

A Psychological Reading of Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant"

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Abstract

The proposed work 'A Psychological Reading of Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant"' employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework and the principles of clinical psychology to delve into the depths of Oscar Wilde's psyche and the creation of his iconic character, the Selfish Giant. It sheds light on the author's psychology by analysing his early life, and through this, it is seen how his inner psyche exerts influence upon him in creating such character as the Selfish Giant, and the giant's endeavours in this fairy tale portray the effect of the writer's unconscious (Id), conscious (Ego), and conscience (Super-ego). The analysis explores the underlying motivations and inspirations that drove Wilde to pen this timeless fairy tale. Other than this, the work will disclose the clinical psychology of the Selfish Giant, the results of Id, Ego and Super-ego in the giant's character and the reforming of his temperament. In this study, the disguised meaning of "The Selfish Giant" has been revealed with the help of Oscar Wilde's unconscious state of mind. This empirical reading will help in bifurcating between the actual words of the author and the masked meaning of the work, which certify the key aim of Psychoanalytical Criticism i.e. not to see what is intended by the author but to see what he means unconsciously by going into his unconscious mind. In essence, 'A Psychological Reading of Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant"' serves as a scholarly venture to unravel the enigmatic depths of Wilde's psyche and the profound significance of his literary creation, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between psychology and literature

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Unconscious, Conscious, Conscience, Ambiguous.

I

The main aim of psychoanalytical study of any work is to uncover the hidden depths of the human psyche as expressed through literature, art, or culture, offering insights into the complexities of human nature and the unconscious forces that drive behaviour and creativity.

"According to Freud's theory, certain aspects of your personality are more primal and might pressure you to act upon your most basic urges. Other parts of your personality work to counteract these urges and strive to make you conform to the demands of reality."(Cherry)

The theory was propounded by Sigmund Freud, according to which human personality is divided into three fundamental structures: The Id, the ego, and the superego. It argues that dreams represent the unfulfilled or secret desires of the author, and a literary work is a demonstration of the author's own mental disturbance. We can also analyse a character within a literary work, but it is assumed that they are a projection of the author's mental state. It also says that whatever a person experiences in childhood, mental disorders, and what they feel in later life, like childhood traumas, sexual conflicts, and fixations, can be represented in the characters that the author is creating.

“According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego.” (McLeod)

Connecting literature to psychology offers a rich and insightful interdisciplinary approach that enhances our understanding of both fields. Literature has long been recognized for its therapeutic potential in promoting emotional insight, empathy, and self-reflection. Psychologists and therapists use literary texts as therapeutic tools in Bibliotherapy. In this process, they guide individuals explore their own experiences, emotions, and conflicts with the aid of literature. Overall, connecting literature to psychology enriches our understanding of both disciplines by illuminating the psychological dimensions of literary texts and exploring the ways in which literature reflect, shapes and challenges our understanding of the human psyche and the world around us. It also deals with the key concept in psychoanalytic theory relevant to literary analysis like the ambiguous or hidden meaning of the texts.

“I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it, and the others, I did not start with an idea and clothed in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets, and many answers.” (Wilde, Complete Letters)

II

The tale of “The Selfish Giant” begins with the children frolicking in the vast garden of the Giant every afternoon upon returning from school. The garden was full of lush greenery, expansive lawns, and fruit-laden trees. These trees bore succulent fruits, and melodious birds. After an absence of seven years, the Giant returned from the Cornish Ogre's lodging. The sight of the Giant frightened the children. Observing the children at play, he declared that no one would be permitted to enter his garden, he erected a formidable wall and posted a warning sign that read, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' he sealed off the garden. The children wandered around the towering walls, reminiscing about the beauty concealed within. While spring blossomed outside, the Giant's garden remained trapped in wintry desolation, shrouded in frost and snow. The absence of children resulted in silence, as even the birds refrained from their melodies. Occasionally, a solitary flower dared to bloom amidst the grass, only to wilt upon glimpsing the forbidding sign. Subsequently, the harsh North Wind and hailstorms battered the desolate garden, thwarting the arrival of autumn's golden fruits, all due to the Giant's selfishness. One morning, the Giant was roused by a delightful melody, the song of a linnnet outside his window. The tempest subsided, and the arrival of spring was palpable. Through a small aperture, he espied children intervened in his garden perched upon

tree branches, which ushered forth the blossoming of the trees, accompanied by the melodious chirping of birds and the emergence of flowers.

Witnessing a solitary figure, a young boy, stranded in a wintry corner, unable to ascend the trees despite their benevolent gesture, the Giant's heart softened. Confronting his selfish nature, he resolved to aid the boy, dismantle the barriers, and grant eternal play to the children. However, upon their sighting him, the children fled, and winter reclaimed the garden, save for the weeping boy. Placing the boy atop the tree, the Giant witnessed its immediate blossoming and received a tender kiss from the boy. Realizing the Giant's benevolence, the children returned, bringing the spring along with them. Although the Giant enjoyed frolicking with the children every afternoon, the boy who had touched his heart remained elusive. With the passage of time, the Giant weakened, until one winter morning, he beheld a magnificent tree adorned with white blossoms in a corner. Beneath its golden branches the wounded boy stood, thereby evoking the Giant's ire. Promising to vanquish the one who had harmed the boy, the Giant was astonished when the boy explained that these were wounds inflicted by love. Smiling, the boy invited the Giant to his garden. Ultimately, the children discovered the Giant's lifeless form beneath the tree, adorned with white blossoms.

III

"The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde provides a rich sphere of clinical psychological examination, investigating into various steps of the giant's psyche as he undergoes a developing journey.

- **Initial Selfishness and Isolation:** Initially, the giant's psychological state portrays selfishness and isolation from others which can be interpreted through the lens of egoism, a psychological concept where individuals prioritize their own needs and desires above others. His decision to build a wall around his garden to keep children out manifests his social isolation. The wall around his garden, symbolizes his desire to detach himself from others and keep the beauty of the garden all to himself. This isolation reflects a psychological barrier he has erected to protect himself from the outside world, indicating a sense of insecurity or fear too.
- **Sense of Power and Control:** The giant's ownership of the garden and his control over it represent a psychological need for power and dominance. His ego is inflated, and he seeks satisfaction from employing authority over his property, demonstrating a need for control as a means of compensating for underlying feelings of inadequacy or vulnerability.
- **Emotional Regulation and Temperament:** When the giant discovers children playing in his garden, he responds with anger and hostility, driving them away and fortifying the barriers around his garden. This emotional response reflects intrinsic feelings of insecurity and fear of losing control. His irritability and mood swings throughout the story may be analysed in terms of emotional regulation and temperament. Nevertheless, as the story progresses and he experiences a change of tune, his outlook shifts towards kindness and warm-heartedness.

- **Loneliness and Alienation:** Social isolation often leads to feelings of loneliness and depression. Despite his superficial display of power and control, the giant's isolation ultimately leads to feelings of being alone and alienation. His unwillingness to share his garden deprives him of meaningful human connection, leaving him emotionally impoverished and disconnected from the joys of companionship and community. Thus his isolation from the outside world can be seen as having negative psychological consequences as a result of which he experiences emptiness despite his vast garden.
- **Attachment Theory:** The relationship that develops between the Giant and the boy who visits the garden can be observed through the lens of attachment theory. Initially, the Giant is unresponsive towards the boy's attempts to play in the garden. But, as the Giant forms affection with the boy and other children, he experiences a shift in attachment towards them, leading to positive emotional outcomes.
- **Metamorphosis and Recovery:** Through his interactions with the small boy and the return of spring to his garden, the giant go through a profound psychological alteration. He experiences a swing in consciousness, moving away from his egocentric worldview towards a more empathetic stance.

Thus, "The Selfish Giant" explores complex themes of selfishness, isolation, power dynamics, and emotional growth, offering a subtle portrayal of the giant's psychological state as he struggles with his own inner demons and ultimately finds recovery through acts of benevolence and amicability.

"The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde, when introspected through Freudian Psychoanalytical theory, it is observed that, the role of the id can be inferred through the actions and motivations of the giant, particularly at the beginning of the story.

The Id (Unconscious), in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, represents the instinctual drives and impulses, operating on the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification without concern for consequences or moral considerations. The part of personality that we possess since Birth and our innate behaviour is helpful in survival is Id. This is the most basic of all the three components. It is driven by pleasure principles, whatever one need to fulfil one's basic needs like food, water etc. In the story, the giant's initial actions are driven by his id. He selfishly keeps his beautiful garden all to himself, unwilling to share its beauty with others, especially children. The giant's anger and hostility towards the children who enter his garden can also be seen as manifestations of his id. He reacts impulsively and aggressively, driven by his instinctual desire to protect what he perceives as his property and maintain control over his environment.

"My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant; "any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." (Wilde, The Selfish Giant)

However, as the story progresses, the giant undergoes a transformation, moving away from his purely id-driven impulses towards a more balanced state of being. Through his interactions with the small boy and the eventual realization of the consequences of his selfish actions, the giant begins to transcend his instinctual desires and develop a sense of empathy, compassion, and moral responsibility. He regretted for being self-centred. Realizing why

spring refused to arrive, he resolved to elevate the poor child to the tree's peak. Then, he pledged to demolish the barrier, transforming his garden into a perpetual playground for children. Therefore, while the giant's id initially dominates his behaviour in "The Selfish Giant," his journey throughout the story involves a gradual shift towards a more integrated and morally conscious state, reflecting the complex interplay between the id, ego, and super-ego in Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

The children who sneak into the Giant's garden embody the Freudian id, representing primal desires and impulses. They are innocent and driven purely by their desire to play and enjoy themselves. Their presence in the garden despite the Giant's prohibition can be seen as a manifestation of the unconscious, where suppressed desires and impulses often surface despite conscious efforts to repress them. The children's behaviour in the story exemplifies the pleasure principle in action. They are drawn to the Giant's garden because it offers them a space where they can play freely and experience joy without constraint. "How happy we are here! They cried to each other" (Wilde, *The Selfish Giant*). The children's persistence in entering the garden despite the Giant's efforts demonstrates the power of the id to override conscious attempts at control and regulation.

In "The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde, the concept of Ego (Conscious) is intricately woven into the character of the giant. Initially, the giant's ego is inflated and dominates his actions and decisions. He considers himself superior to others, believing that his garden is exclusively his and should not be shared with anyone else, especially children. His ego drives him to build a high wall around the garden, effectively isolating him from the rest of the world. The giant's ego is also evident in his interactions with the children when he returns from his journey. He becomes enraged at finding them playing in his garden, viewing their presence as a threat to his authority and possession. His ego blinds him to the joy and innocence of the children, leading him to chase them away and reinforce the barriers around his garden.

"What are you doing here?" he cried in a very gruff voice, and the children ran away. He built a high wall all round it, and put up a notice-board TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED" (Wilde, *The Selfish Giant*)

However, as the story progresses, the giant's ego undergoes a transformation and his Superego (Conscience) overpowers him. Through his encounters with the small boy and the realization of the consequences of his actions, the giant's ego begins to soften. He learns humility and empathy, recognizing the importance of love and compassion over pride and possession. "But where is your little companion?" he said: the boy I put into the tree." (Wilde, *The Selfish Giant*) Through the giant's journey, Wilde highlights the importance of overcoming selfishness and embracing a more inclusive and compassionate worldview. The Giant's transformation from selfishness to generosity can be seen as a triumph of the super-ego over the id.

IV

In "The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde, one can draw parallels between the character of the giant and Freud's model of the psyche, particularly the super-ego. Ultimately, the story portrays the giant's journey towards vindication and personal growth, as he learns to transcend his selfish impulses and embrace a more congenial and selfless way of living.

While not explicitly framed in terms of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the themes of character building, growth and modification in "The Selfish Giant" resonate with concepts such as the super-ego. Throughout the story, we can see the eventual growth and concretization of the giant's innate integrity and ideals, which align with the functions of the super-ego.

The giant's initial actions are driven by possessiveness and selfishness, which show a lack of empathy and a lack of moral awareness. Nevertheless, the giant's moral conscience changes as the narrative goes on. The giant starts to embrace new moral principles as a result of his contacts with the young child and his ultimate recognition of the implications of his actions. This change can be seen as the giant's super-ego coming into its own and leading him toward a significantly more equitable manner of life. The impact of his internalized moral norms is further demonstrated by the feelings of regret and guilt he feels after realizing the harm his selfishness has caused. As the tale comes to a close, the giant's superego has taken on a life of its own and is now what motivates him. Giant's superego propelled him to seek atonement and rectify his previous deeds. All things considered, "The Selfish Giant" is a tale of moral development and maturation that illustrates the intricate relationship between personal psychology and social norms.

Now, the analogy between the psychical state of Selfish Giant and that of Oscar Wilde has been examined keeping in view the tenets of psychology. Exploring the psychological resemblance between the character of the Selfish Giant and Oscar Wilde can offer intriguing insights into both the story and Wilde's personal experiences and beliefs.

- **Isolation and Alienation:** Because of his unusual lifestyle and sexual orientation, Wilde himself faced social exclusion and loneliness. It's possible that this feeling of alienation influenced how he portrayed the giant, who isolates himself and becomes lonely as a result. One could argue that Wilde's own yearning for acceptance and connection is reflected in the giant's quest towards atonement. Wilde and the Selfish Giant both went through periods of loneliness and estrangement. The Giant's self-imposed social exile is a reflection of Wilde's own sense of alienation from Victorian society as a result of his unconventional views on aesthetics and sexuality.
- **Desire for Beauty and Aestheticism:** Wilde was well known for his dedication to aestheticism's tenets and his admiration of beauty. In a same vein, Wilde's elaborate vocabulary and rich imagery reflecting his own artistic standards are symbolic of the Giant's wonderful garden, which highlights the wonder and beauty of nature. Nonetheless, Wilde's internal struggle between his need for beauty and his own egotistical tendencies may be reflected in the Giant's early reluctance to share the garden.

“It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit. The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them.” (Wilde, “The Selfish Giant”)

- **Conflict between Individualism and Social Responsibility:** Wilde struggled with the conflict between societal duty and personal freedom. It's possible that Wilde's own

battle to balance his need for personal liberty with a feeling of moral obligation towards others is reflected in the selfish giant's early selfishness and eventual redemption.

- **Journey of recovery and revolution:** The Giant's transformation from self-centeredness to empathy is a reflection of Wilde's own creative and personal growth. Similar to the Giant, Wilde went through phases of moral and spiritual development, especially following his incarceration. Like the Giant in the narrative, Wilde sought forgiveness and a resurgence of moral ideals through his literature and introspection. In "The Selfish Giant," the Giant experiences a dramatic metamorphosis, evolving from a lonesome, self-centred character to a kind and giving one. Likewise, Wilde himself faced obstacles in his personal and professional life but looked to his writing and personal development for solace.
- **Critique of Society:** Oscar Wilde frequently questioned accepted conventions and ideas in order to critique Victorian society and its moral standards. The Giant's exclusion of the kids from his garden serves as a metaphor for social exclusion and the cruel treatment of weak people. The Giant's transformation is similar to Wilde's, who on the one hand argued against the strict social conventions and moral hypocrisy of his day and, on the other, supported individual freedom, empathy, inclusion, and artistic expression.
- **Emotional Complexity:** The story's Giant's emotional journey mirrors the intricacy of emotions found in Wilde's own life and works. Both experienced loneliness, longing, and a need for acceptance and connection. Wilde's own yearning for peace and acceptance may find resonance in the Giant's ultimate acceptance of kindness and giving.
- **Personal Tragedy and Resilience:** "The Selfish Giant" and Wilde's life both have themes of resiliency and personal sorrow. Because of his homosexuality and contentious lifestyle, Wilde endured public humiliation, captivity, and exile. He persisted in his creative endeavours in spite of these obstacles. Similar to this, the Giant goes through adversity and loneliness until, with his deeds of generosity and compassion, finds redemption and regeneration.

These commonalities feature the interconnectedness of Wilde's personal experiences, ideologies, and emotional states, with the Giant in his story "The Selfish Giant."

V

In conclusion, the psychoanalysis of Oscar Wilde's short story "The Selfish Giant" offers a profound study of the author's psyche, desires, and philosophical outlook. Through this tale, Wilde delves into themes of beauty, care, salvation, and social justice, weaving together elements of his own life experiences, aesthetic beliefs, and socio-cultural context. Wilde's longing for beauty and idealism resonates profoundly through the character of the Giant, who embodies the relentless pursuit of aesthetic perfection and the transformative potency of empathy. Within the Giant's journey, Wilde mirrors his own quest to transcend the banalities of existence and embrace a realm suffused with everlasting beauty and boundless compassion. The character serves as a vessel for Wilde's desire to transcend the mundane and embrace a world of eternal beauty and compassion. Furthermore, the story reveals Wilde's

desire for connection and redemption, as the protagonist undergoes emotional modification through his interactions with others. "The Selfish Giant" serves as a poignant exploration of Wilde's yearning for connection and redemption. As the protagonist undergoes a profound emotional metamorphosis through his interactions with the children, Wilde underscores the transformative power of human relationships and the potential for personal growth, even amidst desolation and despair. The children themselves emerge as potent symbols of hope, and nurturers of collective resilience in the face of adversity. They also symbolize the possibility of human connection and the potential for personal growth, even in the face of isolation and despair. Moreover, Wilde's critique of Victorian society and its injustices is evident throughout both stories, as he challenges the prevailing social norms and values of his time. By searching into the complexities of Wilde's psyche, desires, and philosophical beliefs, we gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring relevance and profound beauty of this timeless tale.

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