

# Freud's psychoanalysis in art: frida kahlo's surrealism

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One of the most influential social scientists of his time, Sigmund Freud and his theories on psychoanalysis remains relevant today in the study of human personality and the influence of the subconscious on human thinking and behavior.

Freud's ideas on the significance of dreams, which was seen by him as the expression of human being's innermost desire, were in fact borrowed by artists ascribing to surrealism who sought to imprint the subconscious. Surrealist paintings are thus characterized with the use of symbols and often have a dreamlike quality to them, where cannot always be taken at face value or by literal translation.

It is no wonder then that Freud's ideas have been widely used in the interpretation of works of art or even of character sketches. Freud's theory on how personalities are developed which revolves around the main ideas of id, ego, and superego, have, for instance, been used to explain how sex and libido may be transformed into other forms of energies, or how particularly traumatic life events may have a negative effect on both adults and children when not properly processed.

Likewise, Freud's ideas of sexual repression and displacement were influential in the growth and development of the surrealist school, which drew on the rich imagery of one's dreams, wishes, and fantasies to create their art. (West 185)

One of the most notable surrealist painters, Frida Kahlo, has been a classic example of an artist whose works could be interpreted using Freudian concepts and ideas. Kahlo's tumultuous life, characterized by wild sexual

affairs with both male and female lovers, a devastating divorce, and her inability to conceive children due to a series of back operations were mostly found in the bulk of her work which were fraught with symbolisms. (West 185)

In her painting entitled *Self Portrait with a Necklace*, Kahlo painted herself wearing a necklace of thorns and a dangling humming bird, which alludes to her suffering from divorce (as symbolized by the thorns) and to her quest for new love (as shown by the humming bird which is a traditional Mexican love amulet). (Erickson, 2005). In these self portraits,

Kahlo's entire life was depicted in her paintings. She drew her own birth, for instance, and many other events including those connected with her pain and frustration. (Levine 273) Her husband Diego Rivera was also depicted in many of her paintings in different ways: in *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931) which is supposed to be a painting of their marriage, she paints him as a father-figure and herself as his daughter, which is reminiscent of Freud's Electra complex and reveals Kahlo's insecurity at her own husband's authority.

In another painting *Retablo* (1943), she captures the scene of the accident that left her under intense pain for most of her life (Kahlo and Kettenman 32) which she later depicts in *Broken Column* (1944) that "graphically expresses her physical agony." (West 184)

Psychoanalysis therefore plays an important role in understanding and unlocking many surrealist artwork. In Kahlo's case, the artist has rendered her own physical suffering in the metaphoric sense, mostly through the use

of portraiture, to something that is haunting and beautiful, and one which outlasts even the pain and suffering of Kahlo's troubled soul.

Works Cited:

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