

Expression of the “unconscious” under the mask of a tramp: A psychoanalytic dream sequence analysis of selected films of Charlie Chaplin

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ABSTRACT

Charlie Chaplin, an iconic comedian of the silent film and one of the famous stars of the twentieth-century silent film era, has extensively employed “dream sequences” in his slapstick comedies. It is a well-known fact that his formative years were miserable, filled with hardships and deprivations (devoid of even the basics of survival) — the memories and impressions of which occupy a significant portion of his unconscious mind. A mime performer and an artist, Chaplin entered the silent film industry and took it as a medium to express his ideas and values regarding life. It has been observed that studies on Chaplin’s Tramp mainly aim at analyzing his screen persona, Charlie — the tramp, to gauge the psyche of Chaplin — the artist. The current paper aims at determining two things: firstly to analyze that “dream sequences” are the expression of Chaplin’s unfulfilled wishes and desires manifested through Tramp’s wishes and Secondly to explore that “dream sequences” further Tramp’s optimism towards life which again is a reflection of Chaplin’s mind. The dream sequences of the Tramp provide glimpse into Chaplin’s mind. In this paper, the dream sequences of Chaplin’s Tramp in his select films will be analyzed through the dream theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the renowned psychologists. The study reveals that the deep-rooted desire of Chaplin, the artist, to get love and affection of which he was eternally deprived in his youth is reflected in Charlie’s dreams. It was the Chaplin’s unconscious, the evergreen spring that fed him with such symbolic ideas for the Tramp’s dream sequences.

Keywords: Chaplin, tramp, dreams, unconscious, wish, mask.

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INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

Dream analysis can be an effective means to study a character — as dreams are induced by the unconscious, the intrinsic part of the human mind, which acts as the regulator of a personality. Sigmund Freud’s model of the human mind is based on three levels of consciousness or awareness. First is the conscious mind, the exposed part of the personality, that reveals a person in the world. Second is the sub-conscious, the retriever of the recent memories and mediator between the conscious and the unconscious. The third and final one is the unconscious mind, the reservoir of memories and past experiences. The unconscious mind is the repository of the impulses and primitive desires, that constructs as well as controls all the habits, actions and behaviors, the content of which is usually unpleasant such as feelings of pain, anxiety or conflicts (Siegfried, 2017, p. 2) which the unconscious tries to communicate with the conscious through various means. Other than imagination, sensations, emotions, and feelings, “dreams” are one of the many ways through which the unconscious communicates.

With reference to Sigmund Freud’s theory of dreams, Calvin S. Hall in his paper titled “Diagnosing Personality by the Analysis of Dreams” (1947) interprets dreams to be “the externalization of an internal process” (p. 68), a projection of the inner mind. Elaborating upon the exclusiveness of dream interpretation method to analyze a personality, Hall draws on the characteristic features of dreams being “a projection of the personal” intimate self. He agrees with Freud in how dreams are the fundamental source of analyzing a personality. On a similar but specific premise, Lemaster considers the dream sequences of Charlie, that is Chaplin’s Tramp persona, as the best source for delving into the mind of Chaplin, the artist (p. 112). Since the main aim of this paper is to analyze — the ‘mask of Charlie,’ that is Chaplin’s tramp, to explore Chaplin’s psyche and to unravel the inner conflict of Chaplin- the artist — the dream sequences of Chaplin’s select films have been thoroughly studied here by applying content analysis approach.

Charles Spenser Chaplin popularly known as Charlie Chaplin, in his early childhood, had seen several hardships even as he moved into his grim youth. As an ambitious adolescent, he tried his luck with various professions, but “never lost sight of [his] ultimate aim to become an actor” (Chaplin 76). His historic screen persona brought him vast recognition and enormous fame. Chaplin’s Tramp quickly became a legend and an instant favorite with the audience. He is vividly remembered as the ‘little fellow’ in ill-fitting clothes, with large shoes, a derby hat, a thin, flexible cane and a square-shaped mustache with an unusual, strange gait that made his appearance funny. The Tramp maintains the attitude and behavior of a high-class individual but in reality, he belongs to the lower class. The outer self, that is, appearance, style, and actions, of the Tramp, are exposed to the audiences but the inner self, that is, wishes, desires, and hopes of the Tramp remain hidden to some extent; only the dream sequences reveal his wishes and desires. Chaplin’s Tramp is variously described by some as a “character mask” (Lemaster, p. 112) created by Chaplin to express his inner wishes through the

medium of his art. Based on this proposition, this paper posits various questions: What factors promoted the creation of the Charlie — the Tramp? Is Charlie- the Tramp- an embodiment of Chaplin himself? Is the character of Charlie a “mask” which Chaplin created to project his repressed desires via dream sequences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

David J. Lemaster in “The Pathos of the Unconscious: Charlie Chaplin and dreams” contends that dream sequences were Chaplin’s ‘essential tool’ for establishing a sympathetic relationship between his Tramp and the film audience. Lemaster elucidates on John McCabe’s comments about the dream motif of Chaplin’s films as a means to generate pity for the Chaplin Tramp. In this case Chaplin puts his screen persona in a dream sequence to reach a state of bliss and then shocks him into reality by pulling him out of his fantasy world (p. 112). Sigmund Freud had made a fundamental observation about Chaplin playing the tramp’s role in most of his films when he wrote, “he [Chaplin] always plays the same part, the weak, poor, helpless, clumsy boy” and explained that the life of Chaplin himself inspired the character of the tramp. (quoted in Holowchak, pp. 44-45)

Chaplin’s fascination to dreams and fantasies can be traced back to the Karno company’s sketch *Jimmy The Fearless* played by Stan Laurel and Chaplin, in which Chaplin played the role of Jimmy, the central character of the sketch, who was a ‘dreamer’ (Lemaster, p. 116). Like Jimmy, Chaplin’s Tramp too escaped reality to become a hero in his dreams. Lemaster quotes Stan Laurel’s opinion about Chaplin’s fascination with dream sequences:

You can see *Jimmy The Fearless* all over some of his [Chaplin’s] pictures—dream sequences, for instance. He was fond of them, especially in his early pictures. And when it comes down to it, I’ve always thought that poor, brave, dreamy Jimmy one day grew up to be Charlie the Tramp. (p. 116)

The impression of this role had an impact on Chaplin’s creative mind. Evidently, Chaplin has utilized dream sequences to render his Tramp’s wishes and desires via his dreams.

Chaplin’s Tramp was a serendipity. Chaplin never planned and created his Tramp’s character; he was born accidentally on the sets of *Mabel’s Strong Predicament* (1914). But *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914) featured the Chaplin’s Tramp character. Chaplin recalls this fact in his autobiography:

I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. ... I added a small moustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked onto the stage he [the Tramp] was fully born. (p. 145)

As stated above, Chaplin was unaware of the potentials and abilities of his Tramp as it was born instantaneously. But as he moved around with the ‘dress and moustache,’ the tramp came to life. However, Sigmund Freud had a different opinion in this regard. In his assessment of Chaplin in a letter written to Dr. Marx Schiller, he stated that he did not believe in the spontaneous innovation of such a poor, weak, helpless guy played by Chaplin in his films. Freud claims that:

... he [Chaplin] invariably plays only himself as he was in his grim youth. He cannot get away from these impressions, and even today, he tries to compensate himself for the humiliation and deprivation of that time. He is of course an especially simple, transparent case. (quoted in Holowchak, p. 44)

Freud’s disapproval of Chaplin’s serendipitous tramp is, perhaps, based on the belief that an artist often recreates his experiences in his art. Therefore, Freud asserts that Chaplin’s Tramp is a reflection of his deprived youth, whereby the impressions and memories embedded in his unconscious mind have led to the creation of the screen persona — Charlie. Therefore, Chaplin’s psyche could be understood if the character of Charlie and the dream sequences are studied analytically.

Various scholarships on Chaplin suggest that Chaplin, instinctively, had learned to suppress his wishes and desires owing to his poor economic conditions in his growing years. His recollection in his autobiography draws a heart wrenching picture of miserable days of his childhood and youth with expressions like “there was not a particle of food in the cupboard..., and Mother had not a penny” (p. 60). As an adolescent, failure in love adventures made him extremely miserable because like every common man he wanted “attention, romance, and drama in his life.” However, he claims of “erupting with sudden bursts of maturity” (Chaplin, p. 93) but his love was never reciprocated, and his desire for an adventurous sexual life was never gratified. Such is the case with the Chaplin’s Tramp too. In the films, Charlie- the Tramp is a deprived, unemployed vagrant who fails in all his ventures, extending this logic means that, Freud’s claim that Chaplin played himself wearing the mask of the tramp, to reflect on the issues of life he had lived, seems accurate.

The psychoanalytic theory states that painful feelings and repressed desires are locked away in the unconscious, which in turn regulates the actions and behaviors of an individual. If Chaplin’s repressed childhood and grim youth are to be considered in the light of this theory, it is observed that repressed feelings of Chaplin had taken shelter in his “Unconscious” which ultimately found its way out to the “Conscious” through his art and films. Also, Freud suggests that

any unfulfilled conscious wish is less likely to incite a dream unless it shares any similarity with the wish of the unconscious mind that reinforces those dreams.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Fantasy and daydreaming were essential themes outlining most of Chaplin's films, and they established the 'mask' of Chaplin's screen persona — Charlie the Tramp (Lemaster, p. 112). Hence, the dream sequences in the films allowed the critics and scholars to investigate deep into the psyche of Chaplin - the artist.

The Bank (1915)

The Tramp's wish to gain love and affection in the film *The Bank* (1915) found gratification in his dream. In the opening scene of the film, Charlie who works as a janitor, is seen walking to his workplace in a gentlemanly manner. His demeanor is in sharp contrast to his profession which is considered to be of lower grade in the society. He also nurtures a secret love for an employee at his workplace but never dares to reveal his love. All his feelings are suppressed within because she has rejected his advances. Later, in the back room of the bank, depressed Tramp has a dream where he rescues the girl from a group of dacoits and saves the bank from being robbed, thus emerging as a hero. In contrast to his strong character in the dream, in real life he is a weakling and an outcast. Waking to real life, he is seen kissing the mop instead of the girl whose attention he had captured due to the brave act in his dream. The dream fulfills his unconscious wish to get love and affection from the opposite sex. Nonetheless, he is left alone in real life as he comes out of his dreamland.

The Gold Rush (1925)

A similar kind of unconscious wish and desire surfaces in the film *The Gold Rush* (1925) where he fantasizes about a world in which he entertains his love interest and her friends on New Year's Eve. In a particular sequence in the film, Charlie invites his love interest and her friends to celebrate new year. He enjoys the New Year's Eve with his ladylove and her friends, but that is only a dream. The irony lies in the fact that no one comes to his cabin and he is left alone in that celebration. Commenting upon the futility of his dream, Lemaster perceives Tramp's dream as his inner desire (p. 114) to gain love and affection. Nevertheless, he is reunited with his lady love in the end only when he becomes a millionaire.

The Idle Class (1921)

In another film *The Idle Class* (1921), a daydream sequence depicts the desire of companionship and love on the part of Charlie. The lonely Tramp sees a rich, beautiful lady on horseback and slips away into fantasy world. In his daydream, he rescues the lady from an accident caused due to an uncontrolled horse. In the latter part of his daydream, he imagines himself to be happily married to the woman and having a family. Lemaster sees it as a foreshadowing of the future in the film where the Tramp, at first, was warmly welcomed by the woman as she mistook him for her husband but later, he was

thrown out of the house (p. 116). Upon the revelation that the Tramp is not her husband, the woman looks away from the tramp while he is being kicked out. The reaction of the woman makes him pathetic and sad. This daydream sequence mirrors the Tramp's inner desire to have a happy family life, which Chaplin the artist knew would never be fulfilled in his real life as he was undergoing a tough crisis in his personal life.

The Tramp (1915)

Another similar theme of unrequited love is evident in the film *The Tramp* (1915) in which Charlie rescues a girl from thieves on the heath. As a gesture, he is invited to work on the farmhouse of the girl's father. When the farmhouse is attacked, Charlie while fighting back the miscreants gets hurt. The girl nurses his wounds. Charlie mistook the nursing for love, only to get disappointed by the appearance of a handsome youth as girl's lover. Heavy-hearted he resigns and leaves the farmhouse with a note and yet again, he fails to secure his love interest. This film is devoid of Tramp's dream but brilliantly projects Tramp's optimism in the final scene of the film.

A thorough critical analysis of these dream sequences in view of Chaplin's personal life reveals that Charlie's inherent desire to gain love and affection of the opposite sex is similar to that of Chaplin's. Presumably, it is a reflection of a repressed wish of Chaplin as he was lonely and needed a companion. Chaplin's remark, "Cold, hunger, and the shame of poverty are most likely to affect one's psychology" (p. 206) emphasize the fact that the deprivations of the basics of survival in his childhood have affected his psyche and in turn his actions. Chaplin, in another patch of recollection in his autobiography, describes the "strong element of merchant" in him, for his mind was forever preoccupied with the ways of earning a livelihood ever since he was a child. All the businesses that he could ever think of taking up were "always to do with food" (pp. 60-61). This preoccupation with food and the lack of it in his childhood became a significant part of his "Unconscious" that often showed up in the Tramp's funny gags or find their gratification in the dream sequences.

Modern Times (1936)

The famous daydreaming sequence in the film *Modern Times* (1936) is one of those sequences that depict the gratification of his unconscious wish for an abundance of food and luxury. The film is based on two vagrant souls: Chaplin's Tramp and the gamine. Charlie- the Tramp had lost his factory job due to nervous breakdown. The gamine, played by Edna Purviance, had lost her father in a police encounter. For survival, she stole bread and bananas. In an instance, Charlie tries to cover for gamine's theft. Since then, they both stayed with each other as 'brethren in misery.' A little later in the film, owing to his affectionate feelings for the gamine, Charlie imagines that they are a happy couple in a house full of luxury. In his fantasy, every food item is at a hand's stretch. For instance, he plucks an apple by his window side and then kicks it off after a bite and a cow is at his doorstep when he needs milk. He enjoys the luxurious bunch of grapes hung just outside his door at a hand's reach and he sits down to a table full of delicacies with his beloved. His utopian world comes

crumbling down when he wakes up to real life. In this scene, Chaplin has perfectly executed the Tramp's fantasy of having a happy home.

On the contrary, the sequence is a contrast to the real dwelling place of the Tramp and the gamine in the film. In a later sequence in the film, the couple occupy a dilapidated wooden house whose every block comes down even with a slight movement inside it. However, they both are quite happy about it. The Tramp calls it "a paradise," as captioned in the film. In however grave a situation he is in, Charlie is always optimistic about his life. Although a victim of poverty and often brutal fate, Charlie never feels sad about his disappointments. Instead he accepts life as it comes. However, the optimistic attitude of the Tramp evokes pity and sympathy towards him. Dreams and fantasies are his way of escaping a problematic situation to cope with his waking real life. (Lemaster, p. 112)

Tramp's Optimism

An exploration of Charlie's psyche unfolds, or rather hints at several conflicts and crisis that Chaplin faced in his personal life. This suggestion is made on the basis of a few probable parallels drawn between Chaplin's personal life and the films that he made/produced. As evident in the dream sequences of his films, Charlie never gets the satisfaction within his dreams or fantasy world. There is always an obstacle that stands between the object of his desire and its gratification. For instance, in *The Bank*, he finally gets the attention of his love interest, but when he kisses the lady, he wakes up to the real world to realize his wish is left unfulfilled. Similarly, in *Modern Times*, when he sits down on the dinner table with his beloved to enjoy the sumptuous meal, the carving of the meat brings him back to the real life where he is a poor vagrant and cannot afford such a luxurious life. Nevertheless, Chaplin's Tramp has an optimistic outlook towards life. After every dream sequence in his films, the Tramp takes charge of his life, shakes off his fantasy, and moves on with his waking life, with a hope to have a better future.

Jung, in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* characterizes dreams as "involuntary, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche..." (p. 48) considering dreams as the psychic forms of the Unconscious. Jung was opposed to Freud's idea that sexual motives are the driving force behind the dreams. On the contrary, he considered dreams to be the symbolic language of the Unconscious trying to connect with the Conscious. Freud's dream theory explains the unconscious mind as the seat of the dream inciting region, and identify dreams as the 'fulfillment of wishes.' Whereas Jung's dream theory establishes dreams to be the inner map of the dreamer's evolution towards a balanced relationship between the two level of his mind— the Unconscious and the Conscious— acquainting the Unconscious to the Conscious. Explaining Jung's idea of dreams, Kelly Bulkley writes, "Jung believed that dreams function to promote ... the uniting of conscious and the unconscious in a healthy, harmonious state of wholeness," which Jung termed as "individuation," a process of "complete actualization of the whole human being" (p. 2). Under such considerations, the character of Charlie

— the Tramp is an instance of the process of ‘individuation.’ An escape into the fantasy world has harmonized his unconscious with the conscious paving the way to self-realization, which in turn, has helped him to be optimistic. Hence, the Jungian approach to dream sequences explain the optimism of Charlie-the Tramp.

CONCLUSION

In his films, Chaplin has utilized “dream sequences” as an efficient tool that serves various functions. First of all, they gratify the desires of the Tramp which he cannot achieve in waking life and becomes a means to escape the reality for the time being. Secondly, they reveal the psyche of the Tramp — his unconscious wishes, urges, and fears that incite the dream, and finally, the depiction of the Tramp’s harmonious state of mind that resulted in his optimism towards life. Moreover, the unfulfilled wishes in the dream sequences caused due to the waking up to real life provokes pity and sympathy among the audience towards the character of Charlie. Undoubtedly, the dream sequences of the Tramp when seen as a whole, reveal the inner desire of Charlie who is an extension of Chaplin’s own personality. Hence, the deep-rooted desire of Chaplin, the artist, to get love and affection of which he was eternally deprived in his youth is reflected in Charlie’s dreams. While Chaplin’s unconscious wish for love, food, money, and power emerge as the primary factors, the awareness of his contemporary world become secondary factors behind the creation of the mask of Charlie— the Tramp. It was the Chaplin’s unconscious, the evergreen spring that fed him with such symbolic ideas for the Tramp’s dream sequences. In Fawell’s opinion, Charlie represents the best of Chaplin’s nature. He writes, “Charlie distills and idealizes qualities in Chaplin that were not enacted so gracefully in real life. ... Like Charlie, ... Chaplin was at his best, and only found real ease in his dreams.” (p. 20).

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