Freudian Analysis of American Beauty

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Freud’s Background

- Born Sigismund Schlomo Freud (later changed to Sigmund in 1877)
- Born on May 6, 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia
- Father was a wool merchant. Moved family to Germany in 1859 and the to Vienna in 1860 (where Freud stayed until 1938)
- Decided on a career in medical research and went to Vienna University in 1873
- Began research work on the central nervous system and qualified as a doctor in 1881
- Worked at the Theodor Meynert’s Psychiatric Clinic and later studied with Charcot, at the Salpetrière, in Paris between 1882-1885
- Married Martha Bernays in 1886 and had 6 children.
- Opened a private practice specializing in nervous disorders in 1887-1888
- In 1895, Freud started analyzing dreams, the first being his own known as “The Dream of Irma's Injection”
- Between 1895-1900, Freud developed many concepts which would later be used in his theory and practice of psychoanalysis.
- Appointed as a professor at the University of Vienna in 1902
- In 1923, Freud developed jaw cancer, endured pain and 33 surgeries (but still never gave up cigars)
**Main Terms of the Freudian Theory**

- **Id** - The pleasure principle. The id wants whatever feels good at the time, regardless of later consequences. *Example*: Lester’s lust for Angela throughout the whole film, and his disregard of consequences that would come with their romance.

- **Ego** - The reality principle. The ego gives us a reality check. It realizes that we all have needs and desires but sometimes these selfish acts can hurt us in the long run. *Example*: When Jane tells Ricky that she doesn’t actually want her dad dead, after he turns the camera off.

- **Superego** - This is the moral part that develops due to our moral and ethical restraints placed upon us by our caregivers. *Example*: When Lester in the end realizes it would be wrong to take away Angela’s virginity, because of both the moral and ethical issues that would rely.

- **Unconscious** - The source of our motivations. Whether they are simple ones, such as food and sex, or more complex desires. According to Freud, we are generally unaware of our unconscious. *Example*: Lester’s fantasies throughout the film, that include his sexual desires.

- **Defense Mechanisms** - When anxiety occurs, the mind reacts by increasing problem solving, and seeks rational ways to escape the situation. These Escape routes are called Defense Mechanisms.

  - **Denial** - To alter the truth in a way that it becomes false. *Example*: When Lester tells Jane that he doesn’t have feelings for Angela when it is evident he does.

  - **Repression** - To push thoughts that are uncomfortable to the back of the unconscious. *Example*: How Carol pretends that her marriage is fine to many outside her family, when it is very evident that there are many problems in her marriage.

  - **Regression** - To go back to acting as a child. *Example*: When Lester spontaneously buys the Pontiac Firebird to remind him to bring him back to his childhood.
HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY

Healthy
- Strong Ego that can balance the demands of the
- Super Ego
- Married Adults, who have been through all the different stages

Unhealthy
- No Balance of Behavior – No ID (Lester)
- Dominant – Super Ego (Col. Frank Fitz)
- Fixated in one particular stage (Carolyn) anal stage, she was not real
A Freudian interpretation of American Beauty would be quick to point out that each character is a semi-allegorical, anthropomorphic personification of the different aspects of the human mind. Others are the living models of certain behaviors (such as Colonel Fitts's embodying an extreme reaction formation). They are exaggerated, almost cartoonish, caricatures of "normal people". The movie is, in part, an exploration of how extraordinary the very ordinary really is.

Lester Burnham--LB is basically an Id which has been dormant for 17 years. upon "waking up", he begins to act utterly impulsively, ignoring all social conventions and norms. he quits his job and blackmails his boss, starts smoking weed, and indulges in sexual fantasies about Angela, an underage girl.

- at start, LB has repressed his desires, becoming ruled by routine and ground down into mediocrity. for years, LB has tried to be the lowest common denominator--nondescript, unexciting, just a dull gray 9-to-5 guy. white-collar loser
- when LB sees Angela, he realizes how much he's lost by not reaching for what he desires. he "wakes up", as he says. when he does this, he begins to see the Beauty that he's been blind to for so long. Angela is, in a way, his spiritual guide towards Beauty
- he begins to live by his Id, rediscovering himself by letting himself be ruled by his impulses and desires. LB is guided by impulsive behavior, which leads to his feeling happier and more fulfilled
- at the end of the film, LB finally resolves the conflict between his id & superego. he realizes that, Although he desires Angela, she needs emotional support more than he needs sexual gratification. by seeing to her emotional well-being before his own sexual gratification, Lester is overcoming his lower instincts--he reaches the higher moral ground
• Theorist's background (Jeremy Lasky)

* Main terms (John O'Connell & Jaclyn Roberts)
* What is a healthy or unhealthy personality? (Jeff Trotsky)
* Why do they characters act as they do? (Adam Singer)
* Keynote presentation (Jaclyn Roberts)
* Responsibility sheet (Adam Singer)
* Works cited sheet (Jeremy Lasky)