
Freud and the Creative Writer: An analysis of Writing, Dreaming and the Interpretation of Dreams

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Abstract

Freud well known for his psychoanalytic theory relates to art in general but focuses on literature in particular. In his thought provoking essays *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud like many other writers before him tries to analyze from where the creative writers draw his inspiration and materials and why they have such a tremendous influence on the readers. Freud links this to the activity closest to creative writing and draws our attention to the unconscious or suppressed emotions of our childhood. Splendidly blending science and literature, Freud draws our attention and forces us to rethink the significance of the unconscious minds. Comparing fantasies, the plays of children and dreams, the paper tries to explore and understand Freud's significance in the contemporary literary scenario. It aims at analyzing the perennial question as to what prompts a creative piece of literature and the forces that distinguishes one man from another even though all men may be 'poets at heart.'

Keywords- *Creative Writing, Dreams, Repressed Desires, Day-Dreaming, Subconscious Mind*

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Introduction

Sigmund Schlomo Freud (1856–1939) better known as Sigmund Freud was undoubtedly among the best known figures of the 20th century. Rightly called Freud's century, the seminal works of Freud have left an indelible mark and continue to exert tremendous influence even in this 21st century. In the words of Freud's critic John Kihlstrom:

More than Einstein or Watson and Crick, more than Hitler or Lenin, Roosevelt or Kennedy, more than Picasso, Eliot, or Stravinsky, more than the Beatles or Bob Dylan, Freud's influence on modern culture has been profound and long-lasting.

From interpretation of dreams to the psychopathology of everyday life, this Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist's legacy has transcended the fields of science and he is today an important figure in the realms of literature and literary criticism. Popularly known as the 'father of psychoanalysis', he is best known for his exploration into the unconscious mind.

Constantly absorbed in oneirology, Freud was among the foremost men who made sustained efforts to study and understand dreams in a scientific manner. After the analysis of a number of his clinical patients, Freud tried to understand the hidden significance of dreams and more importantly tried to understand from where creative writers draw their inspiration.

People have often wondered how all the great writers are able to bring out such momentous and significant works. Where Herman Melville believed 'to produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme', there were other writers like Somerset Maugham who asserted that 'if you can tell stories, devise incidents, and have sincerity and passion, it doesn't matter how you write.' Freud however was very interested as to where the creative writers drew their inspiration from.

In his thought provoking piece, *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, Freud tries to answer a recurrent question that has haunted centuries of men including Cardinal Ippolito D'Este who questioned the Italian narrative poet Ludovico Ariosto, "Where did you find so many stories, Lodovico?" (Freud, 1995)

Where writers find their tales is a curious and debatable question and the answers even more confusing. Like us laymen, Freud also wonders from where the creative writer draws his material and how they manage to arouse in us such powerful emotions which we never would have thought we are capable of. Interestingly, even when writers themselves are questioned of their own sources, they are confounded and unable to give us any satisfactory explanation or any clear insight 'into the determinants of his choice of material'. Many of the creative writers try to bridge the gap between the common human

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beings and themselves by assuring us that ‘every man is a poet at heart and that the last poet will not perish till the last man does.’

Freud however is not content with this explanation and traces the imaginative activities of writers to childhood and questions us, “Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood?” (Freud, 1995)

There is no doubt that games preoccupy children all the time and it is their best-loved and most intense occupation. He rightly notes that every child behaves like a creative writer whilst playing where he creates his own fanciful world with his rich and fertile imagination. Freud draws our attention as to how language has preserved this relationship between the child’s play and the poetic creation. The term “play” or the German “Spiel” is a play in all its senses, which includes drama and role-playing. This interesting term from Friedrich Schiller’s 18th-century aesthetic theory in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humankind* (1795) focuses on *Lustspiel* (comedy), *Trauerspiel* (tragedy) and the *Spieltrieb* or the drive toward play as the main aesthetic principle.

Freud is right when he remarks that every child creates his world and re-arranges the things that are a part of his world in a different and new manner that would please him. Children love their games and they invest a wide range of emotions in these games. Many of us may not have thought before of the seriousness and effort those children expend on their games and play. Like Freud remarks, “It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously.” (Freud, 1995)

What should also be noted is that most of these children also have the ability to distinguish the games from reality. A child usually links his imagination to the real world and this linking helps to separate the child’s world of ‘play’ and the child’s world of ‘fantasy.’ Similarly, the creative writer also uses his imagination and does the same. He takes his world of fantasy very seriously. The writer also ‘invests large amounts of emotion’ to invent his plots, characters, and settings.

In this essay Freud also tries to make a distinction between the imaginative writer and the ‘dreamer in broad daylight’ and also the creations of these writers and their daydreams. He also ponders over the reason as to why some things are more enjoyable only in fiction. Freud rightly notes:

For many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of fantasy, and many excitements which, in themselves, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer's work. (Freud, 1995)

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This is best exemplified in the gory scenes of Shakespeare's play which would definitely not appeal to all men and women were it to be real. Samuel Johnson also makes this observation in his *Preface to Shakespeare* where he notes, "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind." (Johnson, 1778)

Likewise in the case of kids they enjoy being heroes but they forget the perils they would have to face in reality and the actual trauma that they might have to endure. Even the laymen and readers enjoy these works of fiction because it is seen as entertainment that relieves them from the mundane everyday affairs without participating or involving themselves completely. In fact as Freud notes that even, "The author sits inside his mind, as it were, and looks at the other characters from outside." (Freud, 1995)

In fact, if these stories were to be real they may not live up to the idealized versions that a person has in his mind. As a child grows up this 'play' cannot continue as earlier and hence he has to give up this source of pleasure which is not easy because they are aware of the escape that it can provide. As a substitute, adults now indulge in "fantasies" and "daydreams", but what is to be remembered is that the adult is ashamed of these fantasies and tries his best to conceal it from others. A distinction now has to be made between adulthood and childhood. There is a need to concede to the principal of reality. Imagination can no longer be wild and free, but has limitations and has very few avenues to express it, and thus the creative works takes birth. The pleasure principle plays a dominant role when it comes to imagination. When our reality does not allow us to enjoy a certain pleasure, we seek for gratification in our imagination. Children's play is substituted by humor and this is replaced by literature. Pleasure is never abandoned, but it exchanged or substituted by one or the other forms of pleasure.

Freud also discusses the possible reasons adults could be ashamed of their fantasies. He thinks it could be because they are either childish or it could be because these fantasies cross the limits of societal conventions and are immoral or improper. Thus, this fear or shame restricts and prevents the adults from sharing their imagination. The fear of revealing too much is also a reason.

Freud then goes on to outline the characteristics of these fantasies. According to him fantasies are of two distinct types. The first one is the ambitious wishes where the subjects are elevated and the social status is enhanced. The second one is the erotic fantasies that focus on relationships, love and sexual gratification. Ambition is linked to men whereas the erotic fantasies are attributed to the women. The ambitious and erotic fantasies are often united in our fantasies.

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He also draws our attention as to how the heroes in these tales are egoistic. As Freud remarks, "We can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every daydream and of every story." (Freud, 1995)

We live vicariously through this hero to overcome our own vulnerability. The hero is usually the writer or reader and they can identify themselves with the hero. He also writes about the 'black and white portrayal' and how they are sharply divided. The good characters of the literary world are the helpers, whereas the bad characters are the rivals and enemies of the ego who is the hero of the story. Here Freud focuses on preconceived plots and motifs.

In case of the modern authors, the hero is fragmented into different parts and split into various characters. Freud writes:

The psychological novel in general no doubt owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part egos. (Freud, 1995)

Freud also focuses on the connection between daydreaming and the creative process. The creative writer, or as Freud calls him the "dreamer in broad daylight" also takes his world of fantasy very seriously. He also centers his interest on the writers of romances and popular novels rather than the classical, and notes that one distinctive attribute of all these writings is the main character or the hero. The hero's journey in a work is synonymous to the journey of the writer's ego as well as those of the readers. As Freud writes:

One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers: each of them has a hero who is the center of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special Providence. (Freud, 1995)

Thus, Freud suggests that a work of creative writing becomes a substitute for the children's play.

Freud then discusses those authors who draw their inspiration from myths and folk tales. In these instances, this writer reinvents and expresses his own point of view and accordingly chooses his material and mode of writing. In such cases, too, the author expresses himself in the choice of material and in the subtle changes he introduces. Even if he does not change the myth, these myths reflect the collective fantasies of a larger faction. As he comments, "...it is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations, the secular dreams of youthful humanity." (Freud, 1995)

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In this essay Freud also tries to understand why we experience such inordinate pleasure from the fantasies of the creative writers. This could be because the egoistic character of the fantasies reduced the severity of any situation and penetrates the barriers. Another reason could be that creative writers focus on the purely aesthetic pleasure of the form and structure. This is related to the principal of "incentive pleasure" or "fore-pleasure."

Thus, in his essay *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* Freud brings out the egoistical characteristic of writers and how literature is fundamentally autobiographical. He also focuses on how writers find release in their literary and imaginative activities and how it acts as a substitute for the neurotic symptoms. Creative writing is also a manifestation of various confessions and is therapeutic not only for the writer but also for the reader. Literature helps us to release our frustrations and helps to vicariously live our own wishes, problems, potentials, dangerous consequences.

The structure of literature is thus similar to the structure of dreams and the creative imaginations operate on similar principles of dreams. He wants us to remember the stress on childhood memories in the creative writer's life. He remarks, "...a piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood." (Freud, 1995)

Apart from analyzing the significance of daydreaming, and the influence that childhood memories have on the creative writers, Freud also focuses on the significance of dreams. In his magnum opus *The Interpretation of Dream*, Freud highlights the significance of dreams and how they represent wish fulfillment- 'the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood.' None of this great psychoanalyst's works have caused as much furor as his theory of the Oedipal complex. Freud believed that the incestuous impulses of children survive in the unconscious layers of the adult mind. Freud believed that dreams were "the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious". Using his own dreams and the dreams of some of his patients, Freud reached the conclusion that dreams played a pivotal role in an individual's psyche. According to him there was a significant connection between the mind's energy and a person's sexual drive, and hence all dreams or nightmares are outlets of the libidinous energy.

Focusing on the two major tragedies, Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Freud focuses on the psychological exploration and interpretation of the soul. He notes that the reason *Oedipus Rex* written so many years earlier is capable of affecting even the modern reader today is because of 'the particular nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed.' Freud remarks, "His fate moves us only because it might have been our own..." (Freud, 1907)

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Freud writes that Laius who was slain by King Oedipus his own son is because of the repressed desire and attraction towards the mother. Freud believes that like Oedipus we all have latent desires and writes:

As the poet brings the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigation, he forces us to become aware of our inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are suppressed. (Freud, 1907)

Freud also believes that the dream of having sexual relations with one's own mother was as common in the past as it is today. As he writes, "...it is the key to the tragedy and the complement to the dream of the death of the father." (Freud, 1907)

As the author brings the guilt of Oedipus to the forefront, he forces the readers also to become aware of our own inner thoughts. Freud is of the opinion that like Oedipus Rex we too live in ignorance of the wishes that offend morality and hence we avert our gaze and look away from the scenes of our childhood. Freud asserts tragedy of Sophocles had its origin in the dream-material of 'immemorial antiquity.'

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also has its roots in the same soil as that of *Oedipus Rex*, but there is a change in the treatment of the material. This change in the material reveals the difference in the mental setup of the two varied civilizations spread over different ages. Whereas in *Oedipus Rex* this wish-fantasy is discovered and realized as it is in dreams, in Shakespeare's tragedy of *Hamlet* it is repressed, and we are made aware of its existence through the after effects. As Freud notes:

In *Oedipus Rex* the basic wish fantasy of the child is brought to life and realized as it is dreams; in *Hamlet* it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence-as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis-only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it. (Freud, 1907)

When Hamlet's father is killed and his mother Gertrude remarries soon after, Hamlet feels the need to avenge his father's death. He is unable to avenge the death not because he is incapable of action but because of his Oedipal complex. According to Freud:

The loathing which should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach, by conscientious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish. (Freud, 1907)

On the surface, the two plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* seem to be different when it comes to the competition with their own fathers for the mother's affections. Hamlet seems to be very affectionate and loyal towards his father but according to Freud Hamlet is repressing his actual urges due to the norms of

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the civilized society. Wish fulfillment is unconsciously motivated, and hence it is difficult to find a balance between the basic and potentially conflicted desires.

Like other neurotic symptoms dreams also require hyper-interpretation before they make sense or become as Freud says 'perfectly intelligible'. Freud also believes that every genuine creation of a writer proceeds from more than one single motive, more than one single impulse and therefore has more than one interpretation. He attempts to interpret only 'the deepest stratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet.'

Conclusion

Just like Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Plato or Poe tried to understand the roots of creative writing; Freud also uses scientific grounds to attempt an explanation of the artistic and literary imaginations. Whether it is the games of childhood, fantasies or dreams what remains common is the human beings desire to significantly alter the unpleasant realities that causes dissatisfaction. A creative writer's choice of subject seems to be hidden in the unfulfilled desires of our childhood and the repressed emotions that manifest itself in the great works.

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