

A Psychological Reading of Dennis Lehane's Shutter Island

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Abstract

Shutter Island(2003) is a psychological thriller novel that explores the various conflicts that happen within the human psyche. This paper is a detailed analysis on how trauma, guilt and repression cause mental disorder by looking into the fine line between normal defense mechanisms and psychotic tendencies. By taking the protagonist of the novel Andrew Laeddis as an example, this paper will explore the eternal battle between the Id and the superego and will try to understand how ego's attempts at creating a balance is often led to complete collapse of sanity.

Keywords: Trauma, Guilt, Repression, Psyche, Defense Mechanisms

Introduction:

The 1923 personality theory of Sigmund Freud divided the psyche into three defining elements, the Id (*Es*), the ego (*Ich*), and the superego (*Uberich*), these three areas spread themselves out into the unconscious, the subconscious, and the conscious. The Id is the impulsive and unconscious part of our mind which is present from early childhood. It remains in this infantile stage all its life. Its needs, desires, and motives remain immature; this is because the Id has no contact with the outside world. Much like an infant, the Id remains cut off from the moral structures that define the society. The Id functions by the pleasure principle. "Pleasure principle aims at the immediate discharge of accumulating tensions which typically results in hallucinatory gratification" (Lear 255). The superego is the part of the psyche that only develops in the final stage. Further divided into the ego ideal and the conscience, the superego analyses each of the Id's wishes based on society's expectations and decides whether it is to be followed or not. While the ego ideal acts as a standard by which

the ego's actions are analysed, the conscience possesses the crucial power to impact guilt, which, in cases of an unbalanced psyche, "plays a decisive economic part and puts the most powerful obstacles in the way of recovery" (Freud 11). The ego, acts as a mediator, positioning itself between the Id and the superego. While the Id relies on impulsive motivations, the ego functions based on pure rationality. "The ego follows the reality principle. The reality principle seeks realistic gratifications of wishful impulses and desires" (256). It is responsible for keeping a check on the id, serving not two, but "three severe masters and has to do its best to reconcile the claims and demands of all three. These demands are always divergent and often seem quite incompatible; no wonder that the ego so frequently gives way under its task. The three tyrants are the external world, the superego, and the id" (110). The ego, if failed to abide by the reality principle, will start functioning many defense mechanisms to evade anxiety.

Freud's discovery of the concept of defense was a turning point in the field of Psychology. In his work *Ego mechanism of defense*, he identified the five most important properties of defense mechanisms, from "managing instinct and affect, being unconscious and indicative of major psychiatric syndromes to being adaptive as well as pathological" (4). The first defense mechanism that Freud discovered was Repression, 'the Queen of all defenses' or the 'cornerstone of psychoanalysis, which is often referred to by the layman as "convenient forgetting', where the person forgets, either consciously or unconsciously, those things which remind him of his inadequacies", (Hurlock 409). It blocks a threatening idea, a traumatic memory, or a frightening childhood experience from entering the consciousness. As C. Hull remarks, it is "one of the methods by which the ego tries to counteract or master an impending disaster or threat by adopting a method of denial, falsification or distortion of reality instead of adopting realistic problem-solving methods" ("Repression: Concepts, kinds").

Psychological Reading of the Novel

The novel *Shutter Island* was published in 2003 by Harper Collins. Set in a gothic environment, the novel takes the reader to an uncanny and chilling inner battle, fought by the protagonist Andrew Laeddis. The story is set on an island called Shutter, which was once a hideout of pirates and thieves. The menacing presence of the sea hangs threateningly over the

islanders, along with a grave lighthouse that glimmers in the light of an age-old conspiracy. The Ashecliff hospital for the criminally insane is located right at the heart of the island and it gives the required gothic element to the novel. The sea has a sinister role throughout; it is described as a trap, nothing leaves the island; the waves bring them back just the same way they went out to the sea. The environment itself hints at the psychological tension and mental confinement of a tormented human mind through many such visible symbols.

Andrew Laeddis was a US marshal, who was forced to participate in World War II. The war left a deep scar on his conscience, as he was forced to compromise his humanity for the sake of his nation. The novel explores the thin line between the dark and the light within each human being. “God loves violence. There is no moral order at all. There is only ‘can my violence conquer yours?’” (Lehane 279). When a person witnesses the horrors of the violence he is capable of, either he loses the entire command over his superego, sinking deeper into a life tainted with the murderous desires of Id, or accepts the punishment of the superego and gets pierced with the pangs of guilt. Michael Shreiner, in his essay analysing Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, discusses this victory of one over the other:

When the Id won, the individual felt satisfied but culture and civilization, all the higher aims of human existence, paid for it. When the superego won the individual felt thwarted, but the culture and civilization, all the higher aims of human existence, were protected and could continue to advance... People could get their instinctive needs satisfied only at the expense of civilization, and civilization could flourish only at the expense of their instinctive needs (“Id versus Superego”).

According to a research conducted by Jeremiah A. Schumm, Ph.D. and Kathleen M. Chard, Ph.D., for the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, supported by the Department of Veteran Affairs, United States, military-related trauma, often leads to alcoholism and simultaneously PTSD in a minor yet significant group among the war veterans. They suggest that the individual could be diagnosed with PTSD if he or she repeatedly undergoes the following actions, i.e., re-experiencing the war-related traumatic events through nightmares or flashbacks, arousal, that is startle or get sleep disturbances, and avoidance through withdrawing from people and places that reminds the person of the war, or

those who try to chain the person to the reality (“PTSD and Alcohol use”). Throughout the story, Andrew is reminded of his war days. Even after returning, he was not able to reclaim a normal life, he avoided his family and the people around him so that he could, successfully, yet unhealthily, withdraw from the trauma of his past. The relief he found was through alcohol. It was Andrew’s inability to deal with the trauma that rendered him powerless. Addiction is described as a defensive strategy to avoid the feeling of helplessness, a mere attempt at self-regulation by the individual to cope with the anxiety that emerged from the threats of the Id and the helplessness of the ego. Immersed in his own mental shambles, Andrew wasn’t able to give due attention to his family. Until then he was only going through minor anxiety, which he could have overcome in the course of time. But his ignorance of the things around him made him pay a bigger price, his family, his life, reputation, and ultimately his sanity. His wife, Dolores Chanal was by then a bipolar patient. Due to her husband’s continuous neglect and a lack of proper treatment, she was already at the maniacal heights of violence and suicidal tendencies.

Deranged by the illness Dolores drowns their children in the nearby lake, leaving Andrew to deal with their dead bodies. With the repulsive horror of what happened due to his ignorance and the consequent self-hatred, Andrew reaches a juncture, the most crucial point for his own psychological journey. Appalled by his wife’s action and tormented by his own ignorance, Andrew slowly loses the little command he had over his mental strength. The monstrous desire to end this all using the violence that he knew he was capable of was one choice, the one commanded by the Id, the sudden release of all tension, through Freud’s pleasure principle. To accept what he has done and face the consequences of his wife’s illness and the loss of his children was another, the one favoured by the superego, which is in harmony with his moral values as well as the external rules, through the reality principle. But at the same time accepting that would only mean how badly he failed his ego ideal. Triggered by hatred, towards himself and his ignorance that transcends the limits of self-restraint and clouds the ability of judgment, he finally succumbs to the former option, shooting his wife and hence liberating her of her illness. By the analysis of Michael Shreiner, this scene is significant due to its exactness in mitigating the Pyrrhic victory of the Id over the superego. The only logical conclusion that we can draw from Andrew’s action is that his ego acted out in favour of the Id and thus opened an opportunity for the superego to execute its punishment of instilling guilt. The superego that revolved around strict morals and values couldn’t accept

what the ego had done, “since the actions of the ego deviated largely from the ego ideal, the Freudian notion of a perfect or ideal self-housed in the superego” (Rosenthal 102).

Although Freud used both the terms ego ideal and ideal ego indiscriminately, his own analysis in *Civilization, Society and Religion* of the ego ideal as the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego enjoyed self-sufficiency can help us understand Andrew’s consequent spiralling into psychosis (139). This “identification with an over idealized self- and object-representation, with the primitive form of ego-ideal” can help us understand how the excessive development of narcissistic character defenses results from an exacerbation of the early infantile ego ideal as a defense against fear and guilt over multiple conflicts (Kernberg 239,240).

Carl Jung, the founder of Analytical Psychology, in *Psychology and Religion* defines guilt as “a cheap substitute for legitimate suffering” (qtd. in Flaherty 107). Guilt is a necessary aspect of the psychological process. With the courage to accept the consequences, one may restore the balance with some effort, at the same time, without this courage, guilt could be a malignant co-traveller who could deliver you to the doorsteps of neurosis. With the death of his wife, Andrew could no longer live his true identity, to escape from the strong guilt he associated with ‘Andrew’; he had to create a new self. Repressing a single memory itself can be complicated as it is never really gone, then repressing all the memories associated with an identity and hence trying to forget the identity itself is a form of self-destruction, an abnormal repression. As repression is never absolute, these memories of his real self come back through hallucinations and dreams.

Connecting her own views on the role of shame with Freud, Helen Block Lewis, in her essay ‘Shame, Repression, Field Dependence, and Psychopathology’ explains that irrational guilt often leads to neurosis. According to Freud, the patient considers himself not as guilty but as ill. Adding to this, Lewis explains undischarged shame as the emotional force that fuels guilt enough to justify an unnatural anger (qtd. in Singer 233). In his newly created identity and life, as Teddy Daniels, Andrew makes sure to invent an antagonist of the name Andrew, to whom his unnatural anger is channelled. In his new identity, he was a US marshal and a childless widower whose wife was killed by pyromaniac Andrew Laeddis. Otto Fenichel explains the role of guilt with the help of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where Macbeth, to reduce the severity of his guilt used the witches as alternate figures to share his burden. Fenichel’s description of the sharing of guilt is thus:

Frequent in occurrences are attempts at projecting guilt feelings. "Someone else has done it, not I" is the leitmotif of many a neurotic character. There are different types of quasi-projections of guilt feelings. Any guilt can be borne more easily if someone else has done the same thing... persons who either have done something for which they feel guilty... feel greatly relieved if they succeed in finding someone who does or had done the same deed. (165)

Teddy's relentless efforts to find pyromaniac Andre Laeddis thus have two significant meanings. Firstly, the attempt by a loving husband to find the killer of his wife. This would render Teddy as a hero, the ideal self, that he so longs to achieve. Secondly, this could be the feeble attempt of the real Andrew buried deep within the new Teddy in finding a fake character who could share his unaccounted guilt.

The arrangement of the fantasy itself is a tool to analyse the disparity between Andrew's unconscious and conscious mind. Andrew Laeddis, the repressed personality, could be considered as representing the Id, the one who committed the crime, the one who ought to be punished. Teddy Daniels, the new personality, could be considered as the superego or perhaps the ego ideal, the one abiding by the rules defined by the superego. The real Andrew, lost in between these two selves, tries relentlessly to attain the much desired integrated self. Adding more complication to this instability, the superego's anger towards the Id has manifested itself as a destructive sort of revenge that Teddy felt towards Andrew. This meant that Teddy will always engage in a search for Andrew, the results of which are either a chance towards healing, or to further dissociation, a mere repetition.

From the beginning of the novel, we are following the story of Teddy Daniels and his partner Chuck Aule (actually a doctor), two US marshals who have come to the Shutter Island's famous Ashecliff hospital to investigate the case of a missing patient Rachel Solando which was all, in fact, a part of Andrew's delusion. Since Andrew had chained his original identity to the deepest corners of his unconscious, he had to create his new identity in all the complexity and originality associated with a normal human life. So he started believing that he was in the hospital not because he was an insane murderer, but because he was asked to go to the island as a part of his job. Here, Andrew, a clear victim of Psychosis, starts creating lies, elaborate and subtle, embellishing them with details so much that the tale slowly

becomes quite fantastical. The only apparent break to this delusional thread was his frequent dreams and hallucinations.

In his work, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud discusses how dreams are windows to our unconscious; whatever our unconscious hides might arise as different symbols and images through our dreams. In his delusional self, Teddy had created his own version of his wife's death, set to fire by Andrew Laeddis, but in his dreams, she always appeared dripping wet. The account of his worst dream is given in chapter twelve of the novel, a dream where Dr. Crawley, the head doctor at Ashecliff, Chuck, Rachel, Andrew, Teddy, his dead kids, and his wife were all present. In the dream, the kids are begging Teddy to be saved from their mother, Rachel, and Rachel is in turn promising Teddy that she would be a wife to him forever only if he helped her in killing their children. But here in the dream too, Dr. Crawley is trying to reason with him, asking how he could love the woman who killed his children. The conversations repeat again and again in the dream, and Teddy's choices are always the same, helping his wife. "And Teddy kept waving, even though the girl wouldn't wave back as her mother carried her towards the mausoleum and the little girl stared at Teddy, her eyes beyond hope for rescue, resigned to this world, this sacrifice" (188).

The dream portrays the inner battle perfectly. It is not only about the grief tormenting his existence day by day, but also about the deeply rooted shame he felt in being a participant, through ignorance and inaction, in his wife's actions. In the dream, he is never able to save his children because of his overwhelming desire to have Rachel as his wife. This shows his immense love for Dolores, the ultimate symbol of his repression. Even in the dream his superego talks to him through Dr. Crawley, reasoning and persuading him. Reham Al Taher explains in her research, "As Freud believed we are essentially every character in our dreams, his dead wife and children may be an extended representation of himself that has crippled him with guilt and he tries to drown his children deeper into his unconscious to avoid attaching himself to the crime" ("Shutter Island: A Psychoanalytic Perspective").

According to his delusional self, he is in Shutter Island for two purposes, to find the missing patient Rachel Solando, accused of killing her children, and to find the pyromaniac, Andrew Laeddis, the one who killed his wife. These characters were a distortion of his truth. His real investigation then is to find himself and his wife, that is his repressed memories. The name Rachel Solando itself is an anagram of Dolores Chanal and the name Edward Daniels (Teddy), an anagram of Andrew Laeddis. Apart from this, Edward, Daniel, and Rachel are

also the names of his dead children. This is how the repressed contents are subtly manifested in the novel.

Dr. Crawley and Dr. Sheehan soon realize that the only way to cure Andrew was to let him be Teddy and find Laeddis, so they play along with him in his delusions. As the instances of the resurfacing of repressed memories started increasing Teddy further invents stories about how the hospital was conducting illegal lobotomies on healthy people like himself. Finally in the last scene at the lighthouse, the symbol of an integrated (healed) mind, Teddy is made to accept who he is. Andrew is made to face his truth and the two broken selves are integrated. He was given the chance to live either as a cured man with a guilty heart or to pretend to live in the illusory space that he created and face lobotomy. But the former option required courage that was beyond Andrew's power, and so he chooses the second one, the one where he could have an untarnished self that was appealing to the standards of his superego. The last sentence from the movie adaptation of the same story gives a clearer idea about Andrew's final choice. "Which would be worse, to live as a monster or to die as a good man?" (Scorcese)(Shutter Island). He chose to live in his delusions even if he knew that it only meant an early death.

Conclusion:

Following the above discussions and arguments, it can be said that Dennis Lehane's Shutter Island is a perfect site for psychological exploration. The novel deals with mental trauma leading to repression triggered by guilt. Andrew was already mentally unstable by the time of his wife's death; this would naturally mean that his ability to decide between right and wrong is already weakened. The story is a gradual development towards the superego's final victory. The battle was started by the Id's action, but after being tormented by the punishment of guilt, the ego finally succumbs to fulfilling the ego ideal, erasing the thin line between normal defenses and psychotic tendencies.

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