

A Psychodynamic Analysis of the God of War

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"Provide an in-depth character analysis via the psychodynamic framework of defence mechanisms. Discussion should include causes of anxiety in the character's life and whether the specified defence mechanisms are a positive or maladaptive response"

Santa Monica Studios' hack and slash masterpiece God of War (2018) focuses on the story of Kratos,¹ the Greek god who seeks to fulfil his wife's dying wish of spreading her ashes over the tallest mountain in Midgard. Alongside this journey, Santa Monica Studios provides a unique character study into a fractured man who wishes to forget his tragic past and start life afresh with his son Atreus. His character development is fascinating to dissect as the game explores Kratos' inner demons throughout his journey. In addition, his problems play a central part in the storytelling and gameplay, often influencing the game mechanics for players. This character analysis will go in-depth about Kratos' guilt and the resulting trauma he faces, his use of suppression and projection to fight against his problems, and whether these defence mechanisms help him cope with his internal troubles.

Throughout his journey, Kratos faces severe guilt over the death and destruction he's caused in the earlier games, where he was tricked into murdering his own family and was betrayed by Zeus. These unfortunate events caused Kratos to seek revenge on Zeus and murdered any Greek god that stood in his way. Now that he resides in Midgard, Kratos is often haunted by this horrific past, which causes him to suffer severe trauma. His trauma is best shown when he relives flashbacks in Helheim; he hears Zeus reminding him of his past misdeeds *"It is time, my son. Look around at what you have done"* (God of War, 2018). He also sees visions of him taking down Zeus at Olympus, which horrifies Kratos and leaves him paralysed, only escaping with the help of Atreus. Kratos also tries to avoid anything that reminds him of his rage and misdeeds, specifically the Blades of Olympus. However, when he is forced to use them for the sake of Atreus, he isn't able to control his psyche. Considering these are the same blades he used to kill his wife and child, he is petrified of *"[digging] up a past [he] swore would stay buried"* (God of War, 2018).

To help deal with his trauma, Kratos relies on defence mechanisms to try and prevent his rage from taking over his consciousness, particularly suppression and projection, which were first proposed by Anna Freud in 1936.² By using these defence mechanisms, Kratos' *"guilt decreases and the anxiety caused by [his] neurotic conflict is temporarily assuaged."* (William Indick 2004. p. 47)^{3,4}. Looking at this from the perspective of Sigmund Freud (1923), Kratos has to maintain his id, ego and superego, three components that all work together to create complex human behaviours.⁵ Let's begin with the id, which attempts to fulfil all of Kratos' emotional impulses and desires without him even knowing it (Freud, 1923).⁶ He has to suppress his thoughts of rage and old instincts down into his unconsciousness to stop them from taking over. Another thing Kratos has to manage is his ego, which deals with the world around him and the clashing demands of the id and superego (Freud, 1923).⁷ In Midgard, the ego comes in the form of Baldur, aka The Stranger, who represents the social view of the Norse Gods. Baldur also represents the Trickster

¹ God of War for PlayStation 4, Santa Monica Studios, 2018.

² Freud, A. (1992). The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence. (1936). United Kingdom: Karnac Books.

³ Freud, S. (1989). The ego and the id (1923). TACD Journal, 17(1), 5-22.

⁴ Indick, W. (2004). Psychology for Screenwriters: Building Conflict in Your Script. USA: Michael Wiese Productions, pg. 47

⁵ Freud, S. (1989). The ego and the id (1923). TACD Journal, 17(1), 5-22.

⁶ Freud, S. (1989). The ego and the id (1923). TACD Journal, 17(1), 5-22.

⁷ Jaffé, A., Jacobi, J., Jung, C. G., Franz, M. v., Henderson, J. L. (1964). Man and His Symbols. United Kingdom: Doubleday. pg. 120

archetype, who makes fun of dominant belief systems and attacks others (Jung, 1964, p.126).⁸ On their first encounter, Baldur mocks the values of the Spartans and criticises Kratos' newly found restraint.

"Here I thought your kind was supposed to be so enlightened. So much better than us. So much smarter. And yet you hide out here in the woods - like a coward" (God of War, 2018).

He also attacks Kratos' id by relentlessly punching him and begging for retaliation. However, despite Kratos' best efforts to settle things, *"You do not want this fight"*, he gives in and fights back. During the fight, Baldur continuously mocks Kratos by calling him *"[s]low and old"*, taunting him by saying *"you bore me"* and *"are you even trying?"* and asks if he *"struck a nerve?"* (God of War, 2018). Baldur successfully (but only temporarily) strains Kratos' id into his consciousness by triggering his rage and corrupting his psyche (visualised through the 'Spartan Rage' mechanic). As a Trickster, Baldur's *"most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness"*(Jung, 1959, p. V), because he doesn't have full control of his actions and emotions.⁹ He *"wills nothing consciously"* and is often constrained in his behaviour as he's possessed by *"impulses over which he has no control"* (Radin p. 181).¹⁰

After dealing with Baldur, Kratos regains control but seeks help from his wife Faye, up in the heavens asking, *"what do I do?"* as he is desperate for answers. This leads perfectly into the superego, which opposes the id's desires due to their conflicting goals and its aggressiveness towards the ego (Freud, 1923).¹¹ Faye is inadvertently a superego for Kratos, someone who gives Kratos a reason not to lose control and make him want to act morally (even if his morals don't match those of society). Another Superego for Kratos is Atreus. Throughout their journey, Kratos will do whatever is necessary to prevent his son from giving in to habits of rage, often reprimanding Atreus, who gets increasingly frustrated. He does this because he doesn't want Atreus to suffer a similar fate of tragedy and grief as he did. Because of this, he suppresses his rage and old instincts for Atreus, which is shown when Kratos disciplines him for killing Mogi with no remorse *"I teach you to kill yes... but in defence of yourself. Never as an indulgence"*; disrespecting his late mother *"You are rash, insubordinate, and out of control. This will not stand."*; and when Atreus proves he can't control his emotions, *"Your anger... you can get lost in it. The path ahead is difficult and you Atreus, are clearly not ready"* (God of War, 2018). Kratos successfully uses suppression to maintain his mind for most of his journey and can tame the id, ego, and superego together, allowing him to press on while attempting to set a good example for his son.

Kratos also relies on projection to help deal with his trauma, where a troublesome unconscious impulse attaches onto somebody else (Indick, 2004).¹² Kratos portrays the behaviours, emotions, and thoughts he considers dangerous onto his son, which unknowingly represents Atreus as the Shadow Archetype, a.k.a. Kratos' id (Jung, 1959, p. V).¹³ This is seen in the previously mentioned

⁸ Jaffé, A., Jacobi, J., Jung, C. G., Franz, M. v., Henderson, J. L. (1964). *Man and His Symbols*. United Kingdom: Doubleday.

⁹ Jung, C. (1959). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

¹⁰ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1956), ix.

¹¹ Freud, S. (1989). *The ego and the id* (1923). *TACD Journal*, 17(1), 5-22.

¹² Indick, W. (2004). *Psychology for Screenwriters: Building Conflict in Your Script*. USA: Michael Wiese Productions

¹³ Jung, Carl Gustav. "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. 1959." *Trans.RFC Hull*. New York: Princeton UP (1990)

killing of Møgi and dishonouring of his mother. Other examples of this projection can be seen when taking down Dauði Kaupmaður and fighting Møgi, who constantly mocks Atreus' mother during the fight. Even Mimir warns Kratos of his son's emotions by stating, *"that boy... he's in nine kinds of pain. He's heads turned so far around... he might become everyone's concern if you don't do something"* (God of War, 2018). While fighting Møgi, Kratos also projects his 'Spartan Rage' onto Atreus, who starts to glow in flames after becoming enraged by Møgi, causing him to lose control of his mind before fainting. However, this projection's most significant problem on Kratos is his paternal relationship with Atreus, putting a massive strain on their relationship. Atreus is often cocky towards his father, mimicking him by going, *"Boy... read this. Boy... what's that say?"* since, according to him, *"[the] [o]nly time you want to talk to me is when you need something"* (God of War, 2018). While the relationship between Kratos and Atreus does get somewhat better once Kratos opens up more about his past, there's still a sense of tension between the two, which may be impacted by Kratos' projection of his hate, fears, and insecurities onto his son. However, this defence mechanism does appear to help him cope with his trauma, but it has come at the cost of his father-son relationship with Atreus.

When analysing the effects of suppression and projection, it's important to remember that these defence mechanisms *"do not eliminate or resolve the neurotic conflict, they merely put a bandage on the problem"* (Indick, pp. 55-56).¹⁴ Because of this, Kratos is only temporarily taming his rage and coping with his trauma. There is no proper way to remove his 'emotional impulses and desires entirely' and, as he gets closer to the tallest mountain in Jötunheim, he learns to accept that these impulses will always be a part of him. For instance, when reclaiming the Blades of Olympus, Athena (who was dreamt up by Kratos' mind) states that he will never change and that *"[he] will always be a monster"*, in which Kratos responds, *"I know."* While he accepts his tragic past, he appears to embrace it too much, as his morals lead him to kill Baldur in order to save his mother, Freya. This unexpectedly creates an enemy out of her, as she threatens to *"rain down every agony, every violation imaginable on [Kratos]"* (God of War, 2018).

In conclusion, Kratos learns to deal with his guilt and corresponding trauma, thanks to the help of suppression and projection. While projection does strain the relationship between Kratos and his son, Atreus understands Kratos' behaviours and why he acted as he did. Unfortunately, while he does learn to accept that he can never remove those parts of himself, Kratos still ends up making more trouble than he needs with the decisive call to kill Baldur. Only time will tell if Kratos continues to contain his impulses (now that he is willing to accept them) when Ragnarök strikes upon Midgard.

¹⁴ Indick, W. (2004). Psychology for Screenwriters: Building Conflict in Your Script. USA: Michael Wiese Productions.

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