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**ZENIA'S FUNCTION AS THE FREUDIAN ID
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE***
BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1993, Canadian author Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and its divisive main antagonist, Zenia, continue to inspire lively critical discussion. Despite Atwood's reservations about interpretations rooted in gender binaries, the existing research has primarily focused on Zenia's status as a woman while overlooking frameworks like Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, especially his theory of the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Because of this, the thesis aims to demonstrate how Zenia aligns with the Freudian id and examine what this reveals about her function in the novel. The introduction provides a background on the previous reception of *The Robber Bride*, a brief summary of the novel, and an overview of Atwood's views on feminist readings of her works. The literature review outlines the three main approaches to analysing Zenia in the previous scholarship and discusses the central concepts of Freud's psychoanalytic model of the mind. The first three subsections of the empirical study examine excerpts from the novel to provide proof of Zenia functioning as the Freudian id, followed by a comparison of the findings of the id approach to those of previous interpretations of Zenia in the fourth subsection. The conclusion summarises the findings of the thesis.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, Canadian literature, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ZENIA AND SIGMUND FREUD’S PSYCHOANALYTIC MODEL OF THE MIND	9
Introduction	9
1.1. Zenia as a <i>Femme Fatale</i>	10
1.2. Zenia as an Intertextual Reference	12
1.3. Zenia as a Psychological Construct.....	13
1.4. Sigmund Freud’s Id, Ego, and Super-Ego.....	15
Conclusion.....	19
2. ZENIA AS THE FREUDIAN ID IN <i>THE ROBBER BRIDE</i>	20
Introduction	20
2.1. Tony and the Life Instinct	21
2.2. Charis and the Pleasure Principle.....	23
2.3. Roz and the Death Instinct	25
2.4. Zenia and the Function of the Id	27
Conclusion.....	29
CONCLUSION	31
REFERENCES.....	34
RESÜMEE	36

INTRODUCTION

“A disaster is a disaster; those hurt by it remain hurt, those killed remain killed, the rubble remains rubble. Talk of causes is beside the point. Zenia was a bad business, and should be left alone” (Atwood 1993: 3) – this is one of the first sentiments expressed in Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* (hereafter abbreviated as *TRB* in citations). Even so, despite often being overshadowed by Atwood’s better-known masterpieces like *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *The Blind Assassin*, scholars are still dissecting the novel’s titular robber bride and main antagonist, Zenia, over 30 years after its publication. Due to the prolonged interest in the frequently overlooked yet captivating novel, talk of causes appears to remain as relevant as ever.

A literary shapeshifter like its main antagonist, *The Robber Bride* has often been classed either as feminist, historical, or even fantasy writing. However, when asked about the genre of the novel in a 1993 interview, the ever-elusive Atwood replied that she “would hope that the novel could be read on at least two levels, and, if you’re really lucky, maybe seven” (KPFA 2020). Ambiguous genre notwithstanding, at its core, the novel tells the tales of its three protagonists – Tony, Charis, and Roz – and their experiences with the mystifying yet irresistible Zenia. Accordingly, the novel is broadly divided into thirds in order to follow each of the three women’s lives before, during, and after being befriended and betrayed by Zenia. Because of this, Atwood has emphasised *The Robber Bride*’s extensive scope, even calling it her “novel for the recession” (KPFA 2020), as it consists of three interwoven stories spanning over six decades, from World War II in the 1940s to the narrative present in the early 1990s.

Tony is a history professor fascinated by war, raised by a neglectful, abusive mother and an alcoholic father bound only by an unplanned pregnancy. Because of her chaotic childhood, Tony values rationality and rejoices in a peaceful life with her husband, West. While in university in the early sixties, she is befriended by West’s then-girlfriend, Zenia, but their

friendship ends after Zenia exploits Tony's academic genius. Following Zenia's mysterious disappearance, Tony claims the grieving West. In contrast, Charis, formerly Karen, values wellness, and Zenia takes advantage of her deep spirituality in the early seventies. Charis welcomes Zenia into her home after hearing about her supposed cancer and toxic relationship. However, due to childhood sexual abuse by her uncle, which caused her to abandon her old self, Charis cannot handle the emerging affair between her partner, Billy, and Zenia. Ultimately, she is left to raise her newborn daughter alone as Zenia runs off with Billy. Lastly, Roz is a mother and businesswoman who struggles with her newfound privilege and success after growing up in a half-Catholic, half-Jewish family fragmented by war. Following a childhood of discrimination, Roz becomes successful after inheriting her father's dubious real estate business. In the early eighties, she is captivated by Zenia's stories of Roz's father's heroism in the war and considers Zenia a friend and business partner. Eventually, Zenia betrays her by moving in with Roz's unfaithful husband, Mitch, whom she later abandons, leading him to drown himself. Ultimately, however, the three women's shared struggles with Zenia establish their long-lasting friendship.

Throughout the novel, Zenia remains indecipherable due to her unclear motives, mysterious background, and constant lying to inspire pity or preserve her relationships and social dominance over the protagonists. In *The Robber Bride*, some of her backstories include being a child prostitute in Paris (*TRB*: 162), a Romani girl traumatised by her mother being stoned to death (*TRB*: 268), and a German Jew rescued by Roz's father during the war (*TRB*: 357–359). Additionally, she seems to vanish and reappear at will, disappearing twice during her university days and only briefly returning to seduce West one last time, running off with Billy and Mitch, seeming to die in the Middle East, and finally reappearing to taunt the middle-aged protagonists in the early nineties before supposedly committing suicide and vanishing for good. As the protagonists repeatedly emphasise, they do not think of Zenia as a real person with

plausible motives within the fictional world of the novel. Instead, she seems to act as a chaotic force of nature, taunting both the protagonists and critics alike.

A key reason why Zenia eludes scholars is Atwood's distinctive style, seemingly designed to question mainstream literary criticism. Tolan (2007a: 1) describes Atwood as a writer and critic who "both uses and challenges the ideas which permeate her culture". For example, while Atwood's writing is deeply influenced by the second-wave feminism movement – defined by Tolan (2007a: 2) as the diverse political and theoretical discourse focusing on the female gender and sexuality – Atwood has famously resisted the feminist writer label (Brans and Atwood 1983: 301–303). According to Tolan (2007b: 51), this can be attributed to Atwood's reservations about critics deeming her female characters morally good or evil based on gender and similar essentialist notions, such as the Cartesian divide between the rational mind and instinctual body (Tolan 2007a: 19–21). In other words, Atwood opposes what Tolan (2007b: 51) calls the "feminist attraction to female moral innocence", which often leads to scholars excusing female characters' actions simply because of their role as helpless, emotional victims. This opposition to analysing female characters solely through their femininity is best exemplified by Atwood's (1979: 33) claim that "[f]or a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital W off Woman."

Despite Atwood's doubts about essentialist readings rooted in gender binaries, various feminist interpretations of *The Robber Bride* have proven to be very productive. While the novel has been analysed using various theoretical frameworks – ranging from archetypal criticism of the *femme fatale* (e.g., Bloom and Makowsky 1995, Bouson 1995, and Gardner 2024) and intertextual analysis (e.g., Bouson 1995, Bontatibus 1998, and Murray 2002) to psychological theories (e.g., most notably, Wyatt 1998, but also Staels 1995 and Bontatibus 1998) – the majority of the research seems to agree that Zenia is a subversive feminist figure, acting either

as an intentionally selfish seductress or a positive catalyst for transformation. This predominantly feminist approach is particularly relevant when discussing Zenia's morality and the potential explanations for her actions, with multiple scholars framing her as a more sympathetic figure trying to oppose a patriarchal society. Thus, this view of Zenia as a rebel against women's oppression is constructive because it not only contextualises and justifies her wrongdoings, offering more insight into the divisive antagonist, but also highlights the challenges facing the female characters in the novel.

Nevertheless, the predominantly feminist readings seem to contradict Atwood's (1979: 33) request to treat her female characters as individuals, not just representatives of their sex. Rather, the existing interpretations of Zenia are primarily rooted in assessments of her morality as a woman, deeming her a victim of the patriarchy or an offender forcing other women to stand up for themselves. Zenia's ambiguity as a character, however, suggests a possibility for a more nuanced reading, which has not received due critical attention. Additionally, despite the overarching focus on repression and identity, nearly all scholars overlook the potentially useful psychoanalytic concepts of Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. While his theories tackling gender differences in sexual development have been criticised (Lapsley 2006: 78), the dismissal of his foundational model of the human mind as being comprised of the id, the ego, and the super-ego (Rennison 2001: 38) appears to be a substantial gap in the research. Because of this gap, the thesis aims to demonstrate how Zenia aligns with Freud's concept of the id opposing the constructed ego and moral super-ego. This approach allows me to not only examine Zenia's function outside the context of her gender, but also address the sentiment expressed at the beginning of the novel by tackling the relationship between the intent and consequences of Zenia's actions.

To do this, I have divided the thesis into two parts. The first section provides an overview of the existing scholarly literature on Zenia and explores the three most prominent

approaches to her character. Namely, I will discuss interpretations of Zenia as an archetypal *femme fatale*, an intertextual reference to famous villains and fictional characters, and a manifestation of various psychological constructs. With this overview, I intend to more thoroughly define the theoretical backings and findings of other scholars and clearly outline the gaps in the existing research. Additionally, I will discuss Freud's psychoanalytic model of the mind as being divided into the primal id, the rational ego, and the hyper-moral super-ego. More specifically, I will describe the relationships between these aspects of the self and define the typical traits of the id to prepare for my own analysis of Zenia as the manifestation of the id.

The second part of the thesis aims to provide proof of Zenia representing the Freudian id within the novel and further investigate her function in her relationships with the protagonists. To do this, I will first closely examine selected excerpts from the novel, which illustrate her role as the id opposing Tony, Charis, and Roz's egos. Then, I will compare my findings with previous scholarly interpretations of Zenia to determine how the results of the Freudian approach align with or differ from existing conclusions and outline what the id, ego, and super-ego theory reveals about Zenia's complex function in *The Robber Bride*. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate that while Zenia's actions as the Freudian id expose the cracks in the protagonists' constructed façades and may force them to re-evaluate their identities and beliefs, she is not an intentional teacher to the protagonists. Rather, Zenia acts as an irrational and amoral force of nature that the protagonists can learn to control but never eradicate. In other words, I contend that while conflict with the id may have positive consequences, the id is incapable of being inspired by moral objectives and represents an inevitable, chaotic part of the human psyche.

1. CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ZENIA AND SIGMUND FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYTIC MODEL OF THE MIND

Introduction

As the divisive main antagonist of *The Robber Bride*, Zenia has inspired lively discussion, and critical reception of her varies widely. Therefore, this literature review intends to explore how previous scholars have interpreted Zenia's character and overall function in the novel, as well as provide a theoretical basis for my own Freudian interpretation of Zenia. The literature review utilises scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals as well as books and anthologies by Atwoodian or Freudian scholars and literary theorists. The sources were discovered through database searches and cross-referencing citations in previously reviewed works. Because of the relatively small number of scholarly articles on *The Robber Bride* and the continued viability of the earlier sources, this literature review includes articles published in various academic journals from the novel's publication to the present.

To accomplish the aim of this literature review, I will first give an overview of the explorations of Zenia as a *femme fatale*, an intertextual reference, and a manifestation of psychological phenomena, with a special focus on any Freudian interpretations. Although scholars frequently combine the different frameworks (e.g., Sternberg Perrakis 1997), I will divide the existing scholarship into three distinct subsections to explore what each approach reveals about Zenia individually. Then, I will discuss my reasons for utilising Freud's id, ego, and super-ego framework, followed by a theoretical summary of its central concepts. These perspectives will inform my analysis of Zenia as the manifestation of the id and reveal which aspects of the character have received enough critical attention and which ones remain under-researched.

1.1. Zenia as a *Femme Fatale*

The title *The Robber Bride* immediately evokes the image of a dangerous woman or a *femme fatale*, which is likely the most commonly used term to describe Zenia in explorations of the novel. Multiple scholars expand on this surface-level interpretation of the man-stealing antagonist by attempting to assign more well-meaning intentions to her actions, but the figure of the sensual, distinctly flesh-and-blood woman remains the basis of most analyses. Because of this, it is worth investigating these interpretations of Zenia as a stereotypical *femme fatale*.

López Ramírez (2022: 187) argues that although Zenia has an overall positive effect on the protagonists' lives, she is nevertheless the archetypal *femme fatale*, defining the figure as an “evil and irresistible hyper-sexualized seductress who makes men fall in love with her while she is drawn to money and/or power.” This definition emphasises Zenia’s role as a stereotypical man-eater, with López Ramírez (2022: 188) arguing that although she influences the lives of both men and women, her primary focus is on the protagonists’ partners as objects to steal. Sternberg Perrakis (1997: 152) also describes Zenia as a “clever and glamorous *femme fatale*” but expands on the idea of her as a man-eater, asserting that her physical appearance and captivating stories allow her to infiltrate and change the lives of the female protagonists rather than their male lovers. Whatever the case, Zenia appears to align with the archetype of the alluring temptress capable of great evil.

Because of the *femme fatale*’s capacity for causing destruction, many scholars have attempted to decipher Zenia’s intentions. Wyatt (1998: 42) discusses her motives, concluding that she simply disregards all social norms in favour of her personal impulses to take what is not hers. This interpretation of Zenia as intrinsically vicious is also supported by Labudova’s (2017: 413–414) claim that she is driven by an insatiable appetite for men and money, as well as López Ramírez’s (2022: 189) description of Zenia as “capable of pure evil with no apparent reason.” In contrast, Bloom and Makowsky (1995: 170) demonstrate that Zenia does, in fact,

have a reason for being a dangerous seductress. Namely, she attacks the men not only to satisfy her sexual impulses, but also to expel the lying, manipulative men from the protagonists' lives (Bloom and Makowsky 1995: 170). Thus, the *femme fatale* emerges both as a seductress needlessly cruel to men and women, as well as a more sympathetic figure who is only cruel to men to liberate her fellow women.

An entirely different interpretation of the *femme fatale* is presented by Bouson (1995: 158), who asserts that rather than being a malicious seductress, Zenia represents a parody of the dangerous woman archetype. She argues that Zenia's exaggerated displays of sexuality are a "feminine masquerade" (Bouson 1995: 159) intended not only to manipulate men, but also to rebel against the view of women as helpless victims. A similar point of view is expressed by Gardner (2024: 93), who expands on the idea by presenting Zenia as an antiheroine, claiming that she is "a representation of cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality and abjection" (Gardner 2024: 101). Therefore, Bouson and Gardner oppose the somewhat one-dimensional view of Zenia as intrinsically evil and argue that she is a more complex figure who not only wreaks havoc in the protagonists' lives, but also subverts traditional expectations of the *femme fatale* as an entirely negative, malicious figure.

In summary, although scholars agree that Zenia resembles the stereotypical dangerous woman, their opinions about her effect on other characters diverge. Regardless of whether she is labelled as a selfish seductress motivated by power or a destructive yet necessary antiheroine, the readings of Zenia as a *femme fatale* emphasise her femininity, motives, and moral character as either a saviour or danger to her fellow women. However, directly linking Zenia's morality to her role as a woman appears to contradict Atwood's (1979: 33) request to treat her female characters as individuals rather than just representatives of their sex, revealing a notable overarching focus in the existing feminist research.

1.2. Zenia as an Intertextual Reference

As is the case with many fictional antagonists who mirror other famous villains, numerous scholars believe Zenia to be a combination of intertextual references to literary figures, such as the vampire, the good and evil witch, or the big bad wolf from classic fairytales. Each intertext can profoundly shape our interpretation of Zenia and, especially, her overall role in the novel, which is why I now intend to compare some of the references various authors have identified in *The Robber Bride*.

Most commonly, Zenia is compared to the cannibalistic vampire – a parallel that Wilson (2010: 28) attributes to “The Robber Bridegroom” fairytale intertext within the novel. For example, Sternberg Perrakis (1997: 158–159) relates Zenia to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, emphasising her *Dracula*-like ability to manipulate people. Ultimately, Sternberg Perrakis (1997: 152) argues that Zenia’s vampire-like presence serves a positive, transformative function in the novel. Likewise, Bouson (1995: 150) asserts that the vampire is freeing because it represents the protagonists’ repressed traits and thus forces them to confront their internalised fears. Finally, Labudova (2017: 414) and López Ramírez (2022: 198) agree that while Zenia is an intrinsically evil predator, she coincidentally inspires rebellion and transformation in the protagonists. The vampire intertext, therefore, presents Zenia as forceful yet empowering, encompassing the unladylike attributes the protagonists have previously repressed.

A similar discussion of Zenia’s impact on the protagonists emerges when comparing her to the good and bad witch archetypes. Bloom and Makowsky (1995: 167–171) describe Zenia as “a good witch, disguised as a bad witch” who only does wicked things for the eventual benefit of the protagonists. Furthermore, they present Zenia as a martyr, claiming that she only dies once she has successfully empowered Tony, Charis, and Roz (Bloom and Makowsky 1995: 176). In contrast, Murray (2002: 86) argues that the interpretation of Zenia as benevolent relies on the notion that “the end justifies the means” and insists that because there is nothing in the

novel to suggest Zenia means well, she represents the bad witch instead. Therefore, this debate reveals that Zenia's perceived motives largely determine whether she is seen as a fairytale hero or villain.

Finally, Murray (2002: 73) expands on her reading of Zenia as a fairytale villain, claiming that she functions as the big bad wolf stalking the protagonists. Unlike in the original fairytale, which is a lesson about learning from one's mistakes, Murray (2002: 78) asserts that in this retelling, the protagonists gain nothing from their encounters with Zenia and simply pity themselves. Similarly, Bontatibus (1998: 362) characterises Zenia as a strategic predator stalking its prey, but her overall interpretation seems to concur more with that of Bloom and Makowsky (1995). For example, Bontatibus (1998: 369) describes Tony as "a transformed individual" after her experiences with Zenia. In other words, while the big bad wolf is certainly a villainous intertext, it does not entirely negate the positive consequences of the predator's actions.

In conclusion, intertextual interpretations of Zenia vary dramatically, with her being considered both an altruistic ally and a vicious predator stalking the protagonists. Although the intertextual readings of Zenia's character are firmly linked to her effect on the repressed female protagonists, similarly to the *femme fatale* approaches, the conclusions various scholars draw about her morality vary widely. This difference of opinions proves that Zenia's role remains, above all, ambiguous, which lays the foundation for the following discussion of Zenia as something more abstract altogether.

1.3. Zenia as a Psychological Construct

In contrast to the explorations of Zenia as a fully-fledged female character, which try to decipher or project motives onto her actions, some scholars have also attempted to analyse Zenia as a manifestation of different psychological constructs. Because the primary focus of

my study will be on Freud's psychoanalytic concepts of the id, the ego, and the super-ego, I will first discuss the psychological frameworks previous authors have employed in their explorations of Zenia.

Several scholars agree that Zenia functions as a mirror to the protagonists, but their interpretations differ in the psychological concepts they use to justify this view. For example, Wyatt (1998: 41) relies on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the double, or a subconscious, ideal version of the self that one believes can be achieved through reuniting with a lost or repressed part of the self. Wyatt (1998: 47–50) argues that in the novel, Zenia as the Lacanian double overwhelms the protagonists with her unrestrained sexuality and aggression, filling in their "gaps", which stem from childhood trauma. Because Zenia inspires envy and rage in the women, they initially grow distant and then mend their relationship due to a newfound ability to accept their imperfections and urges (Wyatt 1998: 58). Therefore, the Lacanian double shatters the protagonists' self-perceptions, remedies the shortcomings in their personalities, and forces them to reconstruct their identities as more complete ones.

A similar view of Zenia is expressed by Bontatibus (1998: 360), who describes her as the Jungian shadow, embodying aspects of the protagonists' personalities they would rather not confront. However, as they adopt various traits of Zenia and embrace their repressed selves, the protagonists are freed from self-doubt (Bontatibus 1998: 369–370). Although undisputedly a positive reading, it also risks reducing Zenia's complex role to an entirely beneficial one. In contrast, Staels (1995: 198) differentiates between the positive and negative Jungian shadows and argues that while Zenia liberates the protagonists as the positive shadow, she embodies their near-demonic traits as the negative one. More specifically, she asserts that "[t]he protagonists project on Zenia the negative qualities which they reject in themselves" (Staels 1995: 198). Thus, while the positive Jungian shadow can be a transformative presence, the negative shadow exposes the protagonists' efforts to ignore their more undesirable traits.

In contrast to the readings of Zenia as a source of internal conflict within one person, Aguiar (2001: 122) applies Carl and Emma Jung's concept of the animus or the repressed masculine qualities in women to explore Zenia's wider societal impact. Paralleling interpretations of Zenia opposing gender roles as the *femme fatale*, Aguiar (2001: 130) argues that the animus forces the protagonists to come to terms with their innate masculine traits and abandon their good girl façades, leading them to rebel against their partners and a patriarchal society. Unlike the negative Jungian shadow and Lacanian double, the animus encompasses both negative and positive masculine traits, such as aggression and self-centredness, as well as self-confidence and intelligence, ultimately empowering the protagonists (Aguiar 2001: 132–133). Therefore, Aguiar views Zenia as a positive, empowering presence, emphasising that the animus itself is neither good nor bad but simply deemed inappropriate by society.

Finally, Wyatt (1998: 38) addresses Zenia's possible function as the Freudian double or a manifestation of the uncanny, which Freud (2003: 153–154) describes as anything evoking dread similar to childhood fears. Although Wyatt (1998: 38) relies primarily on the Lacanian double or the "incarnation of a subject made whole", she briefly acknowledges Zenia's parallels to Freud's ideas about childhood trauma or long-lasting psychological pain stemming from past experiences (Breuer and Freud 1956: 6). For example, she suggests that Zenia inspires "primitive envy" (Wyatt 1998: 59) because the protagonists project their trauma onto her, perceiving her as an all-powerful parental figure (Wyatt 1998: 37). Ultimately, Wyatt (1998: 54) essentially conflates the Freudian and Lacanian doubles as means to restore one's inner harmony. As a result, she ignores some of their key differences, such as the Freudian double's evolutionary function of self-preservation (Freud 2003: 142). Thus, her treatment of the Freudian double as yet another path to wholeness (Wyatt 1998: 54) not only reduces Zenia's role to a somewhat unnuanced one, but also misrepresents Freudian concepts, overlooking his potentially productive frameworks.

1.4. Sigmund Freud's Id, Ego, and Super-Ego

Based on the previous discussion of Zenia as a paradoxical character who shapes the protagonists' identities, I contend it would be relevant to analyse her behaviour and relationships not as those of a standalone antagonist, but rather a subconscious part of the protagonists' constructed selves. Therefore, to prepare for my upcoming analysis of Zenia as a manifestation of the Freudian id, this subsection aims to first provide an overview of the various criticisms and acknowledgements Freud's theories have received. Then, I will describe Freud's id, ego, and super-ego model, with a primary focus on the characteristics of the id to be able to identify these traits in Zenia.

While the psychoanalytic approach has been employed in interpretations of Zenia, multiple scholars (e.g., Staels 1995, Bontatibus 1998, and Wyatt 1998) appear hesitant to incorporate Freudian theories, instead favouring Jung or Lacan. According to Lapsley (2006: 78), one reason for this omission is that Freud's approach to gender is now seen as inadequate, especially by feminist scholars. For example, Moi (2004: 842) critiques his commonly disputed theories about penis envy, female pleasure, and mother-child relationships, which likely stem from Freud's belief that women's psyches are fundamentally different from men's (Moi 2004: 849). In contrast, Mitchell (2000: xxxi) urges feminists to reclaim Freud's foundational theories because they have already formed the basis for psychoanalytic works on sexuality and femininity. Indeed, even Freud (1959: 72) calls his model of the id, ego, and super-ego his one truly irreplicable contribution to psychoanalysis. Thus, Mitchell's (2000) justification of his theories concurs with Lapsley's (2006: 78) claim that some Freudian theories can be "salvaged and mobilized". Because of this, I argue that Freud's foundational model of the mind can be repurposed for the analysis of *The Robber Bride*, as it is related to universal identity development rather than female sexuality as an oddity.

Because the Freudian id is defined through its relationships to the ego and super-ego, I will now outline the hierarchies between these parts of the mind. According to Freud (2018: 38), the ego, or the self we present to the world, functions as a mediator or “submissive slave”, balancing the demands of the outside world, the moralising conscience or the super-ego, and the instinctual self or the id. Notably, the ego can only learn to control the id with the guidance of the super-ego, which strives for perfection (Freud 2018: 22) and punishes the ego with feelings of guilt (Freud 2018: 35). Overall, Freud (2018: 17) describes these relationships as a power struggle, with the super-ego punishing the ego for the id’s trespasses and the ego compromising with the id to “obtain control over the id and deepen its relations with it”. As Rennison (2001: 39–40) summarises, the id is a self-centred baby being parented by the ego, while the ego itself is a child trying to appease the super-ego, representing its parents and society.

In contrast to the ego and super-ego, the id is completely amoral (Freud 2018: 26), meaning that despite manifesting as aggression or selfishness, it is incapable of intentional malice. Instead, it resembles an animal guided by two evolutionary impulses: the life and death instincts (Freud 2018: 25–26). Freud (2018: 25–26) describes the life instinct or Eros as a desire for self-preservation, love, and sexual pleasure. In contrast, the death instinct, also referred to as Thanatos (Rennison 2001: 22), is driven by hate and yearns to return to a state of nothing (Freud 2018: 27). However, Freud (2018: 30) notes that “death-instincts are by their nature mute”, meaning that Thanatos is not an active state of destruction, but rather a lack of the life instinct. Freud (2018: 31) elaborates on the conflicting forces, explaining that both are present within the id, creating an uncomfortable tension that must be relieved as quickly as possible. Thus, the id satisfies Eros’ yearning for hedonistic behaviour, leaving behind a gap for Thanatos’ destruction of the self and others to occur (Freud 2018: 31). Therefore, both the id’s

sexual and destructive behaviours are motivated entirely by the interplay between the evolutionary life and death instincts.

Finally, Freud (2018: 31) claims that the id is controlled by the pleasure principle, which motivates it to maximise pleasure and avoid discomfort. In other words, the pleasure principle aims to eliminate what Freud (2015: 5) calls excitation, such as sexual arousal, anxiety, or physical pain. This means that individuals are compelled to give in to any primal impulses as soon as they emerge because satisfying them relieves discomfort and leads to a moment of intense pleasure (Freud 2015: 50), coincidentally satisfying Eros and enabling Thanatos to emerge as a result (Freud 2018: 31). In most cases, the ego can control the id's whims, meaning that its longing for pleasure only manifests in occasional dreams or slips of the tongue (Rennison 2001: 39). However, when the ego is unable to satisfy the id's "instinctual demands" (Rennison 2001: 40), this results in uncomfortable excitation, which the id can only satisfy through erotic or aggressive behaviour and a self-destructive effort to return to nothing (Freud 2018: 26–31), much like the recklessly sexual robber bride.

In summary, although Freud has been criticised for his outdated, male-centric approach to sexuality, his theory of the id, ego, and super-ego creates an enduring universal model of the mind as consisting of primal urges, a moralising conscience, and an anxious mediator. When the ego and super-ego fail to satisfy the id's desires, it must seek out external pleasure to eliminate excitation. This satisfies Eros and creates a gap for Thanatos to emerge, leading the id to destroy itself and others to return to a peaceful state of nothing. Therefore, Freud's model can, indeed, serve as the basis for interpreting Zenia's sexual and aggressive yet remorseless behaviour towards the rational protagonists as a manifestation of the amoral, animalistic id.

Conclusion

In summary, due to Zenia's complex nature and the ambiguous messaging of *The Robber Bride*, scholars have utilised various theoretical frameworks to decipher the novel's cryptic antagonist. However, the three most prominent approaches to understanding Zenia are feminist, intertextual, and psychoanalytic ones.

From a feminist perspective, Zenia has been interpreted as an archetypal *femme fatale*, viewed either as a dangerous seductress satisfying her own desires or a saviour from gender norms. In addition, she has been compared to fictional characters, particularly villains, in order to label her as intrinsically evil or an unlikely catalyst for change. Finally, parallels to various psychological phenomena reveal Zenia's function as a mirror to the protagonists, reflecting their repressed desires. On the whole, scholars have frequently tried to categorise Zenia as either good or evil based on their moral evaluation of her actions, especially in relation to other female characters in the novel, with even psychoanalytic approaches attempting to highlight Zenia's overall positive function as a teacher of valuable subconscious lessons.

Notably, although the Freudian double or the uncanny is briefly mentioned, other relevant psychoanalytic concepts, such as Freud's theory of the id, ego, and super-ego, are absent in the psychological analyses. Nevertheless, Freud's concept of the primal id acting as a selfish, instinct-driven yet completely amoral child of the ego, which is then controlled by the moral aspirations of the super-ego, provides a promising framework for the analysis of Zenia as the manifestation of the ever-present repressed urges of the protagonists.

My interpretation of Zenia as the id would, therefore, address the lack of potentially productive Freudian approaches to *The Robber Bride* and expand the discussion surrounding Zenia's morality and transformative function to suggest that she is an inevitable and irreparable part of the protagonists' lives and identities rather than a teacher who can be labelled as morally good or evil.

2. ZENIA AS THE FREUDIAN ID IN *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

Introduction

Having established the relevance of Freud's model of the id, ego, and super-ego for examining Zenia's function in *The Robber Bride*, this section aims to apply the theoretical framework to specific relationships in the novel to show how Zenia can, indeed, be interpreted as the manifestation of the id. In addition to providing proof for such a reading of Zenia, this section will also compare and contrast my findings with previous conclusions about her role to highlight how the Freudian approach contributes to the ongoing critical discussion of the divisive antagonist.

The empirical study is divided into four subsections, with three of them devoted to analysing selected instances from the protagonists' relationships with Zenia to demonstrate how she represents various core aspects of the id. In particular, I will argue that Zenia exhibits signs of Eros in her relationship with Tony, the pleasure principle with Charis, and finally, Thanatos with Roz. Additionally, I will use the passages to illustrate the power dynamics between the id, ego, and super-ego. To accomplish this, I have selected excerpts that highlight the most striking instances of id-like qualities in Zenia rather than following the complete trajectory of each relationship throughout the novel.

In the fourth subsection, I will outline how my findings align or contrast with the conclusions of previous scholars and explore what this reading of Zenia could reveal about Atwood's (1979: 33) desire to challenge the prevailing trends in literary criticism of her female characters. More specifically, I intend to show that while the Freudian analysis supports the existing interpretations of Zenia as an abstract shapeshifter challenging the protagonists' constructed selves, Zenia as the id does not emerge as a moral teacher of her fellow women or an intentional catalyst for rebellion against the patriarchy. Instead, she is an incurable part of the self whose emergence is inevitable rather than designed to inspire positive change.

2.1. Tony and the Life Instinct

As the first protagonist to meet Zenia, university-age Tony is the most susceptible to the manipulation tactics Zenia uses to ensure her survival, as well as the most eager to appease Zenia to experience some of her power. For this reason, I will use three excerpts from Tony and Zenia's university days to illustrate how Zenia exploits Tony to secure her own academic success and social dominance, thus mirroring the self-centred id, which is guided by Eros or the life instinct.

Tony's first encounter with the id begins with a betrayal as West belittles her for the first time by calling her his "little pal" (*TRB*: 126). Immediately after this, she meets her direct opposite in the form of his attractive and bold girlfriend, Zenia. Although their first interaction appears amiable, with Zenia constantly flattering Tony, some signs of Eros are already apparent. Namely, Zenia is taking action to preserve herself by manipulating both West and Tony for her own immediate or future benefit. For instance, she physically clings to West and talks about Tony in the third person (*TRB*: 127), not only establishing sexual ownership of the man through public displays of affection, but also intimidating a potential rival. Additionally, Zenia's flattery and focus on Tony being "brilliant" (*TRB*: 128) could be seen as the id preparing to befriend her for an academic advantage in the future. Thus, this first encounter illustrates Zenia's Eros-driven capacity for self-preservation and focus on sexual and social dominance (Freud 2018: 25–26).

Zenia's connection to power and sexuality is further exemplified by Tony's transformation from "Tiny Tony" or a "pet" (*TRB*: 115–116) of her peers at the dormitory to an independent and revered friend of Zenia's. Taking advantage of Tony's anxiety surrounding her lack of real power, Zenia enables Tony to inspire fear in her peers simply by being associated with her and takes control of Tony's previously unexplored and repressed sexuality. For example, when Tony protests against looking too childlike after Zenia has transformed her style,

Zenia claims that “[a]ll men are warped” (*TRB*: 133), encouraging Tony to use her unique appearance to appeal to men for the first time. Therefore, Zenia’s careful reconstruction of Tony’s identity demonstrates the id’s ability to recognise others’ fears and sexual desires and use them to relieve uncomfortable anxieties, such as Tony’s powerlessness and apprehension toward sexuality, satisfying Eros as a result (Freud 2018: 31).

Finally, Zenia demonstrates the id’s ability to overpower the ego without remorse by blackmailing Tony with a forged term paper. She appeals to Tony’s high opinion of her academic abilities and exaggerates her own struggles until Tony decides “it’s only fair that Tony should write Zenia’s term paper” (*TRB*: 168). Later, she extorts money from Tony by threatening to confess to forgery despite knowing how important Tony’s academic career is to her (*TRB*: 171). In addition to once again exemplifying the id’s self-preserving nature, the excerpt also illustrates its amorality (Freud 2018: 36), as Zenia’s actions are not presented as malicious. Instead, she gets the money she needs to survive and disappears entirely (*TRB*: 174). Moreover, the passage serves as an example of the id’s dynamic with the ego, as Tony struggles with her super-ego in the form of academic integrity and knows “she’s stepping over a line” (*TRB*: 168) but complies with Zenia’s irrational demands in order to preserve their relationship, which aligns with Freud’s (2018: 38) claim that the ego is both an “ally” and a “slave”, willing to ignore the super-ego to appease the id (Freud 2018: 17).

In summary, although Zenia befriends Tony and elevates her social status, she is ultimately only concerned with her own survival and gratification, which mirrors the id’s Eros-driven desire for self-preservation and pleasure (Freud 2018: 25–26). Furthermore, she exploits Tony without remorse, indicating that Zenia, like the id, is amoral (Freud 2018: 36). Finally, their relationship reflects the power imbalance between the ego and the id (Freud 2018: 17), with Tony compromising her integrity to preserve the friendship.

2.2. Charis and the Pleasure Principle

In contrast to Zenia and Tony's dynamic, Zenia and Charis' relationship is entirely removed from the social university setting. Instead, Charis takes Zenia in after hearing her stories of sickness and abuse, allowing her to become a parasite in Charis' life. Therefore, I will analyse three excerpts of Zenia's entrance into and exit from Charis' life as examples of how the id aims to minimise discomfort and maximise pleasure at all costs, as well as how the pleasure principle both establishes and destroys Zenia and Charis' relationship.

According to Rennison (2001: 39), the ego is usually able to control the primal urges of the id, meaning that its desire for pleasure only manifests occasionally. This is the case when Charis first befriends and adopts the cancer-stricken Zenia, as she is able to provide a comfortable and satisfying environment for her and relieve Zenia's anxieties and pain. Charis is described as mother-like, pampering Zenia with a bath, hot milk, and "good energy" (*TRB*: 222), which could be interpreted as the ego wanting to appease the id (Freud 2018: 17), mirroring Tony's favours for Zenia. However, because Charis' care for Zenia stems from a desire to ease displeasure rather than maintain a good relationship with the id, it can also be said that their friendship is largely based on their shared dependence on the pleasure principle. Therefore, Charis, who believes that "pain is an illusion and should be circumvented" (*TRB*: 209), is able to initially control and satisfy the id not because of the ego's parental urge to pacify the id (Rennison 2001: 39–40), but rather her desire to relieve Zenia of her suffering.

However, Charis is unwilling to provide Zenia with everything she yearns for, leading to tensions within the household. Despite satisfying the id's basic need for comfort, Charis is unable to relieve Zenia's sexual excitation, which must then be expressed through aggressive behaviour. Because of Charis' childhood trauma and belief in purity, she dissociates entirely from her sexuality and body, which she perceives as unclean (*TRB*: 261). This, in turn, causes her to lose control of the id, leading Zenia to threaten to leave Charis' care (*TRB*: 226).

Additionally, despite the ego's efforts to remain nurturing, Charis cannot handle the revelation that Billy "can hardly keep his hands off [Zenja]" (*TRB*: 227). As a result, the animalistic id, motivated by the pleasure principle to seek out sexual satisfaction as soon as any arousal emerges (Freud 2015: 50), becomes restless and "neurotic" (Rennison 2001: 40). Therefore, although the pleasure principle initially unites the ego and the id, it also causes Zenja to lash out against Charis because of her inability to come to terms with both her own and Zenja's sexuality.

As a consequence of the id's needs being unmet, Zenja becomes increasingly agitated, continuing her affair with Billy, reacting coldly to Charis' pregnancy, and criticising her "do-gooder act" (*TRB*: 271–274). Charis, on the other hand, loses touch with her guiding super-ego and positive nature, becoming a "more ruthless person" (*TRB*: 271) and claiming that, although she does not want Zenja's cancer to kill her, she would nevertheless "like to cure her and then never see her again" (*TRB*: 265). Being confronted with this side of herself eventually leads Charis to hallucinate her nine-year-old self, stating, "She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenja." (*TRB*: 263), which highlights how Zenja has come to represent everything the ego wishes to repress. Finally, the conflict between the id and ego's desires culminates in aggression from both women – Zenja runs off with Billy and presumably murders Charis' hens, while the devastated Charis attempts suicide (*TRB*: 276–277). Thus, the end of Charis and Zenja's relationship illustrates how an unsatisfied id will inevitably become restless (Rennison 2001: 40) and turn to external aggression to relieve uncomfortable excitation (Freud 2015: 6).

In conclusion, although both Zenja and Charis are motivated by the pleasure principle to maximise enjoyment and avoid discomfort, they have conflicting priorities and boundaries. As the benevolent ego, Charis wants to control and care for the id but is incapable of confronting her own trauma and managing the id's sexuality. As a result, despite having her physical needs met, Zenja cannot satisfy her urges and becomes increasingly tense, which aligns with

Rennison's (2001: 40) assertions that ignoring the id's instinctual desires leads to anxiety and aggression.

2.3. Roz and the Death Instinct

As the final protagonist to encounter Zenia, Roz is warned of her destructive past but nevertheless falls for Zenia's deception. In fact, Roz is arguably the most devastated by Zenia's actions, as she loses her husband, Mitch, to divorce and then suicide. Therefore, I will examine excerpts from the middle-aged Roz's relationship with Zenia to show how the id's continued exploitative tendencies and the subsequent destruction of Roz's life correspond with Freud's (2018: 31) concept of Thanatos or the death instinct that emerges when Eros is fully satisfied.

Roz's relationship with Zenia begins much like Tony's. That is, she is intrigued by Zenia's unapologetic expression of the selfish life instinct. Raised by immigrant parents and Catholic nuns, Roz is hyperaware of her privilege and her father's "dirty money", leading her to overcompensate for her success with charity (*TRB*: 346–347). Despite being aware of Tony and Charis' history with Zenia, Roz cannot resist the stories about her heroic father, leading her to drop her defences and welcome the id into her life (*TRB*: 314). Later, Zenia encourages selfishness in Roz by proclaiming she is tired of the Third World, and Roz, despite the disapproval of her "boring old conscience", finds relief in agreeing with Zenia (*TRB*: 97). This mirrors Freud's (2018: 17) claim that while the super-ego can punish the ego with guilt, the ego may still be tempted not to censor the desires of the id. Therefore, Zenia as the id infiltrates Roz's life by appealing to Roz's self-interest, leading her to ignore inconsistencies in Zenia's life story (*TRB*: 314) and stray from her strict morals (*TRB*: 97).

Once Zenia has established her position as Roz's friend, she begins to use Roz's money, social standing, and husband to fulfil Eros' desires. After securing a well-paid job at Roz's magazine, she begins going to parties and flirting with men (*TRB*: 365), illustrating the id's

desire for pleasure and relationships. Later, Zenia takes control of Roz's magazine, *WiseWomanWorld*, and rebrands it from a charitable feminist publication to a compilation of diet, fashion, and relationship advice (*TRB*: 366–367), reflecting the id's self-interest and desire for social dominance (Freud 2018: 25–26). Finally, she satisfies Eros' desires for sexual pleasure by having an affair with Mitch and moving in with him before Roz even notices the relationship (*TRB*: 367). In hindsight, Roz suspects that Zenia presents herself as “vacancy, as starvation, as an empty beggar's bowl” (*TRB*: 368) to others, which reflects the id's position as a selfish child to be cared for (Rennison 2001: 39–40), as well as the connection between the complete satisfaction of Eros and the resulting emptiness of Thanatos (Freud 2018: 31).

Finally, Zenia demonstrates that a satisfied id can be just as violent as an unsatisfied one because, as Freud (2018: 30) put it, Thanatos is merely the absence of Eros. Therefore, when Zenia is physically and emotionally satiated, she begins to return to a state of nothingness (Freud 2018: 26–31), which is best exemplified by her exit from Roz and Mitch's lives. Although Roz initially accepts the divorce and is willing to “throw [Mitch] out the window” (*TRB*: 370), Zenia violently takes him from her before Roz can find peace. After tiring of Mitch, Zenia drains his finances and flies to London (*TRB*: 371–373), leading him to drown himself (*TRB*: 380). Ultimately, after taking everything from Roz, the id self-destructs, and Zenia is supposedly killed in an explosion in Lebanon (*TRB*: 379). Upon final reflection, Roz comments on the id's cycle of pleasure and violence, claiming that Zenia is “the kind of woman who wants what she doesn't have and gets what she wants and then despises what she gets” (*TRB*: 376), summing up the never-ending interplay between Eros and Thanatos.

To conclude, Zenia's exploitation of Roz's success and relationship and the consequent breakdown of Roz's morals, business, and marriage illustrate how the id turns to destruction once all of Eros' demands have been met (Freud 2018: 26–31). She satiates the life instinct by using Roz and Mitch for social dominance, sexual satisfaction, and financial security and

quickly turns to destruction when there is nothing left to gain. Thus, Zenia's undoing of Roz, Mitch, and even herself corresponds with Freud's (2018: 25–26) claim that the id's actions are dictated by the tensions between the life and death instincts.

2.4. Zenia and the Function of the Id

As shown above, the examination of Zenia's encounters with the protagonists reveals that she does, indeed, align with Freud's description of the primal id. Specifically, she exhibits signs of being driven by Eros, Thanatos, and the pleasure principle while resisting the ego and super-ego's control. While my findings agree with some previous scholars' conclusions about Zenia, there are also some key differences, which allow for an alternate interpretation of her overall function. Therefore, I will now discuss the most remarkable similarities and differences between the existing research and my Freudian interpretation in order to argue that, although the id's actions may have positive consequences, Zenia challenges the protagonists' and critics' desire to assign a deeper moral meaning to her destruction.

Perhaps most notably, the interpretation of Zenia as the id concurs with the prevailing notion that Zenia shapeshifts to exploit each woman's repressed desires. For instance, Bouson (1995) and Sternberg Perrakis (1997) describe the vampiric Zenia manipulating the protagonists by mirroring their internalised fears, much like how the id both intimidates and impresses Tony with her overt sexuality to control her. Additionally, the id conflicts with the protagonists' constructed selves and socially imposed values. For example, Aguiar's (2001: 130) claim that the animus deconstructs the protagonists' "good girl façades" meant to appease the patriarchy resembles Zenia's dismissal of Roz's compulsion to be charitable towards the Third World, leading to internal conflict between Roz's selfishness and her super-ego. Finally, the interpretation of Zenia as the manifestation of the Freudian concept undoubtedly reinforces

Wyatt's (1998), Bontatibus' (1998), Staels' (1995), and Aguiar's (2001) psychoanalytic readings of Zenia as the projection of repressed desires.

Despite these similarities, there are also some fundamental differences between my Freudian interpretation and previous analyses. First, because the id is completely amoral, functioning as a self-interested parasite, I contend that Zenia cannot function or be labelled as a moral hero or villain. For example, although Zenia dismantles Charis' peaceful life, she is motivated entirely by self-preservation and the pleasure principle rather than malice. Thus, this reading conflicts with the critical tendency to view Zenia as a symbol of female morality, with scholars like López Ramirez (2022) arguing that she is a morally condemnable *femme fatale*, or Bloom and Makowsky (1995) justifying her actions because she ultimately empowers her fellow women. In other words, my reading of Zenia as the destructive yet purely instinct-driven id demonstrates how, although we can learn from a catastrophe, there is not always an underlying moral reason for its occurrence.

Secondly, the id, ego, and super-ego framework reveals that, although the novel revolves around three female protagonists, Zenia's function is not defined solely by her gender. With the majority of the existing research being rooted in feminist theory, such as Bouson's (1995) and Gardner's (2024) analyses of Zenia as a parody of the *femme fatale* archetype, Zenia's actions are frequently evaluated based on her relationships with other women and the patriarchy. However, as the id is incapable of morally motivated action, such as trying to liberate her fellow women, my reading of Zenia as a chaotic, instinctual part of the universal human psyche aligns more with Atwood's (1979: 33) view of female characters as individuals in addition to examples of femininity. Thus, the Freudian id approach allows for an alternate reading of Zenia not as a symbol of female morality, but as a representation of the destructive yet natural part of the self, which transcends the gender binaries.

Finally, my analysis of Zenia as the id lacking any grandiose motives presents her as an intentionally uncomplicated figure meant to challenge the scholarly impulse to rationalise or defend her actions based on their consequences. Since the novel's publication, critics have categorised Zenia as a self-sacrificing antihero, a transformative monster, or an embodiment of the protagonists' ideal selves, all with the goal of determining what lessons she intends to teach with her destructive behaviour. However, the onset of the novel appears to contradict this trend in literary criticism, stressing that "[t]alk of causes is beside the point" (*TRB*: 3). Inspired by this sentiment, I argue that Zenia as the amoral, purely instinctual id challenges the ever-present need to categorise women as victims, villains, or martyrs. In other words, because Zenia functions as an entirely selfish force of nature, she exists to remind the protagonists and critics alike that, sometimes, a disaster truly is just a disaster, not a lesson we must try to find meaning in.

To summarise, the conclusions of my reading of Zenia as the Freudian id align with previous scholarly interpretations in some areas and considerably diverge in others. On the one hand, Zenia as the id resembles the existing interpretations of her as a metaphorical shapeshifter who takes advantage of the protagonists' primal urges, leading to conflict between the women's socially imposed values and true desires. On the other hand, the id approach differs from the previous research in multiple ways, revealing an alternate function of the character altogether. Namely, I conclude that Zenia is amoral, not defined by her femininity, and, most importantly, an instinctual force of nature intended to challenge the prevailing notion that every catastrophe is a morally defensible lesson in disguise.

Conclusion

The empirical study set out to analyse Zenia's relationships with the protagonists to demonstrate how her behaviour aligns with the core principles of the Freudian id. Through this

framework, I aimed to show both the relevance of frequently dismissed Freudian theories and the new insight gained by diverging from the prevailing trends in literary criticism of *The Robber Bride*.

The analysis of the excerpts from the novel reveals that Zenia exhibits signs of Eros, Thanatos, and the pleasure principle. First, she is driven by the life instinct, befriend and exploiting Tony for her academic abilities and striving for social dominance, sexual satisfaction, and survival. Then, Zenia reflects the pleasure principle when she takes advantage of Charis' kindness and lets herself be cared for like a child but becomes restless when her sexual needs are not met. Finally, having taken everything from Roz, Zenia, driven by the death instinct, destroys a marriage, leads Mitch to commit suicide, and disappears in an effort to return to nothing.

While this reading of Zenia as the id concurs with previous scholars' claims that she is a shapeshifter who reflects each woman's repressed desires and, consequently, forces them to confront their values, my analysis does not aim to evaluate the morality of Zenia's actions as a feminist hero or villain. Instead, Zenia as the id emerges as the manifestation of an ever-present part of the universal human psyche. In other words, she does not have deliberately benevolent or malicious intentions, instead functioning as an amoral, self-interested yet completely instinctual force of nature opposing the protagonists' egos.

Notably, this interpretation of Zenia as a chaotic yet natural part of the self aligns with Atwood's (1979: 33) call to resist labelling female characters as good or bad examples of their sex and treat them as individuals rather than heroes, victims, or villains. Thus, the Freudian id approach diverges from the existing, predominantly gender- and morality-based interpretations, revealing that while Zenia causes conflict, she functions as a reminder to the protagonists and critics that chaos does not always have grand motives.

CONCLUSION

The thesis aimed to address the gap in the previous interpretations of Zenia in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* by analysing her as the manifestation of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concept of the id. More specifically, I set out to expand on decades worth of critical works on the novel, which often view Zenia as a moral-driven hero or villain defined by her gender, and instead show how she can be viewed as a chaotic and amoral yet unavoidable part of the human psyche. To achieve this, the thesis was divided into the literature review, which provided an overview of the prevailing trends in literary criticism of the novel, followed by the empirical study, focusing on selected passages from Zenia's relationships with the protagonists to demonstrate how she serves as the Freudian id. Finally, I compared my findings to the previous conclusions to reveal what new insight the id, ego, and super-ego approach offers about Zenia's overall function.

The literature review found that Zenia has often been interpreted from three main angles: as an archetypal *femme fatale*, an intertextual reference to other famous villains, and a manifestation of various psychological constructs. While these approaches have been productive in dissecting Zenia's potential motives and justifying her actions in the context of patriarchal oppression, the majority of the existing research aims to categorise her either as a redeemable antihero or a malicious villain based on her effect on the protagonists. Therefore, no matter the final verdicts, Zenia is mainly defined through her status as a woman and the perceived underlying motives for her actions. Interestingly, this trend in the previous analyses appears to conflict with Atwood's (1979: 33) call to move beyond gender and women's morality in the analysis of her female characters, highlighting a notable focus in literary criticism.

Because of this discrepancy between the author's wishes and the prevailing direction in literary criticism, I found that Freud's psychoanalytic model of the mind as being comprised of the primal id, the rational ego, and the moral super-ego may serve as a useful way to gain new

insight into Zenia's function. Interestingly, however, the literature review revealed a lack of Freudian approaches, which various feminist scholars attribute to Freud's unnuanced and disproven theories about female sexuality. Nevertheless, authors such as Mitchell (2000) and Lapsley (2006) defend the use of Freud's more nuanced foundational theories, leading me to conclude that the id, ego, and super-ego model, which is not tied to gender binaries and describes the universal human psyche, could be constructive in the analysis of *The Robber Bride*. More specifically, while there is certainly room for alternate approaches in future research – such as analysing the super-ego's role in the novel or investigating why the previous works have leaned so strongly toward female morality – I proposed that the id, ego, and super-ego framework would be particularly relevant in the analysis of Zenia's destructive yet completely remorseless behaviour.

The final subsection of the literature review outlined the core aspects of the Freudian id: the life instinct or Eros, the death instinct or Thanatos, and the pleasure principle. Additionally, it elucidated how the id is defined through its dynamics with the ego and the super-ego, functioning as a selfish child resisting the control of the ego and dismissing the moral aims of the super-ego. The subsequent analysis of selected excerpts from Zenia's relationships with Tony, Charis, and Roz in the empirical part of the thesis revealed that Zenia exhibits traits of being driven by each of these core aspects. Namely, she appears to be motivated by Eros in her relationship with Tony, the pleasure principle with Charis, and Thanatos with Roz. Moreover, Zenia selfishly dominates these dynamics while the protagonists attempt to appease her, mirroring how the id disregards the ego's wishes while the ego tries to salvage the relationship.

Therefore, the case studies of Zenia's dynamics with the three women indicated that she is entirely self-interested, much like a child or instinct-driven animal, rather than the calculating villain or hero previous scholars have deemed her to be. Thus, while my reading of Zenia as the

id aligns with the existing conclusions that she is a shapeshifter, conflicting with the women's hidden desires and internalised values, as well as the psychoanalytic interpretations of Zenia as a manifestation of the repressed self, my findings also diverge from the prior ones in substantial ways. Most importantly, my Freudian approach revealed that Zenia as the id is incapable of moral intentions and, consequently, cannot be treated as a saviour or a dangerous yet ultimately positive catalyst for women's rebellion against a patriarchal society.

Because of these key differences, I argue that Zenia as the id reflects Atwood's (1979: 33) wish for female characters to be treated as nuanced individuals rather than symbolic figures defined by the binary categories of man and woman or victim and villain. Thus, the id approach offers an alternate reading of Zenia not as an example of ambivalent female morality, but as the manifestation of a destructive yet inevitable aspect of the human psyche. As a result, Zenia as the selfish, amoral id challenges the scholarly impulse to assign grandiose intentions to female characters and, therefore, defend or condemn their actions. Instead, Zenia as Atwood's deliberately straightforward example of "a bad business [that] should be left alone" (*TRB*: 3) serves as a way to problematise the critical debates surrounding cause, intent, and consequence, demonstrating how, although the protagonists learn from their encounters with the id, destruction is not always intended to be a grand moral lesson.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Heliis Kuulman

**Zenia's Function as the Freudian Id in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*
Zenia funktsioon freudistliku idina Margaret Atwoodi „Röövelpruudis“**

Bakalaureusetöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 36

Annotatsioon:

Kanada kirjaniku Margaret Atwoodi 1993. aastal ilmunud romaan „Röövelpruut“ on juba aastakümneid kirjanduskriitikuid paelunud, kuid tähelepanu keskmes püsib just romaani vastuoluline pahalane Zenia. Kuigi Atwood on väljendanud kahtlusi tema naistegelaskujude sool põhinevate tõlgenduste suhtes, on varasemad autorid siiski peamiselt keskendunud Zenia rollile naiste esindajana. Seega on jäänud tähelepanuta teised teooriad, nagu näiteks Sigmund Freudi psühhoanalüütiline isiksusteooria, mis väidab, et inimese ‘mina’ koosneb idist, egost ja superegost. Seetõttu on bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks analüüsida Zeniat kui idi ilmingut, et selgitada välja, mida taoline freudistlik lähenemine varasemale arutelule lisab.

Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate teose varasemast retseptioonist ning võtab romaani sündmustiku lühidalt kokku. Lisaks kirjeldab sissejuhatus Margaret Atwoodi seost teise laine feminismiga ning selgitab, kuidas kriitikute kalduvus käsitleda Zeniat kui sümbolset naissoo esindajat on vastuolus autori sooviga kohelda naistegelasi kui indiviide.

Kirjandusülevaade on jagatud neljaks osaks, millest esimesed kolm käsitlevad kõige levinumaid viise Zenia analüüsimiseks. Nimelt on teda tõlgendatud kui stereotüüpset *femme fatale*'i, intertekstuaalset viidet kuulsatele pahalastele ilukirjanduses ja muinasjuttudes ning mitmete psühholoogiliste teooriate kehastust. Vaatamata erinevate lähenemiste rohkusele, on analüüsides keskmes siiski Zenia roll naisena ning kriitikud üritavad tema tegevust kas õigustada või hukka mõista. Seega tõlgendavad varasemad autorid Zeniat eelkõige läbi tema soo ja tema tegude moraalsuse. Kirjandusülevaate neljas osa käsitleb Freudi isiksusteooria keskseid mõisteid ning selgitab, miks freudistlik id-ego-superego raamistik on vaatamata Freudi vastuolulisele mainele „Röövelpruudi“ analüüsimiseks produktiivne lähenemine.

Bakalaureusetöö empiiriline osa analüüsib esmalt lõike Zenia ja kolme peategelase suhetest, et leida kinnitust väitele, et Zenia esindab kõiki idi põhilisi tunnusjooni. Katkenditest selgub, et ta peegeldab suhtes Tonyga elutungi ehk Eroost, Charisega mõnuprintsiipi ja Roziga surmatungi ehk Thanatost. Viimane alljaotis võrdleb freudistliku lähenemise ja seniste tõlgenduste tulemusi, et selgitada välja idi funktsioon romaanis.

Tööst selgub, et Zenia kui idi ilming erineb varasemast retseptioonist selle poolest, et tema funktsioon ei ole seotud naissoo ega moraalsete eesmärkidega. Analüüsist järeldub, et Zenia esindab inimloomuse instinktiivset, lapsikult isekat ja kaootilist osa, mis ei ole mõeldud peategelasi õpetama ega nende arengut esile kutsuma. Seega on Zenia tegelaskuju eesmärk vaidlustada kirjanduskriitikas levinud arusaam, et naistegelaste kuritegusid peab tingitama tõlgendama kui varjatud moraalse alatooniga õppetunde.

Märksõnad: Margaret Atwood, Röövelpruut, kanada kirjandus, Sigmund Freud, psühhoanalüüs

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