Unriddling Human Nature: The Id Dominating the Ego and Superego in Kafka’s “A Fratricide”

In Franz Kafka’s “A Fratricide,” Schmar murders Wese. Critics have marveled that there is no direct evidence from the text to suggest a conscious motive for the crime. Pallas, who consciously watches the whole murder unfold from his upstairs window, surprisingly does nothing to intervene. Suzanne Wokenfeld comments on these mystifying aspects of the story, “No explicit explanation of Schmar’s motive is provided and the air of mystification is increased by the question of why Pallas, who watches the murder from his window, did not intervene to prevent it.” Wokenfeld cites Kafka saying the subject of “A Fratricide” is to, “Unriddle the mysteries of human nature!” (Wokenfeld 27). The mystery of human nature is presented by Pallas. While Pallas watches Schmar prepare for murder from his upstairs window, Kafka narrates, “Why was all this tolerated by Pallas?...Go and fathom human nature!” (Kafka 73)

Critics have tried to explain Kafka’s writings through Freudian psychology. According to Ann B. Dobie, Freudian psychology attempts to explain human actions and thought patterns by analyzing the unconscious of an individual. Freud explains the unconscious has three parts: the id, which represents man’s animal instincts and desires; the ego, which regulates the desires of the id; and the superego, which mediates the ego and id and suppresses socially unacceptable desires back into the unconscious (Dobie 52-53). Evelyn Westermann Asher, a literary critic, who uses Freud’s id, ego, and superego to analyze literature states, “These categories seem
particularly well suited for the works of Kafka.” Wokenfeld suggests, “In Freudian terms the story dramatizes the destruction of the ego by the impulses of the id, left uncontrolled by a passive superego.” While critics have explored the id, ego, and superego in Kafka’s texts they have not commented on what light these studies shed on human nature. The intent of this paper is to “unriddle the mysteries of human nature” or in other words determine why Schmar brutally kills Wese and why Pallas does nothing to intervene. By understanding the id, ego, and superegos of Schmar and Pallas, we see how the id dominates behavior and cripples the ego and superego allowing this tragic murder to occur.

There are three characters in Kafka’s “A Fratricide:” Wese, who is murdered; Schmar who commits the murder; and Pallas who is a standby and watches the crime occur. The text is rich with representations of the id, ego, and superego; however the representation of the id is most prevalent. According to Dobie the id is entirely unconscious. It operates according to biological desires and attempts to satisfy those demands as quickly as possible, ignoring social standards and ethics. “As Freud described it, the id strives to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle” (Dobie 53). In other words the id seeks to bring satisfaction and pleasure to the individual. The id is the most prevalent and dominating part of the psyche present in “A Fratricide.”

Both Pallas and Schmar’s ids take control and each of them operates on the “pleasure principle” described by Freud. Schmar, the murderer, after committing murder exclaims, “The bliss of murder! Relief, a lightening, won through the flow of another’s blood!” (Kafka 74). This exclamation by Schmar reveals that there is a burden that has been lifted off his shoulders by killing his friend Wese. The murder brings Schmar pleasure. While the motive for why Schmar kills Wese it is not evident from the text, Schmar’s triumphant exclamation shows that he felt a
need to do so. Schmar uses the word “relief” to describe his feelings after the murder. The Oxford English dictionary defines “relief” as an, “alleviation of or deliverance from distress, anxiety, or some other emotional burden, something that provides mental relaxation.” Whatever Schmar’s motive may be in killing Wese it is evident from these definitions and from the text that the murder does bring Schmar relief. Immediately after killing Wese Schmar, in a celebratory manner, “throws the knife, the superfluous bloody ballast, against the nearest house front” (Kafka 74). This motion by Schmar and the connotations of the words he uses in his exclamation following the murder demonstrate the pleasurable state he finds himself in following the murder.

Schmar is operating solely on the “pleasure principle” described by Freud when he commits this heinous crime. His id is in full control. He is seeking to relieve some sort of tension that will bring him to a more pleasurable status in his life. He does not take time to think at all about the consequences of his actions. His actions are congruent with the descriptions of the id given by Dobie, “lawless, asocial, [and] amoral” (Dobie 53). His decision to kill Wese is animal like and based solely on his desire to be happy.

Pallas also operates on the “pleasure principle” and his actions are in line with the id’s will. He does so in a different way than Schmar. As Schmar prepares for murder it is noted that Pallas, “was watching everything from his second-story window…Pallas leans far out; he must not miss a thing” (Kafka 73-74). These descriptions of Pallas are reminiscent of one who closely watches a movie or other event not wanting to miss a single thing. Pallas’s failure to act makes the reader beg Pallas to answer the question, why? Why does Pallas watch and not do anything to prevent this murder? For what reason is Pallas so intrigued by the developing crime scene? Why can he not draw himself away from the drama to do something to save the life of Wese? Pallas
did not do anything because Pallas, driven by his id, found pleasure in watching the drama unfold. Pallas actions, dominated by the id, are an example of schadenfreude.

The word schadenfreude is described in the Oxford English Dictionary as, “malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others.” Literary critics have done studies on this behavior exhibited by readers in relation to different texts. In his article “Tragic Laughter,” Matthew Dillon explores the origins of laughter in tragic literature. In his exploration of schadenfreude, he delves into the scientific world and cites studies done by ethologists on primates. These studies reveal that primates laugh at violent scenes whether real or staged. Dillon explains the reasons for including these scientific studies in his essay, he feels they, “may have a bearing on the overwhelmingly hostile and primitive nature of tragic laughter, which strikes us as so uncivilized”. Dillon argues that tragic laughter or laughing at the misfortune of others is hostile and uncivilized. While there is nothing in the text that suggests Pallas is laughing while watching the scene outside his window he is finding some sort of similar pleasure. There is part of human nature that derives pleasure watching violence or scenes of unrest. This is evident in large traffic jams on interstate freeways that develop because of an accident that has occurred. Large groups of people when driving by stop or slow down to watch the drama unfold on the side of the road. Whether, curiosity is suppressed or humans enjoy seeing suffering there is a sense of relief felt within the individual who stops. Examples of this phenomenon are available in history. In the Roman Coliseum large crowds congregate to watch gladiators fight to the death as a form of entertainment. A similar, yet much lower key example, is found in the fight enjoyed by teenagers at a middle school where they congregate to watch two students beat each other. These examples of schadenfreude prove that there is a mystifying part of human nature that enjoys watching others suffer. Pallas’s schadenfreude behavior is propelled by the desires of his id as he uncivilly
watches the murder of Wese from his upstairs window. In these two instances Pallas and Schmar both satisfy their ids by watching and committing murder respectively.

Understanding each part of the unconscious and what is happening in relation to each part is crucial to understanding human nature and the decisions of Pallas and Schmar. According to Dobie the ego is the part of the unconscious that is most similar with agency. It regulates between the id and what the animal within desires and molds those desires into behavior that is socially acceptable. “Its function is to make the id’s energies nondestructive by postponing them or diverting them into socially acceptable actions, sometimes by finding an appropriate time for gratifying them” (Dobie 53). The ego when functioning properly should help one to make socially acceptable decisions regardless of what the id desires. By understanding Pallas’s ego we begin to understand his inability to act. Pallas’s ego remains passive and fails to regulate the desires of the id and, consequently the murder of Wese is allowed to occur. Pallas enjoys all too much the pleasure and satisfaction he is receives from watching the murder of Wese. This satisfaction paralyzes his ego. He passively and comfortably stands in his window as an onlooker when reality calls for him to be a hero. He fails to summon any authority, or do anything else that civic duty demands. Pallas’s failure to act is certainly not due to the fact that he doesn’t understand or see what was happening. Pallas’s attention to detail and lack of action are evident in his late squeal to Schmar, “Schmar! Schmar! Everything noted, nothing overlooked” (Kafka 74). Pallas knows what is happening but is unable to do anything about it because his ego has been paralyzed by his id.

Pallas’s ego is passive because of the stimulus he is receiving from watching the murder. Erika Fromm comments on aspects of active and passive egos, “the central element in the distinction between ego activity and ego passivity is the presence or absence of choice: the ego is
active when the individual can make a choice of his own free will; it is passive when he loses the autonomy vis-à-vis the stimuli he receives from his instinctual drives.” Pallas’s ego is not active in this case and is, as Fromm suggests, passive. Pallas is mesmerized by the murder scene before him and rather enjoys watching it. His ego grows more passive because of his fascination with Wese’s murder. His id has taken control and suppressed his ego which would scream at him to do something about what he is seeing out of his window. The stimulus and pleasure he is obtaining from his instinctual drive or id are too great for him to overcome. His ego is found dead.

Only after the murder is completed and the id is satisfied does Pallas’s ego becomes active as he cries out in horror and tries to do something about the murder. This gesture, though socially acceptable, is much too late. Wese, like Pallas’s ego, is dead. Schmar is arrested for his crime but it does no justice to a situation that could have been prevented had Pallas acted. Pallas’s ego is murdered in a sense by his id just as Wese is murdered by Schmar.

Schmar also has an inactive ego. Had Schmar’s ego been active no matter how strong his desire to kill Wese he would have been able to suppress it into a non-destructive behavior. Schmar’s id and his desire, for whatever reason, to kill Wese proved to be too strong for his ego to overcome. Schmar’s ego, like Pallas’s, comes alive too late as he begins to realize the consequences of his actions. When speaking to the dead body of Wese Schmar laments:

Why aren’t you just a bubble of blood, so that I could sit on you and make you disappear for good? Not everything will be fulfilled, not every blossoming dream will flower, your heavy remains lie here, already unresponsive to any kick. What sense is there to the mute question you pose in this way? (Kafka 74).
What is the question that Wese’s dead body represents? Why does Schmar wish that he could sit on Wese and cover him up for good? He admits that now that Wese is dead not every dream will be realized and fulfilled for himself or for Wese. Schmar will undoubtedly be subject to the consequences of the law. The question that Wese’s dead body asks is posed to both Schmar and Pallas, “why could you not suppress your id and spare my life?” Pallas’s ego was not active and Pallas failed to prevent the murder. It would be ideal for the ego of Pallas to be active and prevent the murder as it would be ideal for Schmar to constrain his id and the desire to kill Wese. Because of the id not every one of Wese or Schmar’s dreams will be fulfilled. The desires of the id overcome Pallas and Schmar to destroy their egos and prove destructive to themselves and Wese.

In Freudian psychology the third part of the model for the unconscious is the superego. According to Dobie the superego operates on the morality principle and fights against the desires of the id to suppress socially unacceptable desires back into the unconscious. It is similar to what many would term as a conscience. Dobie declares the superego, “provides the sense of moral and ethical wrongdoing” (54). The superego should prevent one from venturing down a socially unacceptable path.

Pallas’s superego is passive in “A Fratricide.” Pallas allows his id to be satisfied and destroy his ego while his superego is passive and he chooses to do nothing to intervene. Pallas’s superego is passive while he watches the murder occur. David J. Velleman’s article on the psyche further supports and shows the inactivity of Pallas’s while he watches the murder, “Freud claims that the governance exercised over us by morality is a form of governance that was once exercised by our parents and that was subsequently assumed by a portion of our own personalities.” Nothing from the text suggests that Pallas is not a normal citizen who had a
normal upbringing and would not do the moral thing and report a murder when he saw it. He however does not do this because his id is in full control and is enjoying the murder scene. Rather than suppress the desire to watch the murder, Pallas lets his id carry on and watch the terrible scene. Pallas’s superego becomes active when he does the appropriate thing that one would do after having seen a murder. He reports it and seeks justice for the murderer. Pallas shouts at Schmar, “Schmar! Schmar! Everything noted, nothing overlooked” (Kafka 74). In a sense Pallas’s superego saves him from a tragic failure. It is near impossible to think that Pallas would simply do nothing. In this case he eventually does act and Pallas’s superego ultimately saves him from a social psychological failure. This action is too late though. Wese is dead and Pallas’s id has assisted in the destruction of Wese.

Analyzing Schmar’s superego is relatively simple. His is completely passive throughout the story. He does nothing to suppress his animal like desire to kill Wese. He goes through with the murder without hesitation and second thoughts. Arguably the only time when Schmar finds his superego in operation is when he does nothing to resist arrest. Schmar’s id like Pallas’s has completely overtaken his id and the id proves unconscious be deadly.

The unconscious part of the psyche modeled by Freud helps us to understand human nature. As stated by Kafka, the subject of “A Fratricide” is to, “Unriddle the mysteries of human nature!” (Wokenfeld 27). The mystery of human nature or why Schmar would carry out the murder of Wese and why Pallas did nothing to stop it is solved by using Freud’s tripartite model of the unconscious psyche. The desires of the id prove to be too strong for the ego and superego to mediate. Consequently the ego and superego are crippled and the id takes control of the individual and is able to satisfy its desires. It is because Pallas and Schmar’s ego and superegos are paralyzed by the desires of the id that Wese is tragically murdered.
Works Cited


