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Psychoanalysis and Star Wars: The Force Awakens: What the Film Says about Gender Ideology

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Psychoanalysis and Star Wars: The Force Awakens: What the Film Says about Gender Ideology

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge my thanks to my dad, who is always my first draft reader and has no problem talking "Star Wars" with me for long periods of time.

Abstract

Star Wars is a major film franchise and has been part of United States' pop culture for decades. In this article, I will look at the first film in the newest Skywalker trilogy. I will define psychoanalysis as a method for studying the media text, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. I also outline the substructures of psychoanalysis, including Freud's id, ego, and superego, and their relation to the film, as well as Jung's archetypes of the hero, sidekick, and shadow element. I will then briefly discuss the characters of Kylo Ren, Rey, and Finn, and their defining characteristics, such as personality traits, clothing styles, gender, race, and class. A quick synopsis of the film will follow, touching on key plot points in relation to the three characters, before moving into psychoanalysis of these characters using Freud's substructures and Jung's archetypes. Finally, I will discuss the ideology of the film in relation to gender.

Keywords: Star Wars: The Force Awakens, psychoanalysis, archetypes, ideology, gender

Psychoanalysis and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*: What the Film says about Gender Ideology

Lupita Nyong'o as Maz Kanata said in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, "I am no Jedi, but I know the Force. It moves through and surrounds every living thing... It will guide you" (Abrams, 2015). In the *Star Wars* film franchise, the Force is portrayed as an energy that surrounds everything else, and can either be good or bad. While it does not take on a physical form, it does affect people who have the ability to tap into and use it. Characters' behaviors are shaped by which side they choose: light being good, as seen with the Jedi, and dark being evil, as seen with the Sith. Because of this light side/dark side dichotomy, characters can embody themes prevalent in psychoanalytic theory depending on which side they decide to personify, meaning their characterization ends up fitting into a set of ideas that psychoanalysis can help clarify as either "good" or "bad" in its simplest terms. I will use psychoanalysis to analyze J. J. Abrams' (2015) film, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the seventh in the film franchise, and the first of a new trilogy. Because the Star Wars franchise is so ubiquitous in popular culture, it is important to analyze what the characters represent through this methodology to better understand how the audience connects with or perceives them.

One theory that is foundational to psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud's "structural hypothesis" of the mind, or the id, ego, and superego structures. Carl Jung's theory on archetypes of the mind, including the hero, sidekick, and shadow element, is another important theory in psychoanalysis. By using both Freud's and Jung's theories, I will seek to get a better and fuller understanding of how psychoanalysis can be applied to characters in the film and how this analysis can help us recognize the ideology within it. Before analyzing *The Force Awakens*, I will define psychoanalysis and discuss Freud and Jung as prominent figures within the field of study, after which it will be situated within scholarly arguments in a literature review section. I

will then move to a description of the text before analyzing it and eventually focusing on the ideological significance of the analysis. I conclude with a brief discussion of how psychoanalysis is used to better understand what the implications of associating one type of character with a substructure or archetype means in the overall conversation of gender ideology in films.

Interpretive Framework

Psychoanalysis is “a science concerned with the interaction between conscious and unconscious processes with the laws of mental functioning” (Berger, 2012, p. 75). It is a method that can be applied to media to examine how characters are portrayed and how they interact with each other and their environments through the lens of the mind. Freud is one prominent scholar in the field who developed the idea of the id, ego, and superego, which “are part of what is usually referred to as Freud’s structural hypothesis about mental functioning” (Berger, 2012, p. 84). Within media, characters can take on the general concepts associated with these structures, a concept that I will explore in the character analysis section of this article. According to Brenner (1974, cited in Berger, 2012), the “id comprises the psychic representatives of the drives” (p. 84). This is the motivation that causes an individual or character to react before thinking. Brenner (1974, as cited in Berger, 2012) continued to explain that “the superego comprises the moral precepts of [people’s] minds as well as [their] ideal aspirations” or the structure that characters use to think through decisions, rather than simply reacting, and to come to a moral and logical conclusion (p. 84). The final structure is the ego, which “consists of those functions which have to do with the individual’s relation to [their] environment” (Brenner, 1974, as cited in Berger, 2012, p. 84). The ego is the structure that negotiates between the id and the superego to bring balance to the two differing structures. Because the ego is the mediating substructure, it is also the most realistic in terms of how actual individuals, not movie characters, react to real-life

situations (Berger, 2012). This makes it less likely that ego characters will be seen in a story like *Star Wars*, where the characters are split into categories that epitomize good or evil. Characters that embody each of these structures within media texts are usually uncovered by looking at what archetypes they fit into, a concept that I will discuss next. I will also use these structures to analyze the characters of Rey and Kylo Ren and how they embody the symbols found within their structures.

Another prominent scholar, Jung, developed the notion of archetypes within psychoanalysis. According to Berger (2012), “an archetype is a universal theme found...in dreams, myths, religions, and works of art” and these themes are well-known throughout culture and familiar to people (p. 98). These figures come from Jung’s notion of the “collective unconscious.” Jung (1964, as cited in Berger, 2012) explained “the collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited,” meaning that people create common characters (archetypes) and themes in different media, because everyone shares this “collective unconscious” (p. 98). One of Jung’s important archetypal figures is the hero persona. One reason the archetypal hero figure is so important is that “the myth of the hero is the most common and the best-known myth in the world” (Henderson, 1964, as cited in Berger, 2012, p. 99). The hero is an archetype retold over and over in different genres in different media, and complementing this hero figure is the sidekick. McIllece (2012) defined the sidekick archetype as a character that is “humorous,” “incredibly loyal to the hero,” and one who will “often endanger [their] own life in order to save that of the hero.” The other important archetype is the shadow element. According to Berger (2012), “the shadow refers to the dark side of the human psyche, which [is] generally [kept] hidden from consciousness, although it is something [everyone] must eventually recognize and deal with” (p. 99). That shadow element is in

everyone, but is not something that people tend to look at too carefully until forced to do so. I will use these archetypes to analyze the differences between Kylo Ren and Rey and their relations to the Force.

Literature Review

While there is not currently a lot of scholarly research on this film because it is still fairly recent, for the purposes of this discussion, I have situated it within the conversation about gender in media. McClearen (2015), for example, examined the relationship between heroines in action movies and how female audiences respond to their representations, particularly her claim that “heroines are represented as both powerful women and hypersexualized objects of desire” (p. 835). In dialogue with McClearen (2015) I have sought to analyze how Rey is represented in the film as a heroine figure, and what her characterization says in relation to the ideology of gender and femininity. Atkinson and Calafell (2009) offered another example of the argument about gender representations in the *Star Wars* films, but through the characterization of Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader in the original trilogy and prequels. They argued that the view of hegemonic masculinity, as portrayed by this character, allowed him a redemption arc that reinforces a lack of responsibility as a norm of masculinity. I have also placed myself in dialogue with Atkinson and Calafell by examining the role that Kylo Ren plays as a new Darth Vader-like figure who perpetuates the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

Character Descriptions

Unlike the previous *Star Wars* films produced by Lucasfilm, *The Force Awakens* was produced by Disney. According to Dockterman (2017), “Disney...purchased Lucasfilm for \$4 billion in 2012” (p. 76). *The Force Awakens* was released in 2015 and was written, directed, and produced by J. J. Abrams. *The Force Awakens* stars Adam Driver as Kylo Ren, whose real name

is Ben Solo. He is a young white male with a high position in the First Order, which is the newest version of what the Empire was in the original *Star Wars* trilogy. This equates him to middle- to upper-class, due to his high status within the First Order. He has violent outbursts, making him unpredictable and destructive, especially when he does not get what he desires. He tortures and kills to get what he wants. One example is when he kills a former mentor and teacher to get the location of the piece of a map to find Luke Skywalker; he later tortures Poe Dameron (played by Oscar Isaac) to get information about where a part of a map had been taken (Abrams, 2015). His suit looks similar to that of Darth Vader's from the original trilogy in that it is all black with a mask and a cape. He wields a red lightsaber, something usually associated with the dark side of the Force, as his weapon.

The film also stars Daisy Ridley as Rey, a young, white female living on a desert planet as a scavenger, marking her as equivalent to working-class. She wears light clothing, both in color and material, which utilizes pants and a tunic, allowing her free movement while she climbs through old Empire weapons or scales the Star-Killer Base's central chamber near the end of the film. Her hair is always up, keeping it out of her face, and giving her the ability to work without it getting in the way. She is independent and can take care of herself in a confrontation, usually by outsmarting whoever she is up against or outmaneuvering her competitors. She is kind to others, including strangers in trouble, like when she rescues BB-8 from another scavenger wanting to scrap the droid for parts (Abrams, 2015). She connects easily to others in trouble as well, like when she meets Finn (played by John Boyega), who she believes is going to take BB-8 to the Resistance (he is actually a former Stormtrooper from the First Order), and who she eventually calls her friend (Abrams, 2015). At one point, Luke Skywalker's old lightsaber calls to her, showing she is connected with the light side of the Force. This is clarified for the audience

when Maz explains the “lightsaber was Luke’s. And his father’s before him. And now, it calls to [Rey]” (Abrams, 2015).

Finn is a young black male who is a former Stormtrooper, marking him as a soldier-type character in the beginning of the film, then a character on the run from the First Order for the rest of the film. He wears dark clothing, close to what might be found under a Stormtrooper’s uniform, and a hand-me-down jacket from Poe Dameron. He runs from the First Order after he realizes he cannot follow through on a command to kill innocent villagers (Abrams, 2015). His goal throughout the film is to get as far away from the First Order as possible because he knows what it will do to anyone believed to be part of the Resistance; he only deviates from this plan when Rey is captured by Kylo Ren (Abrams, 2015).

The story of *The Force Awakens* is that the Resistance is looking for Luke to bring him home, while Kylo Ren is looking for Luke to kill him (Abrams, 2015). Rey is trying to help get BB-8 and Finn to the Resistance’s base of operations, where BB-8 will give up the map coordinates that will help them find Luke (Abrams, 2015). Along the way, Rey is captured by Kylo Ren who has been looking for her to get the map (Abrams, 2015). However, she outsmarts him to get away, and they come to a climactic battle where she taps into the Force to ultimately defeat him, at least for the moment; she returns to the Resistance base where the map reveals Luke’s location, then leaves to go find him living as a hermit (Abrams, 2015). That is where this story ends, most likely to be picked up in the next installment, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. I will now move to analyze these characters.

The New Characters: An Analysis

The character Kylo Ren is representative of Freud’s structure of the id. He reacts with emotion rather than morality and logic. His suit is a sign of darkness; he wears all black, clueing

the audience in to the fact that he is the “bad guy,” very much like Darth Vader before him. However, where Vader wears his suit and mask as a way to sustain his life, Kylo Ren wears a similar suit as a way to emulate his grandfather, the most powerful Sith lord in the *Star Wars* canon. The most notable symbol of his aggression and status as an id character is his red lightsaber. The weapon is a phallic symbol like most other long and narrow weapons (e.g. swords), but also a symbol of violence as shown by the red color of the blade. This presents what Freud might classify not only as a sexual drive, but also as an aggressive drive in connection with the id (Berger, 2012). The id represents drives and desires, and Kylo Ren always acts on whatever he desires, be it finding Rey or killing a family member. Caputi (2015) explained that “patriarchal heroes and villains always have had a lot in common, as evident by their shared obsession with possessing women, wielding phallic weaponry, and making violence their way of life” (p. 381). Kylo Ren’s character is the patriarchal villain that Caputi described, because he spends most of the film actively trying to find Rey in an obsessive and determined way. Atkinson and Calafell (2009) also touched on this idea when theorizing “hegemonic masculinity as grounded in a hypermasculine ideal that emphasizes dominance, toughness, and violence as forms of power” (p. 3). When Kylo Ren finally hunts Rey down, he uses the Force to knock her unconscious and take her to his base of operation. He then reads her mind, forcing himself into her thoughts, evoking connotations of rape and violence towards women. He not only makes violence his lifestyle by joining the dark side, but he uses that violence for power and dominance, usually over others he feels are weaker than him. He takes what he desires, without regard for the consequences of his actions. This connects to what Artz (2005) discussed in reference to Disney villains, and how they “reach beyond their status and disrupt the social order” (p. 451). Because Kylo Ren reaches past his initial training with the Force, his status on

the dark side shows he has become the newest Darth Vader-like villain. However, where there is an id character, there is also a superego character.

Rey represents the superego structure. She looks for the logic in her situation and the good in new people. Her light-colored clothing is a cue for the audience that she is the “good guy” or the hero, or heroine, of the film. This is similar to the original trilogy where Luke wore light-colored clothing. Rey has a strong sense of right and wrong, which is characteristic of a superego character (Berger, 2012). When Finn wants to run away, Rey refuses because she made a promise to get BB-8 back to the Resistance (Abrams, 2015). This shows not only her moral judgment as she chooses to do what is right, but also her bravery in the face of danger with regard to the First Order. While she also wields a lightsaber, the color of her blade is blue, indicative of the light side of the Force, but it is also a calming color and the opposite of the aggression Ren’s blade represents. She only uses it in self-defense after Kylo Ren has already attacked her and Finn, signifying her representation as a superego character that does not react on impulse. Jung’s hero archetype is also usually associated with Freud’s superego structure. According to Hall (2017), Rey is the character “who follows the traditional ‘heroic’ arc exemplified in the first trilogy by Luke Skywalker” (p. 5). She leaves her desert home to go on an adventure to find an important figure to the Resistance and learns about her own powers along the way. Her story follows Luke’s very closely, relating her to that hero archetype. Rey also battles Kylo Ren at the end of the film, evoking images of Luke and Darth Vader’s duel in the original trilogy. Theoretically, Rey should have lost the fight to Ren because she was new to her powers and untrained, while Ren had been training since he was a child. However, because she is considered the heroine, representing the superego structure, she is able to defeat Ren and get away. Artz (2005) explained, again in reference to Disney’s animation films but applicable in the

context of Rey as a Disney character, that “everywhere and always Disney’s heroic elites are stronger, smarter, and victorious in the final conflict (even when performing antisocial acts)” (p. 452). Though she engaged in a duel, an “antisocial act,” she is victorious because she is the superego character.

In contrast to both Rey and Ren, Finn is not marked as part of the Freudian substructure, but he does fall into the sidekick archetype. As a former Stormtrooper, he knows how the First Order’s Star-Killer Base weapon functions, the workings of the First Order itself, and general plans for what the First Order is looking for. Finn is constantly portrayed as running away from the action, only to eventually get caught up in it again, or following someone else’s lead, equating him to the sidekick. He is not considered an ego character as part of the substructure, because those characters who represent the ego attempt to remain logical and do not run away. Finn, by contrast, seems to slide between the drives of the id to run and hide and the need to do what is right, more in line with the superego, but never embodying one of these characteristics for more than a couple of scenes at a time. He plays a parallel to Ford’s Han Solo in the original trilogy, who also tried running away from the problem, only to be caught up in the middle of it again. Finn is also the only main character played by a person of color, therefore his representation as the sidekick becomes problematic when looking at the fact that he chooses to keep running away. hooks (1992) explained that “the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated” (p. 186). Finn is a former Stormtrooper, meaning that he is one of many in the beginning, nameless and given only a number. The First Order erases his identity, and when he finally gets the opportunity to define his identity, another character gives it to him. As the sidekick, he has to make choices based on what other characters do or say, something hooks (1992) said “denies the

significance of the Other's history through the process of decontextualization" (p. 196). As the sidekick, he does play the important role of sticking close to the heroine and pushing her, indirectly, to make decisions based on his choice of leaving a situation. According to hooks (1992), "ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (p. 179). As a character played by a person of color, Finn is Disney's way of adding diversity, or "spice," to the film without really acknowledging his background as a person of color in the context of the film.

Rey and Kylo Ren share a connection through Jung's archetype of the shadow element. As discussed earlier, the shadow element is found in every character and person. Henderson (1964, as cited in Berger, 2012), explained "that the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality" (p. 99). For Rey, the shadow element is her unknown past and connection to the Force. Her connections to the Force become clear when she picks up Luke Skywalker's old lightsaber and is thrust into a flashback sequence. In it, the voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi explains to her that "these are [her] first steps" (Abrams, 2015). She does not have a great understanding of the Force or how to control it, making it her shadow element for the moment. She does not know what connects her to the Force, making it a barely tapped resource to explore. Kylo Ren's shadow element is his connection to his parents and his feelings about being pulled back to the light. In a scene where he talks to Darth Vader's burned helmet, he explains that "[he feels] it again, the pull to the light," and he wants to be "[shown]...again, the power of the darkness" (Abrams, 2015). The connection to his parents and the light side is manifested in the notion of Ben Solo, the person he was before joining the dark side. He has to deal with his shadow element by killing his father, Han Solo, and completing his training. However, at the end of the film, his

mother General Leia Organa (played by Carrie Fisher) was still alive, leaving open that connection to his past and possibly to the light side of the Force. Both characters find a connection in their shadow elements with their connection to the Force and their pasts, whether known or not, showing that even the opposing structures of id and superego can have associations with one another.

Gender Ideology

The Force Awakens presents an ideology about gender in relation to Rey as female hero. According to Hall (1981), ideology comes from “images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which [people] represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 104). This ideology about a heroine, while not a new concept, is one that is rare to see. Women are not usually centered as the hero of a film. When they are, McClearen (2015) explained, “several scholars have noted that action heroines are represented as both powerful women and hypersexualized objects of desire” (p. 835). This is where the divergence happened in *The Force Awakens*. While Rey is a smart and capable heroine, she is not overly sexualized. She is not centered as the heroine to be looked at, but rather to follow the traditional hero arc of those who have come before her. Rey is the opposite of a “midriff” character, what Gill (2009) defined as a “construction of a young, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’” (p. 279). While she is a young woman, Rey spends the film using her knowledge of technology to fly ships she had never flown, rescuing other male characters, and tapping into a powerful energy she did not know she could use. The ideology she presented to the audience is that a female can be a heroine without being sexualized.

However, because she is part of the Disney franchise, and therefore a Disney character, there are ideologies that are present throughout Disney films that made their way into this film. Artz (2005) explained that “in Disney these values are combined with goodness and physical appearance such that...heroes and heroines are invariably good, attractive, capable, worthy, and ultimately powerful” (p. 450). This is originally in reference to their animated films, but it can be applied here as well. While the ideology of the film may claim that women can be heroes, they must be young, thin, white, able-bodied, and attractive. This also ties into an ideology of race. The hero is a young, white female, but could easily have been a young, black male. Finn could have been considered a hero, but was relegated to the role of the sidekick. He does demonstrate hero characteristics in the end when going to save Rey, but for much of the film, he is seen running away from the problem or threat. By attributing the heroine characteristics to Rey, they are also being attributed to the superego character. The implication, at least within this particular film, is that young white women are to be seen as the epitome of morality. This is especially true when realizing the only other major female character in the film is General Leia Organa, who is much older than Rey and barely speaks in this film, privileging younger women over older women.

There is also an ideology about the id character, which also considers Kylo Ren’s gender. The film equates the idea of a dominant masculinity, read as young, white, somewhat affluent males who are prone to violent outbursts, as the “bad guy” or villain of the film. Hall (2017) explained, “[audiences] may be interpreting Kylo Ren’s story as the first part of a redemption narrative” (p. 14). This becomes a problematic thought because, according to Hall (1981), “ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted ‘naturalized’ world of common sense” (p. 105). If viewers disregard the destructive behaviors that Kylo Ren displayed

in the film as part of a redemption arc, it could be said his lack of morality in things like torture and killing could easily be forgiven by audiences, leading to the notion these could be acceptable, so long as the person is a young, white, upper-class male. As the id character, he is seen as the villain, and therefore would normally be treated as such. However, as a Vader-like figure, there is an open-ended possibility that he may follow in the cinematic footsteps of his grandfather and earn redemption at the end of the storyline, implying that his previous behaviors, as well as those of anyone who behaves like him, could easily be erased and forgiven.

Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to define the method of psychoanalysis and its substructures in J.J. Abrams' (2015) film, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. I then moved to analyze the characters of Rey, Finn, and Kylo Ren through the psychoanalytic lens of the id and superego structures and their accompanying archetypes. The use of psychoanalysis allowed for a deeper and fuller understanding of what the characters' motivations and behaviors really represented, as well as reasons why some of these characters might be easy for viewers to relate to. This analysis led to the discovery of an ideology of gender that showed women can be heroes without being sexualized, but only under certain guidelines. By equating Rey to the superego heroine, the film reaffirms its ideas about what it means to be considered "good," including young, white, and conventionally beautiful. We can also see that audiences possibly view Ren's destructive behavior as forgivable in the long run, equating the "bad guy" with the ideals of the young, white male who does not get punished in the end for his violent acts or outbursts. The film also equates the young black male with the sidekick, always running away from the problem until he gets dragged back into it, while also simultaneously erasing his entire background. However, because this is only the first film in the J.J. Adams' (2015) franchise at the time of this writing, audiences

will have to wait to see how their characters develop, and whether Finn gets to step into the role of hero, whether Rey follows in Luke's footsteps, and whether Ren's story follows closely with Vader's.

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