



A Freudian Psychoanalytical Study of Aster's Beau is Afraid

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a Freudian psychoanalytical analysis of Ari Aster's *Beau Is Afraid* (2023), emphasizing the repressed experiences, fears, unconscious urges, and psychological conflicts that mold Beau Wassermann, the main character. Beau is portrayed in the movie as a very nervous and psychologically troubled person whose sense of reality is constantly shaped by unresolved childhood trauma, anxiety, shame, and mother authority. The study explores the psychological aspects of Beau's character and behavior by looking at the ideas of the unconscious, repression, anxiety, defense mechanisms, neurosis, and the Oedipus complex, mostly based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The study takes a qualitative approach and interprets specific scenes, dialogues, characters, symbols, and narrative events in the movie using textual and cinematic analysis. Beau's mental condition will also be examined in relation to the film's style, which includes jerky cuts, loud and chaotic noises, and small and tight settings. All of these factors contribute to the film's experience being akin to a visual breakdown. The study will demonstrate how the film's disturbing effect comes from its accurate but disturbing depiction of how childhood trauma and unresolved conflicts can affect one's perception of reality. This demonstrates the applicability of Freud's theories to the current art and media.

1. Introduction

Psychoanalytic theory remains significant for understanding the underlying psychological motivations that shape human behavior in literature and film. Developed by Sigmund Freud, this approach suggests that an individual's thoughts, fears and actions are largely influenced by unconscious processes, suppressed memories and unresolved experiences from childhood.

Freud believed that unconscious anxieties developed during early life continue to affect adult behavior, often manifesting indirectly through dreams, fantasies, and neurotic symptoms as a result, psychoanalysis offers a powerful method for analyzing the complex psychological dimensions present in narrative film. Freud's work on dream interpretation suggested that dreams reveal hidden desires and reflect unresolved inner conflicts (Parsons, 1974). The Oedipus complex, the hypothesis that young infants develop an unconscious attraction toward the opposite-sex parent together with rivalry with the same-sex parent, was first presented in his later writings (Hartocollis, 2005; Blass, 2001). Additionally, Freud created the structural model of the psyche, which is still commonly taught today and divides the mind into the id, ego, and superego (Zepf & Zepf, 2011). Freud's impact on psychology and culture is indisputable, despite the fact that his theories have been heavily criticized for overemphasizing sexuality and lacking empirical support (Barnett, 2022).

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Id, ego, and superego are the three interacting components of the human psyche according to Freud's tripartite model. The id, which functions on the pleasure principle and seeks instant gratification of primal instincts and desires without consideration for reality or norms, is present from birth. The ego balances the demands of the id with societal standards and rational thought as it grows to deal with the real world and operates on the reality principle. In contrast, the superego internalizes moral standards and cultural norms, causing guilt or shame when behaviour deviates from these internalized principles (Pick & Roper, 2003). Although this model's rigidity has been questioned by Ekstrom (2004), it nevertheless offers a helpful lexicon for examining the conflict between instinct, reason, and conscience.

Ari Aster, born in 1986 made a name for himself as a director of psychologically complex horror films, such as *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019). Beau Wassermann, a nervous guy whose trip to see his mother turns into a nightmare of guilt, trauma, and paranoia, is the focus of the three-hour surreal dark comedy and psychological horror film *Beau Is Afraid* (2023). The film's chaotic visual universe mirrors Beau's inner mind rather than objective reality, according to critics who have interpreted it as a cinematic depiction of the Oedipus complex (Yu, 2023; Lewis, 2026). Freudian ideas of repression and the return of the repressed are visually enacted by the film's fragmented structure, which alternates between reality and hallucination.

The movie essentially depicts a conflict between the id, ego, and superego, with Beau's mother, Mona Wassermann, acting as a superego-like, authoritarian figure who stifles his instincts. Sheehan (2023) claims that when Beau is made to face unsettling facts about his mother that he has long ignored, the story progresses toward his psychological breakdown. The film's hallucinogenic atmosphere allows viewers to experience Beau's disorientation between reality and fiction, creating what Freud called the uncanny the disturbing feeling that something familiar has turned odd. As Yu (2023) points out, Aster uses dark humour as a way absorb the strangeness of life. This absurdist tone disorients viewers while exposing the severity of Beau's psychiatric disorder.

1.1. Problem Statement

In Ari Aster's film *Beau is Afraid*, a lot of strange and perplexing things happen. Many people watch it and ask themselves, "What was that about?" or "Why did he do that?" Despite the fact that many critics and spectators have stated that the movie is about profound psychological issues, they usually just touch on these topics briefly. This study aims to show that using the ideas of Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis, is the best way to understand the strange plot and characters in the film. The existence of our unconscious impulses and fears can be explained by his beliefs. By analyzing the film using Freud's theories, the study can show that the confused elements are not only coincidental but are powerful representation of protagonist's traumatic history. This will reveal the film's actual message, which is that it's not just a strange movie but also a well-planned tale of a man's mental instability.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

We can investigate concepts like repression, the unconscious mind, and the Oedipus complex with the aid of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. However, this method hasn't yet been used to the study of Ari Aster's *Beau is Afraid* (2023), indicating that something is still lacking.

- To examine Freud's ideas of the unconscious, repression, and trauma in the film.
- To analyze the Oedipus complex in Beau's maternal relationship.
- To interpret the film's surreal symbols as expressions of hidden fears and desires.
- To examine the role of repression in the development of the protagonist's psychological condition.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed in order to address the issue found in this study. The following queries are intended to direct the examination of *Beau is Afraid* via the prism of Freudian psychoanalytic theory:

- How do Freud's theories of trauma, repression, and the unconscious appear in Ari Aster's *Beau is Afraid*?
- How does Beau's connection with his mother reflect the Oedipus complex?
- From a psychoanalytic standpoint, how do the film's symbolic and surreal features reveal buried wants and fears?

1.4. Significance of the Study

In the first place, the study provides a more thorough analysis of *Beau is Afraid* as a cultural narrative that is pertinent to psychological issues that a lot of people can identify with today. Second, it demonstrates the continued applicability of Freud's

theories to the analysis of contemporary art and film. It shows how Freud's theories can be used to explain fear, hidden feelings, and unfulfilled desires in the character of Beau, his relationship with his mother, and the odd manner in which the film is narrated. It's a deep exploration of the unconscious mind and is perfect for psychoanalysis. Freud's ideas can be applied to the effects of family influences, hidden fears, and unresolved struggles in life. In this study, the meaningful relationship between psychology, film and literature will be demonstrated by Freud's psychoanalysis in order to explore Beau's challenges, worries and dreams.

2. Literature Review

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, human behaviour results from a continuous struggle between moral restraints imposed by both internal and external factors and innate desires (Cosmides & Tooby, 1999). This theory's main tenet is that the unconscious mind shapes behaviour in ways that manifest as dreams and verbal blunders (Freud, 1901). Psychoanalysis seeks to bring unconscious material into conscious awareness in order to release people from patterns they do not fully comprehend (Freud, 1923). The id, ego, and superego are the three interrelated parts of the human personality, according to Freud (1949).

According to Hospers (1988), the superego stands for internalized moral standards that cause shame when they are broken, the ego acts as a mediator between these impulses and the outside world, and the id chases intuitive enjoyment without considering the repercussions.

Auchincloss (2015) similarly characterizes these three elements as operating according to distinct principles: the ego upholds the reality principle, the id follows the pleasure principle, and the superego upholds moral and social standards. This paradigm is essential to the psychoanalytic interpretation of behaviour and personality, despite criticism from some scholars, like Ekstrom (2004), for being overly deterministic. In contrast to physical reasons, psychological disorders often result from unresolved conflicts that were repressed during childhood and continue to impact behaviour in distorted and covert ways, according to Freud's theory of neurosis (Freud, 1905).

Fenichel (1995) provides a logical account of how the mind develops from a primitive, instinct-driven stage toward the development of the superego, as well as how repressed material may resurface as anxiety, obsessive behaviour, or other psychiatric symptoms. Hitschmann (1913) notes that despite the extensive clinical experience that supported Freud's beliefs, opposition to his ideas sometimes resulted from discontent with the significant role he gave to sexuality in neurosis.

Repression, according to Freud (Breuer & Freud, 1895), is the unconscious process by which negative memories, thoughts, or emotions are pushed out of conscious awareness because they violate moral or societal standards. Importantly, repression allows this content to indirectly resurface in symbolic or symptomatic forms rather than eliminating it. Billig (1999) offers a significant reexamination of this process, arguing that rather than being a secret internal mechanism, suppression is a product of social discourse and common language. He claims that communication, etiquette, and topic avoidance teach people to repress specific thoughts. This suggests that social and linguistic teaching, especially during childhood, and internal psychological processes both influence repression.

The French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who originally contended that hysteria was psychological rather than solely physical in origin, is credited with developing trauma theory. He demonstrated how intense emotional shocks, like dread or mishaps, might cause actual physical symptoms even in the absence of physical harm. Expanding on this, his pupil Sigmund Freud described trauma as an overpowering occurrence that the mind suppresses into the unconscious because the ego is unable to absorb it. According to Freud and Joseph Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), traumatic memories are intrusive forces that continue to influence feelings and actions even when they are not consciously recalled (Allison & Roberts, 1994).

Jacques Lacan's revision of Freudian theory frequently known as a return to Freud, has had a particularly significant influence on film studies (Gugane, 2022). Lacan reinterpreted the unconscious as a language-like system made up of signifiers whose meanings are continuously postponed. In contrast to simple innate drive, his definition of desire is viewed as emerging from a basic sense of lack. This paradigm is helpful for examining characters whose actions are motivated by emotional dependence, guilt, and anxiety.

Film theory has frequently used Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, in which a child's identification with an external image produces an illusory sensation of wholeness, to study how viewers identify with images on screen (Bowie, 1993). Psychoanalytic cinema interpretation is further extended by his later three-part model of the psyche, which is separated into the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. The Real is frequently linked to trauma that resurfaces in fragmented, repeating forms and defies symbolization.

In Lacan's reworking of the Oedipus complex, the child's assimilation into the Symbolic Order the domain of language, law, and social structure replaced biological desire. He separated this procedure into three phases. In the first, the mother and child have a fictitious relationship in which the youngster tries to make up for the mother's alleged shortcomings. In the second, Lacan refers to this process as symbolic castration, in which the subject realizes that the mother's desire is focused elsewhere. The father is introduced as a symbolic figure who forbids the incestuous tie between mother and child. In the third stage, the father is acknowledged as a symbolic figure whose name enables the subject to enter the language and social order rather than as a rival. The subject stays outside the Symbolic Order and is exposed to the mother's unmediated desire when this process fails, a circumstance Lacan referred to as foreclosure (Dor, 1997). There are significant implications for psychological development from this interaction.

3. Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework used in this study to analyze the psychological aspects of Ari Aster's *Beau Is Afraid* (2023) is Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. By highlighting the importance of unconscious impulses, suppressed memories, internal conflicts, early experiences, and psychological defense systems, Freud's psychoanalysis offers a framework for comprehending human behavior. According to Freud, an individual's emotions and behaviors can be greatly influenced by unconscious thoughts, desires, fears, and memories rather than always being controlled by conscious intentions. This viewpoint is especially pertinent to *Beau Is Afraid*, where Beau Wassermann exhibits extreme anxiety, fear, guilt, insecurity, and psychological turmoil.

The premise of Freud's theory is that both conscious and unconscious processes exist in the human mind. Repression can force memories, feelings, and experiences that are challenging or unpleasant to the aware mind into the unconscious. Repression does not, however, make these events go away. Alternatively, they could reappear indirectly through irrational behavior, anxiety, dreams, anxieties, fantasies, and other psychological symptoms. Beau's warped sense of reality and ongoing psychological suffering in Aster's movie might therefore be analyzed as expressions of unresolved unconscious tensions.

The ideas of the unconscious, repression, neurosis, and the Oedipus complex are especially fundamental to this study's theoretical framework. These ideas serve as the foundation for understanding Beau's complex relationship with his mother and his psychological state.

The foundation of Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the idea of the unconscious. According to Freud, a large amount of human psychological life takes place outside of conscious awareness. Thoughts, memories, desires, urges, and experiences that have been suppressed from consciousness because they are unpleasant, dangerous, socially unacceptable, or psychologically challenging to accept are found in the unconscious.

However, conscious action is still influenced by the unconscious. According to Freud, dreams, verbal blunders, fantasies, illnesses, anxieties, and obsessive behaviors can all be indirect manifestations of unconscious material. As a result, a person's seemingly illogical actions may have a psychological basis that is not immediately evident to conscious awareness.

One of the most crucial defensive strategies in Freud's psychoanalysis is repression. It describes the psychological process by which undesirable, unpleasant, frightening, or unsettling ideas and urges are forced from conscious awareness and kept in the unconscious. Since repressed material does not just vanish, Freud believes that repression is essential to the emergence of many psychiatric disorders. Rather, it might reappear in covert or indirect ways.

Anxiety, nightmares, obsessive behaviors, illogical phobias, emotional disorders, and other symptoms can all be signs of repressed experiences. Psychological tension arises from the struggle between the need to keep upsetting content unconscious and its propensity to resurface.

In order to comprehend psychological symptoms brought on by unresolved internal conflict, Freudian psychoanalysis also offers the idea of neurosis. Excessive worry, illogical fears, compulsive actions, guilt, emotional anguish, and trouble adjusting to daily life can all be signs of neurosis.

Neurotic symptoms can be interpreted as compromises between opposing psychic forces from a Freudian standpoint. While the repressed material continues to seek expression, a person may deliberately try to avoid or conceal an undesirable fear or desire. Symptoms may arise from the ensuing psychological turmoil.

Therefore, the Freudian idea of neurosis can be used to analyze Beau's ongoing anxiety, fearfulness, guilt, reliance, indecision, and incapacity to encounter everyday circumstances without experiencing severe psychological discomfort.

Another important Freudian idea that is pertinent to the current investigation is the Oedipus complex. The idea was created by Freud to explain a stage of psychosexual development where the child feels rivalry toward the same-sex parent and unconscious attachment to the opposite-sex parent. According to Freud's thesis, the child's personality and psychological identity emerge as

a result of the conflict being resolved.

In psychoanalytic criticism, the traditional Oedipus complex is more broadly related to the child's connection with parental authority, attachment, desire, rivalry, guilt, and separation, even if it is mostly linked to Freud's description of male psychosexual development.

Beau Is Afraid can be analyzed as a depiction of unconscious psychological conflict using the theoretical framework created in this study. The ideas of suppression and the unconscious aid in the explanation of the unseen psychological factors affecting Beau's actions. A framework for comprehending his enduring fear, guilt, and psychological instability is provided by anxiety and neurosis. His propensity to avoid or flee dangerous situations rather than address their root causes is explained by defense mechanisms.

Beau's complex relationship with his mother may be examined within the framework of the Oedipus complex and parental influence, while his excessive sense of duty and dread of moral failure can be explained by the concepts of the superego and guilt. When taken as a whole, these ideas enable the study to understand Beau's psychological experiences as linked rather than discrete symptoms.

In this context, Aster's film's bizarre and exaggerated elements are particularly important. Aster creates an outward cinematic universe out of Beau's inner worries rather than using traditional realism to convey psychological strife. A mind dominated by worry and unresolved conflict is represented by streets, houses, people, memories, fantasies, and dangerous scenarios.

4. Analysis and Discussion

One of the most in-depth psychological films in contemporary American cinema is *Beau Is Afraid*. The film enacts Freudian concepts rather than just alluding to them; its bizarre structure serves as the unconscious's visible language. Five interrelated Freudian concepts the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, the uncanny, the death drive, and the return of the repressed are used to analyze significant scenes and motifs in the following section.

4.1. Birth, Anxiety and Absent Father

Instead of starting with a traditional introduction, the movie begins with a picture of Beau's birth, which establishes his mother, Mona, as the person who will determine the circumstances of his life. Based on Otto Rank and Freud's idea of birth trauma, this beginning implies that all of Beau's subsequent fears are recurrences of this initial detachment from the mother's body. Interestingly, the father is completely absent from this moment, hinting at the movie's overall lack of a father figure. According to Lacanian theory, the Name of the Father, the third component that typically mediates the mother-child bond and ushers the child into the symbolic order, is absent right away. In an early therapy session, this absence is made clear when Beau is informed that engaging in sexual activity could be lethal for him. This sequence sets up the first incidence of castration anxiety in the movie. Interestingly, the threat comes from a medical authority rather than a father figure, rephrasing Freud's traditional ban on incest and masturbation in terms of medicine. Beau's acquiescence to this order without protest or opposition is a prime example of what Freud described as the neurotic ego's defining characteristic: the repression of personal will in favour of outside authority.

4.2. The Apartment as Ego, the Street as Id

Beau's flat serves as a spatial metaphor for the ego, which is a well-organized, protective edifice that aims to preserve a barrier between the self and an overpowering outside world. The violent, disorderly streets outside stand in for the id, the wild libidinal energy that the ego must continually keep an eye on and restrain. Mona's constant phone calls, on the other hand, stand in for the superego, which demands obedience and causes what Freud called signal anxiety the ego's panic in reaction to perceived dangers from the id.

4.3. Maternal Demands and the Superego

After a dramatic escape from his flat, Beau seeks refuge with Roger and Grace, a suburban couple whose lovely home initially appears to offer relief from the chaos of the earlier episodes. Warmth, normalcy, and unconditional acceptance are all things Beau secretly longs for, and this moment can be seen as a dreamy scenario. This interpretation is based on Freud's idea of wish fulfilment from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). According to this interpretation, Mona is the persecutory bad mother who shapes Beau's relationships with women throughout the movie, while Grace's character stands in sharp contrast as the idealized good mother of Melanie Klein's object relations theory.

Freud's theory of anxiety and the unconscious can be used to explain the scenario where Beau discovers his keys are missing. Beau reacts with extreme worry and distress, indicating that the scenario evokes underlying psychological instability, even though the loss of the keys seems like a typical incident. Beau's sense of control, safety, and independence is symbolized by the

keys, and their removal makes him feel even more powerless. According to Freud, his exaggerated response can be the result of unconscious anxieties projected onto a seemingly unimportant incident. As a result, the scene presents Beau as a psychologically fragile figure whose day-to-day struggles become expressions of his underlying uneasiness and lack of security.

Freud's idea of dreamwork is best illustrated in a later scene where Beau sees a theatrical group playing a play that is a reflection of his own life. Condensation, displacement, and symbolic representation are all used in this moment since Beau's life and connection with his mother was redesigned. Beau is able to face a dramatized version of his own unconscious issues through the play, which operates as a narrative within a story. This performance's line, which implies that Beau's fear will only get worse rather than get better, functions as a sort of psychoanalytic diagnosis and exemplifies Freud's theory of repetition compulsion: Beau's repeated encounters with his fears only serve to reinforce the repression that caused them, rather than alleviating his anxiety through experience.

4.4. The Maternal House and the Pre-Oedipal Return

The psychoanalytical perspective can be seen when Beau return to his childhood home. The mansion, which is described as being enormous and maze-like and full of artefacts that record Beau's existence from Mona's point of view rather than his own, symbolizes a return to the pre-Oedipal sphere, before a paternal figure intervenes and before the subject completely separates from the mother. The unstable, constantly changing architecture of the movie reflects the psychological disorientation of this regression, where it becomes difficult to distinguish between one's mother and oneself. Perhaps the most overt illustration of the return of the repressed in the movie is the discovery that Mona is not quite dead. The mourning process that has propelled most of the film's earlier events is impossible to finish since Beau has never been able to entirely break from or grieve his mother. Beau's guilt is transformed from a reaction to wrongdoing into a structural condition of his existence when Mona declares that everything she has done has been for Beau. This is an example of what Freud described as the most punishing form of the superego devotion so absolute that it creates an unpayable debt rather than cruelty.

Beau's Oedipus complex is structurally unresolved in the movie due to the widespread lack of a father figure. Freud argues that even if the father's interference is frightening, it is essential because it forces the child to give up incestuous relationships and integrate into the larger social structure. The child is trapped in a dyadic relationship with the mother in the absence of this intervention. According to Lacanian theory, this is foreclosure rather than simple repression: the paternal signifier is entirely absent from the symbolic order and reappears in the Real. This foreclosure is reflected in Beau's incapacity to discriminate between dream and reality throughout the movie, placing him on the verge of madness and neurosis.

4.5. Recurring Psychoanalytic Motifs

The film's psychoanalytic framework is reinforced by a number of recurring motifs. Freud's definition of the superego as an internal observer keeping an eye on the behaviour of the ego is reflected in the enduring feeling of being observed, whether by Mona, neighbours, or anonymous crowds. Freud's description of claustrophobia and agoraphobia as manifestations of castration anxiety, the fear of both open and closed spaces, is reflected in the frequent appearance of doorways and thresholds as locations of immobility and anxiety. Lastly, the film's main idea that sexual release itself constitutes a true physical threat is reflected in Beau's enduring obsession with disease and medicine, which Freud defined as somatization the translation of psychological strain onto the body.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze Ari Aster's *Beau Is Afraid* using the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, contending that the movie serves as a work whose entire shape enacts the logic of the unconscious rather than just as a candidate for psychoanalytic interpretation. Freud's descriptions of repression and inner conflict are mirrored in its dreamlike nature, denial of traditional cause and effect, and emphasis on guilt and shame.

The film's structure centers on an unresolved Oedipal conflict, as this scene-by-scene analysis shows. Beau Wassermann appears as a character whose psychological growth was halted at the pre-Oedipal stage by an absent father, an overbearing, non-separating mother, and an outside world that did not make up for this absence.

The study also shows how Aster externalizes Beau's inner psychological world through symbolism, psychological terror, surrealism, and warped depictions of reality. Therefore, unusual or exaggerated events can be seen as cinematic depictions of his guilt, anxiety, repression, and unconscious worries. Beau's psychological vulnerability is further demonstrated by the constant threat and his overblown responses to everyday events. Overall, *Beau Is Afraid* offers a sophisticated examination of the human brain and the enduring effects of unconscious conflicts and parental ties, making it more than just a traditional psychological horror movie.

As a result, the Freudian framework shows how cinema may graphically depict unconscious mental processes while also offering a useful method for comprehending Beau's fractured identity, psychological distress, and quest for autonomy.

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