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The Death Theme in Christina Rossetti's Poetry

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Introduction

The present thesis, entitled *The Death Theme in Christina Rossetti's Poetry*, falls into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter, entitled *Freud's Dual Instinct Theory*, outlines the theoretical framework. The chapter traces how Freud reached the final version of his dual instinct theory. The chapter starts with Freud's topography of the mind and its three levels of consciousness, which are later elaborated on by Freud in the form of the tripartite division of the psyche into the id, ego and superego. Self-defence mechanisms are resorted to by the ego, to avoid neurotic and moral anxiety, when it becomes absolutely incapable of reaching a satisfying, agreeable situation to the three irreconcilable realms: the irrational, hedonistic id, the rigid, perfectionist superego and the strictures of the external world. Chapter One deals with three ego-defence mechanisms, namely denial, sublimation and repression, which are resorted to by Christina Rossetti's personae.

The first chapter is mainly concerned with the id and its characteristics as it is the warehouse of the instincts. The chapter provides different definitions of the term "instinct," along with highlighting the difference between the stimuli of external origin and those of internal origin, in terms of their impact and the appropriate needed actions in response to them. The basic characteristics of any instinct - pressure, source, aim and object - are presented to further illustrate Freud's notion of instincts. Chapter One presents Freud's early dual instinct theory that was triggered by both Friedrich Von Schiller's aphorism that hunger and love make the world go round and by the fact that people are merely driven by the pleasure principle. Thus, the outcome was the self-preservative instincts versus the sexual

instincts, namely the instincts that aim at the preservation of the individual and those that aim at the preservation of the species.

According to Freud, his early dichotomy was liable to change and modification if it proved to be inadequate enough in accounting for the growing psychological abnormalities. Chapter One presents the different reasons that drove Freud to reconsider his earlier dual instinct theory. The bloodsheds, massacres and carnages accompanying World War 1 played a decisive role in Freud's reconsideration of his hitherto reached instinct theory. The happenings of the war could not be interpreted in terms of either the self-preservative instinct or the sexual instinct. In addition to World War 1, Freud's discovery of the repetition compulsion phenomenon, which revealed itself in the nightmares and daydreams of soldiers as well as in the fort/da game played by Freud's grandson, drove him even further towards a radical shift in viewpoint. Moreover, Freud's oral cancer, numerous operations and the pain and agony he had to tolerate for many years must have brought the idea of death to the centre of his attention. Consequently, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) was the outcome.

Chapter One also presents the biological evidence Freud relied on in justifying the existence of the death instinct as one of the two main instincts of his new version of the dual instinct theory. The final dual instinct theory suggested by Freud puts both the self-preservative instincts and the sexual instincts on the one hand under the umbrella of the life instincts, Eros, as both favour growth and development. On the other hand, there is the death instinct, Thanatos, which seeks inertia in its mildest degrees and death in its severest forms. The first chapter presents Freud's different interpretation and understanding of phenomena, such as sadism and masochism, as a result of discovering the existence of the death instinct as a powerful motivating drive. The first chapter also presents examples of phenomena in which the two

instincts are at play as in the case of sadism, masochism, the Oedipus complex and the Electra complex.

The final section of the first chapter is dedicated to highlighting the relation between civilization and both Eros and Thanatos. The chapter also reveals that civilization is indeed in favour of Eros because it is the instinct that aims at binding individuals, then families, then tribes, races and nations into one mass unity, that of humanity, whereas Thanatos constitutes the most powerful obstacle to the program of civilization. It is also illustrated through the chapter how civilization works on curbing and checking aggression as the main representative and manifestation of the death instinct. Civilization relies on the evolution of the individual and the development of the superego, which acts as an internal moralistic institution.

Chapter Two starts - based on the researcher's deductions - by stating the personal and societal reasons that most likely drove Rossetti to be obsessed with the theme of death. On the personal level, Rossetti spent most of her life as an invalid due to a succession of afflictions. She also nursed and witnessed the death of all her dear family members. She had faith in the constant and fulfilling Lover over the inconstant flesh and blood lover; that is why she was longing for death to meet her Maker. On the societal level, death was an everyday occurrence in Victorian England. The poor workers were crammed in rat holes; thus, resulting in the spread of epidemics. Living conditions and the medical practices that involved a great deal of guesswork led to high mortality rates. In addition to death being a fact of everyday life, the marginalized status of women in nineteenth century England must have troubled Rossetti and directly affected her outlook on life.

Chapter Two presents five common features among Rossetti's death poems. First, the blunt and shocking introduction to the theme of death is a

common characteristic among her death poems. Second, death that already occurred or is expected to occur usually involves the female gender even when it comes to the death of animals. Third, the reasons behind the deaths that already occurred or the ones that are anticipated to occur by the personae are not mentioned or even implied in the poems. Fourth, Rossetti's portrayal and depiction of the process of death is quite a noticeable feature in her poetry; death is an inescapable, unavoidable event in each person's life, yet it is a peaceful one that leads to sleep, rest and liberation from the pains, pangs and tribulations of living. The fifth feature that runs throughout her poetry is her personae's practical attitude and approach toward post-mortem rituals. Extravagant mourning rituals are rejected and regarded as futile because the dead are deprived of all their senses to feel and appreciate the effort exerted.

Chapter Two analyzes six poems from Rossetti's first volume, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. The poems analyzed are: "Noble Sisters," "Sister Maude," "Song," "Remember," "After Death," and "An End." The psychoanalytic theory of Freud is applied to the selected poems. The above-mentioned poems are interpreted in the light of Freud's three main psychic zones, the repetition compulsion phenomenon, the fact that Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct) function simultaneously, with one of them always dominating over the other and shaping the individual's conduct in addition to sublimation as one of Freud's proposed ego-defence mechanisms. Moreover, the five common features among Rossetti's death poems are traced in each of the six analyzed poems. Chapter Two also attempts to read Christina Rossetti in different lights. She has long been confined to the bars imposed upon her poetry by critics - such as John Mulgan - who label her as a merely religious lyricist, who is often compared to the seventeenth-century religious poets, like George Herbert. The analysis of the poems reveals the influence of not only the Oxford Movement but also the Victorian

Movement, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, the Romantic Movement and the Feminist Movement on her poetry.

Chapter Three employs the psychoanalytic literary criticism in analyzing five poems from Rossetti's second volume, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*. The poems are: "The Prince's Progress," "Life and Death," "The Poor Ghost," "A Bird's-Eye View," and "Jessie Cameron." The Freudian applied theories in the chapter vary. The elements of the human psyche (id, ego, and superego) are applied on the Prince's character in "The Prince's Progress." Eros and Thanatos are indispensable in understanding the origin of the characters' desires and actions. The personae's conduct is interpreted in the light of repression and denial; two of Freud's proposed self-defence mechanisms. Freud's proposed ideas in the essay "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" and Ernest Becker's in *The Denial of Death* are used in interpreting and justifying the behaviour of the personae when faced with the inevitable reality of death. Chapter Three reveals that Rossetti harbours an unconscious death wish, which is uncovered via her poetry. The chapter also reinforces and endorses - the proposition made by critics - that there are three motifs in Rossetti's poetry; namely, the sisterhood motif, the broken betrothal motif and the voices of the dead motif. The motifs overlap, as do the themes, which renders the categorization of Rossetti's poems in terms of their subject matters or even motifs quite impossible. Furthermore, the analysis of the poems further refutes the accusations of some critics concerning Rossetti's indifference to the issues of her age; they also prove that Rossetti is a rebellious feminist in a way.

Chapter Four deals with five of Rossetti's poems that are privately printed, separately published in different magazines, or posthumously published by her brother, William Rossetti. The poems are "Sappho," "My Friend," "On the Death of a Cat," "If" and "Sleeping at Last." The five

common existing features in Rossetti's death poems are also traced in the above-named poems. The utterances and conduct of Rossetti's personae is interpreted psychologically in terms of Freud's life and death instincts as well as his expressed ideas in the two essays: "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" and "Mourning and Melancholia." The personae's reactions towards the death of their dear ones are psychologically interpreted from Freud's perspective in the above-mentioned two essays. Rossetti's female personae give validity and evidence for Freud's hitherto controversial theory, namely humans' unacknowledged death wish. Chapter Four reveals the development that the theme of death has undergone throughout Rossetti's writing career. In the poems from *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, the theme of death overlaps with others, such as sisterhood, jealousy, betrayal and protection as in "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude." Four years later, in *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, death becomes the most dominant if not the only subject matter in the poems, as in "A Bird's-Eye View," "Jessie Cameron" and "The Poor Ghost." Death later becomes not only the sole theme of Rossetti's poems but also the only acceptable and craved for refuge from the pains, sorrows and struggles of living, as in "Sappho," "My Friend" and "Sleeping at Last." The thesis concludes with a pinpointing of the manifestations of the death theme in Christina Rossetti's poetry.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NRH	Nodular regenerative hyperplasia
FNH	Focal Nodular Hyperplasia
HA	Hepatocellular Adenoma
HCC	Hepatocellular carcinoma
FHCC	Fibrolamellar Variant of HCC
IHE	Infantile Hemangioendothelioma
AML	Angiomyolipoma
EHE	Epithelioid hemangioendothelioma
HB	Hepatoblastoma
IPT	Inflammatory Pseudotumor
SE	Spin echo sequence
GRE	Gradient recalled echo sequence
FOV	Field of View
STIR	Short T1 inversion recovery
FLAIR	Fluid attenuated inversion recovery
MAST	Motion artifact suppression technique
FLASH	Fast Low-Angle Shot
GRASS	Gradient-Recalled Acquisition in the steady state
HASTE	Half Fourier Acquisition Single Shot Turbo Spin Echo
VIBE	Volumetric Interpolated Breath-Hold Examination
FIRM	Fast inversion-recovery motion-insensitive
DWI	Diffusion-weighted Imaging
SENSE	Sensitivity Encoding
SMASH	Simultaneous Acquisition of Spatial Harmonics
Gd-DTPA	Gadopentate dimeglumine
Gd-DTPA-BMA	Gadodiamide
Gd-DOTA	Gadoterate meglumine
Gd-HP-DO3A	Gadoteridol
Gd-BOPTA	Gadobenate dimeglumine
Gd-EOB-DTPA	Gadoxetic acid(Gadolinium-ethoxybenzyl-diethylenetriaminepentaacetic acid)
Mn-DPDP	Mangafodipir trisodium
CMC-001	Copenhagen Malmö Contrast
SPIO	Superparamagnetic iron oxide
USPIO	Ultrasmall superparamagnetic iron oxide
VSOP-C184	Very small SPIO particle, citrate coating, 184th formulation

Chapter One

Freud's Dual Instinct Theory

Sigmund Freud does not need to be introduced. It is just enough to say that it was his fate to “agitate the sleep of mankind” (Gay x). He was as revolutionary a thinker as Charles Darwin and as bold and adventurous an explorer of the interior world as Christopher Columbus was of the exterior one (Elson1). Freud viewed himself as performing a “third decentring of the human self-image” (Harland 130). Copernicus proved that the Earth is not the centre of the universe. Darwin showed that the human species is not the centre of evolution while Freudian psychoanalysis revealed that human consciousness is not the master of the individual psyche. He joined the faculty of medicine driven by his “greed for knowledge” (Maddi 28). He is a physician who did not want to pursue the conventional medical career. That is to say, he did not want to focus on the physical causes of diseases. He laid emphasis on the mental reasons behind maladies and began developing a therapy for the mind and not the body (Maddi 28). Freud's theories are based on the premise that human behaviour is the outcome of inner forces over which the individual has very limited control. Freud is given credit for articulating and refining the concepts of the unconscious, infantile sexuality, repression and for proposing a tripartite division of the mind's structure, as part of a therapeutic frame for the understanding of human psychological development and the treatment of mentally abnormal conditions. According to Kendra Cherry, Freud's ideas have become blended into our daily life, with terms such as "slip of the tongue," "Oedipus complex," "repression," and "denial" regularly appearing in everyday language. According to David Statt, Freud's ideas were and still are the centre of controversy and debate among both Freud's critics and his advocates. Nonetheless, few people would argue

about his great and widespread influence in making the twentieth century more aware - than any previous age - of the power of the unconscious in determining behaviour (57). W.H. Auden in his poetic tribute, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," sums up the great influence of Freud (Auden 271):

If often he was wrong and at times absurd,

To us he is no more a person now

But a whole climate of opinion

Under whom we conduct our differing lives. [66-69]

The Tripartite Division of the Human Psyche:

Duane Schultz and Sydney Schultz state that Sigmund Freud's original hypothesis divided the personality into three levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious: "The conscious, as Freud defined the term, corresponds to its ordinary everyday meaning. It includes all the sensations and experiences of which we are aware at any given moment" (47). Freud likened the mind to an iceberg. The conscious is the part above the surface of the water. It is only the tip of the iceberg.

The preconscious is the depository of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts of which the individual is not consciously aware of at the moment but can be easily summoned into consciousness as identified by Freud. For example, one cannot at this moment recall the name of his favourite high school math teacher, but with a little concentration and a few associations one could possibly dredge it up. If one is engaged in studying for an exam and then starts recalling yesterday's outing; then, one is summoning material from the preconscious into the conscious. According to Schultz, people are all the time shifting to and fro from conscious experiences of the moment to events stored in the preconscious (47). Freud sums it up: "The preconscious

is presumably a great deal closer to the conscious than is the unconscious” (*The Ego and the Id* 5-6).

Most important to Freud is the unconscious; that larger invisible part below the surface. It is the essence of psychoanalysis as stated by Schultz. The contents of the unconscious are not subject to recall at will. It is inaccessible except through psychoanalytic techniques such as free association or dream analysis. It is also referred to as the home of instincts; those drives and desires that motivate our behaviour. The unconscious is the main driving force behind every action and is the warehouse of desires that man cannot see or control as per Jerry Phares (75). Freud concludes: "What is preconscious becomes conscious, [. . .], without any assistance from us; what is unconscious can, through our efforts, be made conscious, and in the process we may have a feeling that we are often overcoming very strong resistances" (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 17).

Freud divided mental processes into those that are conscious, preconscious, and unconscious, but his further researches led him to think that such a simple division did not tell the whole story. Thus, he proposed a new tripartite division into what he termed the id, ego, and superego. They are the “three realms, regions, provinces into which we divide the mental apparatus of the individual” (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* 77).

According to Freud, “The id is the obscure inaccessible part of our personality. We can come nearer to the id with images, and call it a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement. The laws of logic - [...] - do not hold for processes in the id. Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality” (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* 79). Furthermore, the id: "knows no precautions to ensure survival and no anxiety [. . .]" (Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 68).

Whereas David Statt in *The Concise Dictionary of Psychology* said: "According to Freud the id houses the deepest unconscious drives which are most in touch with the biological nature of the body and is one of the three main aspects of the personality. The id is dominated by the pleasure principle and causes problems for the ego when its drives are blocked" (68).

Ann Birch and Tony Malim describe the id as "[...] the most primitive part of the personality. It represents all the instinctual drives: sexual, aggressive, and those concerned with the satisfaction of bodily needs. It operates on the pleasure principle. That is to say, it seeks to obtain pleasure and avoid pain. The id is irrational and impulsive and is unaffected by social restrictions. In the newborn baby, all mental processes are id processes" (729). According to Jerry Phares, the main objective of the id is reaching an excitation-free state, or at least the minimum level of excitation and arousal (78).

Since the child must sooner or later come to terms with the outside world "a part of this primeval conglomeration" becomes separated off and known as the ego (Brown 28). Salvatore Maddi asks what good does it do to have seething desires and impulses that are good for nothing and cannot reach any where? If people end up with the id alone, then their instincts would be satisfied through only the wish-fulfilling fantasy. This wish-fulfilling fantasy is absolutely inefficient when it comes to needing bread. Therefore, it was quite necessary for the development of the ego (33).

In contrast to the id's pleasure-seeking nature, the ego is founded on the reality principle which: "does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 4); the aim of the ego is the preservation of the organism's integrity by postponing instinctual satisfaction until the appropriate environmental conditions that will satisfy the need are available. For instance, a release of the sexual drive is delayed

until an adequate object and suitable environmental circumstances are available. Thus, when the object and conditions are ideal, the pleasure principle is satisfied. In other words, the reality principle introduces a measure of reason into our behaviour. The ego puts into consideration the current circumstances and calculates through experimental actions the ramifications of the proposed line of conduct. Accordingly, it decides whether the satisfaction is to be obtained, put off, or the demand suppressed as a whole for the presence of danger (Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 69). Thus, Freud describes the ego's function as "an intermediary between the id and the external world" (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 2). Freud believes that the ego stands for what we call reason and logic, in contrast to the id which stands for untamed passions.

It is also referred to as the "executive or manager of the personality" (Phares 79). It is described as rational, systematic and organized. Unlike the id, it does not seek the most direct route to happiness. In other words, its goal is to satisfy the demands of the id; however, it takes first and foremost account of the constraints of the outside world. Ann Birch and Tony Malim say that, before the emergence of the superego, the ego is torn apart between the selfish, self-centred id and the restraints of the outside world (729).

It is believed that "Around the age of four to six the third part of the personality, the superego, emerges. The superego represents the individual's own internal framework of what is 'right' and 'wrong' as represented by the moral sanctions and inhibitions which exist in the surrounding culture" (Birch and Malim 729).

Many figures play a decisive role in the formation of an individual's superego: "The superego, in the course of an individual's development, receives contributions from later successors and substitutes of his parents,