THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND AND MEMORY: THROUGH A FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE
The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and Memory: Through a Freudian Perspective

Our memories are the only permanent part of us. As we grow older, we lose teeth, we lose hair, and cells are born to replace the ones we lose over time. However, memories aren’t something we lose over time. Although our ability to recall them is limited, their imprint on us never dissipates. Memories are the main formative element of our identities that begin growing at a young age. Those years are critical to our identity, since those initial memories will shape how we remember and interpret other memories to come. Our childhood experiences, positive or negative, are crucial and imperative to how we utilize and apply our memories in our everyday adult lives.

“Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.” Life would be so much easier if you could permanently forget your memories, right? In the broken society of Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind directed by Michel Gondry, it’s as simple as that. Dr. Mierzwiak’s clinic offers what the audience would see as a foreign medical procedure but is displayed as a completely normal practice in society. The procedure erases specific memories chosen by the patient, a mysterious phenomenon to modern society. In the film, memory is portrayed as somewhat meaningless and lacking value. The ability to instantly “un-remember” a possibly embarrassing, upsetting, or heartbreaking moment is both normal and encouraged. It is apparent in Dr. Mierzwiak’s countless clients, some who wish the procedure could be done more often, and the unattached attitude of all individuals in the film.

In the film, erasing one’s memory is as simple as going to the grocery store. The society is very accepting of the procedure, some using it for small memories, and some using it for life-altering moments. Not only do patients treat it with no care, so do some of the people that assist
in the procedure. While performing the procedure of Joel, assistants Stan, Patrick, and Mary are more focused on each other and their social lives than Joel’s life changing moment. Partying in his apartment while Joel lays helplessly, the technicians get high and dance half-naked around him. These actions are careless and haphazard, almost ruining Joel’s procedure. Additionally, Patrick, an assistant, manipulates Joel and Clementine, using Joel’s failed relationship with Clementine as a template for how to have a successful relationship with her. Of course, it makes her drawn to Patrick when she most likely would not have been otherwise. This not only manipulates Clementine into a relationship she wouldn’t have wanted, but also manipulates Joel and ruins his chances of getting back together with Clementine.

However, by the end of the film, characters begin to understand the value of memory. Erasing the “bad” memories only does more damage to your identity, making you more susceptible to pain and disappointment. Each and every memory is valuable to the individual, setting precedent for the next. In the flashback scene, Joel and Clementine go back to memories from Joel’s childhood, which he tried to suppress. Some of these memories he forgot existed, but then through his adventure realized how important they were after all. Mary also finds out that her memory was erased, baffling her. Both Mary and Joel were powerfully overcome with emotion upon finding out that their memories and memories of them, respectively, were lost. Both Joel and Mary make it their mission to hold onto these memories, and Mary tries to encourage all patients to do the same. Such an emotional upheaval makes one want to distrust their memory, leaving a gap in their identity.

Not only is memory crucial to the plot of these stories, but it is crucial to the wellbeing of the characters. Joel is visibly insane once he becomes aware that his memory is disappearing, and he has no control over what his brain is retaining. The feeling of literally losing his mind
causes him to spiral and rethink his entire existence. If the presence of memory is so important, why would anyone want to get rid of it? Most, if not all, characters aren’t looking to sabotage their own minds through this form of damage, consciously or not. The value of a memory is not understood until it is in the past, but will you ever know the importance of a memory if it’s gone? Instead of erasing our memories, society today encourages the repression of traumatic events instead. Since society lacks easily accessible mind-erasing technology, repression is the next best thing. To protect ourselves, our mind will force memories deep into the unconscious part of our mind.

Using the Freudian definition, the unconscious mind is the largest part of our mind, driving our interests, thought processes, and motivations. The unconscious mind contains a small sliver called the preconscious, which is where our memories are stored. Pushing unwanted memories to the preconscious mind will allow us to clear them from our immediate thoughts but will utilize them through our motivations. A part of his psychoanalytic theory, Freud developed his concept of repression. Freud believes repression occurs when a memory holds a damaging emotional weight to the individual, causing the memory to be moved from our conscious mind to our preconscious mind. We become completely unaware of the memory’s existence, but it isn’t erased from us completely.

The existence of specific memory may not be known to us, but each one carries significant value to our unconscious mind. We can see this idea come to life when Joel and Clementine are running from the procedure in the flashback scene referenced earlier. Joel is in his house on a rainy day, trying to play outside. Joel easily thinks of this childhood memory but uncovers another. While hiding under a table to avoid the rain, it reminds Joel of a suppressed memory. Joel is a baby in this memory, and through his manipulation, makes Clementine into his
babysitter. He hides under the table because he is upset that his mother will not pay attention to him. This makes him upset, but is not a strong memory of his childhood, despite its effects on his emotions. This is likely a suppressed memory, since he wouldn’t want to remember feeling neglected by his mother.

The inability to utilize memories in our thoughts and interests would handicap our ability to properly connect with others and connect with ourselves. Many will say that memory is the “downfall” of the individual. However, our memory is only our downfall if we choose not to build upon it. Revision is just as important as our memories, since lack of would cause the “downfall” of the individual. Using self-revision, we can balance our memory and our need for improvement, creating our ideal identity.
Works Cited

1) “Psychoanalysis: A Brief History of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory [2019].”
