

# Poetry: A Therapy For Unsatisfied Wishes

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## Abstract

Psychoanalysis is a method that examines the source of knowledge about human unconscious and deals with satisfaction of desires retained in our dreams. Poetry, like dreams, is produced by mental operation. For instance, Freud's analogy between dreams and daytime fantasies is an interesting manifestation that contributes to the purpose of literature. This paper will try to discuss the relationship between psychoanalysis and poetry/literature, dreams and poetry, and the dreamer and the poet. It also focuses on the terms "poetic vision" and "poetic madness" in order to prove how literature/poetry serves as a therapy for us.

**Key Words:** Psychoanalysis, Literature, Poetry, Dreams, Freud.

## Özet

Psikanaliz insan bilinçaltılarındaki bilgi kaynaklarını inceleyen ve rüyalarımızda saklanan arzularımızın tamminiyle uğraşan bir metottur. Rüyalar gibi, şiir de zihinsel aktivitelerle oluşur. Örneğin, Freud'un rüyalar ve gündüz fantezileri arasında yaptığı benzetme edebiyatın amacına katkıda bulunan ilginç bir işaretti. Bu makalede psikanaliz ve edebiyat/nazım, rüyalar ve şiir, ve rüya gören ve şair arasındaki ilişki tartışılmaya çalışıldı. Ayrıca bu makale edebiyatın/nazımın nasıl bizlere bir terapi olduğunu kanıtlamak amacıyla "şîrsel görüş" ve "şîrsel delilik" terimlerini de vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Psikanaliz, Edebiyat, Nazım, Rüyalar, Freud.

## 1. Introduction

The poet has the same difficulty that the patient encounters in the analytic situation, though for the former it is more easily encompassed and the results are generally more pleasing—the task of turning the visual concrete into words (Hoffman, 99).

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Through his task of artistic creation, the poet creates a fanciful world pleasing to the minds of his readers. This fanciful world of the poet functions like a dream in relieving the mind of the reader. The function of dreams, for Freud, is that they have been thought to afford the mind relief and refreshment. Psychoanalysis—born thanks to Freud—is a method that examines the sources of knowledge about human unconscious and deals with hallucinatory satisfaction of desires (wish-fulfilment), which are retained by human beings throughout their lives in dreams. A desire may turn out to be unsatisfiable and therefore a cause of suffering; a desire, once satisfied, may bring on disagreeable consequences. The methods Freud uses in healing human beings who can not cope with reality as a result of unsatisfiable consequences of their dreams serve as a therapy to give relief to their minds. Poetry is also considered to be a means of relieving the overburdened mind as well as a device through which emotions find expression. Poetry, like dreams, is produced by a mental operation different from ordinary thought. This paper will try to discuss the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature/poetry, dreams and art/poetry, and the dreamer and the artist/poet, focusing on the terms: poetic vision and poetic madness in order to demonstrate how literature/poetry serves as a therapy for us as well as conveying the controversy over the notion that psychoanalysis has limits and limitation in art and literature.

Before starting to discuss the function of poetry as a therapy, let us consider psychoanalysis in order to understand its relationship with art and literature. The most famous and controversial school of psychology is psychoanalysis. However, on the one hand, the ideological motif of Freudianism is to be made distinctively clear at first: it deals with an individual's consciousness shaped not by his historical existence but by his biological being—his sexuality. In other words, a human being's fate, the whole content of his life, and creative action—his art or work—are determined by his sexual instinct. On the other hand, psychoanalysis places special emphasis on unconscious conflicts, and interactions in the mind (such as dreams) of which the individual is unaware. Freud—as a pragmatic critic—depends upon dream interpretation to fathom the unconscious. He views mental illness as a continuation from normal to neurotic. In his dream book—*The Interpretation of Dreams*—Freud claims fears and desires repressed in ordinary waking consciousness surface in dreams. Thus, dreams themselves are seen as having an unconscious substructure. Freud has also discovered that dreaming represents the continuation of daytime thinking under the altered conditions of sleep so that the visual experience of dream could be interpreted and translated into ordinary language by applying the psychoanalytic method of investigation.

Freud analyzes a number of literary texts for their psychological content. For instance, in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, he draws an analogy between dreams and daytime fantasies, which are the disguised version of repressed wishes and the conscious constructions of literary artists. Psychoanalysis becomes manifestation of the purpose of literature—to achieve ethical effects in the reader. On the other hand, expressive criticism, dealing with psychoanalysis, puts emphasis on art

(which shows the artist's sensibility) so that it finds the source of poetry in the poet's unconscious mind. Then, the text becomes the fantasy construct of the artist. Therefore, in expressive criticism (which deals with psychoanalysis) the poet's conscious and unconscious are bound to be scrutinized as a source of creativity. However, Freud approaches to literature as a material that interprets and illustrates the major concepts of his theories on psychology.

## 2. The Relationship Between Psychoanalysis and Literature

Psychoanalysis has been both a matter of disagreement and interest in the study of literature: A very important source of knowledge of the unconscious content is provided by dreams, since these are direct products of the activity of the unconscious. According to Kenneth Burke, psychoanalysis is detrimental to literature. Application of psychology to art results in a “derangement of taste”: Burke thinks that in art we tend to look for psychology as a purveying of information since the real value of art lies in what he calls the psychology of form. In an attempt to apply psychology to understanding of literary process, Burke, as a pragmatic critic, makes reference to the dream-art analogy: “modern criticism, and psychoanalysis in particular, is too prone to define the essence of art in terms of the artist's weaknesses” (Burke, 125:36). As the pragmatic theory looks at the work of art as a means for achieving an aim, the source of knowledge about human behavior leads the artist to place emphasis on giving information, with the result that art has substituted its subject for the psychology of the audience. From this angle, literature serves as a therapist to please its audience just as psychoanalysis serves as a medium to please its patient.

Another critic, Trilling, relates that the common element between dream and art is that they have the element of fantasy: “The reality to which he [Freud] wishes to reconcile the neurotic patient is, after all, a taken and not a given reality. It is the reality of social life and of value, conceived and maintained by the human mind and will... if we are to call art an illusion then we must call most of the activities and satisfactions of

the ego illusions.." (953). Trilling further claims that Freud is aware of the fact that the artist is not like the neurotic for he knows how to find a way back from the world of imagination. Thus, the artist does not deal with illusion any more since he suspends the practice of art but he certainly, is in command of his art. At this point, a question occurs : what is the role of element of illusion in the artists personality?

To be able to explore this question, let us look at Freud. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he suggests the existence of an unconscious life in which patterns of conduct are quite complex. For him a road to a knowledge of the unconscious passes through an analysis of why dreams originate and how they function: The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed) wish (Freud, 1913:68). To be able to understand the fulfillment of such wishes, dreams have to be decoded, for they undergo revision in the process of being recounted to the analyst. The manifest content of the dream, that which is remembered and reported, must be seen as a veil of latent meaning: Dreams defy logical entailment and narrative coherence, for they intermingle the daily experience with the deepest wishes. So, the role of dreams are related to the poet's personality in a world of unsatisfied wishes—reality. The personality of poet has a positive influence on his audience. A poet who has sufficiently healthy and independent view of his world, and who possesses a mastery of his craft may produce great works with little aid from his immediate surroundings. The creative artist (the poet) works within a complex environment, and his view of human behavior is subject to qualification by circumstances in that environment. Therefore, the poet's role and function is to work independently on his work assuming the role of an analyst. In other words, the poet helps the world of reality to soften its impact with reality (unsatisfied desires) because he is skillful in the matter of putting a clash (a fantasy-construct of him) between desires and reality through his insight on the conscious world of reality and the existence of unconscious life. The poet makes it possible for us to have a consolation from our conscious sources of gratification. This is a kind of therapy on the poet's part which makes his patient (reader) obliged to give up his neurosis. In an other sense, the poet achieves this therapy through revealing his dreams in his poems. A poem, like a dream, is therefore the imagined fulfillment of an individual artist's unconscious wish.

In terms of the function of dreams in human unconscious, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* has been an important influence, and a contribution of literary qualities of certain dreams to dream-like qualities of some works of art as well. The dream-art analogy seems to be logical: If science can explain the dreams, it may also help the

artists understand the unknown functions of literary criticism. The practical problems of literary criticism are largely left to many contributors of psychology. The use of psychology in the process of making value judgments and critical thinking is in general limited to a common notion that products of an unconscious mind are superior to those of a conscious mind. The unconscious is the more permanent and stable part of the mind. It grows with every action and impression. For instance, a poet, while writing a poem must draw on a deeply digested experience. The inspiration may come suddenly and be soon over. Thus, poetry is a product of mental operation that runs into our unconscious. There is a relation between the poet and unconscious. “Poets certainly recognize the unconscious” (Prescott,1922:92).

In *The Poetic Mind* Prescott’s intention is to explore the resemblances between poetry and the dream, and to examine the poetic process with the aid of Freud’s theories on the individual desires repressed and forced back into unconsciousness: “Everyone has wishes which he would not like to confess to others which he does not care to admit even to himself” (Freud,1913: 67). For Prescott, all works of creative imagination are the products of a wish or desire; therefore the use of poetry is to afford an escape from reality to change the real world by an effort of the “poetic imagination, into an ideal one in accordance with our desires. “The poet in his poetry expresses his desires, primarily his own desires, but also, through his well-known universal and representative character, the desires of others...”(Preseott,1922:20). (Prescott uses the term “imagination” as a substitute for the term “unconscious”) Accordingly, the creationof a poem is a result of an unconscious act—the poetic imagination based on the fact that poetry is an expression of repressed and unconscious desires, and that the function of poetry, like dreams, is to enhance our mental health.

As poetry instructs and relieves by pleasing—an objective of the pragmatic theory, the function of dreams is based on the notion of relief. Dreams have been thought to afford the mind relief, refreshment, and recuperation: “The dream is a bulwark against the regularity and commonness of life, a free recreation of the fettered fantasy...” (Freud, 1913: 69). And, poetry is also a means of recreation that relieves the overburdened mind; it is a channel through which emotions find expression, a safe and regulated expression. In addition to keeping mental balance and relief, the dream and the poetry are alike in having their source in the emotions and in being concrete in their expression. As the dream is a result of a compromise between two elements—the repressed wish and the censor that keeps the wish to be hidden—so poetry is a result of

a conflict between the poet's inspiration and external world—his unconscious desires which do not conform with the poetic conventions of his time.

### **2.1. Poetic Vision**

A poem derived from unconscious sources may not be a good one for unconscious thought may result in weak thinking. As the unconscious mind, in insight and wisdom, is superior to the conscious one, poetry is superior to any intellectual product because it is original. From this light, the Freudian conception is apparent that dreams lead us to a full individual life, giving us a sense of superiority and securing our own personal gratification as well. In poetry, identifying ourselves with the poet, we are also satisfied by the works of the poet which are also capable of discovering poetic vision. Presscot puts a striking analogy between poetic vision and vision of dreams. The poetic vision, the source of true poetry is a product of mental operation—spontaneous, quick, and effortless. Its product is concrete, consisted of pictures which can be expressed in words with difficulty. All the forms of mental experience—poetic visions, daydreams, dreams, and hallucinations—are alike. They are visionary actions of the mind. Poetic vision takes place in waking whereas vision of dreams takes place in sleep. It is possible to draw a conclusion from the correspondence between these two experiences: poetry is produced in waking hours while dreams take place in sleep. Consequently we can assume that we know a little of dreams: “... we can merely remember from dreams when we are awake and can infer there from” (Prescott, 1922:21).

From another perspective, the visions of the poet are largely indescribable. Therefore, the poet is in the same position as the dreamer who is merely conscious of the vividness of the images and feelings of his dream, as well as their strangeness. For example, when his rapture is over, the dreamer finds his vision strange. Furthermore, the vision of the poet, like dream, is transient; it fades more and more as it recedes; and as in dream his memory becomes a pale reflection of the original dream. The poet, like the dreamer, while consciously trying to remember his vision, inevitably modifies it to bring it into harmony with his ordinary waking thought. At this point, the poetic vision becomes a source of poetry, for poetry is produced harmoniously in waking hours.

However, there is no true speech and harmony in dreams; everything that appears as speech is (to Freud in his dream book) actually a mere reproduction of what has been spoken or heard or read by the dreamer in his waking-state. In a sense, this is why poets have always been called dreamers, and dreams are often called poetical. Poetry and

dreams are the products of the same imaginative operation. If the poet's imagination functions as the unconscious then how is the poet to distinguish between conscious and unconscious elements in his poem? The poet's imagination bodies forth the forms of things unseen. Working with his conscious mind the poet may mingle the abstract with the concrete, but as a poet, he sees nothing but images. In recording his vision in the poem, he uses every device to make the reader see as he does.

It is agreeable that the poet has a mental development different in degree and proportion from that of the reader; thus his moments of vision are also different, and are not devoted to rational thought. As opposed to his rationality, the desires of the poet's mind are the fundamental motives of poetry, and products of action and thought as well. The poet has a number of desires satisfied and ended. This satisfaction provides comfort and happiness. However, when a strong desire is strongly repressed it is forced into unconsciousness. In the dream book it is further claimed that this is a complex that establishes a mental wound because the unconscious desire expresses itself through imagination in hysterical manifestations –dreams.

## 2.2. Poetic Madness

When it comes to the imagination in dreams, the way it works is, apparently, in parallel to the way ordinary poetic imagination works. The hysterical imagination is a kind of insane poetic imagination. In other words, the poet becomes insane when he has hysterical imagination. For instance, Shakespeare's Ophelia in *Hamlet* is an example that shows the natural poetry through a neurosis: "And will'a not come again? No, no, he [her father] is dead, Go to thy bed.." (Hamlet, IV-V 191-3). Her singing demonstrates that her desires are dissatisfied which results in emotional disturbance. She has unpleasant, and painful feelings due to the death of her father that lead her to madness. Insanity means literally only a lack of mental health. "In no person is the mental health perfect; in some it is so far from being so that their minds are clearly, even hideously distorted" (Prescott, 1922: 261). In the case of the poet, what degree of madness can we find? The poet's insanity is a "prolonged mental derangement making man not capable of rational thought and action: When his passion or illusion interferes with his rational thought, the poet becomes unfit to discharge the ordinary obligations of society" (Prescott, 1922:261). If we are inclined to question the poet's insanity, we should determine the standards of normality or sanity. When does the poet's passion or illusion interfere with his rational thought? As the term "poetic madness" refers to a high degree

of emotional disturbance arising from unsatisfied desires, we can assume that many desires conflicting with physical fact or authority are incapable of satisfaction. Even though there is no clear line between mental and physical health, feelings and desires of prolonged dissatisfaction are the inevitable consequences of madness concerning the experiences of the poet.

The emotion and tension in dreams—as a product of our desires—can also be identified with poetic madness. The desires that give rise to madness may not be easily removed. Then, poetry becomes a safeguard, a therapist for the individual against mental disturbance and disease. From this angle, it is appropriate to state the notion that psychoanalysis is a process of telling a tale that becomes a whole story: “the very process of psychoanalysis entails the construction of a linear, cogent narrative.. The analysis is narrative, and the analysand is the narrator” (Meltzer, 1965:155). In this analogy, the reader/analyst is the person who is in charge of interpreting what is narrated , understanding its value and function so that he is able to “reconstruct the pot of a life as it is being constructed”. When we read for true pleasure and satisfaction which poetical reading affords, we find in poetry the expressions not so much of the poets as of our own. We see the poet or the hero in his poem as our spokesman. From this angle, poetry serves as a therapist to cleanse the sick and mentally disturbed soul of the poet. Like the poet, who experiences mental disturbances or poetic madness, and who is relieved by confessing his painful emotions and desires, we have a similar fictional gratification that gives us an experience of relief.

### **3. Limits and Limitations of Psychoanalysis**

Freud, as a therapist, has worked to provide his patients with gratification: there is a distinction between waking life, which is obtained by limitation (censor), and the life of dreaming, which is the concentration and tension of psychological life. In other words; to be awake is to detach oneself from willing whereas to dream is to possess perception and memory. However, through a controversy over Freud’s psychoanalysis, Crews, a critic, claims that he has destroyed many lives: “...he was indifferent to his patients’ suffering and quite dismissive of their real world dilemmas, which struck him as a set of pretexts for not getting down to the repressed fantasies that really mattered” (56). Freud, according te Crews, can be said to have practiced psychoanalysis in the sense that he commanded to his patients: “...Freud treated the patients unconscious as an obscure and devious text to be deciphered through the cracking of resistance” (Crews,1993: 63).

In addition to the assertion of Crews, Fry (a formalist critic) argues that the similarity between dream and art has been largely misused: “Art of this kind (that examines the latent contents of patient’s writing)... might be of value to the analyst, but it was worthless as an indication of the nature of genuine art” (16). He further claims that there are two types of artists: “One of these groups ... is mainly preoccupied with creating a fantasy-world in which the fulfillment of wishes is realized. The other is concerned with the conception of formal relations..” (Fry,1924: 4). Fry considers this latter activity as a distinctive aesthetic activity rather than the first one that is involved in the instinctive life. Defining art as emotion about form, Fry responds to the artist as someone concerned with a problem which is quite a normal experience. Thus, the artist’s concern is to create a form which will match an aesthetic conception so that the parts of works of art become an important focus in his criticism. From this light, as opposed to the views of ethical critics, dreams become inferior to art. While the formalists maintain that the artistic process is a conscious activity so that unconscious activity limits the works of art, Prescot and other Freudians, concentrating on the unconscious element in literature and excluding the part played by the conscious mind of the artist, view the appeal of art in terms of its unconscious elements.

In spite of the assumptions that psychoanalysis has limitations in its contribution to artistic values in literary works, Freud’s contribution to literature may be regarded as twofold— association of his name and theories with analyses of character, and adaptation of portions of his theories to theories of writing. For instance, another critic, Read, has a negative reaction to the criteria for judging art. “To anyone who sees the immense importance and utility of Freud’s general theory, nothing is so dismaying as the utter futility of all the psychoanalysts in the presence of art. They can not understand that art is a triumph over neurosis...” (Read, 1924:82). Read attempts to explore what contribution psychoanalysis can have to literary values focusing on his assumption that while psychoanalysis is concerned with the process of mental activity, the literary criticism is concerned with the product of this activity. One conclusion he finds in the theory of fantasy is that “the poetic function is nothing else but an active fantasy [of the normal man] in its more-than-individual aspect. The poet, in fact, is one who is capable of creating fantasies” (91). In other words, unlike the neurotic whose fantasy world remains constructed and unformed, the artist is able to give his fantasies concrete expression so, the poetic function becomes an active fantasy of normal man—the poet—who is capable of creating fantasies. If the artist succeeds in making his

fantasies communicable and valuable then he is able to escape his neurosis. Therefore, psychoanalysis becomes an aid to the artist in being able to distinguish between the real and neurotic world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“Bibliotherapy” literally means book, or literature, to serve or help medically. Poetry therapy is a specific and powerful form of bibliotherapy. Even though poetry therapy is a non-traditional form of therapy, it has contribution to modern medicine: through the evocative value of literature, particularly poetry, the client’s own experiences and emotions are recognised from his/her response to poems. The theory of poetry as therapy for both the poet and his audience becomes also valid through the contribution of poetry to literary criticism:

Thus art has for psychoanalysis the general function of resolving into one uniform flow of life all that springs from the inner well of primordial images and instructive feelings... doing this, not only for the artist himself, from whose own need the fantasy is born, but also, by suggestion and symbol, for all who come to participate in his imaginative work (Read, 1924:91).

In other words, symbols in art represent a hidden reality that can be testified to the richness and range of human mind through analysis.

Apparently, the therapeutic value of literary and aesthetic materials have been explored since the 1950’s of last century. Freud is responsible for the direct translation of therapy into aesthetics: The poet is someone who seeks and finds in art a “substitute gratification” for his unfulfilled desires. Even though we can assume that no writer is a “Freudian,” he might be interested in the aesthetic possibilities of Freudianism without viewing and advising his characters or readers objectively and scientifically. Psychoanalysis has limitations in its relationship with literary works in the sense that it suggests the artist to “cure the hero.” The reader will no more be interested in having the villain killed or the heroine enjoying her wedding, when the analogy between the reader and the patient, or that between poems and dreams is over. “The essential point to notice is that the artist is initially by tendency a neurotic, but that in becoming an artist he, as it were, escapes the ultimate fate of his tendency. And through art finds his way back to reality”(Read, 1924:140). Psychoanalysis has many suggestions for the artist but “curing-the hero” may not be only one of them.

To sum up, poetry becomes a safeguard for the individual's mental disturbances, when it is considered that the Freudian view of the unconscious as being a repository for individual desires is not accepted as valid by many critics. Poetry possesses a value far greater than only serving as a protection against mental imbalance. For a number of critics, who have interpreted the unconscious as an inevitable source for poetry, poetry, to a considerable extent, has been a medium that transcends the individual ego. Freud did not go much further toward a psychology of aesthetics, although from the dream book [*The Interpretation of Dreams*] on his own writings brought the cunning, full, and communicative appeal of art to science.

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