

The BPA Poetic Mind Inaugural Seminar

June 2025

Introduction

Freud and Poetry

'We laymen have always been intensely curious to know...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, and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable.'

Freud (1908) Creative Writers and Day-dreaming, SE 9.

For Freud, the sources from which the creative writer draws his material include the writer's external environment, the world in which he has lived his life as well as his internal environment, his conscious and unconscious awareness. The unconscious, that powerful yet unknown source can effect a powerful impact on us, the reader, as one conscious and unconscious matrix reaches that of another. A poem comes from the individual's mind; personal, deeply intuitive knowledge which comes from their lived experiences, not necessarily consciously remembered, formal and informal learning as well as the pushes and pulls emanating from the unconscious, all influenced by the poet's close family, wider community, society and culture.

For Freud, creative writing both elucidates and allows expression of the unconscious mind, that part of the mind full of instinctual drives, roiling and striving for satisfaction, that timeless, spaceless, contradictory, logic-less part of the mind that exerts such a powerful impact on our thoughts, feelings and actions. How to access that part of the mind has always been a question for Freud, unconscious acts, slips of the tongue, jokes are one way in, he famously described dreams as the 'Royal Road' to this hidden realm and works of art, of which creative writing is one, are another. For Freud, the mechanisms involved in producing art are much the same as those involved in the production of dreams – condensation, displacement, symbolisation and secondary revision.

Ella Freeman Sharpe noted that the grammar of poetic diction in particular had much in common with that of dreaming - the use of simile, metaphor, metonymy, homophones and homonyms, onomatopoeia and repetition - amongst others. Poems, like dreams, can call to mind visual images, intense feelings, convey complex ideas and emotional conflict in a condensed, either disguised or highlighted, form. For Ella Freeman Sharpe 'poems/dreams reveal the unknown implicit in the known' eliciting a host of associative emotion in us, the reader, with the accompanying aesthetic pleasure in the poem helping us to accept or swallow what may be a somewhat bitter pill thereby helping us to face unacceptable aspects of ourselves or our societies.

For Freud, *'Ars poetica lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us...the writer softens the character by altering and disguising, he bribes us with the ..aesthetic yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies... and enables us to enjoy our own dreams without self-reproach or shame.'* Freud (1908) P153, SE9.

Early Freud might have considered the content of literature and of dreams as revealing the suppressed conflicts of the writer or dreamer, a defensive compromise formation of the neurotic condition or a sublimation of unexpressed, unsatisfied libidinal longings from early childhood. Later Freud, as he moved beyond the Pleasure Principle, extended the concept of dreams as wish fulfillments and postulated the emergence of dreams from the unconscious Ego, not only from the Id, *'allowing for more than the satisfaction of a wish and instead, for, the solution of a conflict, for a removal of doubt or for the forming of an intent'* Freud (1940) An Outline of Psychoanalysis. SE23.

A poem, much like a dream, can then be a powerful means of not just expressing a conflict, a doubt, a worry but also a means of addressing it, a form of work, an attempt at mastery, thereby strengthening the ego. Less effort being required to keep repressing that which urges to be expressed, with the possibility of deriving deeper understanding and further meaning enriches the mind and the personality.

Poems, like dreams, migrate from one part of the mind to another, the moving of material that is not always welcome or comfortable yet brings together these different psychic worlds, the internal and external, the visual and the verbal, the individual and the universal, pain and pleasure, the physical and the emotional, the mind and the body, the us and the them.

We know from our work as analysts that integrating these realms and worlds, working through our conflicts takes time, much time. Poems, like dreams, help us both elucidate the nature of the problem or the conflict but also aid us in its working through. In this way the poet does work on behalf of us all, alerting us to issues we would rather not face, expressing that which is so hard to put in to words, digesting that which is unpalatable, processing the unbearable giving voice and name and power to the repressed and suppressed.

References

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