

# Discussion on the Characters in the Anime Work "Demon Slayer"

Ningning Wang<sup>1</sup> Jiaqi Xiang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Liberal Arts, Dalian University, Dalian, Liaoning, China

<sup>2</sup> College of Foreign Languages, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

## ABSTRACT

"Demon Slayer" is a juvenile comic created by the famous Japanese cartoonist Koyoharu Gotouge from February 15, 2016 to May 11, 2020. It tells the story that the protagonist Kamado Tanjiro, who joined the ghost hunting group Ghost Slayer Team with the goal of saving his sister Kamado Nezuko, who became a ghost, as well as taking revenge for his family, embarked on a journey to behead ghosts, demonstrating the beautiful vision of mankind's tireless struggle for the pursuit of light. This paper applies Freud's psychoanalytic theory to interpret the characters in "Demon Layer" from three aspects: the ego, the id, and the superego. Firstly, it interprets the positive characters of the Ghost Slayer Team, such as the personal experience and emotional changes of Kamado Tanjiro. Secondly, it analyzes the character setting of the villain character "ghost", and analyzes the birth process of the image of "ghost" in the work. Finally, it combines the comic text to explore the deep meaning of the characters in "Demon Layer".

**Keywords:** "Demon Layer", Freud, Id, Ego, Superego.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese anime literature, as a visual literary style, is deeply influenced by literary traditions and literary ideas in its creation. In anime works, ghosts also have the same emotions as humans, such as emotions of pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, regret, frustration, extreme and stubbornness, becoming a medium for expressing human inner world. In the book "The Self and the Id", Freud made a special analysis of the structure of human personality. He believes that human personality is composed of the id, ego, and superego. The id is the most primitive and unconscious psychological structure, composed of hereditary instincts and desires. The id is actually an irrational impulse that is completely governed by the pleasure principle and blindly seeks satisfaction. The ego, like a rider, controls the direction of the horse, that is, the direction of the id, transforming the will of the id into action. There is also a level above the ego called the superego or ego paradigm, which focuses on the higher, moral, and transpersonal things in a person and satisfies all requirements for a higher existence in the person. It is precisely because of the interaction and balance

among the id, ego, and superego that a man can have a stable and healthy personality.

In the work "Demon Slayer", one can see the impact of the ego theory on the character shaping of the protagonist team represented by the protagonist Kamado Tanjiro. The ego is "a part of the id that is changed by the direct influence of the external world through the intermediary of intuitive consciousness", and relies on the surface of the id, influenced by perception, representing rationality and prudence, and following the principle of reality. The villain characters represented by Kibutsuji Muzan are deeply influenced by the id theory. The id is unconscious, represents passion, and is influenced by human instincts. Contrary to the ego, the principle of happiness dominates the id.

## 2. POSITIVE CHARACTERS THAT BREAK THROUGH THE EGO

Freud believed that the ego will stand in the perspective of reality, appropriately meeting some of the needs of the id, while avoiding violating some moral principles. Therefore, the ego follows the principle of reality, that is, the ego that exists in

the subconscious level of human beings. Ego is the effect of personality, that is, the way for people to realize their id. The superego is the purpose of personality and the last developed part of the personality structure. It is directly opposed to the id, and is a moral attitude acquired by a person, which can make a person more self-disciplined and restrained. Unlike the ego, the superego is the embodiment of social morality, acting in accordance with "moral principles", and is the most civilized, moral, and noble part of the personality. The influence of the superego on their personality traits is deeply reflected in Kamado Tanjirou and Rengku Kyoujurou, whose actions are basically in line with the guidance of the "moral principles".

### **2.1 Kamado Tanjirou**

As the absolute protagonist in the story, Kamado Tanjirou can be found to have a high moral standard in his character. The boy who sold charcoal, Kamado Tanjirou, originally had an ordinary and happy daily life. On the day his family was attacked by evil spirits, a drastic change occurred. His mother and four younger siblings were brutally murdered, while his sister, Kamado Nezuko, who survived with him, turned into a violent ghost. Under the guidance of the ghost hunter, Kamado Tanjirou, who aspired to become a ghost hunter, and Kamado Nezuko, who became a ghost but still had reason, embarked on a journey. In order to turn the sister Kamado Nezuko back into a human being, to crusade against the evil spirits who killed their families, and to cut off the chain of sadness, the fight between the boy and the ghosts never stopped. Through arduous swordsmanship practice and life gambling trials, Kamado Tanjirou eventually became a member of the ghost hunter "Ghost Slayer Team".

In the plot at the end of the text, Kibutsuji Muzan injected blood into Kamado Tanjirou's body on his deathbed, and a new Ghost King was born. Within seconds of becoming the Ghost King, Kamado Tanjirou successfully overcame the sun and became the ultimate life entity that never grew old and never died. During the fierce battle between the two sides, Kamado Nezuko suddenly appeared, Kamado Tanjirou bit his sister's shoulder, and Kamado Nezuko cried in pain and called out to her brother. Seeing Kamado Tanjirou was about to launch another attack, Kamado Nezuko directly blocked his brother's mouth with her hands. Tomioka Giyuu realized that while Kamado Nezuko was near, Kamado Tanjirou didn't eat her

because he knew his sister was around and he was still struggling. At this moment, Tsuyuri Kanao limped up, holding the medicine that could turn a ghost into a human. She risked losing her sight and, while Kamado Tanjirou wasn't paying attention, directly injected it in his body. At the next moment, Kamado Tanjirou entered consciousness and engaged in an ideological struggle with Kibutsuji Muzan. He firmly believed that as long as he and Kamado Nezuko were still there, his family would not disappear. In his dialogue with Kibutsuji Muzan, the dead family and everyone in the Ghost Slayer Team reached out to hold him up, and Kamado Nezuko hugged him and called for her brother. In the redemption of the brother and sister, Kamado Tanjirou finally broke away from the consciousness control of Kibutsuji Muzan and returned to humanity.

### **2.2 Rengoku Kyoujurou**

The superego is a part of self-development, a moralized ego that includes what is commonly called conscience, ego ideal, and social norms. As the flaming pillar in the Ghost Slayer Team, Rengoku Kyoujurou wore a flamboyant-pattern cape, was cheerful and enthusiastic, had a loud voice, and was very caring for others. Although he didn't listen to people very much, he had excellent leadership and judgment. His weapon was the Nichirin Sword and used the breath of flaming to protect all passengers on the vehicle during the infinite train battle. He was pierced by the Akaza during the battle and died when dawn came. The infinite train chapter focuses on the character of Rengoku Kyoujurou, the experience with the protagonist group, the battle with Akaza, and the plot before death, depicting the image of Rengoku Kyoujurou in a rich and full manner. Although Rengoku Kyoujurou was so powerful, he failed to defeat Akaza. The departure of Rengoku Kyoujurou also laid the groundwork for the setting of the strength of Akaza and the battle.

Ego ideal is an important aspect of the superego. Rengoku Kyoujurou was the eldest son of the family, the eldest brother of the team, and the leader of the protagonist team. Some people say that as one of the nine pillars, the flaming pillar is a strong, gentle, sunny, enthusiastic, and highly attractive existence, and such a character setting must have great popularity. Perhaps it is precisely because he has some overlap with the protagonist Kamado Tanjirou that the cartoonist uses the plot to make Rengoku Kyoujurou prematurely died in

order to avoid a reversal of the order of host and guest. Rengoku Kyoujurou can be seen as a spiritual mentor of the protagonist, inspiring Kamado Tanjirou's firm determination to behead ghosts. Even if Rengoku Kyoujurou was not understood by his father, he was endlessly gentle towards his family and friends and ruthless towards his enemies, adhered to principles, and was full of ideals. According to Freud, the ultimate goal of all life is death. Humans have an internal instinct for death and an external instinct for destruction, the latter of which is manifested through aggression. Due to education, people are able to suppress these destructive instincts towards the outside.

Kibutsuji Muzan was eventually completely destroyed, and the Ghost Slayer Team also paid a tragic price. Kochou Shinobu was killed in the battle with Douma, and Tokitou Muichirou was killed in the duel with Kokushibou. There were countless team members who lived up to their mission, adhering to their beliefs, and fought until the last moment. From the beginning, Kamado Tanjirou only wanted to save his sister who had become a ghost. He showed his instinctive desire and paid his responsibilities as a brother for his family. Until he became a member of the Ghost Slayer Team, working with other members to help humanity eliminate "ghosts", he upheld justice, broke through the ego, achieved the realm of superego, and achieved higher, moral, and transpersonal directions.

### **3. THE SETTING OF THE VILLAIN CHARACTERS OF RETURNING TO THE ID**

The id includes the driving force that requires satisfying all instincts. The id is the foundation of personality, following the "happiness principle", advocating hedonism, and blindly pursuing satisfaction. Everything in the id is always unconscious, emphasizing the animal nature of human beings. It is a primitive and innate part of the personality, composed of innate instincts and primitive desires, including survival instincts, death instincts, and sexual instincts. Therefore, the id can be understood as the natural expression of human beings in an unconscious state.

In the work, Douma was considered by many people to be a pervert and a lunatic, and the only character in the upper string who had not been purified. Douma was regarded as the "Son of God" by foolish and superstitious parents due to his natural colorful eyes and white oak hair color.

Therefore, the young Douma cooperated with his parents' words and actions. His parents once founded the Eternal Blissful Sect, with Douma serving as the hierarch, using the "Son of God" stunt to attract believers. In general, Douma was a very lonely child who had not been understood since childhood, had received insufficient warmth but too much pain. Bearing too much pain led to his ability to actively close down his feelings, and he was gradually shaped into psychological distortion. After Douma became a ghost, many behaviors of him were also because of his eager for love, and there was love in him. From an early age, he was not treated like a child, nor was he able to experience the feelings of the world. When his parents died, Douma didn't feel sad, only having the sensory sensation: the smell of blood was very strong. There was also a rational idea in him: cleaning up the house quickly.

Freud believed that instinct is embodied as a permanent force caused by internal stimuli in the body, which is the internal motivation of human psychology and behavior, both for the purpose of obtaining pleasure from the body's organs. There are two basic types of human instincts: the instinct to live and the instinct to die. The purposes and functions of the two are quite different, but people need both of them at the same time. The instinct to die is not manifested as a desire to die, but rather as harming oneself or others, which includes self-destruction and aggressive drive, manifested as a tendency to invade, and is the transfer of the object of destruction from oneself to others. At the age of 20, Douma chose to become a ghost. Although killing people could prolong his lifespan, it was still useless for experiencing emotions. Emotion was an illusion for Douma. It could be said that one of the purposes for him to become a ghost was to have a longer time to experience human emotions. Douma didn't have any emotional experience, but he disguised himself as a ghost who could shed tears and sorrow for Akaza, laugh and express emotions in a variety of ways.

Ghosts were once human beings. The so-called ghosts are more like portrayals of the dark side of a man's heart, who have abandoned themselves for various reasons. Either because they feel lonely and desolate, or because they feel proud that no one in the world can understand them, or because they can't withstand the pressure from life and society, these people still have a strong human radiance before becoming ghosts, and they have all worked hard. But there is also a group of people who yearn for power, yearn for higher realms, and seek more

value at less cost. This type of people, before becoming a ghost, is already a ghost in their heart, and it only takes an opportunity for their body to become a ghost.

#### **4. TYPICAL SELF IMAGES**

The ego lies between the id and the superego, representing rationality and tact, acting in accordance with the principle of reality, and supervising the movements of the id. Agatsuma Zenitsu and Tamayo have distinct personalities in the work, demonstrating sociality and modernity, expressing people's ideological nature, and possessing rich aesthetic value. By virtue of its typicality and figurativeness, a typical self-image has a far greater impact than the image itself, winning readers' affection and resonating with them.

##### **4.1 *Agatsuma Zenitsu***

Compared to Kamado Tanjiro's calm, thoughtful and perfect character, Agatsuma Zenitsu's character setting is more three-dimensional and closer to the ordinary people around the audience. Agatsuma Zenitsu was cowardly, always cried when encountering difficulties, placed his hopes on others, and always wanted to escape. He was ridiculed and bullied by the senior, rejected and deceived by women, and when he was on the verge of death, he was so scared that he even fell asleep. Because of his own failure to accomplish anything, Agatsuma Zenitsu showed inferiority and lack of self-confidence. He was also brave and saw his own "trotting horse lamp", which was his grandfather's harshness towards him, his grandfather's repeated words "don't give up", and his grandfather's encouragement sentence by sentence. After undergoing cruel training, every gesture and motion had already been embedded in his bones, and he could use it even when he was asleep. When he was pushed to a desperate plight, when he heard his grandfather's encouragement, he would take a deep breath, give it a shot, focus on one point, and reach the peak. From the beginning, he only knew the first move of Thunder Breath, but finally he created the seventh move of Thunder Breath himself. He was never satisfied with his "one skill", but was exploring and improving bit by bit.

As a funny character in "Demon Slayer", Agatsuma Zenitsu had strong combat power after being unconscious. In the Spider Mountain chapter, he killed spiders alone, and the performance of the

UFO Club was extremely exciting. As a supporting role, there were not many gorgeous descriptions of his moves in the comics, but although it was only a short strike of him, it could be said to be thorough. Agatsuma Zenitsu was funny when he was normal, invincible when he was unconscious, and the gentle and kind character setting of him makes him attract countless fans. Some viewers say that they like his unique skill and his silly Emojis, and prefer his growth.

##### **4.2 *Tamayo***

In real life, there are often conflicts between the id and the superego. The id wants to do happy things at will, while the superego insists on doing the right things. The ego is governed by the principle of reality, regulating the ego's impulses and conflicts with the superego.

Getting rid of the id and firmly establishing the direction of the superego. After becoming a ghost, Kibutsuji Muzan discovered that he would die if he encountered sunlight. According to the prescription of the doctor who was killed by him, he knew that he could be cured through the "Blue Equinox Flower". In the process of searching, Kibutsuji Muzan found that Tamayo, who was terminally ill, was proficient in medical. By deceiving Tamayo, Kibutsuji Muzan turned her into a ghost, cured her of her illness, controlled her all the time and allowing her to study drugs to overcome the sunlight for his own use. Tamayo voluntarily became a ghost for her family, but after becoming a ghost, she killed her own family. After becoming a ghost, Tamayo entered a state of uncontrollable violence, killing her child and husband, and ultimately, the human nature of Tamayo defeated her ghost instinct. Although Tamayo always wanted revenge, due to her lack of ability, she had to work undercover beside Kibutsuji Muzan and played a waiting game. After hundreds of years, Tamayo finally waited for the emergence of Tsugikuni Yoriichi. In the battle with the two, Kibutsuji Muzan was heavily injured, and Tamayo also got rid of Kibutsuji Muzan's control due to his weakening. Later, Tamayo actively cooperated with the Ghost Slayer Team to study drugs that could transform ghosts into humans. During the decisive battle, Tamayo injected the medicine into Kibutsuji Muzan's body, and although the medicine was quickly disintegrated, it made Kibutsuji Muzan old and weakened him. The furious Kibutsuji Muzan killed Tamayo and ate her body.

The superego consciousness of Tamayo was embodied in the emotional aspect. As a ghost burdened with the guilt of killing the family and killing people, after breaking away from the shackles of Kibutsuji Muzan, Tamayo, who had been a gentle healer for hundreds of years, ultimately failed to die a natural death but died miserably. Tamayo was strong and powerful. In the thousand year ghost history before Kamado Nezuko, Tamayo was the only known ghost who had freed herself from the bondage of Kibutsuji Muzan. She not only defeated the bondage of Kibutsuji Muzan but also directly faced her own sin. As a ghost with no killability of blood ghost skill, a mother and wife who was originally gentle and kind, Tamayo finally pushed Kibutsuji Muzan into a desperate situation through her hundreds of years of research. The firm strength of her heart and the weight of her consciousness are amazing. Freud's psychoanalysis emphasized the important role of the subconscious in human behavior and had a significant impact on various fields of social science. In the subconscious mind of Tamayo, even as a ghost, killing was also evil, and she was unwilling to become a slave of Kibutsuji Muzan. In the process of confronting instincts, Tamayo adhered to herself and made great contributions to the final victory over the Ghost King Kibutsuji Muzan through her own efforts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The recurring words in "Demon Slayer" are "to become as powerful as a ghost". To seek revenge for their families, to protect the younger sister, and to eliminate ghosts, Kamado Tanjirou and others tempered hard to break through themselves, and eventually became as powerful as ghosts, and competed with them. During the war against the Ghost Slayer Team, within three hours of the drug taking effect, Kibutsuji Muzan had already aged 9000 years, but still had boundless power. Therefore, "like a ghost" indicates that humans are not as good as ghosts, and suggests that the "ghost" who abandons the ego in the human heart is the ultimate dominator of human beings. There is no doubt that in this uncertain and chaotic era, there is another field beyond the world that people can't know, and the terror brought by the spiritual level is the intellectual wonder that people can't know.

Japanese anime literature has a long history and a wide audience, enriching the variety of Japanese culture. In the past decades of rapid development of science and technology, anime culture has always

occupied a place in the Japanese spiritual world, displaying a deeper humanistic spirit, with a wide range of themes and profound, exquisite quality and no lack of artistry. Its monster-themed animation works have also been endowed with new aesthetic connotations, reflecting a deep imprint of national culture. Whether subconscious or unconscious, it always plays an important role in human behavior and has an important impact on various fields of society. Its application in the interpretation of literary works has also enriched and developed the theory of literary criticism, allowing researchers to no longer ignore the psychological characteristics of literary creation and acceptance, making literary theory and psychology combined, which is helpful for researchers to better understand works.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Sigmund Freud. "The Ego and the Id", translated by Lin Chen et al. [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011,9. (in Chinese)
- [2] Jiang Jianqiang. "Demon Slayer" and the Brain Burning Japanese Ghost Culture [J]. Book Town, 2021,1. (in Chinese)
- [3] Zhou Meitong. Analysis of the Reasons for the Hot Release of the Animation Film "Demon Slayer" [J]. Time Report (Running Current), 2021,4. (in Chinese)