

# Ego and super ego in dante's inferno

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Catherine Craven GHUM200, Tu/Th 12: 25 October 23rd, 2012 Compare the relationship between Virgil and Dante in Inferno with Sigmund Freud's discussion of the conscience or super-ego in Civilization and Its Discontents. How does Freud explain and characterize the relationship between super-ego and ego in the individual? Cite examples of the interaction between Virgil and Dante and compare closely with Freud's discussion of the psychical agencies, super-ego and ego: To what extent does the dynamic between Virgil and Dante illustrate the same pattern or features? Freud meets Dante: Ego and Super-Ego in Inferno

In his book Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud offers an explanation for why, as individuals, we tend to punish ourselves with guilt, often times in response to menial things. This explanation has led to the ideas of the ego, and the super-ego. According to Freud, one is responsible for our actions and how the world views us, while the other acts as a “watchdog,” or an authority, in times of wrongdoing. An example of these two concepts is the relationship shared between the characters Dante and Virgil throughout Dante's poem, The Divine Comedy Volume 1: Inferno.

This relationship consists of an authoritative guide and a sinful follower, and therefore Dante and Virgil represent the relationship between the ego and the super-ego. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud asserts that one of the primary and most important functions of a civilized society is to control the individual's natural impulses towards aggressive behavior. These impulses, according to Freud, are caused by the ego, which is the element within an individual that is responsible for their actions, decisions, ideas, rationalizations, and logical thought.

Therefore, the ego thinks things through, and eventually comes to decisions and actions, regardless of whether or not the things decided upon or thought about are deemed as "bad" by society. Furthermore, the ego seeks to avoid any kind of pain or suffering, and instead seeks out ways to gain personal happiness. However, According to Freud, the super-ego exists as a way to level out the ego, and, in a way, keep it in check. Therefore, the super-ego is responsible for an individual's conscience, or, their ability to feel guilt.

Freud continues his explanation of these concepts by asserting the idea that the super-ego calls our attention to our own failures and misconducts, and attempts to assist us in learning from them in order to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Furthermore, the conscience is the form in which the super-ego controls our actions and thoughts, and creates guilt within us. Therefore, the ego is the decision-making, acting part of an individual, while the super-ego acts as the ego's voice of authority and control (Freud).

Moreover, the relationship between the characters of Dante and Virgil in Dante's Inferno stands as an excellent example of the relationship between the ego and the super-ego. In the opening of the poem, the character of Dante finds himself lost in a place he does not know, surrounded by terrifying beasts. In this dark moment, Virgil, a ghost from an earlier time, comes forwards and reveals to Dante that, because sin has obstructed his path to God, he must journey through hell and purgatory in order to return to life, as he once knew it. This journey, according to Virgil, would allow Dante to overcome his sin and, at last, find God's love.

However, Dante does not believe he can complete the journey alone, at which point Virgil assures Dante that he will guide him throughout the entire voyage. Virgil takes on the role of Dante's guide very naturally, and starts him on his trip through hell. Throughout the journey, Virgil makes sure that Dante is witness to the all of the horrible punishments that evil receives in hell, and what will be his fate if he does not return to the path of God. However, Virgil does not only physically guide Dante through the circles of hell, but also reinforces the moral lessons that he must learn from all of the things he sees.

Furthermore, Virgil acts as a protector over Dante, keeping him safe from evil creatures, such as demons and monsters, although he does allow Dante to make decisions and learn lessons the hard way often. Furthermore, the relationship between Dante and Virgil can easily be compared, and made almost parallel to the relationship between the ego and the super-ego. Without a doubt, the ego in this situation is Dante. This can be seen in the way that Dante's actions before his journey led him to stray from his path to God. As the ego, Dante's sinful thoughts eventually led to sinful actions, which in turn led to Virgil's intervention.

Also, Dante chooses to complete the journey through hell because he wants more than anything to rid himself of his sins and start over with God's love. This embodies the ego because it seeks out happiness, and attempts to avoid any kind of suffering. Moreover, Virgil represents the super-ego, and fully epitomizes the " watchdog" label that Freud gave to the term. For instance, the super-ego forces the ego to recognize failures, which causes

guilt. In turn, the ego is given a better understanding of what it has done wrong, and is more easily able to correct fault.

Virgil plays this role in the way that he confronts Dante about the sinful life he has led, and then takes him through hell, thus allowing him to see what he may become, and motivate change within him. Another example of the two characters representing the ego and super-ego is the way that Dante sympathizes with some of the sinners in hell, and Virgil's reaction to it. As Dante interacts with the sinners and shows them compassion, Virgil does not stop him. However, Virgil is extremely impatient with Dante, and even more disapproving towards him.

In these situations, Virgil plays the part of the super-ego by allowing Dante to make his own decisions and act on them, while simultaneously trying to moralize him by causing incredibly guilt. Eventually, Virgil's actions work in his favor, and Dante realizes that he is not helping the sinners, but merely wasting his pity on them. This is a perfect example of the super-ego using guilt to force changes it feels are necessary on the ego. In conclusion, Freud's ego and super-ego are clearly embodied by the characters of Dante and Virgil in Dante's Inferno.

The character of Dante begins the story as a sinful man who is not only in need of guidance, but that also very much desires to find God's love and create a happier life for himself. The character Virgil then seeks him out in order to help and guide Dante through a journey of moral lessons and reality checks, using the power of conscience and guilt, as opposed to force. Therefore, the relationship between the ego and the super-ego is clearly

illustrated in the relationship and journey of the characters Dante and Virgil in The Divine Comedy Volume 1: Inferno.