



Freud’s Conceptual Ruins: Destructive Instincts and the Unmaking of the Thanatos Theory

Sara Tabza

Pusruing Ph.D, Faculty of Letters and the Humanities
– Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco.

Abstract: "The aim of all life is death," Freud proclaimed, inciting a radical change to psychoanalytic theory that is still managing to unsettle readers and academics. Whereas Freud seminal work centered around the issue of libidinal energy and the pleasure principle, his later papers referenced a mystical, even scandalous concept: the death drive or "Thanatos drive". Unlike Eros, which strives for creation and existence, Thanatos heads for dissolution and ultimately no existence. This paper argues that Freud's theorization of death was left incomplete and laden with conceptual tensions. By tracing the evolution of Freud's thinking, its reception, and its transformation, this paper examines the persistent impetus for debate of Thanatos in understanding aggression, mortality, and one's very humanity. This paper critically examines the gaps and unresolved issues in Freud's theory, analyzes its critiques and subsequent revisions over time, and explores its enduring significance and implications within contemporary psychoanalytic and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Thanatos drive, psychoanalysis, drive theory, mortality, human behavior.

Introduction

No other figure in the field of psychology has had so profound an effect on the way the human psyche is viewed as Sigmund Freud. Freud is well-known for his theory of sexual drives and the role of libido being central to psychic development, but his intellectual influence is broader. His years of contribution stretch over more than fifty years of professional endeavor characterized by deep and complex inquiry. During Freud's earlier years of his career, his top priority was charting out the dark caverns of the unconscious, with the belief that the

answers to neurotic disorders, dream discussions, and divided self were contained in there. His interest in the pleasure principle began when he treated patients with occult physical signs and symptoms such as paralysis, tremors and hallucination using a cathartic method. The latter is a kind of psychotherapy used to heal the supposedly repressed memories and feelings. After spending most of his life developing and evaluating the theory of sexuality and development, he disrupted the paradigms of academia and psychological studies by challenging his own psychoanalytic theories on the unconscious mind by introducing the death-drive in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920). According to Freud, no matter how supposedly refined the sexual drive theory was and regardless of its widespread acclaim, he himself deemed it flawed. This discovery led to a paradigm shift in the field of psychology. However, and regardless of how appealing and seductive the death theory might seem, it was deemed flawed not only by psychologists and academics but by Freud himself. The lack of a clear definition, of empirical research, and the limited applicability are but a few of its many limitations. The paper examines the intrinsic weaknesses and residual doubts in Freud's theory, its significant shortcomings and adaptation, and its continuing impact and usage in modern psychoanalytic and cultural discussions.

Historical Context and Development of Freud's Ideas

Freud's academic life began in the form of medical training that progressed through groundbreaking contributions to the field of neurology and culminated in the creation of his psychoanalysis. He sketched and explained the basic functioning of the unconscious, repression, and the psyche-structure in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) – co-authored with

Josef Breuer, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–1917), *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940, posthumously). He examined libido theory, the psychosexual stages, the part that early developmental confusions play in neuroses in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), “On Narcissism” (1914) , *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). Freud's sex theories were extensively applied and evaluated through case studies such as “Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria” (1905) as well as other empirical cases that validated his studies 'findings. Herewith, Freud speculated that the concealed facets of the human mind that define behavioral dynamics are driven by sexual pleasure. He proposed a number of psychosexual theories that explain the dynamic of pleasure and pain and how these notions can help understand the nature of human instinctual behavior.

Freud's works were nuanced as he also dove deeper in the “second topography” of the psyche and ways in which inner conflicts are shaped in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), how psychoanalytic ideas shape our understanding of the shared beliefs and ethics and large social frameworks in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and how unconscious processes get reflected in cultural expressions and in everyday life in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901).

Freud's theories are intimately bound up with his personal experiences. The death of Freud's daughter Sophie in 1920, profoundly affected him and influenced his later publications such as “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Gay). Besides the death of his daughter, and in the context of the post WW1 era, Freud became sceptical¹ regarding the unrivaled eminence of psychosexual development theories and the notions surrounding the pleasure principle as spelled out in. He was

no longer convinced by the supremacy of the sexual drive and started to re-evaluate it in an attempt to understand the darker side of the human psyche that was triggered by the significant state of trauma and loss of the first third of the twentieth century. In "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death" (1915), Freud explains how the lines are blurred between the civilized and primitive people and that "the very emphasis laid on the commandment "thou shalt not kill" makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who had the lust for killing their blood..."(296). It is worth noting that libidinal energy (the basis of the pleasure principle) was not rejected altogether by Freud. He proposed the death theory as a parallel theory to fathom the dynamic interplay between libidinal energy and destructive energy.

Freud's Theory of Death Drive (Thanatos)

During the IPA (International Psychoanalytical Association) congress in Vienna in 1971, psychoanalysts were divided into those who acknowledged the significance of the death drive, and those who rejected the theory as a whole (Lind 60). Critics of the theory were more inclined to accept Carl Jung's monistic view about libidinal energy being the ultimate drive of human behavior. The rowdy crowd claimed that Freud ineptly attempted to integrate this theory into an already quasi-balanced body of work which rendered it fragmentary. "In comparison with other key psychoanalytic concepts—the unconscious, repression, the agencies of id, ego, and superego—Freud's supposition of a self-destructive drive has suffered positive neglect." (Boothby 1). The theory also lacked clinical grounding especially with his known empirical commitment. After the heavy criticism of his community, Freud shelved the death theory.

One of the most compelling concepts put forward in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is that the power of libido is NOT the only drive that governs human behavior and that there is a parallel drive that can explain the “inherent principle of entropy, a tendency for dissolution of life, referred to as the death drive” (Kli 67)., later dubbed the Thanatos drive by psychologists as opposed to the Eros drive. This dichotomy can be explained as follows: the life drive or Eros (sexual instincts) manages basic preservation of life issues, prosocial behavior, pleasure, and procreation whereas the death drive, which can either be channeled inwards or outwards, deals with different forms of destruction. The inward channeling of the death drive can result in self-harm while the outward transfer of this drive can be the cause of destructive behavior toward others and one's environment. In Freud's own words, the opposing drives controlling human behavior are “the internal necessity for fulfillment and the external necessity determinant for self-preservation” (Freud 1920). The reason why Freud's theory of death should be considered as his “unfinished business” is because it was never fully developed in its psychological and existential aspects; he failed to evaluate it through comprehensive empirical research unlike the thorough work he carried out on his sexual drive. And worst of all, he tried to “integrate [it] into his theory of neurosis” (Lind 71). This contradictory to his previous theories especially the conflict between the repressed desires and the unconscious. A death drive, which is abstract and speculative, is unsustainable as it is not empirically supported, and is hard to test scientifically undermining it. It also runs the risk of oversimplifying, as human behaviors about which much is unknown can only be explained as a destructive instinct ignoring trauma or social influences.

Irrespective of the degree to which the Thanatos drive is defective, it bears considerable weight that one ought to dismiss altogether as flawed especially that it has been

developed, refined and even supported by empirical evidence. Freud associates the death drive with the principle of Nirvana, borrowed from Barbara Low, to explain the internal necessity for fulfillment as opposed to self-preservation. Unlike pleasure, the erotic drive, which “yields to the reality principle, inducing the realization that fulfillment and painless satisfaction are impossible” (Kli 78), the state of unpleasure, death, is a state where the self is emancipated from pain and desire associated with objects. It is the transcendence of human beings to a condition where one can no longer be controlled by external motives which can only happen at the death point (the religious connotations of the state of Nirvana in Buddhism and Hinduism are not considered in this regard). This proposition suggests that “an autonomous Death drive affirms an inherent, aggressive, and destructive tendency in the human being” (Kli 71). In other words, Freud's Eros drive pushes people to be active agents of their social groups by preserving their lives and their communities whereas the Thanatos drive pushes human beings to seek cathartic experiences that are not triggered by external objects in order to purge negativity from their psyche (internal fulfillment). The total disappearance of life can be one of these cathartic experiences. Whether this Freudian dualism of dynamic drives is flawed or just ill-timed is irrelevant to the case of this paper. What is appreciable, however, is Freud's realization that the erotic drive does not answer everything about the aggressive behavioral tendencies of human beings nor does it explain complex sociocultural relations.

The fact that drives are abstract concepts and cannot be verified or measured by scientific quantitative tools is one of the most echoed criticisms of Freudian theories. Actually, he himself admitted it blatantly, in his set of lectures on psychoanalysis “New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis” (1933), when he said: “the theory of instincts

is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities...In our work, we cannot for a moment disregard them, yet we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly.” However, many decades later, three esteemed scholars in social psychology named Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski have proven that Freud’s statement is faulty and that these mythical entities are in fact measurable by theorizing the concept of finitude using quantifiable data (We shall come back and expound this in due course).

One of the greatest shortcomings of Freud’s death drive theory is how it is placed in dialectical tension with the structural ordering of his original drive ideas. Eros and Thanatos are depicted as a dyad and connected process—life and death as intertwined performative processes. Still, however, Freud is silent on an obvious meta-psychological explanation of Thanatos’s action on its own, and his vision of how it is linked with the ego and superego is frequently unsatisfying (Laplanche and Pontalis.). Consequently, the death drive theory oscillates between allegorical representation and mechanistic explanation, and between biological processes and abstract concepts.

Limitations and Critiques

The inconsistency of Freud’s use of drive and instinct leaves one confused as to how his theoretical framework should be approached. In previous psychoanalytic work, drives are regarded as the expression of psycho-somatic needs, but in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Thanatos is connoted as an original instinct based on inorganic origins. This re-interpreting brings psychoanalysis to the edge of mysticism thereby compromising its scientific status. As a result, the repetition compulsion which Freud appeals to in order to make the case for the death drive could be taken to indicate unresolved trauma, rather than unassailable proof of the

death driven instinct. "The speculative side of the notion is evident from the first lines of the essay and even from the title" Ricoeur states in chapter 2 of *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. He goes on to say "how is it possible to speak of "the Beyond the Pleasure Principle" if the hypothesis of constancy is the most general hypothesis that can be formed about the psychical apparatus? Just what does the expression "beyond the pleasure principle" refer to?" (283).

Ricoeur questions Freud's death drive theory as a groundless, mythical idea which is based on circular reasoning and structured against empiric facts. This is due to the fact that the drive is not the product of real clinical observation but simply a theoretical necessity that serves to substantiate and explain phenomena that it is set to interpret. Ricoeur's view is that, the tautological nature of the theory has the potential to question Freud's metapsychology and steer psychoanalysis in narrative mode as similar to myths and not in interpretation.

From 1920 onwards, Freud's later works show evident internal conflict about his belief in the death drive. Although Thanatos was originally hypothesized as a primitive mechanism, it was given more intense treatment in later works, such as *The Ego and the Id* (1923) in which the word is often linked to discussions of aggression, guilt, and repression. Freud was ambivalent on his death drive, at one point reinforcing its importance, at another avoiding its more controversial elements without systematically articulating it. This waver suggests that Freud himself was unsure of the death drive in psychoanalytic theory.

Unlike Eros's massive theorizing, Freud's death drive was little developed in his own writing. Access to medical use of the death drive was limited, and its implications for neurotic, psychotic, or normal symptomatology were never developed. Freud's conceptualization of the death drive theory,

represented by the tropes of Eros, Thanatos, and that of regressing to inorganic stasis illustrates a metaphor and mythic preference over empirical scientific research (Ricoeur 1970). The lack of clarity also suggests Freud's ongoing endeavor; to face the intricacies of destructiveness whilst refusing to fall into the neat and certainly unenduring categorization or limitation of it.

Through the analysis of object relations, Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell questioned the fundamental concepts of object relations that Freud introduced in their "Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory" (1983). In their analysis, the 'object' for Freud only plays a role as a medium for drive gratification (release of tension), not as a core part of relational experience. According to this understanding, the object is internalized as dependent and subordinate upon the drive structure. Greenberg and Mitchell argue that Freud's framework trivializes interpersonal phenomena to expressions of the internal force and its discharge, pleasure and unpleasure as primary motivations of behavior (M.Becker). Also, and in the same vein, the overemphasis on instinctual and biological factors contributes to Freud's omission of highly important psychological, social and cultural aspects and overlooks the actual complexity of our actions and feelings. The Freudian subject is largely void of social determinants; Instinctual impulses build up the foundation of the theory, that is, social interplay is considered as a secondary concern (Laplanche and Pontalis).

For Klein, Fairbairn and Winnicott, object relations theorists, human growth is nonexistent without our inter-personal relations and not primary drives. They believe that drives are fundamentally outward facing and directed towards objects and they reject the notion of primary narcissism in the infancy stage and absence of object relations (Klein). Greenberg & Mitchell's drive and relational approaches represent the two irreconcilable lenses from which to view the natural order of

human action and experience. Of Course, the debate between advocates of these models can only be helpful, but never reaches a consummate, satisfactory agreement. Additionally, there are other theories that can provide alternative explanations for acting destructively or aggressively such as social learning theory, cognitive-behavioral theories, or attachment theory etc. These theories may provide a more extensive and empirically plausible account for behavior, than the fundamental attribution.

Revisions and Extensions Over Time

Post-Freudian scholars suggested refined interpretations, revisions and critiques. For Jacques Lacan, the death drive was, at bottom, a part of subjectivity organized by the symbolic system and the reiterating dynamic of it rather than a basic life drive. Marcuse provided another interpretation, but in turn, conceived the death drive as a socio-political allegory for repressive structures underlying civilization (Eros and Civilization, 1955). He states

Freud's metapsychology is an ever-renewed attempt to uncover, and to question, the terrible necessity of the inner connection between civilization and barbarism, progress and suffering, freedom and unhappiness—a connection which reveals itself ultimately as that between Eros and Thanatos. (Eros and Civilization 14)

Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the death drive takes on a new form outside Freud's biological determinism, it is instead theorized through the lenses of meaning of language and the unconscious². For Lacan, Thanatos drive is "'pivotal point" in the evolution of Freud's thought" (Lacan qtd in Boothby 10). He "returns to the death drive but not without reappropriating it in a distinctive way. Lacan finds in the death drive a

privileged point at which the system of psychoanalytic concepts remains open to question” (Boothby 11). According to Lacan, the death drive confronts us with the drive to insistently retrace one's steps for which one engages in unresolved reconciliation with the void reality, which stands in stark contrast with Freud's initial idea.

Melanie Klein, another post-Freudian theorist, made serious contributions to object relations theory by associating it with her research regarding the death drive. Klein observes that in the baby's mind, the death drive assumes the shape of the aggressive impulses acting upon the mother or the vital objects. The paranoid-schizoid position is an infantile development stage in which the infant oscillates between idealizing and devaluing his objects; a way to cope with overwhelming contrasts in feelings. Against Freud's impression that the death drive is a universal, non-personalized energy, Klein put an emphasis on its personal and developmental roots which are also integrally linked to infancy.

Many of today's psychoanalysts keep using Freud's death drive despite its limitations. For example, object relations theory frequently refers to Freud's basic views on the aggression and internal conflicts of people (Fritscher). Contemporary descriptions of projective identification and splitting are mediated by Freud's basic principles of internal conflict and aggressive tendencies that are the basis for psychological defenses and mental illness. These ideas have expanded their horizons from Freud's initial structure and are relying on principles of attachment theory and interpersonal psychoanalysis.

Contemporary thinkers have also developed Freud's theories for repression and death drive to increase the scope of consciousness, which people use to deal with the issues of psychic survival. In modern psychoanalytic views, the

interaction between death and life drives people's identity development with frequent use of defense mechanisms to cope with existential fears. The effect of the death drive upon neuroses like an unconscious compulsion to reenact trauma (suffering) is still studied by contemporary clinical practices – psychoanalytic self-psychology pioneered by Heinz Kohut. In *The Search For The Self* (1978), a study of narcissism, Kohut “links aggression to a narcissistic self-image: this grandiose, omnipotent self-image will not brook offence and frustration, which unleash narcissistic rage whose degree of violence is proportionate to the image's grandiosity.”(De Masi 446).

Terror management theory, developed by clinical psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski , reiterates the same core questions that Earnest Becker once posed in *The Denial of Death*. The theory tested Becker's speculations and formulated a strong theory of death. TMT proves that we are haunted by mortality and that the burden of anxiety and the knowledge we live with is both destructive and beneficial at so many levels. We are trying relentlessly to conquer insignificance and redefine the problem of finitude by pondering “our present circumstances in the light of future possibilities to modify our behavior accordingly” (Solomon 2003). Our ability to think in an abstract manner makes us think that we can be more than “a breathing piece of defecating meat” and that we are much more important than a “lizard or a potato” (Solomon 2003).

Application of Freudian Death Theory in Other Disciplines

Erich Fromm introduced the theory outside the domain of psychology, into the sociological sphere; regardless of the fact that the death drive may manifest itself as social aggression and major destruction. Fromm's insights in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) suggested that there existed

potential to use the death drive politically or ideologically in ways that fostered increased authoritarianism and militarism. Such adaptations present the flexibility of the application of death drive at different elements of human experience, ranging from a personal internal conflict to the deeper cultural and social dramas.

The death drive of Freud transcended the boundaries of psychoanalysis into other studies, mainly philosophy, sociology, and literary theory. The theory has been mobilized in critiques by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, in full-time research into the contradictions of life and death. Derrida criticizes Freud and psychoanalysis as a field of study in "Speculations of Freud". He uncovers the speculative contours of psychoanalysis, which is both necessary and problematic (Derrida 16-21). In his analysis, Derrida also addresses the idea of how Nietzsche shaped Freud's thinking, and notes Freud's unwillingness to fully acknowledge such an influence (Derrida 6-8). Ironically, Freud's insistence that he is independent from Nietzsche's ideas is in itself a reflection of an unconscious intellectual legacy. Derrida refers to this as 'a debt without debt', an abandoned inheritance that is the foundation of Freud's talk about death, repetition and the drives. Additionally, Derrida renounces the death drive; he insists that Freud's account of it works atheistically, refusing to conceptualize it. The death drive instead is not rendered a scientifically testable notion but as a speculative necessity derived from the very need of the pleasure principle.

The death drive has been quite instrumental to sociological studies to illuminate how complex and violent processes influence the formation of collective identity and social conflict. Influenced by Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse remakes the concept of the death drive, suggesting that the repressive situation in modern industrialized society stifles creativity and civil liberty turning Thanatos into destructive forms of aggression. In his writings on modernity and

postmodernity, Bauman recognizes the death drive as a determining reason for the annihilationist logic of technological and bureaucratic orders even as they offer security with a price of human autonomy.

In literary studies Freud's theories of repression and death drive have influenced texts dealing with existential terror, brutality, and unconscious motivation. Psychoanalytic readings of Kafka and Faulkner's work frequently show how his ideas regarding the death drive help to explain the depth of suffering and mortality that are integral parts of their writing. The theories of Freud are generally accepted through critical theory and cultural studies especially when such untoward themes as violence, existential estrangement and the unconscious forces struggling with mortality are to be discussed.

Despite ongoing disagreement regarding both the conception of the death drive by Freud, the death drive remains important when expatiating sophisticated human behaviors such as trauma, anxiety, and aggression. Freud's theoretical framework is refreshed and revised in light of recent developments in Neuroscience as well as to account for ongoing shifts in the social and cultural context.

Implications and Significance

The introduction of the death drive (Todestrieb) in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" represents an important transformation in Freud's metapsychology, which undermines the former optimistic tendency towards pleasure and preservation. The death drive implies a hidden drive present in living organisms not inspired by development, unity, or control, but stagnation, decaying and reverting to an inanimate state. Introducing the death drive dislodges the pleasure principle from the central position it occupied, which destabilizes the institutionalized psychoanalytic model, and

makes psychic processes primed to operate under the span of repetition, compulsion and unpleasure. It assumes an *entropic* logic in subjectivity: the psyche is not only informed by libidinal mechanisms, but it is also confronted by an original negative force. The consequences are ontologically and ethically synchronous; The death drive makes the subject an indeterminate entity incapable of prescribing or subordinating his own desires to a determinate narrative of self-preservation.

This destabilization applies to psychoanalysis as well, thrusting into the spotlight an element which cannot be represented symbolically, analyzed theoretically, or resolved effectively in clinical premises. The death drive is not a tangible drive, but rather a speculative concept which science of psychoanalysis carries into paradoxes it could not overcome (not until TMT provided hundreds of case studies to empirically substantiate the findings). Therefore, the death drive becomes transformed from a diagnostic tool to a philosophical literary boundary which is the intersection of psychoanalysis itself, philosophy and literature.

Future Directions

The strength of the death drive, as a theoretical instrument, lies in its reactivation and recontextualization potential in various academic disciplines, which include, most noteworthy, the field of critical theory and posthuman thought. Against other views that see the death drive as a metaphysical oddity or over-speculation, it proposes new ways of inquiry presently linked to contemporary morbidities of trauma, repetition, and rooted historic negativity. As its affinity with deconstructive concepts such as *différance*, spectrality, and the trace suggests, the death drive is a necessary analytic resource for the study of perpetuating violence, hidden repetition patterns in social history, and the possibilities for non-sovereign ethics.

With the increasing number of environmental disasters, algorithmic rule, and automation of desire, the death drive can serve as a fascinating take on the analysis of insidious forms. Future work could test the implications of the drive using an intersectional framework, i.e. looking at race, gender or colonization. With this approach, the death drive may be seen as both necessary to psychic processes and as a logic of fatigue and renewal on a larger scale, culturally and politically, informing where authority breaks.

Conclusion

Considered as a fragmentary defective piece of work in the early days of psychoanalysis, what Freud's project proves to be through this article is speculation, though, uncertain, can yield profound insight. Between Science and speculation, individual psyche and collective reality, and authority and uncertainty, Freud ended up being a scholar who scrambles with unsettling implications of the unconscious, rather than a person who gives ultimate answers. This paper shows how even in terms of his scholarship, Freud's work cannot be decisively resolved—whether in its structure, or in its implications for culture. And it is exactly this openness, this continuing failure to reconcile the paradoxes that confront his thinking that characterizes Freud's lasting legacy. The contradictions in Freud's thought could be better exploited by contemporary scholarship than by trying to reconcile them, for academic purposes in literature, politics and ethics, and for disrupting assumptions about subjectivity. By this standard, Freud's legacy is more of an opportunity to develop his thinking, rather than a doctrine to be affirmed or denied.

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Note:

1. Check Gay, Peter. *Freud: A Life for Our Time*; The book is an extensive biography that intertwines Freud's personal experiences with the evolution of his psychoanalytic theories. Gay delves into Freud's upbringing, education, professional journey, and the socio-political

milieu that influenced his work. The biography offers insights into Freud's relationships, his intellectual battles, and the controversies surrounding his theories.

2. "If what Freud discovered and rediscovered with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindnesses, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard the Enigma of the "Death Drive" for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier." Jacques Lacan, "The Seminar on the 'Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis*, Yale French Studies, no. 48 (1972): 60.

Sara Tabza

Sara Tabza is a Comparative Literature PhD candidate and English teacher whose research explores finitude resilience, and narrative form through psychoanalytic and philosophical lenses. Her research explores the intersections of literature, cultural studies, and critical discourse. She is as deeply engaged with existentialism and hermeneutics as she is with social psychology.

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