

Interpretation of the Heroine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* with Freud's Psychoanalytic Theories

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Abstract—The Austrian novelist Zweig's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a well-known novella and one of his masterpieces. The heroine loved the man for lifetime and tried again and again and gave multiple hints to let him recognize her, but he didn't. This paper will analyze the heroine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and discuss the deep reason hiding behind her amazing affection to the novelist from the perspective of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theories.

Index Terms—Freud's psychoanalytic theories, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, zweig.

I. INTRODUCTION

Letter from an Unknown Woman is a well-known novella written by the Austrian novelist Zweig and is one of his masterpieces. And it was also highly praised by Gorky. The novel tells a story as follows. A famous novelist R received a letter without a signature and address on his 41st birthday, from a dying woman telling an unforgettable love story, and the male protagonist of the story was the one who received the letter. The story began several years ago. When she first met the man, she was still a 13-year-old child. After that, she obsessed him as a girl and loved him as a woman, and even gave birth to their son. In order to meet him and raise up their son, she endured poverty and humiliation to her body. But she never changed her love for him. What made her sad for a few times was that the novelist never recognized her. She decided to confess before she died. So she wrote this letter to tell the novelist about her life-time love for him. The only thing she beg him was to believe what she said in this letter.

Zweig was born in a wealthy Jewish family. He studied philosophy and literature in Vienna and Berlin in his youth, traveled around the world later, and made acquaintance with Roman Roland, Freud, etc. He was engaged in anti-war work during World War I. In 1934, he was expelled by the Nazis and was exiled to the United Kingdom and Brazil. And he committed suicide in Brazil in 1942. He had been writing poems, novels, dramas, literary theories and biographies. His best known achievements are those in biography and novels [1]. Zweig's novels mainly focus on themes of emotions, and describe the complex emotional activities and mental states of the characters delicately. These features have made his works unique and attracted a large amount of readers. Zweig himself appreciates Freud very much. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a successful practice of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Thus, it is reasonable to use Freud's

psychoanalytic theories to analyze this novella.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is the founder of psychoanalytic psychology. He is an Austrian psychiatrist, psychologist and literary critic. In the book *The Ego and the Id*, Freud further improved his Pre-consciousness theory. He described the personality structure as "id", "ego" and "superego". The most basic level of personality structure is "Id", which is at the bottom layer of mind. It is animal's instinctive impulse that people were born with, especially refers to sexual impulse, which acts according to the "Principle of Happiness". The top layer is "Superego", which represents a defender who strives to be perfect. The main responsibility of "Superego" is to guide "Id", to limit the instinctual impulse and to suppress "Id". "Superego" act according to the "Principle of Perfection" [2]. The middle layer is the "Ego", which is differentiated from the "Id" due to the reality. The part that clarifies the current affairs. "Ego" acts according to the "Principle of Reality" It is the contradiction that can be based on the surrounding environment to adjust itself between "Id" and "Superego" [3].

According to Freud, "Libido" is a kind of power that instincts use to accomplish its purpose [4]. The word "Libido" is taken from the theory of emotions. It is used to refer to the instinctual energy associated with everything contained in "love". The core of "love" is sexual love, but this "love" includes friendship, self-love, parental love, etc. as well. Libido is related to sexual impulses. It sometimes manifests itself as sexual instincts, namely the basic desire for sex. To sum up, Libido is the driving force of individual instinct expression and satisfaction [5].

"Identification" means one's identification to a person who is in higher status or has more achievements, in order to eliminate the anxiety caused by the inability to achieve success or satisfaction. There are several types of identification. For example, fantasy identification is based on a hero or an idol, as you imagine someone you want to be. Identification to an ideal image or an object is to imitate someone who you think is great. This kind of defense also exists among those who are passionate about superstition. They imitate the leader to act in order to escape from unpleasant emotions [6].

This paper will analyze the heroine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and discuss the underlying reason hiding behind her obsessive affection to the novelist from the perspective of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theories. "My boy died yesterday" repeated several times implies that she began to tell him about a new stage of her life. Her life after she met the writer can be divided into three periods: childhood (as a child), adolescence (as a girl) and adulthood (as a woman).

Her feelings to the writer are different during the three periods. The three periods are divided by her state of minds (or mental age) rather than chronological age.

II. INTERPRETATION OF THE HEROINE

In the letter, the unknown woman expressed her love for the novelist throughout her life. She met him at the age of thirteen. When she opened the door for the novelist by chance, he thanked her with warm and passionate eyes. She thought this tenderness was only given to herself so she fell in love with him. When she was sixteen, her mother remarried and they moved away from Vienna. She began to miss him every day and thought he was also missing her. When she finally became an adult, she managed to return to Vienna. After waiting near his apartment day by day, the writer noticed her because of her charming looks. They spent three nights together and she was pregnant. She gave birth to their child in a dirty and cold hospital since she had no money and no relatives around her. The writer never knew the existence of the boy. She made friends with rich men and gave her body to them to raise their boy. She affection and missing to the writer faded since her boy came to the world. She gave all her love and care to the boy and spent much happy time with him. She never went to the writer's apartment to wait for him because she had her boy. He was everything for her. By chance, she met him in the ballroom. Again, she left her lover and followed him to the apartment immediately when he invited her. He still didn't recognize her. The child died of flu and she lost meaning of life. And she started to write this letter to tell him about her life-time love for him.

The letter begins with a superscription, "To you, who have never known me", which seems to summarize her life. It implied her fate of being unrecognized for lifetime. The novelist never knew her, hinting at her tragic fate. And "My boy died yesterday" repeated several times implies that she began to tell him about a new stage of her life. Her life after she met the writer can be divided into three periods: childhood (as a child), adolescence (as a girl) and adulthood (as a woman). The childhood ended with her moving away to another city because of her mother's remarriage. Her adolescence can be defined as the period from her moving away to pregnancy. And her adulthood can be defined as the time from pregnancy till her death. The three periods are divided by her state of minds (or mental age) rather than chronological age. Her feelings to the writer are different during the three periods.

A. *As a Child*

She first saw the novelist when she was 13. And she felt that her life began at the moment she knew him, that is, she felt like nothing before he appeared in her life. Her father died when she was very young, and her mother was afraid of everything, always wearing filial piety. No one visited their house. Even no one knew them. She lived a poor life with her mother like other small citizens. As time passed by, the girl began to abandon this kind of life. Before she knew him, her life was a mess and there had been no happiness in it. She did not like her mother and her classmates and was bullied by

neighbors sometimes. Her world was very small and limited. It can be concluded that she had no identity before she met him. This is the reason why she forgot things happened before she met him quickly. Before he came, she had been very curious on the books taken by the his servant, John. This can be explained by that she had been looking for a model in her life before he came.

When she was thirteen, a handsome young writer moved to the neighbors. When the novelist's servant and luggage arrived, she saw various books in different languages. For a girl living in a very narrow world, a well-known and handsome writer in another big world is a miracle. She started to be very curious about him from then on. He was a light in the world of the child who did not have self-identity. So in those days, she fully engaged herself in peeping into the writer's life. Her life revolved round the writer's with the fidelity proper to a girl of thirteen. She watched his every move carefully and knew well about his life and his personality [7].

Identity is the term used in psychoanalysis to indicate a central process by which the subject establishes or becomes a part, characteristic or characteristic of the person around him at a critical moment in his development, using methods of digestion or encroachment. The concept of identity has gradually gained a central value in Freud's work compared to other spiritual mechanisms. Through this operation, the human subject can be established. Identity is related to narcissism. The narcissistic object selection is that the object is selected according to the mode of the person, and identity is established by the subject according to the pattern of the later object [8].

In the letter, she told the novelist that she could remember the day she fell in love with him very clearly. That day, she was chatting with a classmate at the gate of their apartment when his car came. He got out of the car and was about to walk into the apartment. And she opened the gate for him. So, he looked at her with warm, soft, passionate eyes, smiled at her with affection and thanked her in a soft and relative voice. At this moment, she fell in love with him completely [7]. She loved him for a lifetime. The girl got identification from the reaction of the novelist as a girl. The first identification for a child in his or her childhood is quite significant. Behind the self-ideal lies the first and most important identification which is from his or her father. This is a kind of direct and instant identification and is the most important one for a person [9]. The heroine's father died when she was very young. She never got any identification from a male in her memory. That is why she was so curious about the novelist and fell in love with him when he showed affection to her. She wished to get identification from him.

She began to study hard, to read thousands of books and to learn to play the piano because the novelist like these things. She regarded him as her model, thus her "Ego" started to control her "Id". Her "Ego" started to imitate the one she loved, which is deeply affected by her "Id". Thus, her "Ego" forced her "Id" to love the "Ego" because her "Ego" was similar to the novelist loved by "Id". They both enjoyed reading books and playing the piano. Her "object-libido" was transferred into "ego-libido", so she had a goal and a meaning of life.

She didn't study very well before the writer came. But she began to study hard, to read thousands of books and to learn to play the piano because the novelist like these things. She got excellent grades at school when she was obsessed with the writer. She is afraid the writer would look down on her because of a patch on her old suit, so every time she went upstairs, she used her schoolbag to block the patch [7]. Her admiration to the writer is actually an kind of identification to him. The writer's character is an ideal image for her, so she couldn't help imitating him who she thought was great. For a child with no identity, she found a model in her life and imitated him as hard as she can. She could get identity and like herself by imitating him. She use his standard to judge herself.

Freud believes that narcissism is a reaction related to the "object". "Object" refers to a concept opposite to the subject. Freud believes that one can treat himself as the object of Libido. Here, Freud firstly introduced the difference between "ego-libido" and "object-libido". On the one hand, narcissism is a universal primitive phenomenon. Under the condition of narcissism, there is love for the object [10]. On the other hand, it is more than normal that "ego-libido" is transferred into "object-libido" and that "object-libido" is changed back into "ego-libido" again. The transfer between "ego-libido" and "object-libido" is similar to amoeba and its pseudopodia. Therefore, narcissism can be divided into two states: one is primary narcissism; and the other is libido withdrawing from the object, and betting on the "ego", that is, secondary narcissism [8].

As what has been stated before, this child who had no self-identity didn't like people around her, and it is natural for her to give "object-libido" to the writer who was famous, interesting, knowledgeable and handsome. He was a miracle for her. What hide behind her curiosity and affection to the writer is that she saw him as a model as a child with no identity and that she wanted an identity herself. So she watched everything he did and imitated him, which is a kind of action to gain identity. Her affection to the writer is actually the love for herself. She imitate the writer to gain some characteristics of the man, that is, to make herself a person like him so that she could love herself. She desired for an identity. She began to like him even before he came, because she knew that he was knowledgeable and rich. In this period when she was a child, her feelings to the writer is mainly identification to him.

B. As a Girl

When the girl was 16 years old, her mother remarried and moved to a different place. When she was forced to move away, she felt so sad as if the world was to come to an end. Because without him, she would lose her identification and her life would be meaningless. When she was 18 years old, she overcame various obstacles and returned to Vienna. On the surface, it is because of love, but actually she went back in order to find her identification again.

She had been thinking of the writer every day since then. She missed him so much that she thought he was also missing her. When she became a beautiful girl, her childhood admiration and secret love became a hot love. In order to be with him, she returned to Vienna alone at the age of 18,

quietly coming to the writer's house every night, silently paying attention to his whereabouts. On an occasional chance, when the writer rushed across the road and cast a teasing look at her, she fled with timidity and shame. And this time, she knew clearly what she wanted. She hoped that the novelist would recognize her, noticed her and love her. She could not help thinking of him every minute and every second so that she had an illusion that he was also always thinking of her. One night, the writer finally noticed her. However, from his curious and interesting expression, she immediately realized that the writer did not recognize her as the girl next door, which was the first time the girl suffered from her fate of being unrecognized by the writer. They spent the three nights of ecstasy, and she would never forget it in her whole life. But she did not tell him her love for him [7].

Being unrecognized means that her waiting and efforts are meaningless. It also deprived her of her identity. In the next days of her life, she tried again and again to get her identity back. Before she returned to Vienna, she had always been thinking of the writer so that she had an illusion that he was also missing her. But the truth broke her heart and she realized that he was a man who liked women but would never want to take responsibility. He couldn't remember the looks of women. In this period (as a girl), her identification to him was changed into sexual love for him.

C. As a Woman

When she realized that the writer likes to abuse love for all women, but did not want to make any sacrifices. She didn't want the writer to feel that she was a cumbersome person, and even hated her, so she gave up telling him when she gave birth to their child in a poor hospital. Because of her desire to seek the writer's recognition of herself, she wished herself to be a special woman in his heart so he would love and appreciate her when thinking of her [7]. She desires an identity from the writer so much that she could suffer from poverty, disdain and physical and mental pain. All these pains are better than being unrecognized because that means depriving her of identity she lived by.

Their boy became her savior. The writer never needed her and never thought of her, but her boy needed her and loved her. After the boy was born, she stopped standing near the writer's apartment to wait. Instead, she just sent someone to send flowers to the writer on his birthday to help him remember her [7]. She gave all her love to his boy. The identification she didn't get from the writer was given to her by the boy.

In the years that followed, they met in the theater, in the concert, in the park, on the street, and her heart repeatedly called out deeply: "Recognize me, recognize me as the child next door! That is the girl!" But he never noticed her, even after she gave birth to their boy. Every time he met her, he treated her as a new acquaintance and soon forgot her indifferently. This was the biggest disaster for her, not being recognized. But she never told the novelist she had been always loving him until she was going to die. She knew it exactly that her illusions and fantasies would be broken once she told him the truth. She did not want to lose identification again, so she never talked about this secret with him even after she was pregnant and gave birth to his baby. She wanted

to get recognized by him all the time throughout her life. When she got access to the novelist again as a young woman, she fell into an affair with him, tried again and again and gave multiple hints to let him recognize her, but he didn't. In desperation, she remembered that the writer had sent a few white roses to her after the three nights of passion, so every birthday of the writer, she sent someone to send a bunch of roses to the writer, just aiming at waking up the writer's memories [7].

The writer never recognized her. However, when she left the his apartment, the writer's servant, John, who had never seen her since her moving away years ago recognized her as the girl once living in the neighbourhood at the first sight. She felt so grateful that she wanted to kneel in front of him and kiss his hand [7]. John's recognizing her helped her get identification in some way.

When she wrote this letter, she was dying. The only thing she request for him was that he could believe what she said in this letter. On the surface, she wanted the love of the man, but the deep truth hiding behind her affection for him was that she was looking for identification from the man for lifetime. So the only thing she want before her death was that the man she loved could believe what she said in this letter. If he believed what she said in this letter, she could feel that she gained her identity back before she died. This was her last chance so she tried for the last time.

Another important thing in this letter is that the woman hoped he could realize that she was the 13-year-old child living in the neighbors. She wanted him to remember that she was exactly the child at the age of 13 rather than the 18-year old maiden waiting by his apartment. The deep reason why she tried again and again and gave multiple hints to let him recognize her as the 13-year-old child is that she got her identification from him for the first time when she was 13. At that time, the writer looked at her with a cordial, gracious, all-embracing glance, which was almost a caress. He smiled at her tenderly and said gently, nay, confidentially: "Thanks so much." [7] If he didn't realize that she was the child, the identification she received as a child would not count. It was the identification she got at the age of 13 that supported her to struggle to live until now throughout her life, not the one she got as a maiden or woman.

III. CONCLUSION

Letter from an Unknown Woman is a well-known novella written by the Austrian novelist Zweig and is one of his masterpieces. This paper divided her lifetime into three periods according to her states of mind and analyzed the deep reasons behind her affection and sacrifice for the writer. Her life after she met the writer can be divided into three periods: childhood (as a child), adolescence (as a girl) and adulthood (as a woman). The childhood ended with her moving away to another city because of her mother's remarriage. Her adolescence can be defined as the period from her moving away to pregnancy. And her adulthood can be defined as the time from pregnancy till her death. Her feelings to the writer are different during the three periods. In the first period as a child, her feelings to the writer can be concluded as identification. He was her model and she imitated and learned

from him. In the second period as a girl, her affection to him changed from identification to sexual love for him as she became an adult. In the third period, her love for him decreased because her boy came to the world and gave her a lot of happiness. The boy needed her and loved her so she gave all her love to the boy and never went to the writer's apartment to wait for him. This boy gave her identification and a new meaning of life.

Her father died when she was very young. She never got identification from a male in her memory. That is why she was so curious about the novelist and fell in love with him. When she began to imitate him, her "object-libido" was transferred into "ego-libido", so she had a goal and a meaning of life. As time pass by, the 13-year-old child became an 18-year-old girl, her feelings to the writer was transferred from identification to him to sexual love. And later she gave birth to their boy and raised him up alone without telling him. Since the boy was born, she never went to the writer's apartment to wait for him. Her love and missing for him decreased because the existence of the boy. Her boy loved her and needed her, which gave her identification. They spent joyful time together and she got a new meaning of life. But the boy died of flu and her only faith to life disappeared. Losing identification again, she turned to the writer by writing this letter to him. She wanted to get identification from the writer before her death. Thus, the only request of her in the letter was to beg the writer to believe what she said in the letter. On the surface, the woman sacrificed herself for love, who had been chasing after the novelist's love in her whole life. However, from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, she was not chasing for love but identification from the novelist. She would suffer from mental and physical pains as long as she had an identity from the writer. So the only thing she required from the writer was to believe what she said, that is, to recognize her as the child living in his neighbors. This was her last struggle to get her identity back. Her life-long affection and sacrifice for the writer is to get identification from him.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wang Siyu conducted the research and wrote the paper. The author had approved the final version.

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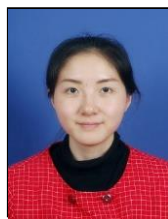
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