



# The Choice of Characters under the Collapse of Values-- Interpreting *A Road to the Big City* from Psychoanalytic Theory

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**Abstract**—“*A Road to the Big City*” is one of Doris Lessing's classic short stories, which depicts three typical characters in society at that time. This article believes that the three characters correspond to the three levels of Freud's personality theory, and based on this, analyzes and explores the reasons behind the character's behavior.

**Keywords**— Jansen, Lilla, Marie, Personality theory, Sigmund Freud

## I. INTRODUCTION

*A Road to the Big City* starts with the story of Jansen, a city passer, leaving the city by train at midnight. In the six hours of changing the bus, Jansen meets two sisters. sister Lilla is a prostitute who has a giggling career for a year, and her sister Marie is a rural girl who has just arrived in the city in the morning. Obviously, Marie wants to come to the city to take refuge in her sister. But she doesn't know what her sister is engaged in and her sister even wants her to do the same job. But Jansen knows that. Facing the doom that is coming to Marie, Jansen's inner humanity is touched. He wants to persuade Marie to return to the countryside, just to keep Marie's innocence and not be polluted by the turbidity of the city. However, Jansen's persuasion seems weak under the strong material temptation of the city, and Marie doesn't believe anything he said at all. Finally, out of a desperate state of mind, Jansen forcibly sent Marie to the train back to the countryside, but when his own train starts, he finds that Marie has got off the train and back to the city. Obviously,

Marie chooses to stay in the city at the last moment and face the future she doesn't know. This short story is one of Lessing's classic works, which is short but thought-provoking. Most scholars tend to analyze the female character Marie in their works, with almost no comparative analysis of the three characters. Therefore, this article creatively uses Freud's personality theory to analyze the psychology of three characters, exploring the character selection and its reasons under the disintegration of traditional social values.

## II. THEORETICAL SOURCES

Personality refers to important and relatively stable aspects of behavior (Ewen, 2009:3). According to Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic school, the goal of all behavior is to obtain pleasure and avoid displeasure or pain. Freud's first theory was called the “topographical model”, and it divided the mind into two areas: a Conscious/Pre-conscious area that contains all the thoughts and feelings of which we are

already aware or could easily become aware; and metaphorically beneath it, a much larger unconscious is full of drives and impulses of which we cannot be directly aware (Roth, 1997:08). These drives and impulses are thought to be innate and instinctive in order to seek immediate gratification - food, drink or sexual gratification. In order to further reveal the mystery of psychological personality, Freud published another important work in 1923: *The Ego and the Id*. In this book, Freud developed the previous two personality structures into three personality structures, namely the Id, the Ego and the Superego, which formed a systematic theory of personality.

The Id was a term Freud borrowed from Nietzsche, according to George Grodek saw it as an unknown and uncontrollable force. The Id is full of the energy provided by instinct, but it has no organization and produces no common will. It only follows the principle of pleasure and strives to meet the needs of instinct (Freud, 2011). Freud believes that Id is the psychological essence of human being, the most primitive subjective reality, and the internal world that existed before the individual got the external experience (Freud, 2011). Thus, it can be seen that Id is a chaotic world, which contains a mass of unstable, instinctive and suppressed desires, concealing all kinds of uncivilized instinctive impulses which are not allowed by modern human social ethics and legal norms. It is the cradle of all kinds of psychological activities. The Id seeks the satisfaction of instinctive impulses and repressed desires, and its only function is to vent the excitement caused by internal or external stimuli in time. It can be said that Id reflects the biological side of human beings and is an animal instinct impulse, especially sexual impulse.

The Ego is a part of the Id transformed by the direct influence of the external world through the mediation of perceptual consciousness. The Ego is guided by the "reality principle" and not influenced by the "happiness principle". The purpose of the reality principle is to delay the release of energy until something satisfying is found or produced. Following the principle of reality does not mean giving up the principle of happiness, but merely requiring it to be put aside for the time according to practical needs (Behrendt, 2016:46). The influence of the Ego's self-preservation drives the pleasure principle is displaced by the reality principle, which without abandoning the aim of ultimately

achieving pleasure, none the less demands and procures the postponement of gratification, the rejection of sundry opportunities for such gratification, and the temporary toleration of displeasure on the long and circuitous road to pleasure (Freud, 2003). The implementation of the principle of reality, the role of the second process, the more important role of the external world in one's life, all stimulate the development and maturity of such mental processes as perception, memory, thinking and action (Hall, 1986:30). The Ego represents what we call reason and sanity, in contrast to the Id which contains the passions (Freud, 1989:08). Because of following the "principle of reality", Ego can adjust the contradiction between "Id" and "Superego" according to the actual conditions of the surrounding environment, and take rational behavior, striving to satisfy the Id's desires in realistic and socially appropriate ways.

The Superego is the representative of every moral constraint and the advocate of the pursuit of perfection. The Superego, at the highest level of the personality, is the moralized Ego. Its power comes from its capacity to create guilt and the bad feelings connected with guilt, and it can dictate our behavior and even our thoughts. While the Superego can help the individual to conform to the basic rules and laws of the society he lives in, it can also sometimes become the most powerful and even the most destructive part of his personality (Roth, 1997:13). The psychological punishment and reward for the Superego are pride and guilt or inferiority. The Ego, when it has done something moral, or conceived a moral thought, it is pleased with pride; and when the Ego gives in to temptation, it feels ashamed. The main function of the Superego is to control and regulate the impulses in the Id that, if lost, would endanger social stability. Superego is a symbol of morality and norms and a defender of traditional social values. Freud believes that Superego is the social side of personality, representing the normative role of social morality on individuals. Superego ignores the gains and losses of reality and acts in accordance with "moral principles". It is a high-level leader of personality. It restricts the Ego with conscience and moral Ideals and affects the Id.

### III. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Lilla

In the short story, sister Lilla can be seen as the embodiment of Id. Her behavior only follows the “happy principle”, that is, avoiding bitterness and seeking happiness, and eliminating the stressful experience that makes people feel painful and uncomfortable. In life, she ignores the external norms of social morality and constantly induces the “Ego” to meet her desire for happiness. Lilla is dressed in a stylish and exquisite way:

“She wore a tight short black dress, several brass chains, and high shiny black shoes. She was a tall broad girl with colorless hair ridged tightly round her head, but given a bright surface so that it glistened like metal. She immediately lit a cigarette...”

(Lessing,1)

In the process of speaking to Jansen, Lilla also has her own routines, such as asking the time of the train, and finding opportunities to give Marie and Jansen time alone. From these places, we can see Lilla's work nature and proficiency. In the patriarchal society at that time, women generally undertook housework at home and did not go out easily. The nature of the work of women who always show up outside can be imagined. Men are always better educated and find better jobs in society. It is also reflected in the text that men are gentlemen in suits. In a patriarchal society, most women can only rely on men, either as housewives or as prostitutes like Lilla. Under the temptation of big cities, Lilla who comes from the countryside, longs for the brilliance of big city life, never considered the practical possibility and morality of her desire. As a prostitute, Lilla not only satisfies her physical desires, but also satisfies her material desires. As long as she thought it could bring pleasure to her psychology or physiology, she would do even irrational things. Social ethics and norms are not within Lilla's consideration. She only needs to meet her own needs. In order to earn more money, she even did not hesitate to teach her sister to be a prostitute. Lilla took her to the railway station, specially selected men to stay overnight, helped her choose men, and created opportunities for her to have relationships with strange men. Lilla is a victim of a patriarchal society and a full manifestation of the dominant position of the id in consciousness.

#### 3.2 Marie

Marie can embody her “Ego”, and she also follows the principles of reality. As a rural girl, Marie also wants to live a free life with money and “love” as her sister Lilla. We learned from her that she always thought her sister was a typist. She could also do a serious job as a typist and live the life she wanted. She is eager to realize her dream by working hard and making a living in a big city. That's why she came to the city from the countryside and wanted her sister to introduce herself to a suitable job. But Marie whose ideas are pure and simple, never thought of doing work that broke social norms and values, which can be seen from her formal dress and her utter lack of urbanism:

“Plump, childish, with dull hair bobbing in fat rolls on her neck, she wore a flowered and flounced dress and flat white sandals on bare and sunburned feet. Her face had the jolly friendliness of a little dog.” (Lessing,1)

Therefore, we saw the Ego in Marie's consciousness. She has her own "happiness principle" that she wants to follow. In order to achieve this goal of happiness, she currently follows the "reality principle", that is, running from the countryside to the city and finding a decent job. Everything in the external world, that is, the big city, is stimulating and seducing the senses and psychology of this inexperienced girl, seemingly accelerating her psychological development and maturation process. She increasingly felt that she had broadened her horizons and became more and more obsessed with the prosperity of big cities, so she wanted to stay.

“The three went into the street. Not far away shone a large white building with film stars kissing between thin borders of coloured shining lights. Streams of smart people went up the noble marble steps where splendid men in uniform welcomed them. Jansen, watching Marie's face, was able to see it like that.” (Lessing,3)

Finally, Marie learned the truth from Jansen and firmly chose to stay in the big city. This is actually the result of her adjustment between the contradiction between "Id" and "Superego". Living in a busy big city like Lilla is something she aspires to, but Jansen suggests a simple and original life back in the countryside. Finally, Marie stayed and chose to realize her dream in her own way.

### 3.3 Jansen

In the short story, Jansen embodies "Superego". At the beginning of the short story, Jansen's background was explained: "For a week he had been with rich friends, in a vacuum of wealth, politely seeing the town through their eyes. Now, for six hours, he was free to let the dry and nervous air of Johannesburg strike him direct." Based on the following text, we can also learn that Jansen is tired of the life of luxury in the city. He had already seen through the filth, hypocrisy, and deceit of city life and wants to return to a more pure and simple life. Therefore, he was attracted to this simple girl Marie at the first glance. Under the influence of the conscious superego, the Ego feels ashamed when it succumbs to temptation. When Jansen unknowingly returned to the apartment with them and realized what was going to happen next, he suddenly felt very helpless and angry.

"Jansen adjusted himself on the juicy upholstery of a big chair. He was annoyed to find himself here. What for? What was the good of it? He looked at himself in the glass over a sideboard. He saw a middle-aged gentleman, with a worn indulgent face, dressed in a grey suit and sitting uncomfortably in a very ugly chair." (Lessing,4)

Superego is a symbol of morality and norms and a defender of traditional social values. As a person who has experienced everything in the city, Jansen wants to escape here and protect the girl from the same occupation and life as her sister Lilla. So, Jansen kept persuading Marie to go back to the countryside and even bought a ticket to take her on the train. At this time, it was Jansen's conscious Superego, which ignores the gains and losses of reality and acts in accordance with "moral principles" that was at work. Jansen just wanted to follow his conscience and morality and send this simple girl back to the countryside. In this way, it is possible for her to continue to maintain her innocence without being invaded by the impetuous big cities. Otherwise, she will only become a slave to desire, like her sister Lilla, and become a prostitute for material life. However, in the end, Marie returned to the city, and Jansen failed to achieve his wish. No matter how ethical it is, Marie still chooses to pursue Ego. Because the Superego cannot completely conceal the impulses of the Id and Ego. Freud believed that this perfect personality state was only an ideal and could not be fully realized. The Id and Ego will strive

to break away from the bondage of the Superego. So, in some cases, the Superego must obey the demands of instinct.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Doris Lessing created three characters with different personalities in her short story *A Road to the Big City* with delicate strokes and concise language. By analyzing the correspondence between the male protagonists Jansen, Lilla and Marie and the Superego, Id and Ego in Freud's personality structure theory, this paper believes that in order to live a vain life, Lilla didn't hesitate to pull her sister as a prostitute, and she had no shame and moral bottom line. She was full of desire and instinct, and was the representative of Id; Marie pursued the principle of realism. In order to live as brightly as her sister, she simply adhered to the principle that she thought she was right, that is, listening to her sister's words can be as successful as her sister, having love and money. She was the embodiment of Ego; Jansen became the moral authority among the three. He wanted follow his conscience and morality to save Marie to escape the city, symbolizing Superego. In this short story, Freud's theory of personality structure has been better displayed and completely explained.

By analyzing this short story, we find that in that society, traditional values were disintegrating. People in the countryside are tired of their existing lives and yearn for big cities. What people value is no longer a simple and peaceful life, but a rich material life and enjoyment. Rich men spend money like dirt, while women even become prostitutes in order to satisfy their desire to enjoy themselves. Having discovered the dirty and restless side of the city, for the middle-aged man, Jansen, who still has a conscience and traditional values, but is not compatible with the young people in the city, he has to return to his hometown and seek the comfort and tranquility that traditional life can provide.

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