
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Portraying Sam Shepard's The God of Hell Through a Freudian Psychoanalytic Lens

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ABSTRACT

Echoing the unheard screams of humanity, drama evolves as an outcry reverberating humanity's anguish and concealed agony. Through its sensitive consideration of real-life issues, drama touches on diverse critical phenomena hindering humans' well-being and continuity. In this regard, this study aims to explore the literary context of Sam Shepard's contemporary dramatic play entitled The God of Hell. It mainly approaches the explored scope through the lens of the Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory highlighting the consequences of power abuse and misused political authority on humans' social and psychological well-being. The researcher approached the stated problem through an analytical lens exploring the diverse themes and the symbolism of the characters in the studied play. The findings asserted the sensitivity of drama to human issues, mainly psychological ones, showing how the egoistic and inhuman use of power results in fostering inhuman traits such as betrayal and brutality. Through the Freudian lens, these align with the inhuman political practices of some governments that dehumanize innocent citizens driving them to stagnate at the id level instead of fostering their superego. Therefore, the findings revealed that power is a double-edged weapon that, once misused, has catastrophic consequences on the entire societal structure and humanity.

KEYWORDS

Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory, drama, politics, power abuse

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1. Introduction

Since antiquity, human life has been the concern of diverse fields, sciences, and disciplines that attempt to investigate the multiple factors and features influencing humanity and social realities. Among these scopes, drama is a critical literary field that aims to cure societal suffering through a sense of entertainment burdened with intended messages that influence realities and shape humans' minds, thoughts, and behavior. In light of this extensive commitment of drama to cultivating humanity and promoting social life, it is not unusual then to find the dramatic scope concerned with political as well as psychological phenomena. At the level of politics, the intersection between drama and politics is manifested in the theatrical performance of political phenomena as a means of challenging the diverse boundaries forced by political authorities. This contributes to promoting the individuals' awareness of political ideologies and fostering a sense of rebelliousness and resistance to multiple forms of unjust regimes that hinder humans' societal rights, identity, and freedom.

Being perceived as an instrument of social change, drama delves into deep societal and political phenomena exploring these issues through a psychoanalytic lens. Particularly, drama intends to address different forms of suffering among which psychological suffering is one critical notion. However, the psychological approach does not only touch on the psychological ramifications brought forth by political or societal conflicts but also on the invisible psychological features driving the evolution of these issues. This involves a critical consideration of the egoistic, brutal, and selfish attempts of power practitioners who misuse

authority due to their hidden psychological problems. However, this form of power abuse leaves catastrophic consequences on humanity and the well-being of individuals. The functionality of drama and theater in addressing real-life issues is highlighted by Bozic and Tancic who argue that "through the performance, the theater can perceive certain subjects, in specific situations, and solve their problems in their own way, as well as critically explain and interpret them, from the aspect of results, effects and consequences" (1).

In light of this interconnectedness linking drama, politics, and the scope of psychoanalysis, this paper attempts to explore the dramatic scope of Same Shepard's play entitled *The God of Hell* through a psychoanalytic approach. This allows for perceiving the display of politics through the dramatic scope showing how power abuse and dehumanization lead to drastic societal and psychological consequences on humans. Therefore, the conducted research reflects the role of drama in addressing diverse psychological phenomena instigated by the misuse of political power and governmental brutality.

2. Statement of the Problem

As drama emerges as a reflection of realities and a depiction of the truth, the use of drama to address sociopolitical issues is an effectively functional approach to real-life phenomena and problems. At this level, the world of social realities is critically shaped by the diverse political notions and strategies imposed by governmental institutions and power practitioners. At this level, the critical contribution of politics and governmental powers to shaping human behavior and social life emerges as a sensitive issue hindering humans' well-being, liberty, and freedom. While some political claims pretend to hold positive intentions, they are sometimes structured on a fake basis that tends to hide true egoistic attempts behind false explicit pure intentions. This contradiction emphasizes the role of drama in alerting humans to the invisible effect of power on victimizing humans and enslaving them under the notion of national security and governmental practices. Among the diverse ramifications of abuse and inhuman power on humanity, the psychological suffering of individuals is one critical outcome that is mainly manifested in the contribution of power abuse to humans' fixation at the primitive level instead of approaching the superego.

In light of the aforementioned, this study attempts to highlight diverse issues, mainly psychological ones that emerge as a consequence of political corruption and individuals' dehumanization. Throughout Shepard's dramatic work, namely *The God of Hell*, multiple psychological issues and societal problems are highlighted. These issues are intensified as a result of individuals' ignorance of the implicit and invisible impacts of ideologized power. The psychological suffering incurred by humanity is a sensitive phenomenon demanding extensive levels of social and psychological awareness to be resolved. Therefore, the major issue that this study aims to address is manifested in highlighting the consequences of misusing power and dehumanization on the psychological cultivation and continuity of individuals. It mainly fosters the influence of misused authority and governmental inhumanity on the psychological structures of humans, namely the id, ego, and superego. Through the characters of Frank and Emma, the playwright touches on the drastic consequences of power abuse on humanity and the disruption of tranquility and peace. Besides, Haynes' character symbolizes another issue manifested in the drastic impacts of the government's involvement in people's lives on shaping social realities. This highlights another issue represented in the need to promote people's awareness of the essentialness of previewing political practices through the lens of critical thinking. Eventually, Welch's character represents the themes of betrayal and dehumanization reflecting other societal problems evoked by the inner conflicts of egoistic leaders who tend to misuse power within the political context.

3. Purpose of the Study

Attempting to address the stated research problem, this study primarily aims to approach the explored dramatic context through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens. This allows for investigating the invisible consequences of diverse social and political issues on the psychological well-being of humans that essentially contribute to shaping their life conditions and continuity. Through exploring the diverse themes encoded through the dramatic narrative of the studied play, the researcher highlights multiple notions and brings into light different real-life problems that hinder humans' well-being. At this level, this study touches on the sensitivity of drama to real life showing how dramatic scenes and characters serve as depictions of real-life problems suffered by humanity. Among the diverse aspects that this study intends to highlight, the invisible dehumanization of individuals through governmental practices is one key notion. This sheds light on the concepts of power abuse that are implicitly practiced by governments under the name of national security. Besides, the psychological suffering of humans is another key aspect that this study attempts to touch on through its analytical approach to the studied dramatic scope. This accentuates the power of drama in addressing real-life issues and resolving the diverse psychological problems suffered by humanity.

4. Research Questions

In line with the stated purpose of the conducted research and as a means of addressing of aforementioned problem, the researcher posed the following research questions:

1. How are the Freudian psychanalytic aspects manifested in the characters of *The God of Hell*?
2. To what extent does the Freudian lens contribute to illuminating existential themes in the studied play?

5. Literature Review

5.1 Politics and Drama

In line with its popular function as a tool for entertainment amusement, drama effectively manifests itself as a tool of social change. This effective function is structured on the basis of political conceptions that occupy a wide space in the dramatic field. In this regard, Bozic and Tancic identify politics and drama as two realities exhibiting a sense of interdependence among each other. This interplay is reflected in how drama serves as a tool for addressing societal phenomena and shaping realities. This critical role is accentuated by Bozic and Tancic who argue that "a given country, without people, or more precisely, without actors who represent them in a theatrical performance, there is no history, no politics, no culture, no theater, and no political events in a certain time, space and territory" (1). This claim mirrors the power of drama and theater in establishing sociopolitical change and exerting influence through the symbolized messages encoded within their literary context. The major concern of drama in addressing political phenomena influencing societal life lies in promoting individuals' awareness of the diverse inhuman political strategies that rape humans their rights and drive them to stagnate in suffering and depression. Therefore, Bozic and Tancic assert that "the application of force, violence and political violence...was often the subject of theatrical performances of theater, that is, political theater" (5).

In identifying the notion of political theater, Matthews defines this notion stating that it is a dramatic type mostly concerned with addressing sociopolitical and governmental issues, inspiring humans to undergo social change, and raising their awareness to recognize any act of corruption practiced through the power of politics. However, this term remains debatable as some theorists wonder whether all theater that involves politics is political. Accordingly, Kirby maintains that identifying theater as political theater demands the visible presence of political interference and governmental contributions. At this level, Kirby provides a clear definition of political theater maintaining that:

If a theatre piece is intended to be political and the intent is not perceived, there is no need to categorize it as "political theatre." Thus, if a presentation does not attempt to be political, it is not political...Political theatre is intellectual theatre. It deals with political ideas and concepts, usually in an attempt to attack or support a particular political position...Political meaning is "read" by the spectator. (129-130)

However, Matthews asserts that despite its extensive reliance on the interference of political and governmental features, political theater is not considered political unless it involves societal aspects that the theater attempts to address.

5.2 Psychoanalysis and the Art of Drama

Due to its extensive sensitivity to human nature, drama effectively intersects with diverse theories of psychoanalysis. In this regard, Turri highlights the interplay between these two disciplines maintaining that drama serves as a tool for addressing psychological phenomena underlying human suffering in real life. At this level, Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory evolves as a considerable approach through which multiple societal and psychological issues can be addressed. In the dramatic scope, Turri views the plays' messages as tools for unveiling humans' suffering, addressing their psychological problems, and bringing into light the multiple unconscious processes underlying humans' external behavior. As drama is concerned with realities and individuals' well-being, exploring the psychological features underlying human behavior is a critical reflection of the invisible factors contributing to human suffering and agony in some contexts.

Within the wide scope of psychoanalysis, Fedewa claims that a critical manifestation of psychology in the dramatic field, particularly political theater and anti-war drama, is displayed at the level of Trauma Theory. This theory highlights the interplay between human cognition, the unconscious mind, and the perception of realities. This reflects the functionality of drama in addressing psychological and societal issues hindering humans' continuity and well-being. Besides, Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory is another scope through which diverse dramatic aspects and theatrical features can be previewed (Zhang). Hence, the effectiveness

of diverse psychoanalytic approaches in exploring the dramatic context highlights the critical interplay between drama and psychoanalysis as two separate yet interrelated areas of life.

6. Methodology

6.1 Corpus

In exploring the literary dramatic context that this study explores, the researcher approached the scope of contemporary English drama manifested in Sam Shepard's play *The God of Hell*. This play is a politically charged dramatic work that crystallizes the interplay between drama, politics, and societal realities. Throughout this play, Shepard touches on diverse sociopolitical notions such as freedom, government surveillance, manipulation, and dehumanization. This play centers around the life of a working-class couple, namely Frank and Emma, who were living in their farmhouse in a remote area of Wisconsin, isolating themselves from the chaos and brutality of the city. As the narrative unfolds, a guest suddenly arrives at the couple's house. Although Frank and Emma could hardly recognize who it was, it turned out to be Haynes, Frank's old friend who ambiguously disappeared some time ago.

Following Haynes' arrival, Welch appeared as another guest suddenly visiting Frank and Emma and seeming to know all the details about their life, even their private concerns. While Welch's intentions first seemed to be good and sincere, it turned out to be the opposite. It became evident that he was not who he claimed to be; instead, he was a government agent primarily involved in the government's secret immoral experimentation on humans. Welch's quest for Haynes turned out to be charged by the government's attempts to hide its inhuman experimentation on Haynes who fell victim to this unethical behavior that was conducted in the name of security and preserving national continuity. The play ended up victimizing Frank whose innocence drove him to be like Haynes and fall victim to the government's inhuman experimentations. The ending accentuates the government's inhumanity, abuse, corruption, and dehumanization that hinder humans' security, privacy, liberty, and well-being. Throughout the play, Shepard highlights the psychological suffering of the characters that was instigated by the inhuman practices of the government.

6.2 Research Design

According to Kumar, a research design is a procedural outline adopted by the researcher in planning the entire research procedure demanded to complete a study. In the context of this study, the researcher followed a non-experimental qualitative design manifested in the descriptive and analytical approach to the studied corpus. In identifying the nature of the qualitative design, Creswell and Creswell maintain that it is an emergent design that attempts to address a research problem through subjective analysis and meaning interpretation. Dornyei asserts this view claiming that qualitative research is context-sensitive as it holds a micro-perspective to diverse explored phenomena and addressed issues. In light of this identification of qualitative research, the conducted research approached the selected corpus through a qualitative interpretative lens adopting the Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory in an attempt to explore the diverse features characterizing the studied dramatic context.

6.3 Adopted Framework

Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory

According to Zhang, "psychoanalysis theory is Sigmund Freud's theory of personality that attributes thoughts and actions to unconscious motives and conflicts" (229). Within the dramatic context, this theory is manifested in the diverse characters' interpretations foregrounding the complexities of real-life phenomena. In highlighting this interplay between these two disciplines Turri claims that "the symbiotic relationship between psychoanalysis and theatre roots back to the birth of psychoanalysis itself, testifying to the depth of the connection that exists between these two disciplines" (2). In particular, the Freudian Theory associates human behavior with intrinsic psychological processes underlying external social interaction and mechanisms. Within the dramatic scope, the Freudian psychoanalytic lens allows for exploring human suffering as a critical issue hindering well-being and continuity. At this level, suffering and agony emerge as natural consequences of individuals' exposure to inhuman practices and multiple forms of aggression and abuse.

In line with the individuals' suffering and psychological issues instigated by external practices, the Freudian theory relates these consequences to the egoistic thoughts of those exploiting power and misusing authority. In this context, Freudian theory explores human behavior highlighting the interconnectedness between humans' personalities, their external environment, and the sociopolitical conditions influencing their lives. The dramatic scope critically touches on these aspects showing the diverse consequences of political conditions and humans' psychological and societal well-being. The theme of suffering is primarily fostered at this level as it reflects the ramifications of power abuse and authority misuse on shaping humans' lives. In his theory,

Freud asserts that the consequences of humans' exposure to diverse issues are buried in their unconscious mind until they manifest themselves in the forms of suffering and misery that reflect humans' psychological struggle and depression (Turri).

70 Discussion and Analysis

A Freudian Psychoanalytic Perspective of the Characters in The God of Hell

Being a politically charged play, *The God of Hell* involves critical complexities manifested in the characters of the play. While some of these complexities are social and political in nature, others are primarily psychological reflecting humans' struggle to preserve their identities and gain freedom and liberty. In this regard, the studied play mainly centers around the life and personality of four characters namely Frank and Emma, the married couple, Frank's old friend named Haynes, and Welch, the government agent. Each character embodies a wide diversity of unconscious motivations and desires that can be clearly identified through a Freudian Psychoanalytic lens.

Perceiving Frank through a Freudian lens, his behavior reflects his inner self which is used to oppression and fear. His life in a remote area mirrors his quest for peace at the expense of his desires for liberty and freedom. Frank's character is perceived as a victim of deception and manipulation that threaten his attempts to rebel against unjust regimes. However, as the play comes to an end, Frank's sense of rebellion and resistance evolves as a reflection of his suppressed human needs such as identity formation and liberation. Therefore, his eventual attempt to resist the brutal nature of political figures and the government mirrors his unconscious desires that critically influence his behavior and thoughts. Through a Freudian perspective, Frank embodies the notion of the ego that fluctuates between the id and the superego. Despite that Frank first appeared as an ordinary human, his inner suppressed conflicts started to appear throughout the play manifesting the notions of sublimation, fear, and psychological struggle. Hence, the Freudian lens provides deep insights into Frank's inner conflicts and hidden desires showing his continuous invisible aspirations for self-realization and emancipation.

Moving to Emma's character, a Freudian lens reflects the interplay between Emma's behavior and her suppressed psychological needs. Emma's defiance of governmental authority shows her suppressed needs and her fear of governmental interactions. Besides, her life with her husband and her attempts to engage in diverse roles mirror her internal conflicts with gender issues and sexuality. Emma represents the female character who aims to rebel against traditional genderized and stereotyped roles of women which serve as one form of discrimination. The feminist power of Emma is manifested in her courageous behavior with Welch who wanted to strip her freedom and peace. These diverse factors serve as reflections of the inner conflicts, fear, suppressed needs, and hidden desires driving the societal behavior of Emma.

In exploring Welch's character through a Freudian perspective, his personality represents the id in Freudian psychology. Although he seems to be aware of his cruel behavior and strategic tactics, his personality is associated with an animalistic nature as he is stripped of his humanity. His pursuit of power and manipulation at the expense of morals and humanity reflects his animalistic desires and inner conflicts. These desires are associated with the id as they represent humans' primal instincts. Although Welch's responsibilities and knowledge as a government agent reflect a sense of superego, his animalistic behavior, egoistic nature, and inhumanity do not line up with the features of superego and morals.

Eventually, in analyzing Haynes' character, the man is evidently a victim of dehumanization, inhumanity, and power abuse. Being stripped of his awareness, Haynes ends up being driven and controlled by his primal instincts that foster his animalistic nature. This made him a passive human who accepts everything without questioning its truth or striving to resist it. Being a victim of the government's immoral experimentation on humans, Haynes mirrors the catastrophic consequences of political power abuse and authority misuse on humanity. His fears, conformity, and weakness depict the drastic consequences of manipulation and control on the psychological well-being of humans. These inhuman external forces victimize humans and drive them away from the superego, the human psyche components in which awareness and consciousness are primarily represented.

Perceiving the Themes in The God of Hell Through a Freudian Lens

Analyzing the themes in *The God of Hell* through a Freudian lens, different life complexities can be displayed. Among these themes, authority and power are primary notions. The Freudian lens highlights the impact of power abuse and misused authority on human life. The characters' behavior reflects the psychological needs of humans to obtain security and personal freedom despite their suppressed screams for liberty and peace. The themes of authority and power reflect the fact that power is a double-edged weapon that can contribute to destroying humanity once misused. The immoral and animalistic attempts of the government manifested in dehumanizing people to gain control over the nation highlight the negative aspect of power that might

lead to drowning humanity. Through a Freudian lens, the misuse of authority mirrors the internal conflicts and the egoistic nature of leaders and governors who intend to satisfy their primal instincts and hidden desires by manipulating others and dehumanizing them as a way of preserving their power and hegemony.

Besides, another major theme that can be crystallized through a Freudian lens is displayed in the context of fear and depression as natural outcomes of dehumanization. While Emma, Frank, and Haynes experienced the fear of the government's brutality and violence, Welch's fear was different as he feared the loss of power and control. Regardless of its type and denotations, fear is a critical theme reflecting diverse psychological instabilities characterizing the characters' lives. At the level of Emma and Frank's fear, a Freudian lens shows the complex anxieties and psychological suffering experienced by ordinary people. Their fear and suffering are structured on the basis of insecurity hindering their well-being and continuity. However, Welch's fear is driven by his inner psychological instability fostered by his primal instincts and tendencies to gain power and hegemony.

In line with the aforementioned themes, repression is a critical psychological notion that critically characterizes the studied dramatic context. The behavior and thoughts of the characters are motivated by their internal conflicts, hidden needs, and suppressed desires. The theme of suppression is a vital component of the Freudian approach as it reflects psychological suffering and internal conflicts. The characters in the play had diverse suppressed needs among which the need for self-identification, liberty, and peace is a major desire. Their behavior also mirrors their suppressed subconscious desires to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance. Their suppressed needs were at some levels translated by their animalistic behavior and primal instincts shaping their identity and personality.

8. Conclusion

Approaching the dramatic field through a psychoanalytic perspective, the sociopolitical complexities featuring human life evolve as critical factors influencing the human psyche and well-being. This sheds light on the role of political conditions and regimes in influencing and shaping human life. At this level, a Freudian approach to the dramatic scope of politically charged plays mirrors the interplay between drama, politics, and psychological features. This is manifested at the level of the effects of power abuse and misused authority on the human psyche mainly in the context of suppressed desires. The explored play entitled *The God of Hell* provided a crystallized view of the ramifications of political power and governmental intervention in human life on the psychological development and conditions of humans. The studied characters are manifested as tools upon which political power and hegemony are brutally practiced. This victimization of humans' freedom, peace, and self-identification highlighted the invisible consequences of oppression and violence on humans' psychological conditions. These impacts were psychologically manifested in the suppressed desires and inner conflicts motivated by the id as the primitive component of Freud's model of the human psyche and mind. Hence, the dehumanization of citizens through power abuse has fostered humans' primal instincts leaving them to stagnate at the id level instead of cultivating them and elevating their psychological state to the level of superego in which awareness, morality, and humanity are contained.

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