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Irene Rose De Lilly

Mount St. Mary's College, irdelilly@yahoo.com

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Manifest Content Without a Dreamer: A Freudian Analysis of Percival Everett's *Erasure*

Irene Rose De Lilly
Mount St. Mary's College
Graduate Department of Humanities—English

On the cover of Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure* is the black and white photo of a shirtless African American man. His face is stern as he mugs the camera, gesturing with two downward pointing fingers that resemble a pointed gun. Another African American man's photo is on the back flap of the book. The paragraph beneath him says that this man is the author, an American-born writer and distinguished professor of English. The one-dimensional picture represents a unique person, a human being with thoughts, experiences, dreams, and personal struggles. Yet only one of these pictures represents the source from which the story originated. The man on the back imagined and brought to life the man on the cover. However, French literary theorist Roland Barthes claims that it is writing that makes an author and not vice versa. The special voice of literature, explains Barthes (1977) in *The Death of the Author*, consists of "several indiscernible voices...to which we cannot assign a specific origin" (142). Yet, there is an origin to such voices. Exploring the author's personality, looking at the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, and examining various doubling effects can provide a wealth of knowledge about the inner workings of a text. This paper will provide a Freudian analysis of *Erasure* in order to prove that Everett is, in fact, the two main characters he has created, as well as attempt to challenge the stigma of interpreting through a psychoanalytical lens, rather than treating writing and literature as manifest content without a dreamer.

Since the first words were penned on parchment, readers have admired literary greats for their writing and ability to weave together intricate narratives that captivate and entertain. "There is very real pleasure that comes from surrendering to the discursive seductions of a masterful author" and there are few other ways, aside from a close psycholanalytical reading of a text, to delve into the psyche of a famous author in order to understand his or her genius (Whitby 2011). Nevertheless, many scholars have argued that psychoanalytical criticism is problematic. Barthes (1977) explains that an author "is never anything more than the man who writes [...he] can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings...in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (146). In addition, literary scholar Terry Eagleton (2008) debatably claims that psychoanalytical literary criticism, as it pertains to the author or the work and the work's content, is "in fact the most limited" (155). This is disputable. Someone had to meditate on their ideas, construct the characters, piece together dialogue, and ultimately toil over the writing until it reached its full potential. Studying the author in order to gain better knowledge into the work of literature is critical because the author is first and foremost the source. While solely reading an author's biography as a means of criticism is

limiting, his or her experience, personality, and inner torments are vital to untangling the story.

In the novel *Erasure*, under the pen name Stagg R. Leigh, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison initially writes a story called *My Pafology* in order to put a satirical spin on Juanita Mae Jenkins' bestseller *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. The one-dimensional framework of Jenkins's novel represents an onslaught of contemporary assembly-line African American novels that in Monk's opinion negatively write black culture into literature and onto history. This, in turn, destroys everything positive that socially conscious black writers like Monk work to create. Like the German character Eckhart, about whom Monk brainstorms, Monk feels "irked [to] no end that the whole of [his] recognition rests on the translation of that damn" Ebonics and street-slang (Everett 2001, 38). In order to deal with his inner frustrations towards black culture, Monk writes his own version of Jenkins's bestseller and successfully publishes *My Pafology*. By creating a story that would be too outlandish, too racially stereotypical, and too much of "an idiotic, exploitive piece of crap" for any intelligent person to take seriously, Monk is convinced that he does not have to explain a parody that he believes is blatantly obvious (Everett 2001, 188). However, his plan backfires, he is offered three million dollars to have the book made into a movie, and critics everywhere cannot get enough (Everett 2001, 238). Yet, even with all of his success, Monk is ashamed of his work and extremely disappointed that he has become the hypocritical sellout he never wanted to be.

In many ways, Everett has created two characters that mirror one another—Van Go Jenkins and Monk—and who arguably are a reflection of his own irritation. By the end of *Erasure*, Monk has also become Van Go, the self-loathing and self-destructive main character of his acclaimed novel. This transformation can be seen by looking at Monk's difficult relationship with his own family, his constant struggle with "double consciousness," and his anger with the larger oppressive system of racial injustice in America, which eventually leads to a tragic conclusion.

Reading Psychoanalytically

Psychoanalytic theory seeks to bring out evidence of unresolved emotions and repressed feelings within a literary work. This method of criticism also adopts the practice of interpreting texts the way Sigmund Freud and later theorists interpreted dreams. The theory argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret, unconscious desires and anxieties of their authors. Echoing Freud's views on the hidden meanings within a literary work, Marie Bonaparte (1988) writes that literature and artwork "profoundly reveal their creator's psychology" (101). In addition, Eagleton (2008) acknowledges the limitations of this method, but he also explains why he supports psychoanalytical criticism:

Like the dream, the work takes certain 'raw materials'—language, other literary texts, way of perceiving the world—and transforms them by certain techniques into a product...just as the dream can be analysed, deciphered, decomposed in ways which show up something of the processes by which it was produced, so too can the literary work... [The] concern is not just to "read the text" of the unconscious, but to uncover the processes, the dream work, by which that text was produced. (Eagleton 2008, 157)

The theory also suggests that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses and can be decoded in much the same way dreams are interpreted. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all of the characters are projections of the author's psyche. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, fetishes and the like are examined within the behavior of the characters. As is the case with *Erasure*, both Everett and Monk are the authors in question.

The whole novel in fact has a dream-like quality, shifting in and out of present day, and reverting to flashbacks. Written in the first person, the narrative begins with the line, "My journal is a private affair" (Everett 2001, 1). Immediately the reader is forced to wonder about whose thoughts are on the page. Kimberly Eaton (2006) comments, "The juxtaposition of the book as Percival Everett's novel and as Monk Ellison's journal creates an ambiguity about to whom this narrative actually belongs" (220). Also, instead of dates to mark the beginning of a new "journal entry," Monk puts three X's in their place, as if to symbolize that time does not exist at all, as it often does not in dreams.

As in dreams, psychological material is encoded within the text and this material often hides deeper meaning. In *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud ([1899] 2004) explains that the latent content is hidden within the manifest content. "The task," Freud ([1899] 2004) explains, "[is] investigating the relations between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts, and of tracing out the processes by which the latter have been changed into the former" (400). Van Go's dream in chapter one of *My Pafology* illustrates this point. The dream begins with Van Go, his mother, and his baby sister sitting in the kitchen. His mother calls him "human slough" and Van Go becomes incredibly angry (Everett 2001, 65). He grabs a "big knife from the counter" and begins stabbing her violently in the stomach (Everett 2001, 65). Then he continues to stab her as he goes back and forth in his mind: "I stab her cause I scared. I stab Mama cause I love her. I stab Mama cause I hate her. Cause I ain't got no daddy" (Everett 2001, 65). Then he walks outside, looks up at the sky, and tries to see Jesus, but he cannot.

There are five elements of manifest content to which to pay attention in Van Go's dream: human slough, the knife, the color red, the kitchen, and Jesus. Read through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, it is clear by the use of the word "slough" that Van Go's mother equates her son's potential in life to that of dead skin. This insult is what ignites the young man's rage, sending him over the edge. The knife, which Freud would consider a phallic symbol, is the only weapon Van Go has. His masculine aggression is the only thing that can combat a woman. Then there is the color red, and in his writings on dream analysis, "Freud delineates common symbols for virginity, defloration, and castration in

dreams [to] flowers, breaking of glass, the color read, [and] blood” (Erwin 2002, 593). This horrific scene also takes place in the kitchen, the womb of the home—a place traditionally associated with nourishment and family. However, this is where Van Go murders his mother. He does not feel that he receives any nourishment or comfort from his family. Lastly, Van Go looks up to the sky in a desperate attempt to find some sort of redemption or guidance.

Furthermore, buried within these dreams and memories are Monk’s, or presumably Everett’s, deep frustrations regarding race and publication. In a review of the novel, Bernard Bell (2003) states, “*Erasure* is probably Everett’s most disturbingly semi-autobiographical novel” (474). The novel can also be read as “a parody of Everett’s own writing career” (Ana María Sánchez-Arce 2007, 144). Everett himself attests to this. In an interview from Bell’s review, he reveals:

Monk’s experience is very much my own. Yes, I have been hit with the ‘not black enough’ complaint, always from white editors and critics. I am a writer. I am a man. I am black man in this culture. Of course my experience as a black man in America influences my art...I think readers, black and white, are sophisticated enough to be engaged by a range of black experience, informed by economic situation, religion, or geography, just as one accepts a range of so-called white experience. (Bell 2003, 475, 477)

Even in his most recent work of fiction, *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett’s ability to leave himself out of his novels is questioned: “Is it Everett the writer, or Everett the character? Or is the line between them irrevocably blurred?” (Reynolds 2009). Identifying closely with the characters in his novels, it is difficult for Everett to dislodge himself from Monk because they share so many similar characteristics.

Likewise, there are many instances in which Everett’s presence is felt in *Erasure*. Like his creator, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison is an “avant-garde novelist who reworks Greek myths, a college professor who parodies Roland Barthes’s poststructuralist criticism, and the protagonist whose name is a conflation of the highly innovative black modernist bebop musician Thelonius Monk and the expressionist novelist Ralph Ellison” (Bell 2003, 475). In addition, like Everett, Monk is on a mission to “erase or nullify his African American identity in his transgressive quest for freedom and wholeness as an artist” (Bell 2003, 475). Furthermore, the mock-novel is made up of everything both authors hate about black culture and would rather erase. Bonaparte (1988) writes about the use of psychoanalytical readings of texts: “We should have to determine the extent to which the author’s personality, split into psychic elements seeking to embody themselves in different characters, permits the author to re-embody himself in each of the characters observed” (102). That is exactly what occurs in both the novel *Erasure* and the novel-within-the-novel. Monk, like his creator, is disgusted by the violence, gratuitous sex without responsibility, and ignorance that he feels plagues black America. In addition, Monk’s animosity then comes out in the character of Van Go, which is evident in the destructive ways he goes about establishing self-esteem, finding acceptance, and dealing with the absence of a paternal figure.

It is best to make clear that despite the importance of the author in psychoanalytical theory, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in that it does not concern itself with "what the author intended." Rather, psychoanalytic criticism seeks to bring out what the author *never* intended, that is, what the author may have never known was repressed. Freud found that dreams "express wishes or desires that cannot find expression in waking life precisely because they are at odds with the requirements of larger society" (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 390). This may explain why doubling effects often happen in literature and particularly in *Erasure*. The two at odds are characterized through what Freud explains as the id and the ego. Violent, ambivalent Van Go embodies the aggressive energy of the id, while his counterpart Monk represents the logical and reasonable ego. Further mirroring occurs between Monk and his pseudonym identity, Stagg. Stagg is able to do, say, and write all the things Monk has never been brave enough to do. Lastly, the story all comes full circle, as Monk is the double of Everett, the original author.

Doubling

Both Monk and his alter ego Van Go share an array of similar struggles. Monk's neurosis over struggling with multiple identities comes out in his writing. From not being able to play basketball as a teenager, to growing up in a well-off Black family, Monk never knew which "role" to play. Like Van Go, "there be two lil' niggers in [his] head. Nigger A and Nigger B" (Everett 2001, 69). Furthermore, these two consciousnesses make it hard for Monk to understand who he is as a black man and as a writer. In addition, Monk does not want his writing to be dictated by the market (Everett 2001, 145). The market's criticism of him not being "black enough" led him to write *My Pafology* in the first place and become the sell-out author known as Stagg R. Leigh. Furthermore, in an interview with Anthony Stewart, the duality of Everett the author is discussed. "Because you work in an English department," Stewart states, "you sort of have a split perspective on the world of literary culture...as both an academic and an artist. And this split perspective sometimes appears in your fiction" (Stewart 2007, 294). Evidently, Everett, the original source, is also not immune from double-consciousness.

This duality eventually leaves Monk, the fictional representation of Everett, torn between his false identity and his true intentions. Robert Rogers (1970), who claims the use of doubling in literature is nothing new, uses the term "decomposition" to describe the oppositional character of the double in fiction: "The double is always in some basic way an opposing self" (60). This opposition, this tension, is what leads Monk to reconsider "self-termination" (Everett 2001, 1). "Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him?" Monk contemplates (Everett 2001, 248). He later realizes, "I might find an individual who by all measure *was* Stagg Leigh and then I could kill him...But there was no such person and yet there was and he was me" (Everett 2001, emphasis added, 259). Yet, what is the function of doubling? According to Rogers (1970), "the most natural way for art to depict endopsychic conflict is to picture it as being interpersonal conflict, the seemingly separate characters representing the psychological forces at odds [...] the double is always in some basic way an opposing self" (60, 64). This technique is a defense mechanism, which Monk

blatantly uses both in his creation of the fictional writer Stagg and the fictional character Van Go.

Concepts of duality also apply to Van Go, who must contend with his own double-consciousness—the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. He is selfish and is often quoted saying, “So, why not me?” (Everett 2001, 65). He is conflicted, confused, and desperate to get ahead by any means necessary. In addition, the two character’s attitudes toward getting ahead in life are where Monk and Van Go most notably merge. “I tried to distance myself from the position where the newly sold piece-of-shit novel had placed me vis-à-vis my art,” Monk explains. “It was not exactly the case that I had sold out, but I was not apparently going to turn away the check” (Everett 2001, 139). After much success and acclaim Monk also admits, “I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. I had already talked on the phone with my editor as the infamous Stagg Leigh...I could do it” (Everett 2001, 212). Van Go’s “why not me?” mentality and justification for his behavior does not make him much different from his creator, who took the three million dollars anyway even though he knew his book had tarnished his literary soul.

These two characters also share a sense of hopelessness and anger with the interlocking systems of oppression that make it nearly impossible for them to be themselves or truly succeed. Both men blame everyone else except themselves for their failures. Monk is frustrated with the publishing industry, with the reading public, and finally with his newfound love interest Marilyn Tilman for reading the book he hates. Van Go feels like he “coulda been out there wif a good job, makin some good money in a office or sumpin” and graduated from high school if one of his old teachers had not kicked him out (Everett 2001, 67). Neither character could change, defeat, or outsmart the system, so they succumbed to it. It is at this point in his writing career that Monk “considered [his] motivation in creating Stagg in the first place, felt again [his] anger and dissatisfaction with [his] world” (Everett 2001, 262). He had tried to write something worse that would possibly open people's eyes to the flawed and racist writing of authors such as Jenkins, but by creating something worse, he only made things worse. As the story progresses, Monk also realizes the type of man he is becoming and that he is losing his integrity in the process. However, like Van Go, he wants to get ahead and he is “pissed as hell now...they gots money and [he] realize how important that be” (Everett 2001, 104). Monk needs the money. Prior to writing *My Pafology*, he had been having trouble selling and even publishing his work. He had been having trouble paying his bills and keeping food on his table. In his opinion, it was his turn to make a profit; in this respect, he adopts his character’s motto.

Oedipus Complex

Freud coined the term “Oedipus Complex” to describe the childhood desire to sleep with the mother and kill the father. In *Erasure*, the Oedipus Complex happens in reverse. Instead of Monk and Van Go wanting to kill their fathers, both men are sexually dysfunctional and desire to kill their own mothers. Perhaps because neither Monk nor Van Go really knew their fathers, as adults they are unable to form successful relationships with women. Monk struggles to connect sexually with the women he dates, at one point comparing sex with a female friend to having sex with a “bicycle,” and Van Go’s hyper-

sexuality leads to a life of unreasonable promiscuity (Everett 2001, 11). Although constantly compared to their absent fathers, both characters lose them at a young age. Consequently, a strong, yet volatile, connection with the female parent is formed and they are seemingly unable to find their own identities.

Family, one of the central themes in the novel, creates some of the most painful and difficult choices for the two opposing characters. First, through a series of flashbacks Monk remembers his father, providing glimpses into the main character's middle-class upbringing and his father's irrational favoritism. Monk grew up often feeling "special," different, and marginalized from his siblings. Reflecting back on his status in relation to the other members of his family, Monk states, "Mother and Father had sat at the prominent ends and I was placed on a side alone, facing my brother and sister, an empty chair beside me" (Everett 2001, 206). Bell (2003) sums up Monk's relationship with his family best in his review stating:

The satirical events that dominate the frame-story of Monk's expressionist aesthetic as a writer and college professor and that reveal his intellectual arrogance and alienation as an African American artist are disrupted periodically with flashbacks to his childhood fascination with woodworking and fly fishing with his father. They also illuminate the origins of his existential angst, the exaggerated sense of his intellectual and artistic difference, fostered by the favoritism and pronouncements of his father, who committed suicide, and the subsequent emotional estrangement and psychological alienation from his siblings, colleagues, and acquaintances. (Bell 2003, 476)

In addition, Monk's mother is a frequently referenced cause of grief for the main character. She shifts from the past to the present, and from passive to soon to be passing away. She is suffering from Alzheimer's disease and her youngest son Monk has taken up the responsibility of caring for her; however, the emotional and physical duties wear on him. Although he loves his mother and does not want to send her to a convalescent home to die, with each of her outbursts, his patience grows thin. Eventually, he makes the difficult decision to send her to a retirement home. "Given her condition," he says, "I wanted very much to commit her...I was also troubled by the word commit. One commits murder or suicide, permanent things" (Everett 2001, 192). Similarly, as Van Go did by stabbing his mother in his dream, Monk "murders" his mother by sending her away.

Likewise, Van Go also does not have a strong or positive male role model and later learns that a homeless man named Willy may perhaps be his long lost father. After almost shooting Willy while running from the cops, the drunkard says to Van Go, "Look at my face. Look at my coal black skin and then look at yown. Look at my black eyes and then look at yown. Look at my big black lips and look at yown. I be your daddy whether you likes it or not" (Everett 2001, 123). Similarly, at various points in the novel, Monk is compared to his father, whom he knew briefly as a child, but to whom he never actually felt that close. There are times during his mother's dementia that she confuses him for his father: "She looked up at me through her haze and wondered aloud if I were my father" (Everett 2001, 49). Although doing everything to forget the past, as King Oedipus did

everything possible to escape the oracle's decree, the pain of not having fathers may have fueled Monk and Van Go's mutual desires to kill their mothers.

In the end, Monk is not the author he sought to be and he has transformed into the very same writer that disgusted him. Everett, as well, claims he experienced a similar metamorphosis. In the photograph on the back flap Everett admits, "I was twenty-two years old and a completely different person. And so I liked the whole thing in *Erasure* of his becoming a different person" (Stewart 2007, 314). However, Monk cannot hide his identity with an outdated photo on his novel's concealed back flap. His paranoia about discovery eventually catches up to him. Likewise, in *My Pafology*, Van Go realizes that he can no longer run from who he has become. He is trapped the same way Monk finds himself trapped. The most comparable moment, however, comes when Monk finally steps on stage and the "lights were brighter than ever... constant, flooding light. I looked at the television cameras looking at me" (Everett 2001, 265). At an earlier date, Monk had written about the very same event. Only he was sitting in a get-away car as the 19-year-old Van Go, crazed and excited that "the cameras is pointin at me. I be on the TV" (Everett 2001, 13). The tragic ending of *My Pafology* mirrors that of Monk's own literary career and potential sanity.

Reverting back to the essence of the uncanny, Everett explains, "The frightening thing about writing fiction, is what's in there is something that I can find in me. Good and bad. And when you start realizing that as an artist, as a person in the world, that all of this stuff is coming from one source. It's a sobering thought" (Stewart 2007). Ironically, Monk asks the audience at The Book Award ceremony, "How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" (Everett 2001, 264). There are many ways to untangle the inner workings of a novel, one of the most fascinating being psychoanalytically. It is intriguing to peel back the different levels of truth within the story, as Freud compares "the interpretation of a dream to the translation of an ancient text" (Frieden 1993, 103). In much the same way, interpreting a work of literature through a psychoanalytical lens frees the reader from the illusions that may be blocking the deeper meaning buried within the layers.

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