also moves someone whimsically and hotly; and that the person will not be guided by logic just like a child. Lear could apprehend the true situation of his daughters' mentality, but he fails, as a child fails to apprehend the true state of a situation. Lear fails to investigate the hypocrisy of Gonerill and Regan, as a child fails to understand so. Lear misses to observe the true love of Cordelia, which a child misses. Not only that Lear fails to understand the logic of Kent, audience see a child fails and becomes illogical. Lear wants to live with his daughter Cordelia. This thinking was suppressed in Lear's unconscious mind as a repressed desire. All these activities are termed as Freudian Whimsy.

After dividing his kingdom and disseminating his power, for the first time, Lear visits his elder daughter Gonerill's house. Lear starts understanding the true mentality of Gonerill. Gonerill behaves with his father more harshly that pushes Lear to understand the true situation and pushes him to maturity. So, it goes in Freud's description of ego.

Lear Leaves Gonerill's house and goes to Regan's. But Regan is of same nature as Gonerill. Lear understands the situation more seriously and more logically that Gonerill and Regan are hypocrites. Lear gets his eye of knowledge and rationality which he missed at the opening of the play. As the play moves forward, Lear's mentality also moves forward from id to ego.

Abandoned by his two daughters, Lear goes to Cordelia who receives him with heart. Cordelia gives Lear proper treatment and allows him to take rest. After getting treatment, food, shelter, sleep and rest, Lear's mind is revived and regenerated. Now, Lear gets the kaleidoscopic vision of understanding the mentality of Gonerill, Regan, Cordelia, Kent and Gloucester. Lear also gets the idea that he has done a great mistake by disowning Cordelia and banishing Kent. Lear gets the maturity of his mind and stands on the mental stage of superego.

Lear is an old king. There is no mistake in Lear's character that pushes Lear to commit the wrong of disowning Cordelia and banishing Kent. Being a man of maturity, Lear should possess every possible good nature and judgment of resisting

his temptation of committing any wrong. If audience take it for granted that passions and feelings i. e., 'id' are responsible for Lear's misdeeds, Lear's logic and sense try to stop him but fail to check Lear's passions. Successively, this very Lear apprehends that he has done wrong to his younger daughter Cordelia. "I did her wrong" (I. v. 24). Lear admits his fault and this is a sign of 'higher nature' that Freud (2005) calls, "ego ideal" or 'superego'. 'and here we have that higher nature, in this ego ideal or super ego" (p. 459).

Higher nature was present in Lear at the beginning of the play, but he couldn't exercise it. Though, super ego remains present in childhood, they can't exercise it. Gradually a child gets acquainted with other factors; receive these by heart; form the conscience and can perform superego. Freud (2005) says: "When we were little children, we knew these higher natures, we admired and feared them; and later we took them into ourselves" (p. 459).

Lear at the very beginning misses to show his higher nature. Gradually he acquaints with the severe reality of his life. He visits his elder daughters' house and is driven out in storms at night. Now, Lear grows into a man of higher nature and of conscience. Freud says ego is of external and superego is of internal. In Freud's (2005) words: "Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, of reality, the superego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world" (p. 459).

Lear becomes a regenerated and evolved man and so, his suffering and death grow sympathy, pity and fear in mind of the audience. Now, Lear can do everything with his conscience, wit and intellect. First thing Lear does after the recovery of his sense is that he seeks forgiveness from his daughter Cordelia. I'll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness. (V. iii. p. 170, 10-11)

Seeking pardon is related to guilty feelings and guilt feelings come from heart and thus from conscience. Lear thinks him guilty and so, he seeks forgiveness. This realization Lear achieves from his sufferings. Freud (2005) says: "It is easy to show that the superego answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man" (p. 459). In the case of a specific child, parents, teachers, neighbours play vital role of forming superego. Freud says:

As a child grows up, the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship. The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. (p. 460)

For Lear, morality, social sense or suffering play vital role in building his superego. In Freud's words: "Religion, morality and a social sense-the chief elements in the higher side of man ... The superego, according to our hypothesis, actually originated from the experiences" (p. 460-61). It means that through the gradual suffering and experiences, Lear moves from irrationality to rationality and logic, i.e., from id to superego. Therefore, Lear's actions and motives all through the play are expressed through Freud's psychological theories, for example, id or whims, ego, and superego.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that King Lear at the very beginning of the play disowns his younger daughter Cordelia whimsically, irrationally and illogically that are the signs of Lear's id, i.e., Freudian Whimsy. Most parts of the play reflect these whims. Lear's ego fails to control his whims. Finally Lear's conscience gets regenerated and apprehends the real situation after much suffering. Thus, Lear reaches toward the state of superego in Freud's theory. Then, Lear's preconscious mind fails to pierce into consciousness and thus remains latent as unconscious. Finally, Lear's unconsciousness comes out at the end of the play *King Lear*, as he thinks that this is the convenient time for uttering forgiveness and understanding the true state of his own mind. These happen for having no repulsion or resistance from his mind that usually happens in the dreams of an individual.

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