

## SIGMUND FREUD "CREATIVE WRITERS AND DAY-DREAMING" (1908)

Freud, Sigmund. "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." Criticism: the Major Statements. Ed. Charles Kaplan. New York: St. Martin's, 1991. 419-428.

Freud's focus in this essay is on the relationship which exists between an author and his work. His stated goal is to uncover "from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it" (420).

In Freud's view, firstly, there is an analogy between the activity of poetic creation and the world of play and fantasy indulged in by children. For Freud, the "motive forces" (423) of all fantasies are "unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality" (423). Fantasies are most often provoked, Freud argues, by

some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish. (424)

Freud contends, in line with this, that a

strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. (427)

It is in this way that the writer "creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality" (421).

Freud differentiates, secondly, between writers who "take over their material ready-made" (425) (such material is derived from the "popular treasure-house of myths, legends and fairy tales" [427], myths being the "distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity" [427]) and those who "originate their own material" (425). Freud's focus is on the latter (fantasies that originate with/in the individual writer) whereas, by contrast, as we shall see later, Carl Jung's interest is in the former category (the link between literature and myth).

Thirdly, Freud proposes that unsatisfied wishes fall into two categories: those concerned with one's career and those that are erotic in nature. The former tend to occur in the day, the latter at night. For Freud, night-dreams are manifestations of fantasies that are less respectable because they are, more often than not, erotic in nature and thus forbidden: "at night there also arise in us wishes of which we are ashamed; these we must conceal from ourselves, and they have consequently been repressed, pushed into our unconscious" (425). Dreams accordingly take two main forms: those that cater to wish-fulfilment on the part of the ego and the ego-ideal (or super-ego) and those that seek to repress those unpalatable desires which lurk in the unconscious. Sometimes, of course, both these trends can be mingled in the same dream.

With regard to wish-fulfilment, Freud finds it significant that many stories written by male authors have a "hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means" (425). This hero is most often invulnerable and the women characters almost inevitably fall in love with him. It is precisely because of these characteristics that Freud recognises in the hero of such stories "His Majesty the

Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story" (425). The hero is, in short, a fantasised projection of the writer's ego as *he* would like it to appear. This process of projection is even visible in the more complex characterisation of the modern psychological novel, Freud argues, where the writer splits up his ego "into many part-egos" (426) and personifies in this way the "conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes" (426).

By the same token, if literary works contain characters and episodes that are nothing more than wish-fulfillments, they also contain evidence of those repressed desires that are lodged in the writer's unconscious (the work is thought to be a sublimation, from this point of view). The literary work is something akin to a night-dream or even a neurosis which can be explored for symptoms of the writer's unconscious desires. From this point of view, the process by which fictional works of literature are created is analogous to the process of repression involved in the dream-work that utilises mechanisms comparable to 'condensation' and 'displacement.' Freud's point, in short, is that what ends up in a literary work is not solely the writer's conscious intention(s). The most interesting elements are those which *inadvertently* enter a work: these emanate from the writer's unconscious which is the repository of repressed desires in the masculine subject. (Freud's point of reference in this respect is obviously the male writer. Female writers seemingly do not count.) Psychoanalytic critics like Marie Bonaparte accordingly scrutinise the literary output of writers like Edgar Allan Poe as if it were as valuable as his dreams (the most important source of insights for the practising therapist) in helping us to diagnose the author's repressed desires. In a classic and persuasive reading of his work, she contends that recurrent motifs in Poe's horror stories point *indirectly* to the contents of his unconscious, sometimes conflating or condensing desires, sometimes displacing them onto seemingly unrelated objects, and conspire to reveal a generally neurotic mental predisposition on his part.

If Freud's main thrust for much of this essay is 'expressive' (to use M. H. Abrams's classification), that is, his emphasis is on the relationship between the literary work and its author, he finishes the essay by turning his attention to the "emotional effects" (427) aroused by literary creations in their audience (in other words, his attention shifts to what Abrams calls the 'pragmatic' pole of literary criticism). Freud's point in this respect is that fantasies, unless disguised, would "repel us or at least leave us cold" (427), given the egotistical and / or forbidden nature of the unsatisfied wishes upon which they are predicated. Creative writing, although often no less an expression of such fantasies, is in fact, however, the source of great pleasure and this is what intrigues Freud. The "essential *ars poetica*" (428), he consequently theorises, "lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us" (428) in two manners: the writer either

- a) "softens the character of his egoistic day-dream by altering or disguising it" (428), or
- b) "bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic - -yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies" (428).

Freud terms this emphasis on the aesthetic or formal qualities of a work, one designed to distract the reader from the egotistical and / or forbidden fantasies that inhere in the work, "*fore-pleasure*" (428). He concludes that if "our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. . . . not a little of this effect is due to the writer's enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame" (428).

Freud develops this 'pragmatic' train of thought in another important essay on literature entitled "The Uncanny." This is his term for disturbing or 'uncanny' feelings sometimes aroused in the audience (especially in the case of horror stories). The cause of

this feeling is the depiction, Freud argues, of certain scenarios that recall one's repressed desires and, in particular, the scene of the castration complex during infancy. (Freud's point of reference is again obviously the male reader / spectator.) For example, the spectacle of Gloucester's eyes being removed and stamped upon by his enemies disturbs the audience of a King Lear production because it recalls, by a process of displacement, the threat of castration.