Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious

While Freud and Lacan have different ideas about how the unconscious is formed, and what it’s purpose is, both agree that the unconscious is something that can never be fully known to the lucid mind. Lacan might attempt to weave an impression of what the unconscious *is* based upon what it *is not,* while Freud (as usual) attempts to convince everyone that it all pertains to their mothers. Freud believed that the unconscious acts as an ultimate motivator for all “desires”, while Lacan declared the unconscious the center of the human mind, with all other notions of selfhood and meaning based upon their relation to it.

People want to have sex, and they want to have sex with their mothers. This statement is, in essence, Freud’s underlying reason for all human behavior, and an explanation for different states of mind. This is because Freud believed that the unconscious is home to any and all “repressed” desires, which have been pushed away and remain unsatisfied, creating tension or distress within an individual. In the “polymorphously perverse” stages of early childhood, desires need not be repressed due to the infinite accessibility of the mother. The first instance of when a baby male must repress his desires comes just after the Oedipus Complex. His desire to retain a connection to his mother, who he wants to satisfy his newfound phallic urges, is counterbalanced by his fear that his father will castrate him should he attempt to rise up and displace him. This “Castration Complex” directly leads to the formation of the unconscious, which becomes the singular storehouse for any and all repressed desires. Freud has a tough time addressing how females develop their own Unconscious, as they never have the same sexual desires for their mothers that men do, and thusly do not form a Castration Complex. As a result of this, women never “fully develop” their Unconscious, according to Freud, rendering their repressed desires all the more likely to seep into the conscious and cause different neuroses. This would lead Freud to create Psychoanalysis, through which one would identify (and then hopefully collapse) their repressed desires via discussion with a psychologist.

Freud and Lacan both realized that the Unconscious had a direct impact upon the development of the Self or “I”. However, Lacan believed that every person’s sense of selfhood is a mere illusion formed by the unconscious. This process begins in Lacan’s Imaginary Stage, in which the child has begun to formulate an idea of “otherness” while still ignorant of it’s own individual essence. A critical moment occurs through a phenomenon known as Specular Imaging; upon first seeing it’s reflection in a mirror, the child identifies the exterior image as itself, believing that it is “I” he is seeing for the first time. This event also gives birth to the Ego. Lacan says that this development is phantasmal - no true change has occurred, but the child now experiences a false sense of entirety, having transformed the “ideal ego” seen in the mirror into a sense of selfhood. While the child only understood otherness before, it now possesses independence from nearby people and objects. For the rest of it’s life, the child will base its sense of selfhood upon the mirror image that he incorrectly identified as himself.