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## A Treat towards an Artist's Psyche: A Psychoanalytical Reading of 'Red' by John Logan

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### ABSTRACT

The essence of human psyche as a primary subject of psychoanalytical discussions was in the center of attentions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thereupon, the investigations of various human psyche lead to the understanding of the relation between the conscious and the unconscious. In other words, what people do is done instinctively as a reaction toward their unconscious. On the contrary, human beings were not cognizant of unconscious' complexity; the directory of individual lives is interrelated to choices that are made in an out-of-reach aspect of mind, which does not always make a sense. Psychoanalysis, as a nonmedical observation of human mind, zooms in on various ways of interpretation of an individual's psyche. For instance, a famous play by John Logan entitled *Red*, written in 2009, appears to picture different aspects of an artist out of its characters' psyche while distinctively make conversation within the play. This paper's intention is to provide a reading Rothko, protagonist of *Red*, with having eye on the features discussed by the theories of psychoanalysis. The analysis illustrates the complexions of individuals' psyche interlocked with different circumstances and situations.

**Keywords:** *Psyche, Unconscious, id, Belatedness, Mirror stage, Abjection*

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### 1. Introduction

*Red* as a one-act play written by John Logan, American contemporary playwright, denotes words on the explanation of a period in Mark Rothko's life, famous American painter in twentieth century. Logan obviously based his character, Rothko, on the characteristics of real Rothko. In other words, Logan makes Rothko live once again and forces him to announce his view towards art to the audiences. Logan's style of characterization helps the readers to delve in the real personalities of Rothko. The play pictures an apparently historical plot where Rothko and the other personage, Ken, argue the notion of emerging popular art that resulted in the death of abstract expressionism. The play juxtaposes these two movements in order to highlights Rothko's conception of art.

For the reason that of Rothko was personally interested in Freud and his works, in this paper, a psychoanalytical dissection will be adopted to delineate the inner intention of Rothko in his life. For further elaboration, it could prove useful to name figures in psychoanalysis theory whose some terms and concepts will be taken for

granted; Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Sigmund Freud, Austrian doctor, as founding father of psychoanalysis put a brand new interpretation on human psyche. Accomplishing his objective, Freud developed some terms; for instance, iceberg theory, consciousness, unconsciousness, *id*, ego, superego, repressed drives, and displacement, which all will be defined in later chapter.

"Through decade, the belief that Freudian Psychoanalysis neglects social life as one of the human existential aspect motivated critics to reinterpret Freud" (Hosseini and Rajabi, 2019, p. 78). Continuously Jacques Lacan, French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, under tremendous influence of Freud, highly developed the ideas of unconsciousness and ego as a complex structure of human psyche. Moreover, he introduced Mirror Stage as fresh significant term while interpreting one's subjectivity. Lacan exploited the term to emphasize on the relationship among ego, drives, the other, and the others. Subsequently, Bulgarian-French philosopher, Julia Kristeva pursued Lacan's view although in some points she stood

against her master. The division between Kristeva and Lacan happens when the student offers a psychoanalytical feminist view. Kristeva added an innovative term known as Abjection to the body of psychoanalysis theories. Regarding Abjection, Kristeva presented a more explicit explanation on Lacanian view in formation of ego.

The researcher after presenting the introductory section will review literature regarding John Logan's work, *Red* in particular. Then in Conceptual Framework section, he will define required terminologies set in the paper. The main section of the present study, which is the Discussion section, attempts to provide a reading of *Red* with refer to the defined psychoanalytical terms. The last section alongside will point to the findings and conclusions of the research in brief. Summing up the section, some questions will be arisen concerning the paper; what is the aim of this paper? Is it possible to present a psychoanalytical reading of the play? Certainly, the aim of this paper is to delineate this matter in a practical process of decoding the clues that playwright laid them in his lines.

## 2. Literature Review

Due to the considerable interest of researcher in John Logan's famous two-hander, *Red*, this piece of literary work is chosen as the case study of the research paper. In the present section, other studies regarding *Red* by John Logan will go under a consideration. In the last attempt with the aim of finding gap within previously done researches on the *Red*, researcher surprisingly came to find that nearly no scholarly research is already done on the topic. The researcher thus attempts to go through reviews from magazines and newspapers.

Since the performance at Wyndham's Theatre is widely appreciated, various reviewers left notes on the theatricality of the work. It forced author of the present paper to focus on the most significant ones that generally are related to the play rather than the performance. The similarities and dissimilarities of the selected review will be highlighted. The notable part of the section, which emphasizes on the uniqueness of the current study, will come next. The ultimate paragraph of Literature Review section is devoted to suggestions for further studies and readings.

One of the primary review of the play written by Charles Spencer appeared on

*The Telegraph* during December 2009. The reviewer stands against the play to the extent that he start his review requiring Philip Larkin, "art about art wasn't really art at all, and his words echoed in my mind during much of John Logan's new play about the great American abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko" (qtd. in Spencer, 2009). He argues that the play suffers from an obsession with color, philosophical aspect, and unreliable information about Rothko. The problem with the review is that it does not provide reason for what it says and does not delve into the underlying aspect of the play.

Paul Taylor however has a different idea on the play. In his 2009 review on *Independent*, Taylor writes, "Logan's two-hander is [...] the tricky job of showing that the piece is a genuine "work" play as well as a resounding Oedipal clash of generations, differing attitudes to the significance of colour in art, and opposed views on how art should accommodate commerce." This review briefly points to the subjective aspect of the play while mentioning one the significant Freudian term, yet it does not open the matter in critical way. In fact the reviewer's approach may share much with the present paper's approach, yet the creditability of the mention review is under the question as reviewer avoids elaborating on the terms he used in his writing.

In a review addressed as "Red," published by *The Guardian*, Michael Billington divides the play into various parts to support below ideas;

Plays about painters are fraught with difficulty. Either the hero preaches about art without practising it, or the Bohemian lifestyle supersedes the work. But John Logan's play about Mark Rothko overcomes these obstacles with finesse: partly because, for Rothko, ideas were inseparable from art, and partly because of the tensions within the paintings themselves which Rothko once described as "dramas". (2009)

Discussing dramatically, the real Rothko's life and the way he interpreted the world let Logan to dramatize Rothko's idea easily. Furthermore, the extract from Billington's review claims that for Rothko the idea and the act are the same. This bravely asserted claim is partly supported in the review.

*The Stage* at 2018 published a review entitled "Red review at Wyndham's Theatre, London – 'Alfred Molina is superb'" which concentrates on the subjectivity of the characters. The reviewer observes Rothko in the play as "a creature of ego and



conviction, but also self-doubt; he's aggressive, charismatic and vulnerable all at the same time" (Tripney, 2018). The review assumes Rothko's initial acts in the play because of conflicts between his *id* and ego. Then it tries to generalize the pattern of conflicts for all artists who were and will be a figure in a particular field of art. In other words, demonstrating the inner conflicts of artists is what reviewer tends to do in *The Stage*.

Tony Peters in *RadioTimes* provides a review where he reveals points on the sociological aspects of the play. "Red review: A Modern Classic about the Nature of Art" (2018) argues the essences of Rothko's work. Peters attempts to draw line between "art" and "thing." In one hand, he divulges the artistic aspect of Rothko's works; on the other hand, he investigates the root of being employed in Rothko's perspective. Not all these are mention directly in the review that can lead readers towards ambiguity. Moreover, Peters does not adopts a firm critical approach in his reading of *Red*.

In one of the latest review on red by John Benjamin, theatre reviewer, he states, "It [*Red*] is fast-paced and full of great monologues that are heavy on philosophy and opinions about art history" (2018). "Review: Red at Wyndham's Theatre" published by *Exeunt*, illustrates the general aspects of dialogues, monologues, and stage direction of "Red." The review tends to highlight the aesthetic and literary devices of the play. Benjamin devoted his review to the formal analysis of the play, the way setting and colors are set. Although the review provides great information for its reader, it neglects experts' expectation of a review.

To conclude, it is worthy to mention that lack of efficient scholarly research on *Red* caused underlying notions of the play to remain hidden. As a new target, this play buries many critical clues that could be vastly discussed under the shadow of different critical approaches. As it is delineated in Literature Review section, most of reviewers are seemingly towards a psychoanalytical reading of *Red*, yet no one really tend to do so. The present study thus provides a psychoanalytical reading of *Red* by John Logan.

The present study is one of the various possible readings of John Logan's one-act play. It is possible to claim that *Red* as a literary work has the tendency to be read through various theoretical frameworks. For instance, other theories of the

psychoanalysis field can provide required terminology for a new reading of the play. Additionally, as the play is character base the theories of the subject can be an interesting reading. Finding philosophical backgrounds of Rothko's idea towards art can be one the precious studies regarding *Red*. Tracing the class conflict and the notions of alienation in the play also can provide sincere findings for the readers.

### 3. Freud's Iceberg Theory

Contrary to the common beliefs that named Freud as the founder of unconsciousness, it is better to refer him as the finder of the unconscious' structure. The findings of psychoanalysis build their ways into literature, taking advantage from the terms and concepts through interpreting them beyond the general outlook of psychoanalysis (Ahmed, 2012, p. 61). Psychoanalysis divides human psyche into two major components; the conscious and the unconscious. Freud, in his Iceberg Theory, directly compared the conscious to the visible part of a big ice mountain that is out of water but the significant and massive part, which he announced it as the unconscious, is under water. For him, none of human conscious actions is really based on his/her conscious. In fact, the unconscious leads human acts. This theory caused a new aspect of ambiguity for modern people. (Freud, 1963, p. 119) Modernity caused people to encounter their weakness within themselves; hence, they were trapped in a kind of determinism of their own. On the other hand, the practicality of Freudian theory has always been controversial. Psychoanalysis puts its emphasis on narrating a person's life through study of his/her mental life – how his/her unconscious grows in lifetime. Afterwards, Freud divides the unconscious itself into three aspects, which are not due to physical matters; *id*, ego, and superego.

The first aspect in Freudian view toward unconscious is the *id*. It is the heir of human instinct and it dissolves with desire, pleasure, and tension. As well, he defined the *id* as a chaotic nature of the unconscious. Furthermore, Freud believed that for a newborn child *id* is the dominant aspect of mind. The Second aspect, ego, is based upon rationality and it is possible to say it works as a controller. The ego, the decision-maker aspect of human personality, appears as idealist that is in direct relation with the external world. Comparing *id* and ego Freud once asserts, "the *id* being a horse while the ego is the rider. The ego is like a man on

horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse.” (Freud, 1913, p. 11) The last but not the least aspect Freudian divisions is called superego. It is obvious from the name of the term that it is concerned with ego and some extra aspect. One can consider external world as the extra aspect of the superego. In a simple way, it is logical to say that superego is the ego of the society in which it puts impacts on the psyche of human. Superego also works as a bridge between *id* and ego, which, for Freud, the best view over the life is available when one stands in the middle of the bridge. (Freud, 1962, p. 12)

The following term that Freud coins in his study of psyche was Oedipal Complex. The term is related to the surge in the process of masculine infant's unconscious formation. In this condition, a repressed desire from a masculine infant's unconscious will be displaced into his conscious that can cause him to think he should kill his father in order to sleep with his mother (Freud, 1913, p. 155). Freud argued that the root of human drives is in the unconscious. These drives, in a simplistic view, mistreat the conscious and remain in the unconscious as repressed drive. In order to delineate ways of transferring a latent dream to a more comprehensible story, he introduced three major processes by which the repressed drives haunt a subject in hidden ways. Freud is on the side of a self-made assumption that claims going through a particular algorithm can be the way in which a dream can be interpreted. (Bradford, 1994, p. 87) He addressed the processes as 'Condensation,' 'Displacement,' and 'Dramatization.' Condensation of the component parts of the preconscious material of dream, 'Displacement' of the form of dream, and 'Dramatization' of the entire dream by translation into visual images is the map for interpreting a dream. (Habib, 2008, p. 236)

“After Freud, Lacan pioneered a new structure for consciousness” (Hosseini and Rajabi, 2019, 78). Lacan accepted that the process of unconscious developing for an infant takes place in different orders and stages. “The infant in the early stages of his psychological development perceives both the environment and its body as fragmented shapeless entities.” (Maleki and Sadjadi, 2018, p. 135). This what Lacan addressed as the Imaginary Order. One of the stages that is of a high significant in Lacanian theory of subject is called mirror stage, the stage in

which an infant for the first time finds him/herself as an independent subject.

Thus, after this stage the human subject puts all his/her strength on the formation of ego (personality).

what we call the mirror stage, it is in so far as the image of the other gives to the subject this form of the unity of the other, as such, that there can be established somewhere this division of inside and outside, with reference to which the good and the bad objects are going to be reclassified - the good in so far as they ought to come inside, the bad in so far as they should remain outside. (Lacan, 1958, p. 396)

The Mirror stage is the end of the Imaginary Order and the beginning of what Lacan called the Symbolic order. Symbolic Order is the period when the Language-based-structure unconscious start to put reflects on subjects life.

The ultimate order in Lacanian theory of the unconscious formation is the Real Order. Lacan claims that all the acts during the subject's life are an attempt to find the real and to stand in the realm of the Real Order. He never provided a clear picture of the real for he believed that the language-base structure of the unconscious keeps the subject far away from the reality. Additionally, *objet petit a*, desired object, plays a significant role in Lacanian definition of the subject. As *l'objet petit a* changes permanently in the subject's life, the real is constantly changing too. Due to the changing essence of the real for the subject, reaching to the Real Order appears impossible in its Lacanian notion.

In another treat toward ego, Kristeva introduce a new term called Abjection. According to Kristeva in “Powers of Horror”, the Abject is in a linearly relation with the fear and horror that an ego as a person experiences at the time of breakdown and lost. (1982, p. 2) In this term, the subject starts to label others as itself. It means that the subject discovers its own fears and horror in the subjectivity of the others. The acts, done by others at the time of subject's breakdown, terrify the subject. The subject's reaction in this regard appears mostly unconsciously.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Rothko's id and Essence of Art

The construction of the play is based on Rothko's real life, which gives permission to the psychoanalytical clues to enter the story. In the very beginning lines of the play where Ken enters, Rothko asks him to look at a painting in a particular way;



. . . Let it pulsate. let it work on you. Closer. Too close. There. Let it spread out. Let it wrap its arms around you; let it embrace you . . . No, be exact. Be exact — but sensitive. You understand? Be kind. Be a human being, that's all I can say. Be a human being for once in your life! These pictures deserve compassion and they live or die in the eye of the sensitive viewer, they quicken only if the empathetic viewer will let them. That is what they cry out for. That is why they were created. That is what they deserve . . . (Logan, 1)

The above lines by Rothko show his view toward painting, or art in general. It shares similarity with what Freud defined as *id*. In the Rothko's commentary on painting, he wants Ken, or better to say audience, to look at his painting in a passionate direction. It is accepted that tension and all other pleasure-seeking feelings within human psyche flourish under the shadow of *id*, which its structure is definable by considering differences between *id* and ego. On the other hand, *id* itself undergoes to the unconscious aspect of psyche.

As the fruit of comparing Rothko's commentary on art and Freud's commentary on *id*, it is reasonable to say that for Rothko art is a child of *id*. Consequently, the creation of art, from Rothko's point of view can be mapped in a psychological process; an unconscious act which takes place in the *id* caused in the birth of an artwork. It may come to the reader that Rothko's conception of art is comparable to the Freudian notion of a dream. In fact the dream like setting of the play can be an evidence for such a claim in general.

#### 4.2 Rothko's Belatedness: Anxiety of Influence and Oedipal Complex

Regarding play, Freud's famous description of high art perfection can be mentioned. Freud expressed that a noble artwork shapes within the process of displacement, where repressed drives of artists came to appear as a work of consciousness. Freud, for further elaboration, said that a noble art is the art in which exposes the creator's repressed drive in form of an aesthetical act in his/her conscious. It is hence possible to claim that art is a self-treatment of psyche for the subject. Relatively, Rothko considers a laying tragedy in every art piece; "There's tragedy in every brushstroke" (Logan, 5). Whereby all tragic flaw can be interpreted as a mistreatment of the *id*, it is true to maintain for Rothko art is based on how artists' *id* performs. The vivid image

presenting by Rothko is not purely a new thought in this regard. The matter has been previously argued by Harold Bloom in his great work; *Anxiety of Influence* (1973). *Anxiety of Influence* elucidates the concept of belatedness in conjunction with what Freud called Oedipal Complex.

Rothko while giving speech on the relation between abstract expressionism and cubism expresses ". . . We stomped it to death. Nobody can paint a cubist picture today" (Logan, 9). Afterwards, in next line of the play on page 10 is put that "The child must banish the father. Respect him, but kill him." Rothko is afraid of being late in the history of art. He adopts abstract expressionism for he thinks all previously adopted movement stop him from being a genius. This simply is what Harold Bloom entitled, *Anxiety of Influence*; that an artist encounters anxiety during his artistic life. Rothko tends to produce marvelous paintings that are capable of dividing their ways from previous movement. Rothko escapes from the anxiety of being under influence of his former artists through abstract expressionism. This reminds a great applicable theory of Oedipal Complex where a son is to kill the father figure in favor of being laid with mother. Thus, for Rothko as a son there is necessity of killing cubism in order to achieve the mother, "painting."

#### 4.3 Apollonian Rothko

Contradictory to what Rothko expected to be, a heavy attack of disappointment faces him in the play's page 19 when Ken expresses his ideas about Rothko and accuses him to be an Apollonian.

Dionysus is the god of wine and excess; of movement and transformation. This is Pollock: wild, rebellious, drunk, and unrestrained. The raw experience itself ... Apollo is the god of order, method, and boundaries. This is Rothko: intellectual, rabbinical, sober, and restrained. The raw experience leavened by contemplation ... He splatters paint. You study it ... He's Dionysus and you're Apollo.

Apollonian as a term was firstly introduced as a rational psyche of human in the opposition to Dionysian, the passionate psyche of human. In other words, Dionysian in human psyche is what Freud called *id* and Apollonian stands as Freudian ego. In a harsh attack, Ken destroys Rothko's opinion about himself as a real artist whose ideas explode out of his psyche.

Having eye on the Lacanian definition of mirror stage, it will be more tangible to

consider abstract expressionism as the forming ego of Rothko. In the stages Lacan introduced as the levels of development for the unconscious, the mirror stage plays a grand role. This stage can be count as the greatest shock for a person while the subject lives. In this stage, a subject finds him/herself independent and just a part of a whole (mother personality) for the first time in his/her life. After this event, the person as a subject goes in search of its own individual ego.

Thus, Rothko is in search of abstract expressionism that represents his ego in the play. Like what Lacan says, Rothko never achieves to this objective due to its non-individual existence; abstract expressionism is not exclusively at the serve of Rothko. He shares abstract expressionism with others, for instance Pollock. The situation forces Rothko to be a part of a whole and not a whole himself.

So said the Cubist, the second before you stomped him to death. (Rothko stops, looks at him.) 'Tragic, really, to grow superfluous in your own lifetime' . . . 'The child must banish the father. Respect him, but kill him' . . . And now your time has come and you don't want to go. Well, exit stage left, Rothko. Because Pop Art has banished Abstract Expressionism . . . (Logan, 40)

Pop art as the emerging movement shatters the possible ego of Rothko. He is aware that pop art will certainly treat abstract expressionism in the same manner abstract expressionism treated cubism. Rothko finds himself as a father figure that is in danger of being killed by the growing son.

Besides, the element of colors in the play as significant issue, that is even obvious in its title, can be taken as granted for treat of Abjection in Rothko's psyche. Rothko all along the play is concerned with the colors, red and black. Although, Rothko describes black as dead and conducts himself with joy in red, he is worried about the emergent of black that is to swallow red. Evidently, the situation is repeatedly appearing in various pages 17, 21, 29, 31, 33, and 42. Moreover, this condition put Rothko in an Abjection that are he and his art subject or are their object.

. . . I was walking up to my house last week and this couple was passing. Lady looks in the window, says: "I wonder who owns all the Rothkos." ... Just like that I'm a noun. A Rothko. (Logan, 23)

The horror of becoming an object frightening Rothko can be interpreted as what Kristeva the fear for the subject. It is obvious throughout the play that Rothko is afraid of various matters; afraid of being removed from history of art because of pop art, afraid of being alienated of his works by capitalism system, and afraid of losing his subjectivity in his works.

## 5. Conclusion

Psychoanalysis, as a literary school of criticism that is concerned with the uncertainty of individuals' psyche and presence of unconscious, finds its own way to fiction works of literary world. Cogently, *Red* by John Logan is one of the devoted works of literature that mirrors elements of Rothko's inner psyche complexion to show readers, how things can be understood and be interpreted. Dialogues that are made around art, by Rothko as an artist, declare existence of psyche primary to everything. The psyche gets flourished under the shadow of unconscious. It is obvious that we discover psychoanalytical elements in Rothko's characteristics through *Red*. Due to its obvious points to Freud's and Nietzsche's conventional division of the psyche, this is what *Red* was written for, to provide a context for dissecting. To sum up, as no researches and studies been ever done on Logan's great masterpiece, *Red*, as an object matter, now it is definitely possible to say that psychoanalysis theories worked out well due to Logan's purpose.

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