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“There’s a Tear in My Beer”: Understanding Childhood Trauma and the Addiction Memoir

Mary Karr is an author from Texas who has written novels, poems, and three memoirs regarding her childhood and alcohol addiction. For the purpose of this paper I will delve on her memoir *Lit*, which has a primary focus on her experience with alcohol addiction. *Lit* begins with Karr traveling from her home town to the West coast; however, she does not stay there long before she moves again to start college. While at college she meets Warren, but it is also during this time that her alcohol addiction becomes prevalent. Eventually Karr and Warren get married and have a son, Dev, but their relationship is rocky due to Warren’s outlook on Karr because of her addiction. After Karr attempts to commit suicide, she checks herself into a hospital and shortly after that she and Warren split up. She battled with her addiction all throughout their marriage, but once they are separated, she begins the recovery process. The memoir features an interesting first-person narrator with a complex mind worth exploring. Therefore, I aim to look into Mary Karr’s id, ego, and superego as presented in her memoir *Lit* for two primary purposes: first, to better understand how the three systems interact with one another and, second, to explore how these interacting systems perhaps contributed to the development of alcohol use disorder. Finally, I will explore Karr’s childhood as detailed in her writing to examine specific events that could have impacted her id, ego, and superego.

According to Sigmund Freud a child’s personality development is composed of three systems that develop at different stages in the child’s life. These three systems are the id, the ego,

and the superego. The id is the first to develop, as it is present at the birth of the child (Cordón). The id drives itself from instincts and operates on the pleasure principle—often known for being selfish, irrational, and part of the unconscious mind. The ego is the next system that develops, which helps calm the id by rationalizing one’s thoughts and making decisions. The ego is unlike the id because it has conscious idea of the world, meaning it tries to satisfy both the id and the superego acting as a mediator between the two and making sure societal standards are followed. Lastly, there is the superego which acts as the moral system. The superego develops from the ego and functions by contributing morals to the decision-making process, letting the ego know that, if it does something wrong, it will be punished with guilt (Cordón). Though they do work together, the id, ego, and superego can be imbalanced, creating an unhealthy adulthood psyche. If the id is more in control, the person can grow up to be impulsive and selfish. An id more dominant than the ego and superego can be seen in the narrator of Karr’s memoir, *Lit*. However, an examination of impulsive and selfish behavior is only the beginning of seeing how one’s childhood impacts adulthood; it is also important to understand specifically how trauma results in a dominant id.

In the first sentence Karr describes herself, “age seventeen, stringy-haired and halter topped, weighing in the high double digits and unhindered by a high school diploma, I showed up at the Pacific Ocean, ready to seek my fortune with a truck full of extremely stoned surfers” (Karr 19). With this early sentence in the memoir, Karr reveals a lot herself at this time of her life—first, it seems her parents are not strict; she has left her home town at the age of seventeen with a group of people, and any strict parent would not want their child hanging out with, much less moving to pursue her life with such a deviant group of teenagers. Second, readers learn she gives into the pleasure principle easily by the way she is getting into a truck, moving across the country, and noting that she is “unhindered” now with a high school diploma. These three things

show Karr's narrator makes decisions on impulse to satisfy her pleasure principle, instead of thinking long-term with her reality principle. The pleasure principle is part of the id's goal is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. While everyone has this pleasure principle within them the ego normally works to control the pleasure-seeking activities. However, because she makes it known she left her home town in such a reckless way without caring about her high school diploma lets readers know her id is strong and her ego is weak within the first sentence.

The reader continues to see the more dominant id throughout the memoir in the many ways, one of which is the way Karr's narrator prioritizes drinking. The reader can see Karr putting drinking before her job, her relationship, and rent—when her manager threatens to fire her so she quits and goes to a bar to drink (Karr 131). She states, “with only five or six dollars in tips, how much trouble can I get in?” (Karr 132-133). Once again, it is difficult for her to think about much else besides drinking with what little bit of money to do that. However, she ends up drinking sixty dollars' worth of alcohol and has to borrow money from Warren to pay her tab. In this scene before Warren pays her tab she states, “twenty dollars is approximately one tenth of my rent” (Karr 134). Meaning she drank three tenths of her rent in one night showing how quickly she seems to develop alcohol use disorder. This scene also makes clear she is almost out of money showing how alcohol triggers her pleasure principle in difficult times, such as quitting her job and stressing over money.

With alcohol triggering her pleasure principle, and the fact she has a strong id and weak ego she is more likely to rely on alcohol in stressful times because she wants to satisfy her desires and her ego is not strong enough to override that desire. Relying on alcohol during times of stress can be seen again shortly after she gives birth to Dev; during this time, Karr is experiencing post-partum, she and Warren are sleeping in separate beds, and Warren is failing to

help her take care of their son (Karr 216-228). Soon, Karr's mother tells her the beer will help her milk dry up, so she begins drinking a "daily beer or two" for "healing purposes." Karr later writes that she stopped breast feeding within a few weeks because she knew "three or four or five beers could affect Dev's milk supply" (Karr 228). Here, we see Karr's difficulty restricting her consumption of alcohol; she arguably needs to receive pleasure from something, and she finds this pleasure in alcohol. Even though her drinking prevents her from being able to breast feed her child, she cannot stop drinking because of her need to satisfy her pleasure principle within her id is stronger than the reality principle within her ego.

The next scene continues on this idea that times of stress led her to drink more by the way she handles getting up with Dev in the middle of the night when he is sick. The scene starts with Dev spiking a fever and having to visit the hospital where his sickness continues for some time. Even once he returns home his cough is still violent enough to keep Karr worried about her son. One can assume her stress levels are even higher now than before because on top of problems with Warren and post-partum her son is now sick. Her higher stress levels are accompanied with more drinking as well and can be seen when she says:

That's the secret to getting up: the glass talks and my neck cranes towards the drink like flower to sunbeam. My heavy skull rises, throbbing with a pulse beat. I grab the drink and let a long gulp burn a corridor through the sludge that runs up the middle of me-that trace of fire my sole brightness. A drink once brought ease, a bronze warmth spreading through all my muddy regions. Now it only brings a brief respite from the bone ache of craving it, no more delicious numbness. (Karr 232)

It is important to remember that this quotation is in regard to how she gets up in the middle of the night to take care of her sick son. Reinforcing that as times become increasingly stressful, her

drinking also increases. In an interview with Sheryl McCarthy, Karr was asked why she used to drink so much; Karr, without hesitation, stated she was depressed and then followed with childhood stories. This answer supports the idea of trauma as a risk factor for addiction. When Karr writes, “a drink once brought ease, spreading through all my muddy regions” (232), she is referencing her id and ego became impaired during her childhood. To understand this, we should look at happened during her childhood to create these “muddy regions” that impaired her id and ego.

The first time the readers come across a traumatic incident within Karr’s childhood is in the prologue. She asks her mother why she tried to kill her and her sister with a butcher knife; her mother responds by saying “I just could not imagine bringing two girls up in a world where they do such awful things to women. So, I decided to kill you both, to spare you” (Karr 5). In this moment readers can see that Karr’s mother did not model a strong ego herself because her mother did not know how to bring the reality principle into play when making decisions either. It is important when trying to understand Karr to understand her mother suffered from mental health problems and alcohol use disorder. Here, we see not one but two of the primary risk factors of addiction at play Karr’s narrative.

In a study by the Centre for Community Child Health in Melbourne Australia, which focused on parental stress predictors of early childhood internalizing difficulties, researchers found that children whose parents were less warm and engaging with them were more likely to internalize difficulties from their childhood and develop anxiety and depression. Adolescents are also more likely to carry the anxiety and depression into adulthood due to the fact they internalized them as a child (Bayer). The findings from this study give support that Karr’s id was traumatized when her mother rationalized an attempt to kill her by claiming the world is cruel to

girls. Her mother believing, she was doing the right thing by trying to kill her daughters to protect them is one situation from Karr's childhood that she internalized, perhaps contributing to depression. And ultimately, depression arguably caused her to need to satisfy her pleasure principle, without taking into account her reality principle, which led her to drink more once she did find said pleasure in alcohol. In addition to the pleasure principle theory, it is important to point out that we often see comorbid diagnoses with substance use disorder and other mental illnesses.

Another part of Karr's childhood that could have impacted her id and ego was the fact both of her parents suffered from alcohol use disorder. Research shows how growing up in a household where one if not both parents are alcoholics hinder a child's development. Sihyun Park and Karen Schepp take it a step beyond how it impacts their development to see how a child adapts to a parent's alcohol addiction in their article, "The Patterns of Adaptation While Growing Up Under Parental Alcoholism: A Grounded Theory." With their research they argue that a child adapts to their parent's alcohol addiction in six stages.

In stage one, children feel trapped. Park and Schepp explain how, when a child is too young to understand what is going on, they are trapped and feel helpless. This psychological entrapment can be seen when Karr's mother tries to stab her, and she is far too young to rationalize her mother's illness and need for help.

The second stage of Park and Schepp's research is awakening which refers to the moments the child realizes a parent has a drinking problem. Karr writes about the moment she learned everything she had hoped was not true about her father was, in fact, true. In that moment Karr's father picks her up for winter break and on the ride home pulls out a whiskey bottle from under the seat, drinks some himself, and then offer it to her. She shows this is the moment of

realizing her father's problem because she states, "for the first time in front of me," (Karr 64). The third stage is struggling, which consists of attempting to control the parents drinking or improve their situation. Karr realized she could not control her parents drinking so she tried to improve her situation which readers can see when she writes, "I adapted to Daddy's absence partly by smoking enough reefer to float me through a house where-increasingly-nobody's path intersected with another" (Karr 26). Here, readers can see because her mother did not help her develop a reality principle instead of facing the fact her father was becoming increasingly absent due to his drinking, she smoked marijuana to make herself happy, giving into the pleasure principle. Next, comes the blocking stage where the child attempts to block the alcoholic parent out of their life. Karr can be seen attempting to block both parents out of her life by the way she moves out of state as soon as she graduates from high school without contacting them until she decides she needs to go to college. The next stage is understanding one's family addiction, which can be seen throughout *Lit*, when Karr begins to struggle with alcohol and therefore commiserates with her dying father and creates a better relationship with her mother. The final stage is separation. In this stage the person begins to find identity outside of being a child of a person suffering from addiction. Karr finding her identity outside of this can be seen when she enters into her own recovery process, in her case, seeking guidance from a higher power. Examining how Karr adapts to her parents' alcoholism shows her development was based around her parent's alcohol addiction resulting in the need to satisfy her pleasure principle, as well contributing a primary risk factor for her own development of alcohol use disorder.

In another memoir by Karr, titled *The Liars Club*, the writer reveals more details about her childhood trauma. Karr writes about two rapes she endured as a child. Many studies show the link between people childhood trauma and the development of substance use disorder. For

example, Ayeshe Hunter looks into the connection with a phenomenological lens allowing the people who experience childhood trauma and then later developed a dependency for a substance, to share their view of the connection between the two. This connection is important because not everyone who has a childhood trauma develops a dependency on a substance and not everyone who has ever depended on a substance had a childhood trauma. After talking to several women, Hunter concluded that “when trauma begins early in one’s life and persists for an extended period of time, it can cause women to present with a wide range of psychological difficulties, emotional distress, behavioral dysregulation, and interpersonal challenges” (11).

Within her writing, it is clear that Karr experienced a great deal of childhood trauma. It can be argued that her narrator was not taught how to satisfy both the pleasure principle of her id and the reality principle of ego throughout her childhood, as she was preoccupied attempting to adapt and care for herself as the child of parents with mental illness and alcohol use disorder. The delayed development of her ego and overactive id along with still adapting to her parent’s alcoholic dependency could be one factor of her own eventual alcohol dependency. These findings are beneficial to understand that something happens psychologically when a child experiences trauma that can later lead them to experiencing a substance dependency. However, these findings also led to more questions: what do trauma narratives and addiction narratives have in common? What can we learn from addiction narratives about recovery not only from substance use disorders, but also other mental illnesses? Exploring sensitive topics, like addiction, through literature is beneficial because it allows insight into the person’s eyes who suffers from substance use disorder, which allows readers to feel empathy for those suffering. Karr evokes this feeling of empathy for her narrator, which allows the audience to look past her addiction and see her as a person who suffered from trauma.



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