

## Imagination and Therapy in Literature: From a Freudian Perspective

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Kang, Jin-Ho. Imagination and Therapy in Literature: From a Freudian Perspective. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 69 (2018): 69-81. Psychoanalysis and literature have a coextensive relationship in that both of them try to recover the unconscious which has been repressed and disguised by the conscious censorship of reason and morality through a narrative form of fantasy. And both of them regard that the central part of the repressed unconscious is concerned with the Oedipus complex. So the literary narrative re-structuration of fantasy is regarded as playing a key role in sublimating and curing the symptomatic mental problems by re-experiencing them in a positive vicarious way. From this perspective, it can be argued that the psychical therapy as well as the truth of psychical reality are possible through the construction of fantasy from a new current insight in cooperation with a patient and a psychoanalyst or a reader and a writer. (Kyungpook National University)

**Key words:** Freudian psychoanalysis, fantasy, the unconscious, Oedipus complex, literary therapy, sublimation

### I. Introduction

From early on in his career as a psychoanalyst, Freud found out the relation of homology between psychoanalysis and literature, taking note of the common phenomena that both a patient and a writer reveal the affect which was strongly repressed through the structure of fantasy formed in language. A writer unfolds his/her own repressed memory or feeling deeply hidden in the unconscious through writing a literary text while a patient betrays his/her repressed feeling through a tendentious verbal expression, a slip of tongue, a joke, a dream or a fantasy. Thus in this respect, the work of a reader or a literary critic to explain and interpret

the psychical conflict of an author through the linguistic configuration of the text can be paralleled to the work of a psychoanalyst to trace out and distinguish the cause of the psychical suffering of a patient through a verbal elaboration.

In the clinical process of psychoanalysis, an analyst focuses on the symptom of a patient, its motive and a patient's resistance to an analyst's engagement as well. In the case of neurosis Freud finds its cause from the unfulfilled desire in the triangular relationship of the child with his/her parent in the period of Oedipus complex. The frustration which the child experiences when the relationship of union of love between mother and child is broken up by the intrusion of the father can be the origin of psychic problems in the adult later on. In this process, the experience of frustration shows the characteristics of paradoxical nature in that the important meaning of the experience is revealed at the same time it is disclosed as it is replaced by screen memory at the level of the conscious. Freud suggests the symbolic experiences desiring incest and parricide as the most important events which is hidden under the screen memory.

Freud argues that the tragic and pathological motive of literature is impregnated by the experience of Oedipus complex of a character as well as an author and the hidden feeling of guilt and shame which are derived from the desire for incest and parricide in the period of Oedipus complex plays a key role in the evolvment of the motive. From this perspective he demonstrates that the interpretation of literature is extended and deepened by the application of the method of clinical psychoanalysis. In other words, his argument means that the psychoanalytic analysis of a literary work can be the case study of psychoanalysis and the literary imagination embodies the dynamics of the unconscious. Therefore considering that psychoanalysis and literature are mutually enlightening and supplementing each other, it can be said that the relationship of psychoanalysis and literature is not mutually exclusive and independent

but mutually inclusive and corresponding. In this regard, pointing out the mutually contributing relationship of psychoanalysis and literature, Lionel Trilling mentions Freud's confession that the writer and the philosopher discovered the unconscious earlier than the psychoanalyst and he was only a scholar who discovered the scientific method to study the unconscious.

Yet the relationship is reciprocal, and the effect of Freud upon literature has been no greater than the effect of literature upon Freud. When, on the occasion of the celebration of his seventieth birthday, Freud was greeted as the "discoverer of the unconscious," he corrected the speaker and disclaimed the title. "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious," he said. "What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied." (203)

## II. Fantasy and Literary Imagination

Comparing literary creation and children's play, Freud remarks that both of them show a similarity in that they seek for pleasure which cannot be attained in the real world through the construction of an imaginary world. But he also points out a difference in that an adult writer tries to conceal fantasy in his/her writing with shame while a child voluntarily likes to participate in the play of fantasy. Regardless of the difference, the common ground of both cases confirms that the motive of fantasy in Freudian psychoanalysis is a desire to vicariously fulfill a wish which cannot not be achieved in reality. Freud adds that the wish can be divided into two groups, an ambitious and an erotic wish ("Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming" 47-48).

As the development of a desire to fulfill a wish through fantasy is viewed from temporality, the fantasy tends to incorporate the memory of childhood in the past and the expectation of the future. This function

of fantasy corresponds to the mechanism of dream in which the dream-work produces the dream-contents of present events in terms of the overdetermination that is the process of dream distortion transforming dream-thoughts of past experience into dream-contents of present experience(*The Interpretation of Dream* 311). Emphasizing the peculiar function of fantasy, Freud explains that fantasy guarantees the safe space of one's own cut off from others and the outside danger integrating the past and present experiences. From this viewpoint he proposes that a daydreamer is matched with a writer and daydreaming, the process of writing. So this writing process can be interpreted as an endeavor to achieve the unfulfilled wish of the past through literature structured in the time and space of fantasy in which the powerful experience of the present reminds the writer of the emotionally frustrating experience of the past in childhood.

Although both daydreaming and writing in common try to fulfill the unsatisfied desire of the past in the unified temporal and spatial dimension of the past, present and future, they show a difference from each other with respect to shame and concealment. Interestingly in this comparison, we can underlie the distinction between the two that while a daydreamer hides the fact of fantasizing itself, being conscious of a shame and a negative reaction from others, a writer, in some sense, actively involves himself/herself in and takes advantage of the structure of fantasy in an indirect way. Paying attention to the writer's singular relationship with fantasy, Freud maintains that a writer "softens the egotistical character of day-dream by changes and disguises" and gives the aesthetic pleasure as "incitement premium" or "fore-pleasure" to "release the greater pleasure arising from deeper sources in the mind."("The Poet and Day-Dreaming" 54).

Freud's discovery of the preliminary function of fantasy bringing out the aesthetic and formal pleasure in literature, in turn, leads to the

explanation how both a writer and a reader can ultimately satisfy and sublimate an unconscious desire unfulfilled in the past without shame and resistance through the construction of fantasy in writing and reading a literary work. Of all genres of literature, we can say that drama illustrates the concrete example of the ultimate function of literary fantasy for the fulfillment of a frustrated and repressed desire. Drama presents the world of fantasy in which an actor acts out dramatic scenes fulfilling the repressed unconscious desire on the imaginative stage. In a sense, the pleasure an audience gets from drama primarily is due to a relief from direct suffering and harm because the audience already presupposes the illusive nature of fantasy in drama and its distance from reality. Thus the foregrounding of fantasy as a main source of pleasure is remarkably played out in drama.

For the analysis of the development of fantasy on the stage, Freud distinguishes some preconditions of suffering in drama: a struggle against divinity, a heroic struggle against social regulation, a struggle between individual men, a struggle between different impulses of a character, and a struggle of the combinations of such preconditions. Focusing on psychological drama and psychopathological drama which highlight the psychical issues through the *mise-en-scenes* of fantasy, Freud supposes that while psychological drama concerns the conflict between two equally conscious impulses and the repression of love by social convention and cultural restraint, psychopathological drama engages the spectator as a kind of a neurotic who empathizes with the struggle of an actor between a conscious impulse and a repressed one, and the dramatist as an original neurotic who “provokes not merely an *enjoyment* of the liberation but a *resistance* to it as well. (“Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” 91). To most of psychoanalysts including Freud considers *Hamlet* as a typical drama of fantasy which foregrounds the unconscious impulses and repression with the themes of incest and parricide on the stage.

As he concentrates on the analysis of psychopathological drama remarkably revealing the mechanism of the unconscious impulses and repression through the dramatic structure of fantasy Freud attempts to analyze the novels in depth which embodies the crucial themes of psychoanalysis: compulsion to repetition, the return of the repressed, the uncanny return of the familiar and the blurry boundary between fantasy and reality. In *The Uncanny*, for example, Freud indicates that child's ambivalent feelings toward a father, love and hatred, derived from Oedipus complex and castration complex turn into a death instinct, repeating climactically their conflict and return, breaking down the barrier between the familiar and the unfamiliar. So he interprets that "The Sandman" of E. T. A. Hoffmann interpellates repeatedly Oedipus complex and repression through the structure of fantasy of a novel.

Tracing the cause of the psychopathological aspects of writing to the neurotic mentality of an author, Freud is engrossed in the unconscious cathexis and the epileptic symptom of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Freud interprets Dostoevsky's epilepsy as the symptom which is developed to dissipate the excessive psychical excitement as in the case of neurosis. He takes note of the regressive obese attitude of Dostoevsky to both the secular authority of an Tsar and nationalism and the sacred authority of the Christian Church, analyzing the biographical background of Dostoevsky in order to figure out the cause of his neurosis. As a result, Freud diagnoses that Dostoevsky's obedience to the authorities of political and religious kinds is directly related to his masochistic attitude to the father which was initiated by the Oedipus complex in the early childhood. To Dostoevsky an Emperor, the State and the God are identified with the father figure in the form of a superego which was set up in his ego of early childhood and so of his will he acquiesces to any punishment of the authorities. So in this connection it can be assumed that Dostoevsky's masochistic, psychic fixation to the father in early childhood causes him

to write on the father figure obsessively in a concentric manner.

The distinct theme of patricide in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, vindicates Freud's view that the fantasy concerning child's fixation to the father can be fully fledged into a work of literature as the fantasy is sublimated into the major leitmotif of a literary work. From Freud's point of view the theme of *The Brothers Karamazov* is said to be based on the ambivalent feelings towards the father, hate and love, and guilt and fear of castration. Outlining this oedipal subject of patricide Freud puts *The Brothers Karamazov* in the same plane of world masterpieces with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Dostoevsky and Parricide" 246). To explain the mechanism of the fantasy of patricide more clearly Freud points out Dostoevski's altruistic and sacrificial care for the peer criminals at the time of exile in Siberia despite his own severe plight and self-humiliation of bankruptcy from gambling habit. He interprets that Dostoevski's pathological, eccentric actions as self-punishment for the fantasy of patricide to unburden the sense of guilt inflicted on him and that punishment of loss allows him to write a better work of literature(249).

Like Freud who finds the cause of psychical conflict of a writer mainly from the fantasy of Oedipus complex, Clarence Oberndorf also indicates the author's strong instinctual drives and their fixations and shows how in his/her writing the writer reveals them either by overcompensation, by unconscious choice of symbols, or by tender or violent passages (103-104). Oberndorf, focusing on an author rather than a character, emphasizes the defence mechanism of writing and dream with which both a writer and a dreamer take advantage of the structure of fantasy to escape "the bitter hardships and stern demands of reality's daily needs(104).

Taking a work of literature into a Freudian psychoanalytic point of view with respect to fantasy, I define that the fantasy of Oedipus complex is at the navel of the psychic cathexis of an author and it is reverberating

its implication in the imaginary time and space of a literary work in a climactic way. The fantasy is extended into the leitmotifs of the ambivalent sadistic and masochistic feeling towards a parent, patricide, incest, fear of castration, guilt, and shame. It also constructs the imaginary world of literature with a variety of combinations of leitmotifs through the lives of characters.

### III. Therapy through Fantasy

The psychoanalysis of Freud aims to find out the hidden meaning of the statement and the activity of an analysand and an author, always being suspicious of their unsatisfactory apparent motives. So Freud maintains that the most economical way for an author to suggest a motive in literature arousing a tragic effect against the resistance of the most suffering reader is to disguise it so that the reader or audience cannot recognize it.

Aristotle introduces the concept of the catharsis of feeling through fear and pity when he talks about the effect of tragedy(25). The catharsis in it is meant for purification which corresponds to the same definition of discharge as the purpose of therapy in psychoanalysis aims at: the discharge of emotional excitement. Therefore the success or failure of literature depends on how a work of literature earns the sympathy of a reader or audience to the psychical reality of its characters. So a great writer proves a literary technique to make a reader feel forepleasure instead of resistance even to the psychopathological symptoms of a character.

Oberndorf also notices the parallel between an author's creative writing and an analysand's confession and stresses that an author's effort to write his/her neurotic conflicts repeatedly and a patient's endeavor to talk them over and over again are the same symptoms to free themselves of the neurosis. But most of time the author's writing turns out unsuccessful



in getting rid of the fundamental conflicts though it performs as the same function as the cathartic confession of a patient does(105). As a rule the psychoanalyst's efforts to interpret the cathartic effect on a patient help the analyst recognize what its unconscious motive signifies and what kind of desire he/she wants to reveal or hide. However in contrast to the psychoanalyst's work evoking the effect of purification from repressed desire on a patient, Oberndorf regards that such writers as Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Pierre Baudelaire, and Nathaniel Hawthorne fail in liberating themselves from their chronic emotional sufferings though their creative writings. He highlights that above all of them Hawthorne is most obsessed and gives way to the feelings of guilt and criminality as the example of his own character, Arthur Dimmesdale, a culpable minister, in *The Scarlet Letter*(106).

From a biographical perspective, Hawthorne's psychopathological traits can be traced out from his past; difficulties with reality, withdrawal from life, solitary life with abnormal mother, emotional identification with his sister, Elizabeth, shame and self-reproach from his forefathers' cruelties in Puritan fervor, marriage life with pathological wife, Sophia Peabody. In Hawthorne's novels the combination of complex psychopathological characteristic can be distinguished with respect to the themes of punitive self-reproach and redemption. Pointing out Hawthorne's obsession with self-torture, Jean-Baptiste Montegut dates its origin from the Puritan legacy passed down to Hawthorne after many generations.

This habit of seeing sin everywhere; this dusky gaze bent always upon a damned world, and a nature draped in mourning; these lonely conversations of the imagination with the conscience; this pitiless analysis resulting from a perpetual examination of one's self; all these elements of the Puritan character have passed into Mr. Hawthorne, or, to speak more justly, have filtered into him, through a long

succession of generations. (Henry James 60 recited)

Outlining the relation of the creative work of an artist to the sublimation of a frustrated desire, Henry Lowenfeld, an American psychiatrist, gives an example of a thirty-year-old artist who suffers from anxiety and hypochondriacal fears but likes to voluntarily expose herself to the traumatic attacks and tries to concentrate on the creative work incessantly through fantasy to overcome them. Here Lowenfeld stresses the function of sublimation of an artistic work to reexperience the painful traumatic experience through the artist's fantasy as in the play of children(63). As Freud makes an analogy between his one-and-half grandson's spool play, a fort/da game to relieve his fear and resentment in face of the absence of his mother and the creative activity to sublimate a frustrated desire in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*(15), Lowenfeld also seeks for the possibility to sublimate the harmful traumatic feeling through the creative art of fantasy. The creative work of an artist projects his/her inner experience to the outer world of imagination through the creation of an artwork. To search for an appropriate artistic mode of expression is to open up a way to the sublimation of unfulfilled desire through fantasy.

In making an attempt to embody the dynamic multiplicity and complexity of humanity and its world, and reclaiming values ignored and undervalued by reason and moral norm, literature is coextensive with psychoanalysis. Both of them try to recover the mentality of human beings which has been repressed and distorted by the censorship of the moral measurement of the conscious. Lionel Trilling considers such romantic writers as Denis Diderot, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and Friedrich Schiller as the precursors of Freud who are engrossed in the dynamic operation of the unconscious repressed and disguised under the surface of the conscious(253). The Romantic literature opens a new period in which

literature extends its thematic boundary to the realms of dream, sexual aberration, and unconscious association and integrates the complex mentality of human beings. This conspicuous zeitgeist leads to the insistent inquiry of psychoanalysis to the theoretical motive of the apparently incongruous phenomena. Therefore the encounter of literature and psychoanalysis in Freud provides a theoretical means to interpret the complexity of human mentality from a psychoanalytic perspective and the dream, death wish, and sexual, destructive perversion of the patient from a literary perspective of fantasy.

Owing to the discovery of the depth of the unconscious by Freud, his contemporary writers began to investigate myth, dream fantasy and the world of the unconscious in full scale. As Trilling indicates, different from the neurotic patient who is possessed by fantasy and cannot be free from it by himself/herself the writer is in command of fantasy and is possible to sublimate it through a creative, literary transformation of the fantasy(260). In this point, I think literature has a function of therapy by detaching fantasy from its nucleus of a pathological origin such as Oedipus complex and sublimating the pathological fantasy to the creative literary fantasy.

### III. Conclusion

Literature brings out a positive effect by making a reader or a writer rethink and restructure the problems of humanity and its world including those of his/her own in terms of a vicarious experience of the reality through the reading or writing of fantasy. The restructuring of symptomatic problems through the creative work of fantasy results in the mental growth and maturity, and a relief from psychical illness. Especially the development of psychoanalytic literary criticism initiated by Freud opens up a possibility for the creative operation of literature, reading or

writing, to abreact and sublimate the repressed unconscious and to suggest a way to dissipate the psychical conflicts and their symptoms. Thus literary therapy aims to search for a way to overcome the traumatic experience through reading or writing it in a creative, substitute form of fantasy.

According to Freudian psychology the purpose of psychoanalysis is remember the traumatic forgotten experience in the past and to remove the repression in it. The significant motive of a patient or a writer or a reader to evoke the psychical symptoms is called the nucleus, or nodal point or navel of the unconscious which is concerned with the Oedipus complex in his/her infancy. The creative activity of literature and psychoanalysis seeking for the understanding of psychopathological symptoms and their successful cure is not to discover the fixed, and ever-present psychical legacy of such emotional cathexis as Oedipus complex, but to realize the incomplete, changing reality which is constructed by a patient, or a reader in cooperation with a psychoanalyst or a writer through a narrative fantasy. This interpretation reads as insightful Freud's view that a psychoanalyst is different from an archeologist in that the former constructs the historical reality from a new current perspective while the latter reconstructs it from an old original perspective("Construction in Analysis" 160). So I argue that the literary therapy can be achieved by the sympathy and recognition of the validity of narrative truth which is distinguished from historical truth by Donald P. Spence through the creative process of narrative fantasy.

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