

DEFINING THE COMEDIC

**A theory of the mind
And how it applies to comedy.**

SIGMUND FREUD

- Sigmund Freud was an analyst, theorist and sometimes literary critic who **developed a few major theories to describe how the mind works** which have been useful to studying characters in books, films, television, and is sometimes useful in discussing everyday human behavior.
- Freud's theories are not scientific, but rather figurative, **and depend largely on metaphor and descriptive literary language to describe behavioral phenomena.**
- In so being, **he is closer to philosophy than neuroscience.**

TWO EXTREMES

- **The Id** – disorganized, lecherous, concerned with satisfying immediate urges, usually sexual.
- **The Superego** – anal, anxious, guilty, concerned with perfection.

Example: The Superego

- Makeover-type reality television shows, where an expert shakes up somebody who has bad habits, and essentially makes them feel guilty for being a certain way.

- E.G. Kitchen Nightmares:

<http://www.youtube.com/watchv=aMPe7TnDNTk>

Example: The Angel and Devil



Balance: The Ego

- The mind doesn't work without finding a middle ground between obscenity and anality.
- **The Ego often affects the part of your identity you show the world the most.**
- The ego works to find a **synthesis** between the Id's short-term pleasure seeking and the Superego's repressiveness.
- The ego looks to gain pleasure by fulfilling desires in a way that will not cause long-term pain or suffering, but **is often inconsistent and neurotic.**

Warren The Ape

- Warren, the character, is an Ape Puppet who struggles with extreme impulses from both his Id and his Superego, barely finding a middle ground between the two extremes.
- He is a recovering alcoholic, sex addict, and narcotics abuser, and spends time in multiple types of addiction recovery, **which is culturally-sanctioned Ego rehabilitation.**
- http://www.mtv.com/shows/warren_the_ape/series.jhtml

The Cultural Superego

- Freud further developed the idea of the Superego by proposing that **society collectively produces an unspoken ideal of cultural perfection.**
- These ideals of perfection have been used by governments and other social institutions to politically control mass behavior.

The Cultural Superego: Use In Advertising

- Advertisers often use this cultural superego to develop an artificial inadequacy in its market, while promising to solve the inadequacy with its product.

The Cultural Superego

- **But, we find that the demands of the cultural superego are maleable, even between communities and subcommunities.**
- E.G. FCC Obscenity, Indecency, and Profanity guidelines: <http://www.fcc.gov/guides/obscenity-indecency-and-profanity>.
- “An average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole appeals to the prurient interest [...]”

Radio Edits and Community Standards

- The definition of “Community Standards” is not always geographic, but can be demographic as well.
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGF_0AcHaGs
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuMi0rO2E-s>
- **So, the Cultural Superego is inconsistent and neurotic.**

Comedy as a form of Cultural Ego

- Comedy works to find the balance between the Id and the Cultural Superego as well.

Psychopathology

- The definitions of Id, Ego, and Superego **depend on a very scientific, and very precarious balance between physical structure and electro-chemical impulses.**
- **Again, Freud's theories are figurative, not scientific.**
- The possibility for total balance between bad impulses and long term goals is slim. It is an ideal that is useful to imagine, but is mostly impossible in practice.
- **Comedians often claim psychopathology, or the incorrect functioning of the brain, and by extension the emotions, and it seems important to discuss why they do.**

Psychopathology

- **What usually happens is the frequent alternation between extremes in the Id and the Superego.**
- Some people can navigate these frequent changes and carry on with everyday life.
- **In others, it can cause emotional imbalances** such as depression, anger, irritability, disturbing thoughts, dependency, aggressiveness, etc.
- Sometimes these imbalances become apparent after a breakdown or long period of time.

DEFINING COMEDY (AGAIN)

- Remember: **Comedy exists in a continuum.**
Between uplifting and depressing.
- A trend in contemporary comedy has been to confuse genre conventions by **combining Comedic elements with non comedic elements.**
- So, defining where 'the comedic' exists becomes tricky, and not extremely useful. It is more useful to consider what we might find humorous and think about why.

American Beauty

- Where do we see the Id, Ego, and Superego displayed in the characters?
- How does this film confuse genre convention?
- How are the characters confronted by Psychopathology and what do they do to control or overcome it?