

Towards the Roots of Literary Imagination: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the Light of Freud's *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming*

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, made a speech in 1907 named *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming* which means to say that no literature evolves as a complete work of imagination. He tries to explore the mysterious process of artistic creation on scientific grounds. According to him, the real inspiration of such a production lies deep into the childhood for the understanding of which, one must delve deeper into the world of a child; his plays and phantasies (or day dreams). In the lecture, he talks about how day dreams and phantasies inspire works of art. He has also exemplified how the conflicting currents of the author's personal life reflect in their characters. If they failed personally, their characters indeed are jubilant in addressing those conflicts. He also talks about two concepts – 'special providence' and 'splitting of the ego' – and how they play a role in literary imagination. Even though Freud himself stated that, whatever he said are just 'suggestions and encouragements (427)' that leads towards the problem of the writer's choice of his literary material, it is an interesting line of investigation. In this paper, we try to analyze *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne following the suggestions in the essay which is expected to throw a little light into its author's fountain of creativity.

Keywords: Freud, Hawthorne, phantasy, day dream

1. Introduction

The working of human mind has been a topic of perennial interest to us. A lot many poets, writers, philosophers and psychologists have tried to decipher it and not completely in vain for today, we have more and stronger speculations regarding it even though we haven't yet landed to certainties. We are not completely unaware of it as was the condition a couple of centuries back. In literature, we do find some authors having done a very in depth and serious study of human mind in the form of deep psychological explorations of characters but how bemusing would it be if we could throw some light into the psychology of these authors and their literary imagination itself? This line of thought must have led Sigmund Freud to a lecture entitled *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming* in which he explores the mysterious process of artistic imagination on scientific grounds. He states that an artist's choice of subject matter is not always completely imagined but also fueled by unfulfilled childhood wishes, his dreams and phantasies. In this paper, we are trying to analyze his principles and apply some of them to Nathaniel Hawthorne's celebrated novel named *The Scarlet Letter*. In the lecture, which later turned into an essay in 1908, he cautions that this study may not be fruitful on the writers of epic and tragedies who "take over their material readymade" but on those writers "who seem to originate their own material". This essentially become the writers of romances, novels and short stories who "nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes (425)".

2. Day Dreaming and Phantasy – Relationship with the Creative Writer

For an accurate understanding of Freud's attempt to compare the imaginative writer with the day dreamer or the "dreamer in broad daylight (425)", one might want to know his concept of children's play and its transition into day dreams which happens when the person grows up. According to Freud, the first traces of imaginative activities of a person can be found in his best loved and most intense occupation in childhood – play. We could compare a child at play and a creative writer where both create a world of their own or rearranges the things in the real world so as to please them. Nevertheless, both the child and adult take their business very seriously and invest large amounts of emotion into it. As people grow up, they cease to play and along with it seem to put an end to the high amount of pleasure they used to gain from playing. Freud states that "hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure he once experienced". What seems to be a renunciation is really the formation of a surrogate. Here comes the transition from child's play to phantasy. Since an adult, according to society's norms, is not supposed to indulge in child's play but envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness and labor for the family's growth, he now substitutes his play with phantasy. If in childhood, he used to build castles in the sand, now he makes castles in the mind but with the same intensity. In Freud's words,

“he can look back on the intense seriousness with which he once carried on his games in childhood; and, by equating his ostensibly serious occupation of today with his childhood games, he can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by humor”(422)

For a creative writer, this phantasy takes the shape of a creative work in the form of a novel, story or poem.

3. Phantasy-time relationship in *The Scarlet Letter*

To analyze the concept further, let's take a particular concept of phantasy (day dream) and its relation to time. Freud says that the phantasy –time relationship is very important. It hovers between three time periods – the past, present and future. A provoking occurrence might arouse a person's major wishes. From there it harks back to the memory of an earlier experience in which this wish was fulfilled. Now it creates a situation in the future where this wish is going to be fulfilled. This is how a day dream is created. To prove the thesis to be of any value and to establish a connection between the imaginative writer and day dreamer, let us apply this on *The Scarlet Letter*. The assumption says that,

“a strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to childhood) from which now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as the old memory (426)”

The Scarlet Letter is the most celebrated work of the author which talks at length about American Puritanism, a condition of chauvinist ideologies where human beings were subdued and sacrificed for high morality and religious fervor. To apply the above described thesis here, the strong experience that awakened in the author a past experience is the manuscript he got from the customs house where he was working in the 1840's. From the manuscript, he read about a lady who was crucified for adultery. She was treated with disdain and was considered a blemish on entire womanhood and society. She was punished for a crime in which she had a definite counterpart but no authority was resolute about finding and punishing him even though he also has equal participation in the so called crime. She was left bare and isolated to suffer the consequences which, by the way, pointed its fingers at the hypocrisy of puritan regime. This might have aroused in Hawthorne's mind, his family history of hard core Puritanism. His great grandfather John Hawthorne was a judge in the infamous Salem witch trials of 1690's where a group of women and men were accused of witchcraft and later executed. The intense puritan upbringing Hawthorne had in his childhood left an indelible mark in his young mind – the mark of Puritanic fervor and its atrocity. Hence the manuscript, the strong experience in the present awakens in the writer's mind an earlier experience, which in this case, is the experience of Puritanism which is more or less embedded in his psyche. This leads Hawthorne to *The Scarlet Letter*, his creative work where he at last finds fulfillment.

Hawthorne was never a person who advocated Puritanism though his works have, perhaps, high Puritanic content. He vehemently opposed such devilish practices of the community which ostracized men in the name of religion and morality. It is a kind of protest which he couldn't do physically or in the sphere of reality but deep inside his mind, he had seeds of resent brewing up. This, at last, made its manifestation through his work and in a way afforded to throw off the heavy burden he carried all the way. Added to this, as Freud stated, the text itself exhibits the recent provoking occasion as well as the old memory. The recent provoking occasion is overtly mentioned in the introductory chapter and the old memory, which is the memory of childhood dipped in puritanic ideals, looms large in the entire text from beginning to end.

4. Psychological novels – Description of the Hero

Another assumption of Freud in his lecture is that even though he admits that very many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of naïve day dream, he suspects that “even the most extreme deviations from that model could be linked with it through an uninterrupted series of transitional cases (426)”. This postulate is about the psychological novels in particular where only one person – the hero – is described from within. It is as if the author sits inside his mind and looks at other characters from outside. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the story is narrated by a custom house surveyor who is telling the story almost two years after the actual events described took place. The narrator is omniscient and he paints the story in such a way that, he knows more about the characters than the characters themselves. He voices out his own opinions about the happenings, with a special providence over the characters Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, and has ample influence over the story to the point that it determines how the story must be read. This is exactly what Freud stated as the author sitting inside the mind of

the narrator and looking at other characters from outside. Added to this, Hawthorne is acclaimed for his in depth analysis of human psyche.

5. Splitting of Ego – Laymen and Ecclesiastic

Freud has employed an interesting concept named ‘splitting of ego’ to analyze the origins of literary imagination. This is not directly connected to the naïve structure of a day dream but tracing its roots might take us to a realm which comes to life only in the form of a phantasy. Also called black and white thinking, it is the inability of a person to bring together both positive and negative aspects of a person or a thing. In this condition, a person thinks only in extremes, i.e. his motivation would either be only good or only bad. This is a common defense mechanism for which a fine example would be the politicians of today. They always picture the opposing party as bad and themselves as good. The author tries to resolve the dilemma that perplexes him in reality through his story for which the characters in the story are sharply divided into good and bad, in defiance of the variety of human characters that are to be observed in human life. This can hardly be looked upon as a portrayal of reality but can be easily identified as an essential constituent of a day dream. In this case, Hawthorne compartmentalizes the ecclesiastic as corrupted and hypocritical and it’s preys, mostly laymen, as inherently good. The division is very sharp. The gatekeepers of Puritanism in the novel are in reality the bad ones. Inside their mind they are malicious and are more devilish and immoral than the accused themselves. If Hester Prynne is crucified for adultery, why don’t the judging authorities use its power to find out the counterpart in her crime and expose him at the scaffold together with Hester? The narrator’s abomination of this class of people is evident even in Dimmisdale, a character who is highly sympathized by Hawthorne. Even this soft feeling doesn’t let him escape the censure employed by the author in the form of his ‘guilt’ or the perpetual conflict incurred by his mind in not being able to confess in spite of having done a ‘crime’; in fact a greater crime in not revealing his role in the sin. This is a taint to the otherwise kind portrayal of the character. This blemish is not on Dimmisdale alone but the entire class which he belongs to. In nutshell, the author shuns the whole ecclesiastical community and deems it completely bad. In his portrayal, there is not an iota of goodness in them.

On the other hand, the accused Hester Prynne, in spite of her adultery is dealt with more goodliness in the novel. She is described as a very kind woman, who is ever ready to help the needy and the isolated. By the end of the story, we find her transformed from an adulteress to angel. The author treats her under his special providence and makes sure that, the final page of the book canonizes her above all the other characters. In this case, in spite of being immoral, her character is shaped in such a way that, she leaves an impression of a seraphic image without any blemishes. Her soul is not tainted by her past. This is an explication of Freud’s concept ‘splitting the ego’ undertaken by the modern writer.

6. Author’s Conflict & Psychological Novels

Freud also talks in particular about psychological novels. Through this genre, the writer does something unusual. With the aid of self observation, he splits up his ego into many part egos and tries to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes. Hawthorne exemplifies it in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The Custom House chapter in *The Scarlet Letter* showcases a crisis of mediation between the author and the society. He struggles to keep in balance conflicting roles within antebellum culture and his failure to achieve that balance leaves him in the interstices of the culture. Hawthorne initially saw The Custom House position as enabling “his participation in the interrelated patterns of his culture” specifically the activities of the commercial man and the artist, the financially secure and the ideologically protected. He hoped to sustain two conflicting roles, those of ‘public man’ and the ‘author’ simultaneously. He believed that his literary vocation would earn him a kind of immunity as a public man, for he expected protection from partisan political decisions but sadly this hope didn’t materialize. He called them ruffians and expressed his strong resent upon them in a letter to Longfellow. He says, “This I will do [wreck vengeance] not as an act of individual vengeance but in your behalf as well as mine (199)”. Also the heavy work in the custom house became a burden upon him to pursue his favorite role of that of a creative artist. In short, in an ironic twist of events, neither of Hawthorne’s expectations was realized. This dilemma between public man and author intensified in his mind and later entered his work but it was manifested in a different way. This conflict of emotions is displayed, though differently, in Hester and Dimmisdale.

Hester is a luminal character caught between her social roles as a result of her passionate transgression, from that of a common girl to an adulteress. That liminality is explicit by her virtual marginality, her house located in the border region between city and forest, urban and the wild. Her dilemmas largely result from her confusion whether she must fulfill socially defined obligations while at the same time living on the margins of such

obligations. After the adulterous act, she attempts to become a good mother to Pearl but she smothered to fulfill the socially defined roles for the same.

The tug of war inside the mind of Hawthorne is also portrayed through the character Dimmesdale. The splitting of ego into part egos is manifested here in the character Dimmesdale who is also a victim of conflicting emotions. A conflict inside his mind is tormenting him every moment of his existence. He is torn between his puritan beliefs and his conscience. According to beliefs, he has sinned in being a partner of adultery, but from a broader perspective he is sinning even more by not acknowledging his adultery which could thereby lift two souls from perpetual agony and infamy. At the same time, if he embrace Hester and Pearl and welcome them to his life publicly, he would wrong all the high religious ideals he upheld so far. He can never more become a priest and will have to put an end to his religious life. Although, this is not literally the dilemma that Hawthorne faced in his life, according to Freud's arguments, the mental trauma the author faces reflects in his work through the character of Dimmesdale. By doing thus, the author tries to resolve the most unsettling conflict of his life through his character Dimmesdale which would have stemmed out of a phantasy that Hawthorne nurtured deep inside his mind.

7. Special Providence

Some writers would have a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom they try to win our sympathy by all possible means. The hero is placed under the protection of a special providence. This can hardly be seen as a portrayal of reality but is essentially a necessary constituent of day dream. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the object of special providence is none other than Hester Prynne. As the story begins, her character is doomed in detest, immorality and scandal. She is the most disgraceful being in the town when she stands on the scaffold for the public to abuse. From this slough of despond, the author raises her into a benevolent spirit so that the 'A' on her breast no more symbolizes 'adultery' but 'angelic'. The totality of the novel pictures her as the most compassionate woman the town has seen. Such a transformation is not possible unless the writer uses the 'special providence'.

8. Conclusion

Creative Writers and Day Dreaming is a lecture delivered by Sigmund Freud in 1907 in which he explores the idea of deriving a connecting link with a writer's past, childhood and his literary imagination. In this paper, we have made an attempt to analyze the magnum opus by Nathaniel Hawthorne named *The Scarlet Letter* with the help of this lecture.

One of the tools used for the paper is the phantasy-time relationship which reveals the mental process which led to the novel that was stimulated by the discovery of a manuscript in the custom house. Freud also talks about psychological novels where the author showers his 'special providence' over a particular character and he / she is described from within. In this case, Hester and Dimmesdale becomes the object of such predilection of the writer. 'Splitting of the ego' is the next tenet which says that the author, inspired from his experiences, might involuntarily deem the characters into very sharp categories of good and bad even though in reality no character is completely good or bad. In this case, the categorization is between common men (which include Hester and Pearl) and the ecclesiast community. The paper also explores how conflicting emotions in the author's mind is reflected in the characters he make; in the story it echoes in the characters Hester and Dimmesdale. Lastly, the paper examines how certain authors try to shield to shield a particular character above others. No matter how worse the conditions turn out to be, by the end of the story the writer makes sure that the particular character holds a revered position in the mind of the reader. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne becomes that character. Freud adds that this tendency of the author stems out of his phantasies.

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