

Shakespeare's
measure for
measure:
psychological
freudian analysis



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In Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, the main character's qualities and ideologies tend to align eerily well with how Sigmund Freud depicts human consciousness. Within us all lies an Id, an Ego, and essentially what can be considered a patriarchal Superego. On one end of the spectrum, this rampant moral corruption in the streets of Vienna is represented by Mistress Overdone, essentially the antithesis to this new movement of returning to strict moral roots; therefore she plays the role of the pleasure principal, the Freudian Id. In the middle representing the Ego, we find the Duke, Isabella, and Claudio. These characters have an inherent drive to do the right thing but don't fully represent purity in all respects since they're willing to still compromise and listen to reason. The tyrannical role of the Super Ego is given to Angelo, he aims to create a society that follows the rule of law to the 't', has generally good morals, and wants what he considers to be "right" to take place regardless of whether or not it's entirely logical.

A key reason why the Duke decisively put Angelo into power was because he knew that the only way to suppress the chaos and moral decay character's like Mistress Overdone (the Id) bring to equation was to bring fourth a force that directly opposed this lackadaisical hedonistic ideology, essentially the complete opposite of the direction society seemed to be taking. The brothels and characters like Mistress Overdone represent the Id of society because it's that little portion of human consciousness that influences us to disregard morals or possible legal implications to fulfill the pleasure principle. Partaking in prostitution, let alone premarital sex was the complete opposites of what the hyper religious tyrannical christians believed in at the time.

When it comes to the the Freudian Ego, we find the Duke, Isabella, and Claudio fall in line quite nicely with this mid-range ideology. We see the Duke as someone that has an innate desire to govern his people in the most admirable manner while balancing their rights, happiness, and freedoms. He sees how the streets have become saturated with prostitution and premarital sex, but feels as though he's the "cool father" that doesn't want to overstep his boundaries and upset his children but realizes he needs to start punishing them if he expects their behavior to ever change. This mentality is demonstrated through this quote:

"I do fear, too dreadful:

Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,

'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them

For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done,

When evil deeds have their permissive pass

And not the punishment. Therefore indeed, my father,

I have on Angelo imposed the office;

Who may, in the ambush of my name, strike home,

And yet my nature never in the fight

To do in slander."

Essentially he's stating that he's continuously allowed these indecent actions to take place for too long now, there's no way he can just turn around and change up what he's accepted in the past. By going into hiding allowing a more dominant Super Ego like Angelo to take power, he's essentially attempting to fix this societal moral decay through heavy enforcement but isn't willing to do the dirty work himself and 'slander' his name.

Isabella, in an attempt to rid herself from this society she feels is spiraling out of control morally, goes through the steps to become a full-fledged nun. So while she's attempting to adhere to this strict moral ideology, she becomes conflicted when she realizes the only way to save her brother from certain death is to commit the very act that got him sentenced to death in the first place. To Isabella, ignoring the word of God and having sex before marriage will result in eternal damnation, "Better it were a brother died at once - Than that a sister, by redeeming him, - Should die forever" (Act 2. 4. 14) Through this quote, I feel she's expressing just how serious it is for her to even contemplate having premarital sex to save her brother's life. By disobeying God she'll be eternally damned to hell. So while she teeters between portraying the super ego and the rational standard Ego, she inevitably reinforces her role as the Ego by disobeying Venetian law conspiring to have another woman have sex with Angelo in her place. This displays her willingness to be pliable and makes it clear to the audience that although she has the morals of a saint, she still can be persuaded through logic & is capable of mercy.

Claudio isn't a complete sexually charged mindless beast, he's utterly head over heels in love with Juliet and wholeheartedly plans on marrying her in the <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-measure-for-measure-psychological-freudian-analysis/>

long run, but instead of adhering to strict Venetian law, he slips and consummates the relationship. Claudio is another example of the Ego because at the end of the day, he had morally sound intentions. He didn't find Juliet at a street corner or a back alley brothel, he's very much in love with her and did plan on legally binding the courtship but couldn't resist the temptation to fornicate prior to making things official. So while he didn't adhere strictly to what was morally acceptable, he wasn't in direct opposition of this new movement of suppressing societal moral decay. He teeters between being the source of the problem & someone with innocent intentions.

On first impulse, Angelo plans to reunite church and state with his new administrative power in a tyrannical fashion. In this era of Vienna's history, brothels, rowdy drunken debauchery, and premarital sex are on the rise with no sign of stopping. All of this directly opposes the catholic church's ideology at the time which was very much intertwined with law. Angelo is a paramount example of this concept of the Freudian Super Ego because of his strict adherence to moral code and inability to compromise.

Angelo even admits in Act II that from time to time in his life he nearly disregarded the rule of law and committed unlawful acts, he still managed to overcome temptation and maintain this cut throat sense of strictness; he displays this ideology through the quote " 'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall" This thoroughly demonstrates his sense of integrity, he's noble enough to admit that he's very much aware of these temptations that surround him, but always had the ability to disregard and overcome them. This ties into why he's unwilling to compromise when it <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-measure-for-measure-psychological-freudian-analysis/>

comes to executing Claudio or not, he's been in the same position where the opportunity to break the law and have premarital sex presented itself, but he managed to resist the urge because of his innate desire to adhere to law & religious morals. This thoroughly enforces his role as the Super Ego, strictly adhering to moral code and unable to compromise.

Shakespeare's Measure for Measure through the lens of Freudian logic displays that in almost every story since the dawn of time, there's almost always a vivid representation of the patriarchal hero that fights to preserve core moral values and adhere to doing what's right regardless of temptation like Angelo. Likewise, there wouldn't be a story if an antithesis didn't exist that directly opposed this ideology like Mistress Overdone. While these two extremes are always in a constant struggle to coexist, there tends to be a middle ground where the Dukes of the world reside. Wanting the best for the world but realizing that it's best to compromise and listen to reason on occasion even if that means breaking the rules occasionally.