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Myth and the Unconscious

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Abstract:
Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis probably made the single most valuable contribution to the interpretation of myth: the first serious exploration of the unconscious life of the mind and the earliest articulation of its importance to consciousness. Myths, for Freud, were the products of the first era in human culture, in which an animistic picture of the world had dominated, but details of the relationship between myths and animism seem to be unexplained in some essential respects. In his evolutionary scheme, myths originally celebrated the spirits of the dead. As the dead were deified, myths came to celebrate the spirits or gods of nature.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Dream, Oedipus

1. Introduction:

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), provided a scientific basis for myth and couched its language in scientific terminology to explain his discoveries about the complexity of man's mind. He mentioned myths both in passing and as brief digressions in his writings, but he never devoted an extended methodological or theoretical discussion to the topic. Freud occasionally turned to myths, legends, and fairy tales as materials in order to support his psychoanalytical findings and explored them as a possible mode of expression. Freud first announced the theory in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, dated December 12, 1897:

'Can you imagine what endopsychic myths are? The latest product of my mental labor. The dim inner perception of one's own psychic apparatus stimulates thought illusions, which of course are projected onto the outside and, characteristically, into the future and the beyond ... *meshugge*? Psycho-mythology' (cited in Merkur 2005:1).

Similarly, the following words addressed to Albert Einstein in 1932, seven years before his death highlight his concept: 'It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology and in the present case, not even an agreeable one. But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said today of your physics?'(Strachey1960:211). In a similar vein, his masterpiece *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*) which first appeared in 1900, and eventually led to his break with his mentor, Wilhelm Fliess, simultaneously offered a comprehensive theory of mental processes and gave birth to psychological mythology (Doty 2000:160). It was this epoch-making book published on the very edge of the new century that launched the great 'Freudian revolution' in modern thought. Besides, it also introduced the most controversial concept of the 'Oedipus complex' (Aarne-Thompson Tale Type 931, Oedipus tale) to the general public. Well conversant with Greek mythology and Sophocles, he refers to Oedipus's tale explicitly in more than twenty places in his completed works, the most important spot is no doubt *Totem and Taboo* (Vleminck 2013:266). The

mythical figure of Oedipus indeed seems to function as Freud's 'thread of Ariadne' in order to investigate his way through the labyrinth of the human psyche (*ibid*.). Given his almost obsessional pre-occupation with mythology, it is almost impossible to imagine that this myth escaped Freud's attention. Freud seriously examined the Oedipus myth and thus concluded: 'It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to steer our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father' (Strachey 1953:262). It is in this context that the Oedipus complex is not, of course, an isolated phenomenon in the life history of an individual, but merely the central focus of a long continuous line of development. The methodological aspects of Freud's approach to the Oedipus complex may be well described by his earliest extant reference in a letter to Fliess, where he maintains:

'A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found in my own case too, being in love with my mother and jealous of my father and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood... If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate ... the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion, which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfilment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one' (Merkur 2005:6-7).

2. Myth of Oedipus:

The myth of Oedipus used by Freud to illustrate the psychological complex of humanity has become one of the most widely known in the world and is the key to the Freudian view of human psychology. The Oedipal paradigm for Freud is related to sexual aggression; it is the basis of the nuclear complex of neuroses found universally. As indicated in *Totem and Taboo* (1919), it becomes clear that the murder of the father has its origin in a sexual problem, namely the sexual desire of the sons for the women (Vleminck 2013:267). He elaborates on a reconstruction of this historical myth by introducing his famous myth of the primal horde. According to him, at some point of time in primal history, there was a primal horde that was reigned over by an almighty primal father who possessed the females, ruled tyrannically, and was both feared and hated as a rival by his sons as well as admired and loved for his strength. One day the son horde killed their father and ate him. The result of the deed, however, is not only that by this murder they get access to the wife and identify themselves with their father's strength, but the killing and eating also trigger remorse and a sense of guilt that according to Freud, the primitive cultural and religious ideas and institutions emanate: the prohibition to possess the mother and obedience to the totem god or father. The sense of guilt is thus regarded by Freud as the key issue that relates primitive man to later civilised enlightened man (Vleminck 2013:266). In other words, the driving force behind culture, morality, and religion has its due origin in the ambivalent attitude towards the father.

Freud's myth of the primal horde articulates an understanding of the origins of religion, morality, and culture in the sublimation of aggression. In both 'The Little Hans' and 'The Rat Man,' Freud has shown that aggressive expressions are indeed related to sexual aggression (*ibid*.:267). Freud finds similar complexes in Greek theogony, which is, in fact, replete with tales of obsessive struggles for power between divine fathers and their sons: Uranus throws his sons the Titans into Tartarus and Cronos castrates Uranus but eats his own sons except for Zeus, who is saved by his mother (Meletinsky 2000:40). In Freud's own words, this struggle revolves around sexual rivalry for the favours of the mother (Gaea, Rhea).

The nucleus of Freud's theory and the most original part of his contribution to the subject resides in his tracing the cause of this distortion to a 'censor' which interposes an obstruction to the becoming conscious of unconscious psychical processes (*ibid*.:286). He arrived at this conception from the analysis of various abnormal psychical manifestations, and psycho-neurotic symptoms, which he found to be constructed on a system fully analogous to that of dreams (*ibid*.). Regarding the significance of dreams, Freud maintains:

'But what makes the dreams so invaluable in giving us insight are the circumstances that, when the unconscious material makes its way into the ego, it brings its own modes of working along with it. This means that the preconscious thoughts in which the unconscious materials have found its expression are handled in the course of the dream-work as though they are unconscious portions of the id; and in the case of the alternative method of dream formation, the pre-conscious thoughts which have obtained reinforcement from an unconscious instinctual impulse are brought down to the conscious state. It is just in this way that we learn the laws which govern the passage of events in the unconscious and the respects in which they differ from the rules that are familiar to us in the waking thought. Thus the dream work is essentially an instance of the unconscious working over the pre-conscious thought process' (cited in Baral 1988:70-71).

The dream is therefore like a neurotic symptom in that it is a compromise formation (*ibid*.:71). The dream itself is not what it appeared to be but represents some earlier trauma that had been resolved unsatisfactorily. The unresolved traumas are primarily problems having to do with sexual frustrations, as in the Oedipus complex, i.e., the son desiring to sleep with the mother, and wishes the father were dead or removed from his role as a competitor, which Freud increasingly saw as foundational to many aspects of civilisation (Doty 2000:162). Freud states that inside the two chambers of the human mind, the conscious, and the unconscious, the desires are frequently at variance. When a desire is the same in both, then 'a dream is a fulfilment of a wish' *tout court*. However, when unconscious desires are opposed to those of the conscious mind, then 'a dream is a disguised fulfilment of a suppressed or repressed wish (Csapo 2005:86-87). So, for Freud dreams were originally regarded … as either a favourable or hostile manifestation by higher powers, daemonic and divine' (Merkur 2005:1-2).

Freud also suggests that most myths consist of projections of the environment of what are actually divisions within the psychic apparatus, in the form of gods and of heroes. A huge symmetry can be found between humans and the world and therefore the myths about heroes, who can be either human or divine involve projection. Moreover, the plot of hero myths is the fantasised expression of family relationships with the named hero playing the role of the idealised mythmaker (Burnett 2013:109). So, to understand the world is, similarly, to withdraw those projections and to recognise the world as it really is. Moreover, by reversing the projection, i.e., by reinterpreting the tales in a reductive, psychologising manner, the metaphysics might be replaced by meta-psychology. In other words, projections take place because 'myth gives vent to the repressed longings and fears of humankind: 'we revel in Oedipus's crimes because they represent our own unconscious desires, and we feel relief when he is punished because this alleviates our own feelings of guilt' (Sels 2011:56). The expression of oedipal wishes in disguised form is a compromise between the pleasure principle, which seeks to vent the wishes outright, and the reality principle, which opposes the satisfaction of them altogether. Freud thus concluded: 'the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex' (Freud 1919:260).

3. Freud and Myths:

It is surprising to note that Freud, apart from his analyses of the Oedipus myth left us only two analyses of myth: Prometheus and Medusa. Freud gave an extended analysis of the myth of Prometheus and the theft of fire. In the myth, Freud interprets fire as a libido symbol. The fennel stock in which Prometheus stole the fire is a phallic symbol (Csapo 2005:96). The eating of Prometheus's liver by the eagle of the father Zeus is a castration symbol. The symbolism in myth also contains an inversion of fire and water. Prometheus is credited with giving fire, but he forbade watering. The fennel stock that contained the fire but the penis it symbolises contains water (*ibid*.). There he used the clinical experience to establish that the fire of gods, which Prometheus brought to man in a fennel stalk symbolised the impregnating fluid of the phallus (International Psychoanalysis n.d.:16).

The second analysis of the myth attempted by Freud is that of the severed head of Medusa, a short but highly suggestive of its associated imagery. The cutting of the head symbolises castration (*ibid*.:97). The terror inspired by Medusa is, therefore, the terror of castration, which is linked to something seen. For instance, a boy sees female adult genitals surrounded by pubic hair, especially the mother (*ibid*.:98). Similarly, the sight of Medusa's head makes one rigid with fear, where rigid means erection and so in the consolation of the viewer, he still has a penis and confirms it through getting an erection (*ibid*.). As indicated above, Freudian theories, like the Jungians best-fit hero myths, as the subject matter of those kinds of myths is striving and accomplishment. The hero-like Oedipus can be the stereotypical rebel against the tyrannical father. In other words, the hero symbolises the adult still neurotically tied to the oedipal stage of development (Segal 1999:85). Moreover, the hero like Moses *vis-a-vis* God, be the heir of the father, identifying himself with the father and thereby forging psychological maturity (*ibid*.). Furthermore, the hero can even be the creator god himself, thereby accomplishing the same feat as the female: i.e., giving birth (*ibid*.). The hero can be divine or human, is the son who either defeats his father or, better reconciles himself with his father (*ibid*.).

Freud's significant contribution to the study of myth lies in his concept of psychoanalysis. In other words, according to Freud, psychoanalysis is based on the premise that mostly unconscious psychological forces determine human behaviour. Freud was able to reconstruct the psychological development of the human race from his clinical reconstructions of the psychic history of specific patients (Bell 1997:13). The case of Anna O (the pseudonym for 21-year-old Bertha Pappenheim, the founding patient of psychoanalysis) gave an empirical proof of the existence of an unconscious life of the mind which could have a profound effect on conscious life (Csapo 2005:83). The case of Anna O demonstrated that hysterical symptoms are not caused by the traumatic event but by the memory of a traumatic event, which is not permitted to fade in the normal fashion (*ibid*.).

4. Conclusion:

Thus, the kernel of all psychoanalytic theories of myth is the assumption that the symbols of myth, especially the themes underlying the plots are constructed in or well up from the unconscious (Cohen 1969:340). In other words, myths are like daydreams as it makes use of the symbolism of dreams expressing unconscious wishes and conflicts (*ibid*.:341) because behind every manifest content lingers a latent fantasy of masturbation, castration, penis envy, incest, etc. In other words, if the dream uncovered

the infantile desires of one human being, myths revealed psychic repressions of the childhood of the race' (Dorson 1972:26). Hence, myths would be seen to embody a type of 'dream work' - albeit with greater interposition from the unconscious mind than in dreams - which manifests the anxieties of its society.

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