

## Interpretation of Dreams and Kafka's *A Country Doctor*: A Psychoanalytic Reading

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**ABSTRACT.** Dreams are so real that one cannot easily distinguish them from reality. We feel disappointed after waking up from a fascinating dream and rejoice to wake up knowing the nightmare is ended. In some literary works the line between fancy and reality is blurred as well, so it provides the opportunity to ponder on them psychologically. The plot of some of the poems, novels, novellas, dramas and short stories is centered on the minds, thoughts, or generally speaking, human psyche. This essay elaborates upon the "nightmarish"-rather than dreamlike-story, Kafka's *A Country Doctor*, by applying psychological approach. It seeks to discuss the interpretation of some of the incidents of the story according to Freud's "The Interpretations of Dreams". Also, the id, ego and superego, the three parts of Freudian psychic apparatus, as well as their identification with the related characters are discussed.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka, one of the most influential writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a German-language writer with the significant style of writing known as Kafkaesque. His stories are thoroughly bizarre, digging into psychological state of the characters as well as characterizing different aspects of human psyche. In spite of his straightforward and simple style of writing, his philosophical works are not easy to understand, and need to be read and re-read in order to decipher their meanings.

In *A Country doctor*, the doctor as the narrator tells the story of his journey in a snowy night to visit his patient. The changes of the verb tenses, the rapid and timeless transitions, the sudden appearance of the characters, a school choir singing a tune, stripping the doctor's cloths, etc. give the readers the impression that what they are reading is a dream. The setting of the story is a forest which is associated with unconsciousness, and represents a surreal image of a place where passing the time is not natural and tangible.

The doctor who is a rational, responsible and moral character has to contact and interact with the other characters who act irrationally, brutally and ineptly. He symbolizes logic in a chaotic world. From psychological point of view, his interaction with other characters is the story of the inner conflict of human being.

Psychology is one of the main factors to be considered in any approaches for analyzing Kafka's work. Kafka was an expert in Freud's work and he practiced analysis as well, evoking childhood memories and reconstructing the relationship with his parents. The absurdity of life, physical and psychological savagery, child-parent conflicts are some of the main themes of his works.

### 2. BACKGROUND

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis introduces different models of the human psyche such as the dynamic and tripartite model. In dynamic model human mind is divided into conscious (the rational) part and unconscious (the irrational) part. The conscious part is a perceiver and recorder of the external reality and the reasoning part of our minds. The unconscious part is the

place for our hidden desires, wishes, ambitions, fears, and etc. We believe that we act upon our consciousness, the rational and reasoning part of our minds, while according to Freud that is the unconscious which is in charge of most of our actions.

Another model is the tripartite model that separates the mind into id, ego and superego. The irrational part of our minds is called the id that "wishes only to fulfill the urges of pleasure principle" and acts upon impulse. Ego is the rational and logical part of our minds but many of its activities remain in the unconscious. Ego regulates the desires to work out harmoniously with the reality principle and conduct the desires to release non-destructively. Superego, the third part, is the agent of censorship and filtering that operates according to morality principle and forces us to suppress the forbidden desires and instincts which are not in compliance with social codes and moral restrictions (Bresseler 125-127).

According to Freud, every human being is forced to oppress the "pleasure principle" by the "reality principle", that means everyone instinctively wants to rest and seek pleasure all day long, but in reality it is not possible and he/she has to be productive and undertake some duties. In case the repression becomes excessive, it makes us sick (Eagleton 131). We usually postpone an immediate pleasure to retrieve it later; in case of intolerable repression, we would end up suffering from neurosis (132). Therefore, every human being carries on himself/herself a baggage of repressed desires from the moment of birth. Unconscious is the place we transfer are unfulfilled desires (132). Unconscious is the "royal road" to dreams which symbolically reveal the containments of our unconscious which are distorted since the direct confrontation with them will be too shocking and disturbing (136).

Freud's interpretation of Dreams is not only the classic text of psychoanalytic dream interpretation, but also a key text for psychoanalytic critics since its techniques for interpreting dreams are extremely applicable to the interpretation of works of literature; literary Critics find Freud discussions of dreams useful for their demonstrations of interpretive technique (Booker 30). Freud repeatedly emphasizes that the dreams can never be completely interpreted due to its rich and complex content (30).

Psychoanalytic critics have analyzed the works of the arts to conclude psychological makeup of the their artists; for example, Freud relates artistic creativity to unconscious and later on many critics have discussed the possible link between art and madness (Booker 32). Psychoanalyzing authors on the basis of their texts have not been popular in recent years since it reduces the works of to the "pure expressions of the unconscious drives of the artist while paying little attention the role of conscious intervention on the part of the artist. But more sophisticated versions of such attempts t psychoanalyze author (such as Harold Bloom's model of literary history as driven by the Oedipal relations between authors and their most precedents have remained influential" (32). Later on, psychoanalysis shifts its focus from the author to the characters of the story especially in the literature of modernism which is influenced drastically by Freud's work (32).

In the first chapter of the Interpretation of Dreams, Freud asserts that interpreting the dreams are possible through psychological technique and a dream "may assign to a specific place in the psychic activities of waking state" (Freud 4). This is applicable in literature as well; for example in Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, the heroine, as well as the other two main characters, is obsessed with the fantasy of Rebecca as the perfect, fault-free and mythical woman who she can never keep up with. The anxiety of second Mrs. Winder is artistically reflected in the very famous first line of the story: "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again", and the author meticulously prepare readers to face the anguish of the heroine's mind which is mirrored in her dreams.

In some of the stories the identification of Id, ego and superego with the characters is so tangible. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown, the three main characters can represent id, ego and superego. Goodman Brown is the characterization of the ego, thus he is going to a journey in order to visit devil. He decides to get back to his pure and angelic wife and never commit any evil act afterwards. The stranger who tries to persuade him to continue his journey personifies the id, or the human desire to go for libido. Faith, for Goodman Brown, is the ultimate goodness, faith and purity. She can be considered as superego which aims at perfection.

### 3. FRANZ KAFKA'S LIFE AND WORKS

Kafka was born in 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1883 in Prague, into a middle-class German-speaking Jewish family; he obtained the degree of Doctor of Law, then he worked for an insurance company and he wrote in his spare time. He always regretted that he had to spend too much time on his occupation and not to have enough time for writing, also unsatisfied with long hours of working. In his second job in the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, he was rapidly promoted and worked for shorter hours which provided him with sufficient time for writing. Kafka had an active sex life; he visited brothels frequently and had close relationship with several women during his life; He also lived with the fear of sexual failure (Stach).

Despite the fact that his literary works have been admired preciously after his death, a few of his writings have been published during his life time and he owed his posthumously success to his friend, Max Brod, who instead of burning Kafka's writings -as Kafka had asked him to do- after his death, he preserved, edited and completed them (The European Graduate School).

His suffrage from multiple diseases-such as tuberculosis, migraines, insomnia, boils, social anxiety and clinical depression- as well as his agonizing death from hunger, all in all are reflected in his works and make the readers sympathize with him. The current themes of "isolation, alienation and authoritarian" made him an icon of "dark existentialist and absurdist literature" (NNDB). In a letter to his father, he stated that his writing was all about him, "all I did here after all was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast" (NNDB).

In *Metamorphosis* he portrays the difficulties of living in modern life, alienation even from your own family in critical situation, and deterioration due to being neglected. He suggests that if you are not economically productive you will be secluded from your family and the whole society. Kafka's constant struggle with his domineering father for whom Kafka was a failure is mirrored in the Gregor's relationship with his father (Nervi). Although he is transformed to a vermin, he is still a member of the family and he is shocked when he notices his father bombarding him with apples and afterwards, he has suffered profoundly from this incident (Kafka).

In *Trial* Kafka criticizes the totalitarianism and the pressure it imposes on the subjects and deals with the concepts of existence, life and its absurdity, consciousness, helplessness, hopelessness, and isolation. As one of the best modernist writers *Trial* as a dystopian literature addresses typical modernist concerns such as decay of the modern society and how authority possesses an unlimited power to persecute, detain and even execute the individuals (Modernism, Dystopian Literature). The too much pressure upon individuals by society is also pictured in *A Hunger Artist* which is the story of an artist who is tortured by people around him without making any mistakes or committing any crimes.

Kafka's *A Country Doctor* sets in a nightmarish place; the readers are not informed directly or indirectly about the date or the name of the country. This is comprehensively a surreal image of the place where passing the time is neither natural nor tangible. The plot carries on like a dream: different scenes are changing in no time, characters suddenly appear and disappear and people instantly traverse from one place to another. The above mentioned elements provide an opportunity for applying psychological approaches to the story. In addition, Kafka implies that Freudian thoughts are inevitable in the process of writing *A Country Doctor*; therefore, it is helpful to argue the interpretation of some of the objects and incidents mentioned in the story according to Freud's theories (T.Gray 100).

### 4. Psychoanalytic Analysis of The Country Doctor

The doctor is standing outside of his house in snowy night thinking about how he can visit a patient. Since he lost his horse, he is not hopeful that Rose, his maid, would be successful in borrowing a horse from the neighbors. The narration of the story by the doctor, as the limited omniscient narrative, keeps the readers in constant revealing of what he thinks. Since the very start of the story, we notice that how he cares about the patient and anxiously stands outside the house in cold weather. Therefore, he is a responsible man, a committed doctor who is not indifferent towards the suffering of his patient.

After the Rose come back without any horses and the doctor is disappointed in finding a horse, a groom suddenly appears with the two horses. Although he does them a favor, his presence is not as benevolent as it seems. In spite of doctor refusal, like a magician he forces him to start the trip. The dialogue between them is noticeable; "But I'll drive you, you don't know the way" the doctor says, "I'm not coming with you anyway, I'm staying with Rose" the groom answered. Charles Frederick Reed in *Psychopathology: A Source Book* argues that riding symbolizes masturbation or coitus and a horse symbolizes a phallic symbol (260). The doctor's desire to take the groom with himself beside his wish to keep Rose safe, may represent his lack of sexual capability and his dependent upon groom as the dark and carnal side of his own character. Since the groom says he is staying with Rose, the doctor should ride the horse by himself and the doctor has no woman beside himself riding the horse alone, it is interpretable that riding a horse in the context is more the symbol of masturbation (by considering the biography of the author, it brings to mind his fear of sexual failure).

Being striped by the village people, he stands there and looks at them quietly, and then people carried him to the bed of the sick person on the side of the wound. According to Freud, being naked in front of strangers when the dreamer feels shame and embarrassment and is "unable to stir from the spot, and of being utterly powerless to alter the painful situation", is related to the "memory of the dreamer's earliest childhood", a time when we were seen naked by our relatives as well as the strangers (Freud 99-100). Dreams of nakedness are also categorized as exhibition dreams –which are linked to erotic theme- in which repression finds the place (100).

A Country Doctor is, somehow, the story of inward and outward conflicts; apparent and hidden desires; conscious and unconscious decisions; and struggle of good and evil. The main character has gone through self-scrutiny especially about the dark side of his mind. The characters in the story are identifiable with different parts of Freud's models of human mind. Apparently, the doctor is a good man by nature who feels responsible for the others in the village, the little society, and at the end of the story harshly tortured by them. He seems a moral character who has not even noticed Rose-as a woman-thus she has lived in his house for many years (Haghighi 254). On the contrary, groom appears as a wild, amoral character who is explicitly states that he would stay with Rose. The doctor entirely refuses letting him stay with her, but he is forced to leave her with him.

According to Freud, "where id was, there shall ego be"; he means men and women have to control themselves, and the reason and self-mastery should reign when they are under the pressure of forces they cannot comprehend (Eagelton 139). The doctor personifies the ego while the groom represents the id. Their behavior in interaction with Rose highlights the difference between them. The groom won't go with doctor to help him in finding the way, he rather stays with Rose. Has the doctor ever notices Rose in his house as a female? Is he ever tempted by her presence to have intercourse with her? While feeling guilty about leaving her behind, the doctor mentions that "the pretty girl, who had lived in my house for years almost without me noticing her (Haghighi 254). The groom may be the personification of the id. He is the one who shout out what he wants, without being ashamed of articulating his desire he acts as he wishes. The author added to the horror of groom's action by dramatizing the flee of the Rose, " 'No,' shrieked Rose, fleeing into the house with a justified presentiment that her fate was inescapable; I heard the door chain rattle as she put it up; I heard the key turn in the lock; I could see, moreover, how she put out the lights in the entrance hall and further flight all through the rooms to keep herself from being discovered" (252).

The groom gets rid of the doctor by saying "Gee up!" and clapping his hand and the doctor's journey started although he doesn't want to go anymore (Haghighi 252). We generally think that we make our decisions consciously while neglecting the fact that many of our decisions are profoundly influenced by the unconscious; this understanding is the base for many related advances such as the emergence of neuromarketing which targets the unconscious of the costumers for marketing (Dooley 1).

The country doctor represents the ego, the conscious thinking. In addition, the struggle between the doctor and the groom reflects the conflict between id and ego. The groom can be regarded as his id and his libertine unconscious which indicates the desires of the doctor for sexual

intercourse with Rose. Sending the doctor to the journey represents the fact that not only the unconscious deeply impacts our conscious decisions but also forces its impact intangibly. By personifying ego and id as the characters, one may conclude that the id can easily manipulate the ego and follow its wishes.

The village is located in forest that traditionally has a strong relationship with the unconscious; it "is the realm of the psyche and a place of testing and initiation, of unknown perils and darkness" as well as a threshold of unrevealed perishes and tendencies where the soul comprehends its suppressed layers (Fraim). Forest is a notable setting of many myths, legends and folktales and its symbolism is complex thus it is relevant to the "female principle or of the Great Mother"; because the "female principle is identified with the unconscious in Man, it follows that forest is also the symbol of the unconscious (Cirlot 112).

When visiting the patient, the doctor finds out the patient does not have any symptoms and surprised by him saying "Doctor let me die" (Haghighi 253). After checking the body for the second time the doctor mentions an open wound "as big as palm of doctor's hand which is full of worms. Then, the boy whispered with a sob, "Will you save me?" (253). From this point in the story, the conflict between the doctor and villagers started,

That is what people like in my district. Always expecting the impossible from the doctor. They have lost their ancient beliefs; but the doctor is supposed to be omnipotent with his merciful surgeon's hand. Well, as it please them; I have not thrust my services on them; if they misuse me for sacred ends, I let that happen to me too; what better do I want, old country doctor that I am, bereft of my servant girl! (254)

They come; "the family and the village elders" and stripped his clothes off him while the school choir starts to sing:

Strip his clothes off, then he'll heal us heal us,  
If he doesn't, kill him dead!

Only a doctor, only a doctor (254).

After stripping his clothes, they took him and carried him to bed and laid him "down in it next to the wall, on the side of the wound" (254). The patient insults and tells him he'd like to scratch his eyes out. The villagers instead of admiring his services in order to help the people of the society torture him. They expect him to make the impossible possible. The society treats the best ones worse; it puts too much pressure in the individuals; as they try more and more, it shouts "No, it's not enough", "If he doesn't, kill him dead"; it suppress us till we suffocate and "there is no help" to us.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A Country Doctor is a psychological story seemingly based on Freud theories. The narration of the story is generally the same as a dream. In the village he lives there is no time and the characters move from one place to another in no time. The story is narrated by the doctor-first person narrative, which induces in the readers feeling of anxiety and agitation after reading the story as a result of the immediate confrontation with the amorphous mind of the doctor. This is not just about the doctor's inner conflicts; the readers are also confronting with his interaction with the other people in society.

In A Country Doctor characters are identifiable with different parts of Freudian psychic apparatus. The forest as the setting of the story is associated with unconscious. The doctor as a moral, responsible, honorable and rational character portrays ego. The groom, on the other hand, pictures id that seeks the gratification of libido. Their interactions with Rose, somehow, bold their difference. The doctor wants to stop him but he is powerless and not able to dissuade him. Their struggle is the conflict between conscious and unconscious or in other words id and ego. As the story implies, the interaction between the two is not the way in general we think it is. Although we think we make our decisions consciously, our unconscious mind influences our decisions profoundly. The groom is in complete control of the situation why the doctor has to carry on in the way the groom-id- determines for him.

A country doctor is the story of the cruelty, absurdity and futility of life. We are all put in different situations that make us numb, we cannot change anything, neither ourselves nor anybody else is able to help us; the story of inner and outer conflicts of human being which in both cases, eventually result in failure.

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