

## Analyzing Sigmund: “The White Hotel” and the Judgment of Freud

In

D.M. Thomas uses “The White Hotel” to critique the phenomenon of psychoanalysis, and he does this in part by assessing Freud himself. As Tanner writes, the novel “relies to a large extent on Thomas’ appropriation and manipulation of Sigmund Freud as a character” (131). He gives the reader ample evidence to decide upon the validity of Freud’s theories; we receive many details about her treatment and its effects. Thomas gives us several perspectives on the heroine of the story, Lisa: first in her own words, both in the form of a poem and then in a narrative explanation of the poem, and then in Freud’s case study, a third person narrative, and finally a brutal story of the Holocaust. Over the course of this novel, we see Freud attempt to make sense of Lisa’s symptoms and do so inadequately: while he does help her, it is more by virtue of being a caring presence than providing a perfect analysis, and he fails to see that her pain is not physis but rather a harbinger of things to come.

The patient in this story is Lisa Erdman, whose voice we first encounter in her 13 page narrative poem, which we later learn she wrote on the pages of a musical score to her analyst, one Sigmund Freud. It is a dreamlike poem which takes the bold step of addressing Freud directly: “I was split open/ by your son, Professor...can/you do anything for me can you understand” (Thomas 16). She not only directs her freewheeling verse at Freud but suggests that she is having a sexual relationship with his son, that she

has escaped with him to the titular white hotel, where she and Freud's son supposedly have wild, enormously erotic sex nearly constantly. Already, she is challenging Freud, a trend that will continue throughout her relationship with the man.

Further, Thomas' preoccupation with violence, and the ways in which violence and sex are intertwined, becomes apparent almost immediately in Lisa's poem.

Throughout the poem, there are hints of tremendous tragedy coupled with eroticism: "... the guests/fell through the sky...I've never known my nipples to grow so quickly" (26).

Calamity follows calamity at the white hotel as guests fall from the ski lift, are burnt to death in a fire, drown in the ocean, and each time are replaced by a fresh flood of guests.

Each tragedy seems only to heighten the arousal experienced by the young lovers:

"charred bodies hung from trees/he grew erect again, again I lunged, oh I can't tell you how our rapture gushed..." (20). Although the reader will not learn this until much later,

Lisa's deep fascination with the ways in which sex and violence are entwined foretells her brutal rape and death. That her own sense of sexuality is heightened by violence

frightens her: "am I too sexual? I sometimes think/I am obsessed by it..."(27). Looking

for a sense of escape, something she will be desperately seeking later, at Babi Yar, she

writes, "...it was good/to feel a part of me was someone else"(28). As Tanner writes, the

poem demonstrates Lisa's "willingness to level the distinctions between violence and

sexuality" (138). The poem is dreamlike and quite often nonsensical: the next segment of

the novel represents Lisa's attempt to make sense of her poem, although the reader does

not yet know this. It also recollects Freud's own obsession with sexuality. Virtually every

line in the poem is saturated with sex. It hangs over the entire poem. Freud was, as we

know, a man who felt quite firmly that almost everything in a person's psyche circles

back to sex. His own obsession is therefore echoed in his patient. The juxtaposition of sex and violence is especially striking in the poem; the imagery related to both is searing, and

In the second segment, *The Gastein Journal*, we are presented with an alternate, narrative version of the events that occur in the poem. This time the story is told in the third person. Still Lisa is not identified: rather, she is referred to as “the young woman,” while the man we know is Freud’s son is “the young man.” Other characters are given fuller identities: there is a priest, a musician named Madame Cottin, a major, a watchmaker, and more. We get a better sense, over the course of this narrative, of what actually takes place: the lovers meet on a train and travel to a white hotel, where they wallow in each other, spending a great time of time making love. Over the course of their stay, all of the violence which the poem mentions in glimpses is more fully realized, and the juxtaposition between sex and violence is still more obvious: “At the same time one of his fingers was in her anus, hurting her, but she wanted to be hurt more. On the lake, there were a few lights where rescue boats were still searching for bodies” (Thomas 43). As we see from postcards sent by other guests, their behavior does not go unnoticed. One woman notes: “there was our hotel burning to the ground...and this young fellow pulled his girl on to his lap...and there were these people screaming all around...! (48). Yet the lovers will pull the other guests along with them. As in the poem, death covers this narrative: as the lovers have sex, they see many of the guests tumble from cable cars and fall to their deaths, but that night, “a whole new crowd of tourists had moved in, and naturally they could not be expected to eat their hearts out over misfortunes that had preceded them;” instead, everyone was quite cheery, and not for the first time, the young woman allows several people to drink from her breasts (82). Upon the closing of this

narrative, we are reminded again, as at the end of the poem, that the young woman is relieved to be part of someone else. Still, we do not yet have a sense of who this is. That all changes with the third act, Frau Anna G.

Frau Anna G is in many ways the centerpiece of the novel, in which Freud himself presents his case study of, it becomes apparent, the woman who produced, at his direction, the first two sections of this novel. Thomas' version of the case study reads much like an actual case study: he begins by presenting us with the problem Freud encountered, "a young lady who had been suffering for the past four years from severe pains in her left breast and pelvic region..." and goes on to give us the results of the pseudonymous Anna's physical examination (no explanation for the pains) and personal and familial history (89). He spends a great deal of time contemplating the latter, given that Anna—who is, in fact, Lisa—lost her mother at a young age: her mother was, according to Lisa, killed in a hotel fire when the girl was five. Freud ascribes a great deal of meaning to this early loss, saying that it brought her a "cruelly sudden expulsion from her paradise" (93). His belief is that this, and the subsequent paternal neglect, is among the events that are responsible for Lisa's current pains, which he considers to be hysterical rather than physical. He finds other causes as well: street harassment when she was fifteen, an affair with "A.," marriage and then divorce. Freud becomes frustrated with his patient: he can, he says, make little progress with her, because she fails to be honest with him (99). However, he begins to feel that he is making headway when Lisa writes the poem and narrative that make up the first part of the novel. At this point, he has also learned that as a child she witnessed her mother having sex with her uncle, something he considers vital to understanding her pathology. Freud pores over her writing quite eagerly

and studies it for symbolism: “Here...was evidence of Anna’s profound identification with her mother, preceding the Oedipus complex...The breast is the first love object... Thus, in the ‘white hotel’ there is no division between Anna and the world outside...”(116). His analysis—which he assumes is correct—is based largely on these writings: this is the explanation that Freud has for Lisa’s pain and for her fear to bear a child. In the coming segments, we will be given the opportunity to judge his work.

The most conventional segment of the novel, *The Health Resort*, is a fairly standard third person account of a woman’s life. The woman is, of course, Lisa Erdman, who by this time the reader knows quite well. This time, though, there is little hint of pathology or eroticism, at least of the wild, nonstop variety that so characterized her earliest narrations. This is, instead, a straightforward story of a young woman who is an opera singer, lives in Vienna with her aunt, and eventually marries an old friend whose wife has died so that his son will have a mother. True, she was once a patient of Freud’s, and during this narrative she receives a letter from him, asking to publish her earlier writings in conjunction with a case study, a letter that sends her reeling. And true, she has flashes of “feeling that she was no more than a spectre” (213). But overall, she seems a far cry from the madwoman who has presented herself in earlier bits of the book. Indeed, bits of her letters to Freud indicate that perhaps he was wrong about her, although it cannot be entirely his fault, as she admits to lying to him (187). But, Lisa writes to Freud, “in a way you *made* me become fascinated with my mother’s sin...I don’t believe for one moment *that* had anything to do with my being crippled with pain. It made me unhappy, but not ill (192) (emphasis original). All of this would seem to indicate that Freud’s

analysis was, if not wrong, then at least incomplete—but how incomplete we will not know until the final sections of the novel.

Until the fifth section, *The Sleeping Carriage*, this is a novel that is confusing, beguiling, occasionally funny, but not tremendously disturbing. This segment, however, is a horrifying narrative of the single largest mass slaughter of the Holocaust: in “36 hours of nonstop shooting on Sept. 29 and 30, 1941, the Nazis of Einsatzgruppe C, Sonderkommando 4A, massacred 33,771 Jews” in the Soviet Union (Korey 21). In Thomas’ novel, Lisa and her adopted son, Kolya, are among them.

This is when, as Hughes writes, “terribly, the reader comes to understand as a witness to her rape-murder by bayonet at Babi Yar what Thomas’ Freud could not understand about specificity of her symptoms...hers was a hysteria born of what she could dimly perceive...it was born of the coming mass annihilation of the Jews” (39). Throughout the course of the novel, Lisa demonstrates psychic ability, although she hesitates to admit it: while at the white hotel, she foresees the deaths of Madame Cottin, among others—not to mention her own death. Freud himself believes, based on a dream of hers, that she has certain powers of precognition, but he does not put together her terrible pain with her future death.

Although Thomas has come under fire from critics for his use of a survivor’s words to tell Lisa’s story at Babi Yar, it would be difficult to deny the power of the narrative at this point, especially as the pieces fall together and the reader realizes what has truly been behind Lisa’s pains (Cross 39). A Nazi sends “his jackboot crashing into her left breast...[and then] swung his boot again and sent it cracking into her pelvis. Again the only sound was the clean snap of the bone” (249). And, in the final, devastating

callback to the relationship between sex and violence, a Nazi “yanked her legs apart... inserted the bayonet...very gently...imitated the thrusts of intercourse” (249). By now Lisa is dead, along with all the others, and the reader is left with the certain knowledge that Freud, for all of his certainty, did not get this one right.

Lisa’s death proves to be the ultimate indictment of Freud’s thinking. Lisa insists from the very beginning that her suffering is physical, rather than hysterical, in nature, and Freud flatly refuses to believe her, referring to her condition frequently a “neurosis” and saying that she was “very disappointed” that he did not find a physical cause (90). Lisa herself remains unconvinced, telling Freud years later that she still thinks they are “organic, in some peculiar way” (191). Still, she does not deny that Freud has helped her. “I assure you it [her treatment] was not without fruit,” she writes to Freud; “whatever understanding of myself I now possess, is due to you alone” (193). Thus, while Thomas argues that Freud’s *theories* were incorrect, the treatment was far from useless. Freud’s care for her, his willingness to see her as a human being, to not flinch even when confronted with what she perceives as the full horror of her sexual hunger, is what ends up being healing. His theory may be wrong, or at the very least inadequate, but the care he provides, and the willingness to truly see her, are enough to provide some measure of healing.

It would be remiss not to mention the final section of the novel, in which Lisa is able to find peace and Freud is not: it is an odd chapter, one that Cross explains as sending Lisa to “purgatory...for Lisa, loving and hopeful, the transition proves relatively easy. Freud, whose *Weltanschauung* has made no provision for a place such as the new land, has a much harder time of it (26). Although in life, it was Freud who had the

answers, in death—or in Purgatory—it is the analysand who is able to “live” in relative peace, who manages to reunite with her mother and father, while Freud merely looks ill. Perhaps this serves as a final indictment of his worldview: if he had chosen to live more as Lisa had, more focused on the future, he too could have enjoyed Purgatory.

Regardless of the reader’s personal feelings about Freudian theory, it would be impossible to deny the man’s influence on American culture—and in addition to critiquing Freud, Thomas takes a moment to critique the American obsession with psychoanalysis. Writes Tanner of the reader who plays along with Freud, eager to understand the great man’s theories “by ‘grasping’ Freud’s symbolic interpretation of Lisa’s pain, the unself-conscious reader participates in an act of imaginative violence paralleling that of the soldiers who grasp Lisa’s body and the Nazis who occupy her country” (148). In other words, by choosing to believe the analyst over the patient, the reader becomes an unwilling second rapist, all too eager to trust the so-called expert over the person who is, in fact, an expert in her own experience.

The unconscious is a complicated thing: it is, “by definition, beyond the reach of discursive language” (Levine 1). In Western culture, Sigmund Freud is usually considered the unparalleled expert on the unconscious: his ideas and theory have influenced millions. In “The White Hotel,” author D.M. Thomas appropriated Freud as a character and used that technique to critique the foundations of the man’s work.



### Works Cited

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