

Whose Dream Is It Anyway?

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Freud's analysis of Dora's dreams takes into account familial and sexual issues but omits the perspective of culture and class in helping to determine the meaning of her nighttime productions. Dora's struggle with Freud over the interpretation of her dreams reflects her desire to 'own' her dreams. Her upper-class orientation made her insistent that she had the right to 'own' them. But those dreams also reflect her feelings of powerlessness as a teenage girl. Freud's belief that he knew the truth of her dreams reflects the social power that he felt as a result of his class, gender and age.

It has often been pointed out that Freud ignored the social context of the patient's life. No such commentary on Dora exists even from within the school of cultural psychoanalysis, which views psychic dis-

stress as originating in social anomalies, power inequalities based on sex and class. I believe Dora's desire for ownership of her dreams emerges clearly, from the social anomaly of her upper-class background and the powerlessness of her age and gender and that this was the source of Dora's problems with Freud.

Dora's father had been a patient of Freud's. Dora was sent by her father to Freud because she had a variety of physical symptoms including catarrh, loss of voice, migraine headaches, vaginal discharges, piercing pains in her stomach,



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strange feelings in her ears and a sore throat. Freud soon believed that her physical ailments were hysterical symptoms (psychosomatic is the word most commonly used today) caused by sexual dysfunction. Freud viewed Dora's illnesses as if they resulted from her own individual inability to understand her sexual conflicts, thereby missing the importance of the social and cultural context of her life (and his own as well). He was more interested in confirming his theories of libidinal repression than in caring for Dora.

Dora's story is one of sexual intrigue and betrayal. Dora's father, a wealthy industrialist, was at the centre of the family's social and economic power structure. Dora's mother is described by Freud as having 'housewife's psychosis', which means she had an obsession with cleaning. There were also Frau K, who Dora often confided in and who was having an affair with Dora's father and Frau K's husband, Herr K, who wanted to seduce Dora. Both were house servants. Everyone is reduced to a commodity in this warped human drama. Dora realises that Frau K wants her father because he is a 'man of means'. Frau K is young and beautiful and her body is her valuable commodity. She exchanges her body for Dora's father's means. Herr K, Frau K's husband, is upset over his wife's affair, but he is not powerful enough to do anything about it. He hopes to get back some of his lost prestige, both sexually and socially, by seducing Dora, the daughter of the powerful industrialist. What perfect revenge for Herr K. He would upset the most powerful man who seduced his wife, Dora's father, and make his wife, Frau K, feel that her own worth was being devalued. He would have

gained power because he would now have sexual power over the even younger and more attractive Dora. Freud essentially ignores Dora's mother, because she has lost the value of her prime commodity, her sexual attractiveness, to Dora's father. Dora, being the least powerful by virtue of her age and gender, valiantly tried not to become a pawn in this game. By denying Herr K her body and love, her only commodities, she chose the least victimizing option open to her.

Dora tells her story to Freud but he chooses to ignore the dynamics of the power relations of the family. Instead he focuses on Dora's sexual feelings towards Herr K. This is how Freud attempts to get ownership of her dreams. He tries to convince Dora that his interpretation is truth. Dora resists. As Robin Appleby says, 'Freud anticipates and negates Dora's rejection of his analysis, which displaces her story by theorising away her objections; the only way she regains any space is . . . by quitting analysis . . . refusing to allow Freud to continue to make her story his.' Instead of accepting Freud's interpretation, the power that she feels as part of the upper-class gives her the strength to say 'No'.

Dora reveals to Freud that Herr K, whom she was also very fond of, had made sexual advances to her by the lake where the family was vacationing for the summer. She rejected Herr K's advances and became ill soon after. This incident triggered Dora's memory of something that happened when she was 14 years old. Herr K created a situation where he would be alone with Dora, then kissed her passionately. Dora protested to her father about this incident by the lake. Her father

confronted Herr K, who denied that it happened, saying that it was just Dora's fantasy. Herr K accused Dora of being obsessed with sexual matters, claiming that she was reading sexual books in the vacation house by the lake.

Here is the first of Dora's dreams that Freud analyses.

'A house was on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case, but father said "I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case". We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up.' (Freud, 1953)

Significantly, this dream occurred three times when Dora stayed in the house by the lake. Dora elaborated that her mother and father had been fighting over locking the living room door at night. Her father was fearful that something might happen to her brother while he was sleeping and that he could be trapped. Dora also remembered that one afternoon she fell asleep on the sofa and when she awoke Herr K was standing beside her. She was fearful about what Herr K might do. She also recalled that her mother had wanted a certain piece of jewelry from her father. Her mother was angry when her father got her something different and told him to give it to someone else. Herr K had given Dora an expensive jewel-case shortly before this. The fear of an emergency, such as a fire, came to Dora because of her father's concern for her brother.

Freud sifts through the dream for its significance. 'When did the dream occur, before or after the incident with Herr K by the lake?' Freud asks. 'After,' she re-

sponds. Freud replies 'I am certain that the dream was an immediate effect of your experience with Herr K'. Just as Herr K was standing beside her when she awoke, her father was standing beside her in the dream. She decided, after the incident by the lake, that she could not stay with Herr K without her father being there. At the end of the dream she wakes to find herself outside. She has finally made her escape from the uncomfortable circumstances, concludes Freud. But what about the jewel-case? Freud suggests that Dora would have gladly accepted the jewels her mother rejected and Dora agrees. When Herr K gave the jewel-case to Dora as a present, he had hoped for a sexual present in return. The jewel-case represents her vagina. Freud lectures Dora, "The meaning of the dream is now clearer. You said to yourself, "This man is persecuting me; he wants to force his way into my jewel-case. My jewel-case is in danger and if anything happens it will be father's fault." For that reason in the dream you chose a situation which expresses the opposite – a danger from which your father is saving you. Why? Because the thoughts and feelings you have need to be disguised and repressed. You are ready to give Herr K what his wife withholds from him. You are summoning up your old love for father in order to protect yourself against your love for Herr K . . . You are afraid of Herr K, but you are still more afraid of yourself, and the temptation you feel to yield to him." This "proves once more how deeply you love him".'

The repression of libidinal energy is the key to Freud's analysis. Dora's rejection of Herr K's advances is really its opposite. Saying 'no' means that her libido is re-

pressed because she really desires Herr K. Freud adds, 'Naturally, Dora did not follow me in this part of the interpretation.' By focusing on Dora's sexual feelings, Freud denies the issue of power in her social world.

Dora was an insightful young woman who had come to realise that her father was having an affair with the young and beautiful Frau K. She believed that she was being sacrificed by her father to Herr K, so that her father could continue his affair with Frau K. Freud acts as if this situation was in Dora's control. It was not. Her father's affair and Herr K's need to reassert his masculinity by making passes at her was far beyond her control. Freud assumed an equality among these individuals ignoring that people with power create circumstances that less powerful people are forced to live with. And Dora was the least powerful of all the players in this game.

Using class and culture as a tool of analysis sheds light on the relationships of Dora to her father and mother, Frau K and Herr K. Dora seems to have internalised the class orientations of her family. In her first dream, her genitals, the symbol of self, are not a cardboard box or a clothes hamper, but an expensive, beautiful jewel-case. It is something that is prized and valued, to be treated with respect because of her class, age and beauty. The upper-class bias is reflected in Dora's attitude about Herr K's advances. She feels humiliated because Herr K is treating her 'like a servant'. How dare he compare her to a servant! She expresses disgust for Herr K. This is not a disguise for her attraction to Herr K as Freud suggests. Her disgust for Herr K is real and it stems from his

being below her in class stature. By giving her 'jewel-case' to Herr K, Dora would not be receiving what she feels she deserves in return. Dora would prefer a 'man of means', like her father.

Dora's father's concern for Dora is real, but he is unwilling to change his own behaviour to help his daughter. He refuses to take any responsibility for his daughter's problems, despite his affair with Frau K. Yet he still feels guilty enough to attempt to 'cure' his daughter by sending her to Freud.

The important person missing from Freud's analysis is Dora's mother. She is briefly described as having 'housewife's psychosis', which means she cleans obsessively. This absence of the mother says more about Freud than Dora. Years later when Dora was in therapy with Felix Deutsch, she talked mainly about her mother. Deutsch says that she strongly identified with her mother to ward off guilt feelings over the Herr K incident and other bad experiences with men. Then why is mother absent in Freud's analysis? In the ideal bourgeois nuclear family, the mother stays at home and takes care of the children by providing love and nurturing. The father's role is to conquer the marketplace by making money for the family's economic security. Aloof, emotionally absent fathers and loving mothers are commonplace stories. Considering that Freud realised the special role mothers play in children's development in the bourgeois nuclear family, her absence only makes sense if she is viewed as a devalued commodity. As Freud sees it, her primary cultural role is to be sexually attractive to her powerful husband. Dora's mother has nothing of value to offer to the

marketplace because her work pays no money and her increasing age has diminished her sexual appeal to her wealthy husband. Freud makes her virtually invisible and therefore marginalised. Power demands attention, powerlessness does not. The only attention that Dora's mother gets is to be labeled as having 'housewife's psychosis'. After she has been devalued in this way, she feels the only role left that gives her any power and control is to clean the house. By diagnosing her as sick the issue of her social role and why she has been devalued is totally ignored.

Freud needed Dora to submit to his interpretation of her dreams and important events. At one point he even talks about using his interpretation 'against her'. As Janet Malcolm said, 'He (Freud) subjected her to an extraordinary campaign of mental harassment'. Dora told Freud that she had confronted her family. Freud wanted this conflict to be kept private. Dora wanted to blow the whistle on the entire sexual charade in which she felt trapped. She wanted and expected her father to intervene on her behalf, and was particularly upset because this type of incident was not supposed to happen to people from her class by a family servant. But her father, being the most powerful player in the game did what he wanted to do, continuing his affair with Frau K, even though it hurt his daughter.

I share Erikson's view that Dora's confrontation with her family and her attempt to get her father to intervene was her way of discovering her own 'historical truth'. Trying to get Freud to affirm her story can then be seen as healthy. Dora wanted Freud to keep faith with her on

her own terms, rather than those of her father and seducer.

Dora's second dream reflects the adolescent search for identity during the difficult transition from teenager to adult in bourgeois society. Adolescence, in bourgeois society, is a period where the struggle for autonomy and power against the institutional powerlessness of childhood creates personality conflicts. This is Dora's account of her second dream as told to Freud: 'I was walking about in a town I did not know. I saw streets and squares which were strange to me. Then I came into a house where I lived, went to my room, and found a letter from mother lying there. She wrote saying that as I had left home without my parents' knowledge she had not wished to write to me to say that father was ill. "Now he is dead, and if you like you can come." Then I went to the station and asked about a hundred times: "Where is the station?" I always got the same answer: "Five minutes". I then saw a thick wood before me which I went into, and there I asked a man whom I met. He said to me: "Two and a half hours more". He offered to accompany me. But I refused and went alone. I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it. At the same time I had the usual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward. Then I was at home. I must have been travelling in the meantime, but I know nothing about that. I walked into the porter's lodge, and inquired for our flat. The maidservant opened the door to me and replied that mother and the others were already at the cemetery.'

The sense of being lost in an unfamiliar place represents Dora's struggling with her dilemma of power and powerlessness.

When she states that she 'came into a house where I lived' this is an attempt to come to terms with these feelings. But home is more than a representation of her seeking to deal with these conflicts. It is the place where her parents live, the home of male power, and in her family's case, class power. In the note in the dream, Dora's mother is pretending that she withheld the information about Dora's father's illness because she did not want to hurt Dora, but she meant to punish Dora. In the dream, Dora is immediately at the 'station'. Freud states that the station represents her vagina. The vagina represents the self. Her 'station' could also be her class, gender and adolescent position. She is in the station but is stuck and feels anxiety about not being able to move forward. Being stuck reflects her mixed feelings that stem from the contradictory positions of power and powerlessness that she finds herself in.

Being a teenage girl of an upper-class family, her station, creates certain expectations. Her sexuality is a valuable commodity because she is young, attractive and upper-class. She does not want to 'give' it to just anyone. She wants to get a good value in return. She understands this commodification of her body and logically follows the rules of the game. Yet she resents the dehumanization in this sexual game. What is occurring sexually among her father, mother, Herr K and Frau K is devastating to Dora. Not only is her value based primarily on her sexuality, but the only man who wants her is Herr K, 'a mere servant'. In her dream, she meets a man at the station who answers her question 'Where is the station?'. He offers to go with her but she refuses and goes alone.

She rejects him and then feels anxious about not being able to move forward and then reaches the station by herself. Dora had several important associations to this part of the dream. She remembers a young engineer who brought her a gift. He was not willing to make a pass at Dora until his position had improved. The man is either Herr K, the young engineer, or a composite. Whoever it is the point is that she expects 'a man of means', like her father. The idea of exchanging love and sex for status and position remains the same. If the man in the dream improves his lot and becomes a 'man of means', then she may return her 'box' at the 'station'. Freud argues that Dora is identifying with the young engineer because he is patient. He misses the significance of the cultural/class sexual ritual in which Dora is playing out the sexual role that is expected of her.

'Then I was at home I must have been travelling, but know nothing about that.' Again Dora is feeling lost and confused even when she is at home. 'I walked into the porter's lodge and inquired for our flat. The maidservant answered the door and replied that mother and the others were at the cemetery.' The maidservant must be Frau K. She is now the woman with power. The maidservant opens the door for Dora and tells her important family information. Frau K has power because of her affair with Dora's father. Dora is drawn into this power game. The two most powerful and sympathetically portrayed people in the second dream are Frau K and Dora's father. Dora wants what they have. Frau K has traded her sexual commodity for a good price by getting a 'man of means' in Dora's father.

Dora identifies with the powerful because she feels so powerless. In the same dream, Frau K is the one who 'opens the door' and controls valuable family information about the funeral of her father. Dora has also disguised her negative feelings for her father by feeling guilty in the dream that she was not at his funeral. It is Herr K and Dora's mother, the least powerful and sexually rejected, that are portrayed negatively in the dream. Herr K is beneath Dora because he is not a 'man of means'. Dora's mother has lost the battle for her husband to Frau K, whose sexuality is considered more valuable. Dora has internalised the belief that the way to be legitimised is to have those in power validate her feelings and actions. She disguises the reality of her father's affair so that she will not feel so victimised.

In analyzing Dora's second dream, Freud again lets his need to own the correct interpretation get in the way of therapy. In their last session, Dora tells Freud that she is stopping therapy. Freud barely discusses this with Dora and pro-

ceeds directly to his interpretation of her dream. Freud believed she broke off therapy because of circumstances connected with the content of this dream.'

Whose dreams are these anyway? Freud's or Dora's? Their struggle over dream ownership is a struggle about power and identity. Freud's position from his class, age and gender perspective left him little conflict over who owned the dreams. He did. Dora, being an upper-class girl, grew up expecting property and high position, and is torn by the contradictions of the powerful world of her class and the powerlessness of her gender and age. She resents men because of the commodification of her sexuality, but her class feelings make her feel cheated for getting so little in return for her sexuality. She does not want a servant like Herr K, she wants a 'man of means' like her father. Paradoxically, Dora's internalization of her class background gave her the very strength to fight Freud for ownership over her dreams.

Further Reading

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