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“The Best Minds of My Generation”: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of How Poets Like Roethke, O’Hara, Ginsberg, and Justice Have Discovered the Adolescent Unconscious

The idea of adolescent rebellion and development from childhood into adulthood has been discussed for decades, and, unfortunately, in an antagonistic limelight. Poems such as Theodore Roethke’s *The Shape of Fire*, Frank O’Hara’s *Ave Maria*, and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* describe this typical adolescent rebellion, like staying out late or participating in dangerous and/or illegal activities, which has resulted in society painting a negative portrait of the growing correlation between teenagers and their increasing defiance as they become older. What society fails to realize, however, is that these famous poems unconsciously describe the adolescent mind development and, how through their own thoughts and beliefs, are trying to be accepted as what psychologist Sigmund Freud referred to as the ego and superego, rather than the id. While society’s conscious level of the mind is still cemented on the idea that teenage rebellion against rules and social norms is mere “angst,” more than likely, on society’s unconscious level of the mind, growing teenagers are striving for the validation of adult perspective.

In order to fully comprehend how these poetic works unravel the abstract adolescent mind of wanting to be accepted and treated as an adult meanwhile consciously disobeying their parents, it is important to remember Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of literary analysis and its roots. According to Freud, a person’s mind consists of their conscious mind that divides into two categories: the preconscious mind and the unconscious mind. The preconscious mind consists of

memories and thoughts not currently being focused on, but can be easily brought back to consciousness. The unconscious, on the other hand, cannot be immediately be brought to one's consciousness and often consists of repressed desires and fantasies. Freud's theory, as described in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* edited by David H. Richter, was that these desires in the unconscious were sexual, driven by libido (aiming at pleasure) and the aggressive drive (aiming at destruction). During development, according to Freud, babies and toddlers would demand satisfaction for these desires, or their id, in three stages in the erogenous zones—first, the oral stage, second, the anal stage, and third, the phallic stage (Richter, 1015). Oftentimes, as children grow into and even during adolescence, they mainly listen to their ego—the part of the conscious decision-making process—rather than their superego—or voice of reasoning—to satisfy their id.

Therefore, Theodore Roethke's poem *The Shape of Fire* is a profound example of Freud's stages of development from birth to adulthood, taking readers through the various stages of the subject's life—which can be considered the framework for the adolescent's increasingly challenging conduct as they become older. In part one, readers see a child being born and their id is in full effect, evident in the lines "Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?" and "Mother, mother, stir from your cave of sorrow." (Roethke). At this stage of development according to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the newborn has not yet learned to control themselves in the constant need to satisfy their immediate desires, therefore, crying for their mother every time they need nurturing, also known as the oral stage. In part two, Roethke shows readers that child going through adolescence, as well as their ego in a stage of development. In the lines, "Pleasure on ground has no sound, easily maddens the uneasy man," sexual desires are beginning to arise, and "must pull off clothes to jerk like a frog on belly and nose for the sucking

bog” puberty is occurring, and the now-adolescent is not only starting to listening to their ego and immediately satisfying their id in a situation where the superego has not yet been completely develop, if at all; these situations can refer to both the anal and genital stage. Despite the superego not having been fully matured yet, puberty and, perhaps, promiscuity is—unconsciously—the main building block for adolescents transitioning into adulthood, rather than puberty and promiscuity being constituted as “bad behavior” embedded in society’s conscious mind.

The idea of puberty being the first part of society’s already perceived notion of teenagers and the teenager’s hidden intentions is evident in *Ave Maria* by Frank O’Hara. *Ave Maria* is where readers see glimpses of adolescents and conscious teenage rebellion much to the dismay of their mothers, in addition to the lack of development in the superego. Throughout the poem, O’Hara encourages American mothers to “let [their] kids go to the movies” and to “get them out of the house” (O’Hara). Once again, we see these adolescents wanting to following the demands of their egos and satisfying their ids, or “the soul that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images” (O’Hara). On a surface level, O’Hara is describing typical promiscuous adolescent activities often portrayed and seemingly glorified by the mass media, for example, the UK television series *Skins*, which aired from 2007 to 2013. As mentioned in the scholarly article *Teen-Party-Machines: Representing and Consuming Teenage Rebellion in the 'Skins Party' Trailer* by Melanie Ashe, teens in the show are often involved in wild partying that includes drinking, taking drugs, and participating in sexual intercourse—which, according to Ashe, represents the “rebellion and debauchery” commonly found in teenage behavior (Ashe). For example, in the *Skins* trailer that Ashe mentions, there is “a sequence of sexually charged and highly energetic teenagers tearing at each other’s bodies, euphorically grinding up against one

another on the dance floor, snorting and inhaling drugs, clumping together and messily kissing each other and inevitably at the end of the night, hugging the toilet bowl while vomiting,” (Ashe). Even though *Skins* is a much more modern example of teenage rebellion than *Ave Maria*, which was published in 1964, both the television trailer and the literary work can be compared in the sense that they represent the perceived notion that society has towards adolescents and their etiquette.

Little do adults know, however, that is that these new feelings and uprisings showcased in *The Shape of Fire*, *Ave Maria* and *Skins* unconsciously reflect what adolescents really want out of life: freedom and to be treated as society’s ego and superego rather than its id. Allen Ginsberg’s beat generation masterpiece *Howl* is a prime literary example of uncovering this unconscious idea. Right in the famous first few lines of *Howl*, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” Ginsberg is speaking from the condescending perspective of parents and adults trying and failing to control their rebellious children who are “dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix” (Ginsberg, 225). On the surface, it seems as though Ginsberg’s unnamed young characters are looking to feed their drug habits. While this may be the case, the unconscious meaning behind *Howl* is all about fighting for social change, rebelling against capitalism and the American government, and most importantly, society’s unwritten behavior laws—which were the main themes of the Beat movement in the 1950s. The line “who were expelled from the academies for crazy and publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull” can be considered a notable symbol of adolescents physically and vocally rejecting American standards (Ginsberg).

Middle and high school teacher Sarah Sansbury perfectly understands the adolescent unconscious—in her article “Teen Passion Needs Social Justice Outlet” she explains the widely

known teenage “angst” and how teens are often portrayed in the media, and, therefore, influence the negative standpoint that adults and society in general have towards the age group. Sansbury defends adolescents, however, by saying that society does not have a grasp on the full picture. While Sansbury has experience with delinquents at her teaching job and hearing phrases uttered such as “it’s not fair,” she argues that this realization of different aspects of the world not being just is the main part of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, even saying that “challenging the status quo and dissatisfaction with traditional thinking is not only a normal part of a teenager’s development, but it is the way change and improvement happen” (Sansbury). Rather than criticize the rebellious teenager, Sansbury says to give them an outlet due to the fact that they still have a sense of hope and youth, unlike some adults who may have become jaded over the years. Not surprisingly, Sansbury’s positive outlook on adolescents’ seemingly uncouth behavior has proven to be effective: Every year in her classroom, Sansbury teaches her students the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol* and the Holocaust-focused historical fiction novel *The Devil’s Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen. Sansbury claims, “over and over again, [her] middle school students cling to the idea that justice needs to be served. They desire to stand up against social wrongs, the “evils of the world,” to bring about justice for the voiceless and ignored” (Sansbury). The next year, one of Sansbury’s former students who had previously studied *A Christmas Carol* donated \$100 of saved Christmas and birthday money to help a family in need. Rather than the generous student listen to their ego and satisfy their id and keep the money for themselves, they chose to listen to the superego and donate. People may argue that this act of kindness is to be expected of people and that teens are still misbehaved—but it should not be forgotten that this idea of endowment is all happening in the unconscious mind and, in addition, is a non-rebellious way for teens to prove how they are mature and can make positive decisions.

While Roethke's *The Shape of Fire* describes a person's physical and mental development from birth to adulthood and attempts to explain an adolescent's rebellious behavior as they mature, both O'Hara's *Ave Maria* and the television series *Skins* highlight a negative perception on them while neglecting to dive deeper into the unconscious mind. Ginsberg's *Howl*, on the other hand, do not retreat from taking the psychoanalytic approach of the unconscious mind of rebellious teens, although Ginsberg writes about them in a condescending and judgmental manner. Sansbury, ultimately, sees this conduct that is mainly considered unacceptable by societal standards and instead chooses to express the importance of this rebellion and why, in many cases, it is more than simply teenage "angst." Even though society's conscious level of the mind and their thoughts on adolescents most likely will never be altered, it is important to remember the unconscious level of the mind every now and then about how adolescents are merely striving for society's ego and superego consideration instead of its id.

## Works Cited

Ashe, Melanie. "Teen-Party-Machines: Representing and Consuming Teenage Rebellion in the 'Skins Party' Trailer." *Reinvention: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, 29 Apr. 2015, p. 1. EBSCOhost, [ezproxy.wpunj.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=102961562&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.wpunj.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=102961562&site=eds-live&scope=site).

This academic journal examines the idea of teenage rebellion in the UK television series *Skins Party* trailer. The author drew similarities from this modern example of teenage rebellion and in Frank O'Hara's *Ave Maria* to support her main thesis.

McClatchy, J. D. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Vintage Books, 2003.

This poetry collection consists of works by 75 of America's greatest contemporary poets, including the poems analyzed in this essay: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Theodore Roethke's *The Shape of Fire*, and Frank O'Hara's *Ave Maria*. These works were used to both analyze their meanings as well as support the author's main thesis.

Richter, David H. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, Part 2, Ch. 4, Bedford St Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2016.

This literary analysis book is divided into two parts. In part 1, *Classic Texts in Literary Criticism*, works by Plato, Aristotle, Dante Alighieri, and other famous authors are examined in close detail. In part 2, *Contemporary Trends in Literary Criticism*, literary theories such as formalism, feminist criticism, and deconstruction are discussed. For the purpose of this essay, the author used chapter four, which focuses on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory.



Sansbury, Sarah. "Teen Passion Needs Social Justice Outlet." Teaching Tolerance, 3 Jan. 2013, [www.tolerance.org/magazine/teen-passion-needs-social-justice-outlet](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teen-passion-needs-social-justice-outlet).

This article written by middle and high school English teacher Sarah Sansbury provides a unique perspective on teenage rebellion that society often ignores, such as how teenagers need an outlet for their passion, in which supports the author's main thesis.

## POETRY

### Sensory Overload

I couldn't hear your fables  
over the bar's pulsating music  
because I was too busy swaying my hips  
against yours to that DJ Khaled and Rihanna song

and when you wrapped me in a tight hug  
when I began to shiver I was too busy  
snuggling into your taller frame to feel you  
silently slicing my heartstrings

I nor couldn't taste your metallic cowardice  
in your friend's spacious kitchen that Saturday night  
when our lips became acquainted  
while the bean dip was finishing in the oven

I couldn't smell your lies  
because the spicy chili paste  
swimming in the bowl of ramen  
ignited my nasal passage on fire

and the ascending steam that was  
fogging up my glasses  
was making it difficult to see  
your lack of sensibility

## Insults du Jour

Hey, you! Yes, you! The one whose eyeballs  
are reading these very words.  
Come with me—no, no need to be scared!  
I'm not going to hurt you.  
Just follow me—  
I want to show you something.  
Follow my lead through these cloudy gray walls  
lined with cold, metal lockers  
painted either murky sea blue,  
vomit green,  
or prison jumpsuit orange  
(Depending on what floor you're on).

I'm sorry about the angsty pre-teens in our way  
stomping down the hallways  
rocking their Sharpie-decorated dirty Converse  
and studded belts.  
It's a bit claustrophobic and stuffy, I know—  
and I'm aware, some of these kids  
really need to invest in some Old Spice  
and not that cheap shower-in-a-can  
—that's Axe you smell, by the way.

Oh, there she is!  
Do you see her? That girl, over there?  
That short-haired, chubby girl in the navy polo  
walking by herself  
struggling to carry all of those heavy books?  
*SMACK*. Ouch. That had to hurt.  
Yeah, she often gets elbowed into lockers like that  
by one of the many kids from her school bus  
who just won't leave her the hell alone  
And yes, sadly, other kids would rather kick her  
belongings across the hallway and step on them  
rather than help her pick them up.  
Yet she's keeping her head up as if it never happened  
Even though her upper arm is throbbing  
That's definitely going to bruise.

Let's follow her to her school bus  
at the end of the day  
yes—bus 35—that's correct—  
I know, the toothless bus aid's hair is so greasy  
you could probably fry an egg on it

during the summer  
and she really needs to move on from  
shopping at Mande  
But I digress—  
“Fatass.” “Everyone hates you.”  
“Caitlin, why don’t you just kill yourself?”  
that same kid from before says as he attempts  
to punch her in the nose, and laughs  
When asked why he’s doing it, his reply is  
“I don’t know. It’s fun.” He laughs again  
as another kid ring leads a cruel game  
of Hot Potato with her coat.  
It’s ok—she’s off the bus now  
and headed to her room.

She is silently crying, violently convulsing  
and drenching her white pillowcase  
with her pride that she has been swallowing all day  
to the point where her belly is so full  
that she is on the verge of puking.

She endured that throughout her entire three  
years in middle school.  
Maybe once or twice she thought about  
taking that kid’s advice  
wanting her suffering to end.

## The “Sisters” of Troop 154

As I munch on a Samoa I bought from the Girl Scout troop  
lingering in the Student Center with those neon, eye-catching boxes  
neatly stacked in a line, I reminisce about how  
every other Friday night I would slip into my oversized green vest  
and my reluctant mother would drive me over to the local  
community church building in her green Ford Explorer

and before every meeting my so-called “sisters” and I  
would rise up and say the Pledge of Allegiance  
then we would raise our right hands, three fingers up, thumb holding down pinky  
under the instruction of our leaders, and recite, in unison:

*“I will do my best to be honest and fair,”*

—said one of my “sisters” who started a rumor in the fifth grade about a fellow “sister” being pregnant during one of the camping trips

*“Friendly and helpful,”*

—my “sisters” said as they gathered in a tight circle by that red brick wall every recess, closed off and oblivious to the rest of the playground

*“Considerate and caring,”*

—my one “sister” said as she handed out hand-decorated invitations to her summer bash to everyone during recess except for me

*“Courageous and strong,”*

—sure, if you define “courageous and strong” as running behind your mommies’ backs while fake and ugly snot-crying to them over a problem you deliberately caused

*“And responsible for what I say and do,”*

—ok, I can’t possibly slander any of my former “sisters” for their lack of good example since they were merely clones of their sneaky mothers

*“And to respect myself and others,”*

—like that one “sister” who bullied another “sister” for being more into sports than Barbie dolls

*“Respect authority,”*

—I believe my former spoiled rotten “sisters” were the ones dominating their mothers

*“Use resources wisely,”*

—if you mean cutting meeting to less than once a month and never planning any fun field trips or activities, then I guess Troop 154 kept at least one of their promises

*“Make the world a better place,”*

—What world? Your perfect, exclusive, impermeable pink bubble you were (and probably are) still living in?

*“And be a sister to every Girl Scout.”*

—Oh please. Like any of you “sisters” could fool anyone with those colorful fucking badges and delicious Samoas.

## **Turning the Page**

For some reason I thought by reading the same chapter about that night you called, telling me it was over time and time again would help me to understand what went wrong better, to find a hidden meaning within the text.

Except it got to a point that I had memorized every page and have analyzed each and every word over a thousand times, and the story never changed and the meaning stayed the same.

I finally realized that there was no rewriting or editing this permanently inked page.

So, I inhaled, closed my eyes, turned the page, and began to read the next chapter.

## Dear Society

You told me throughout my childhood  
that I am beautiful as I am, that looks don't mean everything  
and that beauty is not equivalent to  
a blinking number on a digital scale in the bathroom  
or a number stitched onto a tag  
and sewn on the inside seam of my jeans.

But then you proceeded to stuff my face  
with tips to lose twenty pounds in two weeks  
while I was at the supermarket with my mom  
munching on a glazed donut while your "perfect" cover girls  
with the flat stomach and clear skin  
narrowed their blue eyes at me in disgust.

You told me throughout grade school  
that some students excel more at math than at reading  
and vice versa, and that the letters written in blue ink  
on my report card did not equal my intelligence  
nor would matter once I enter the working world.

But then you took a chisel to my brain,  
chiseling and chiseling the fact that if I didn't score at least proficient  
on state exams, and that if I didn't make the honor roll every marking period,  
that no college would ever accept me and that  
my only career option would be flipping greasy hamburgers  
at some scummy burger joint.

You told me that all I needed to be happy  
was my own real-life perfect pixel prince,  
a quintessential gentlemen,  
and that I would trade my rags for a white gown  
and cradle pink and blue swaddles in my arms  
and that we would live "happily ever after"

But then you took the quill and ink  
and ran strikethroughs through my fairy tale  
and instead of sending a handsome prince on a magical horse  
to come and rescue me from my tower  
you sent me warty, green, chubby frogs  
who did not become princes when I kissed them  
You then signed the ending, "And they all lived happily *never* after."

Sincerely,  
Caitlin



## **GROUP PROJECT/LESSON PLAN (w/ Layla Ashi)**

### **First Poem: Creative Writing Exercise- *The Room of My Life* by Ann Sexton**

I. Introduce Ann Sexton's life

II. Read poem aloud.

III. Discuss poem.

- Discuss theme/meaning
- Discuss personification of objects and the room itself.
- Identify figurative language

VI. Questions/comments

VII. Class Writing Exercise

### **Second Poem: Literature- *Having a Coke with You* by Frank O'Hara**

I. Introduce Frank O'Hara

II. Play video of O'Hara reading poem.

III. Discuss poem

- Theme
- Structure
- Literary devices
- Other things worth noting

IV. Questions/comments on the poem.

