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SEARCHLIGHTS

ON

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Dedicated to Professor August Aichhorn, on the Occasion
of his Seventieth Birthday
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THE PRIMAL CRIME AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

By Martin Grotjahn, M.D.

{Los Angeles}

Mankind has finally found the fulcrum which Archimedes promised could turn the world from its course by leverage.

The urge to destroy is a psychological problem but it was not recognized as such until Sigmund Freud transferred the topic of original sin and guilt from the realm of religion and art to that of science, to make them the subject of psychoanalytic investigation. It is now within the power of mankind to actualize this age-old fantasy of total destruction.

The Primal Crime According to Freud

In his autobiography,[^] Freud summarized briefly the hypothesis about the original crime, which he formulated in more detail in his great book, Totem and Taboo.[^]

“However, the sons came together and united to overwhelm, kill and devour their father, who had been their enemy but also their ideal. After the deed they were unable to take over their heritage since they stood in one

another's way. Under the influence of failure and regret they learned to come

to an agreement among themselves, they banded themselves into a clan of brothers by the help of the ordinances of totemism, which aimed at preventing a repetition of such a deed, and they jointly undertook to forego the possession of the women on whose account they had killed their father. They were then driven to finding strange women, and this was the origin of the exogamy which is so closely bound up with totemism. The totem-feast was the commemoration of the fearful deed from which sprang man's sense of guilt (or 'original sin') and which was the beginning at once of social organization, of religion and of ethical restrictions."

The evidence of psychoanalysis confirms what art and religion have claimed since man formed society, namely that the primal crime is the patricide. The findings of anthropology, psychology and archeology seem to support this conclusion. The "Mea Culpa" of the Church proved to be a

1 Freud, Sigmund: An Autobiographical Study, London, Hogarth Press, 1946.

2 Freud, Sigmund: Totem and Taboo. New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1918.

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fact substantiated by scientific research. Clinical evidence shows that the primal oedipus complex forms a part of the development not only of every

neurotic but of all human beings. Some of this clinical evidence will be given later.

Freud in *Totem and Taboo* and later in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* has laid the foundation for an understanding of patriarchy. He himself was influenced by the androcentric bias of his time, and perhaps of his 'own psychological make-up. It may also be that the great clinician was satisfied with an explanation of the oedipus complex which advanced the scientific understanding of man beyond any point previously attained. Freud was fully aware of the problems posed by the phenomena of matriarchy, feminine deities, the symbol of the Sphinx and man's hostility toward the woman who gave him life. He was aware of the reign of the mother before the coming of a patriarchy, but he never described this in the scientific terms nor with the almost seer-like clarity with which he described the existence and clinical importance of the oedipus situation as a phenomenon in the history of mankind. Freud preferred to stop at the oedipus level rather than go further and make the still deeper interpretation that matricide antedated patricide. His theories met with such resistance in his time that to have gone even further might have quashed psychoanalysis at birth.

It is unlikely that Freud was guided in this restraint by motives of strategy or politics but rather that his intuition told him how far he could advance.

Clinical observation, anthropology and the analytic interpretation of literature, all show clearly that there is a "preoedipal phase" in the historical development of mankind as well as in the development of each individual. There is a "pre-Totem and Taboo" phase in the history of social groups. Before the Gods of the "Great Father" type were created, the more primi-

tive "Great Mother" had to be destroyed. In the development of the individual we observe that the infant has to turn from the mother before he can discover the existence of the father.

Lester W. Ward characterized the male as "an afterthought of nature" when formulating this development of a matricentric organization into a patriarchy.

The earliest crime to be discovered both in the history of the race and in the development of the individual seems to be patricide. But the crime

3 Freud, Sigmund: Group Psychology and the Analysts of the Ego. London, Hogarth Press, 1922.

4 Wiegert-Vowinkel, Edith : The Cult and Mythology of the Magna Mater from the Standpoint of Psychoanalysis. Psychiatry, I, 1938.

5 Zilboorg, Gregory: Masculine and Feminine. Psychiatry, VII, No. 3, 1944. Quotes and discusses Lester W. Ward's lecture at the Six o'Clock Club in Washington 1888, Pure Sociology. New York, Macmillan, 1914.

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which antedates it – on an historically older level and even more deeply repressed in the unconscious of all of us – is the murder or rape of the mother.

The mother, whom Oedipus finally possessed after slaying his father, is not

the all-powerful, all-knowing true woman, but she is already the woman of the patriarch episode, already dethroned and degraded to the status of the father's chattel.

The mother of the preoedipal era is the woman who gives life and who can take it away. Her dominance is absolute and man fears her mortally and eternally. In the East she is symbolized as the Great Goddess. The struggle

against her is symbolized, for instance, in the fight of the Greeks against

the Amazons.[®] Before the oedipus situation can arise and be resolved to make

way for the later development, there must be the struggle with the mother.

The hatred of man against woman is a mixture of retaliation, fear, and envy. Man succeeded in dethroning the mother in reality, but not in his mind.

Zilboorg states : "It is not penis envy on the part of the woman, but woman envy on the part of the man, that is psychogenetically older, and therefore , more fundamental.**

It is possible that the mother image of this deepest unconscious level was not murdered like the father on the oedipal level. She was dethroned, degraded, stripped of her power by other means, by the first rape. This probably was less a sexual act, and showed very little, if any, tenderness and

love. It was an act of power, hatred, and animal conquest. In other words, it showed all the features of pregenital organization. The phallus was used as an aggressive, destructive, demonstrative organ. Only the dethroned mother could be loved with the kind of love which Oedipus had for his mother.

Before Freud, but unknown to him, the research of Johann Jacob Bachofen[^] claimed that matriarchy and matricide were historical events antedating patriarchy and patricide.

Johann Jacob Bachofen was born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1815, where he died in 1887, little known even in the German speaking countries. He is responsible for the theory that patriarchy is based upon and evolved from matriarchy. He was the first to discover and investigate the culture of that "prehistoric history*" of which we have no written documents. He interpreted material taken from archeology, mythology, paleontology and even poetry to reconstruct a vast span of remote history. Bachofen's methods are closely related to the psychoanalytic methods of Freud. The scientific world either ignored or rejected his claim that there had been a chthonic matriarchial

© Schulz-Engle, Bernice: The Amazons in Ancient Greece, Psalms, XI, No. 4, 1942.

7 The interrelation between Freud and Bachofen is instructively summarized by

Turel, Adrien: Bachofen-Freud: Zur Emanzipation des Mannes vom Reich der Mutter.

Bern, Hans Huber, 1939.

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period. His theory was too foreign to the common concept of remote antiquity.

Mankind is unwilling to face the thought of its maternal origin and dependency.

The foundation and starting point of Bachofen's theory is his analysis of Aeschylus' Orestes^ especially the third part of the trilogy, the Eumenides.

The Erinyes are the priestesses of the matriarchy who defended Clytemnestra. They are opposed and attacked by the young deities, Apollo and Athene, who represent the beginning of patriarchy and who defend Orestes. According to the old matriarchal law Clytemnestra was not the murderess but the lawful executioner of Agamemnon. According to the new patriarchal law Orestes did not murder his mother but avenged his father. The matriarchal principle of maternal pregnancy and birth is opposed by the spiritual idea of paternal procreation culminating in the cephalogenesis of Pallas Athene. The fight between matriarchy and patriarchy, the fight of Theseus against the Amazons, the fight of the old culture of Asia with the new culture of antiquity in Athens and Europe is the essential meaning and importance of Greek history. In this time of evolving patriarchy, the Erinyes are still powerful but they become the childless mothers of the night. They live in the darkness of the earth as the deities of love and fertility who have been vanquished and drawn into the darkness by Zeus – the new ruler of the patriarchal Olympus.

These problems and conflicts are clearer and franker in Sophocles' Oedipus than in the tragedy of Aeschylus. Shakespeare's Hamlet is more closely related to Sophocles than is his King Lear to Aeschylus.

In the Oedipus tragedy the fight between matriarchy and patriarchy is no longer the issue. This conflict is settled so far as the unchallenged pre-dominance of the patriarchy is concerned. Oedipus, Hamlet, Don Carlos, all picture the same incest conflict and differ only in the degree of consciousness.®

What was a deed in Oedipus, was a conscious wish in Hamlet but a wish already repressed in Don Carlos. All three dramas could have been written by the same Sophocles growing older and more Christian: Man's desire to

conquer the mother, and the woman is not only a problem of libido but also a problem of power and of achieving recognition of the male, for he cannot forget the time of gynaccocracy and the fact that he was once forced to submit to the frightful passage "under the yoke".

Title Symbolization of the Twofold Primal Grime in Dreams

The clinical evidence that the primordial rape of the mother and the later slaying of the father is living truth in our own unconscious can be found in two different observations. These experiences are disguised and,

®Rank, Otto: Das Inzest Motiv in Dichtung und Sage. Leipzig, 1912.

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of course, show that the original desires are deeply repressed in our time. They remain unconscious and can be studied only in their derivatives.

Such derivatives are our dreams and fantasies, and they show what mankind always knew – that we all are sinners. Only a few act it out in the actual crime of rape and murder.

In our patients' dreams it is more difficult to detect the importance and the struggle with the primordial mother than the more obvious and genetically so much younger struggle with the father.

The following dreams are not reported because they are in any way

unusual nor shall we relate them to any neurotic symptom or psychosomatic syndrome, or to any character trait. They are given as illustrations of unconscious tendencies which are universal, and are quoted from different parts of one analysis.

The patient, aged forty-six, was in analysis because of a mild chronic depression. In general it seems to be easier to penetrate through the level of the oedipus situation to the level of the primordial mother in the age group of forty, than in the younger age groups. It may be that certain unconscious aspects of the oedipus complex are worked through to relatively satisfying results during the process of maturation, and especially during the social adjustment to our form of democratic patriarchy. This then in turn facilitates the analysis of the underlying levels of development.

The following is part of a dream as reported by the patient – “. . . In a little town in southern France the people got together in a kind of revolution. I was their leader and showed them how to get into the castle overlooking the village. I also showed them how to get to their leader or king or somebody running the affairs of the city. When we finally got there I was alone and did not know any more whether I was myself, the leader, or one of the revolutionaries . . .”

The meaning of this almost undisguised oedipus dream was nearly conscious to the patient, who had first rebelled against his father then followed in his father's footsteps and finally outdid him in many respects.

Twelve months, or approximately two hundred analytic hours later, after having worked through the oedipus situation, the patient had a dream, which signified the change in his analytic situation.

“. . . I passed a dying man lying half concealed in dirt and straw. Then

I saw a woman who looked almost like my mother, but bigger, standing in a window or a shop, like a butcher shop. She was exposed or partially exposed, as if a crime had been committed. I went away from there and had to climb up a steep wall or mountainside. I could hardly make it and got out of breath. . . .” Another dream – from this analytic period – gives a variation of the same motif. “. . . I saw the vice-president of our company and our woman advertising manager sitting at a long table with many people. I only saw these two distinctly. They sat at the head of the table. I was sitting at the other end. The woman ate little silver fishes with great delight. The whole thing happened on an open street and heavy traffic, people and cars.

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were going by^ but nobody paid any attention. I think I was serving the woman, like a waiter. . . .”

The last dream to be reported here from a still later period of analysis, approximately the four hundredth hour, was reported while the patient went through a rather deep depressive episode:

, I don't know whether this is a dream or a recollection of something I learned in school, or whether I made it up while half asleep. It was as if the earth opened, or as if I were in a basement without a cement floor. A big hole opened and I backed my car or a truck into it. I must have once

heard a story of people who were threatened by an ever-deepening and widening canyon or splitting of their land. Finally the bravest of their sons in full armor and on his best horse, sacrificed himself and hurled himself into the canyon to his death. The earth slowly closed over him and the people were saved. . .

We will not discuss here the therapeutic use of these dreams, their relation to the central issue of transference neurosis, nor their meaning in terms of the patient's depressive condition, nor have we reported these dreams to prove scientifically that the rape of the primordial mother (last dream) was older than the patricide (first dream) .

They are offered only as an illustration of the theory from clinical observation. The patient had worked out well the passing of the oedipus complex and had succeeded in life and in his profession. In his oral sadistic desires, he remained frustrated and later said that he felt he did not get anything out of life.

As a rule the derivatives and symbols of the early stages of the preoedipal development are vague. Frequently anxiety and guilt are not bound to any object. They are felt as panic or horror. It is also significant that these dreams are rather uniform, that they could have been dreamt by almost anyone and are stripped of individual symbols. From the content alone it is often not evident whether they were dreamt by a man or a woman, since women also go through a phase of liberation from the mother and this phase of both sexes occurs at an age level before there is any awareness of sex differences.

The main psychological differences between the sexes become apparent more in the results of this liberation than during the process of it.

As a rule these early feelings of trying to fight the mother, or denying the fact of having been born of the mother, these feelings of the struggle for independence from her, are expressed in affects almost beyond the possibility of verbalization.

‘There was a disaster or something. I was running my car over a body in a crouched position,’ or ‘I killed a dog, and I did not know what to do with the corpse. It was terrible.’ Or, ‘I kissed my wife, and then I saw my mother’s face in the window. She cried and I woke up.’ Or ‘A bat flew in the room, and I did not want it to bite anybody, so I tried to catch it and it turned into my hand. It had to be taken off and it was horrible.’

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These dreams are not necessarily dreamt by psychotics. They may be dreamt by almost anyone sensitive enough to allow his dreams to arise out of the depths of the unconscious and to be noticed before they again sink down into repression.®

Sometimes such dreams are actually acted out, and then the fateful step from a dream state to a psychosis or a crime is made. This was the case of the psychotic veteran who disembowled his dog, “the promiscuous and sniveling bitch”, as a last attempt to symbolize the matricide. He was then swept away by this break-through of his impulses and with tears streaming down his cheeks, stabbed his step-mother through the heart.

The regressive, schizophrenic matricide is at the same time a symbolic rape. The schizophrenic attacks whom he would have loved if he could love at all. The social counterpart is a mob lynching. It is regressive in its cruelty, its lack of rationality, its almost demonstrative denial of justice. The lynching is schizophrenic in its symbolism, and in its implied homosexuality. After the mother has been raped, the culprit is murdered and the brothers can live in peace again.

Reality Manifestations of Guilt

Our interest in crimes as reported in the newspapers or in murder mysteries, in movies and in books, is another proof of these criminal desires of long forgotten times which still live in us, but have been laboriously controlled. It is easier for us now to participate as an onlooker of other people's crimes and punishments than to look into ourselves and to discover them within ourselves and so to suffer all the pain of guilt and shame.

Intolerance is the projection of guilt; tolerance is the identification or at least the partial identification and acceptance of one's own part in every crime. Tolerance means a recognition of common features between anyone's crime and one's own desires. In the tragedy this is enacted before our eyes; it may be in real life or on the stage. "Entertainment", which is quite different, but still related to art, denies the identification with the criminal or the hero of the tragedy, and finally denies the existence of tragedy by means of the happy ending.

The movie thriller and the mystery story play a peculiar, teasing game with guilt and the deliverance from it. The thriller, too, invites identification, but does it in the form of splitting the on-looker into two parts: one

part identifies with the murderer and goes through all the agonies of the chase; the other part identifies with the detective, policeman or prosecutor,

and insists that the crime must be solved and punished. The unsolved crime is a threat, causing a feeling of the uncanny. As long as the murderer is

^ For a more detailed discussion of this aspect see: Fromm, Erich: Sex and Character. Psychiatry, VI, No. 1, 1943.

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among us it could be my brother and it could even be "I", namely, that part of me that I do not know.

The peculiar thrill of the mystery story is based on a teasing game with the collective guilt. Before the criminal is found everybody is suspected, and

sure enough, everybody turns out to be guilty in one way or another, at least

guilty in the psychological sense. This almost goes so far as to include the

reader or the movie-goer even before he starts to identify. The thrill depends

on making use of everyone's conscience.

The term "teasing" is used here in order to show the difference between the true identification in the tragedy and the deluded identification in the movie thriller. The identification is a testing one, as if the onlooker were only asked: Maybe it was you? In the tragedy the onlooker goes further: in his identification with the hero he is willing to atone by suffering, but the movie-goer stops his identification with the murderer at the moment when suffering and punishment begin and changes to an identification with the prosecutor. In this righteous identification he insists on the punishment of the "enemy", his former self.

A few years ago a peculiar murder case caused sensational interest all over the country. According to all newspaper accounts, the evidence was clearly against the defendants. It seemed that the accused young girl, together with her fiance, had bludgeoned her parents to death and then dynamited the sailing yacht where the crime had been committed. The proceedings dragged on for weeks, and the appointment of a jury alone took more than a month. The defendants steadfastly denied their guilt. They were shown the receipt for the purchased dynamite which had been found in one of the defendant's cameras, which bore his own signature. The entire crime could be retraced step by step almost like a movie taken during the real act.

A stanchion was found which fitted perfectly into the victims' wounds. Blood, hair, and flesh were found on the defendants' clothes. Several notes written by the male defendant amounted, at least psychologically, to a confession. The facts were obvious from the newspaper accounts. The courtroom atmosphere was clearly against the defendants. The defendants' own family gave an unmistakable expression of their opinion, almost condemning the defendants.

The whole mounting interest no longer focu'sed on whether they did it

but changed to the question: will they get away with it? Interestingly enough, the question why they did it was easily settled in everybody's mind – greed and lust, which was both true and false. Nobody noticed that life here repeated the tragedy of Orestes and Electra.

Then at the end of the whole trial, the unbelievable happened. The jury, as it seemed to the reporters peeping through the windows, was deadlocked from the beginning with a majority for condemnation and only one

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dissenting vote. Finally the jury informed the judge that a decision had been reached and he admonished the public that no demonstration would be allowed[^] and court attendants were stationed all over the courtroom. When the verdict of “not guilty” was read[^] bedlam broke loose. Everybody cried, laughed, shouted, kissed everybody else, including the defendants. The jury joined the accused, and some of the jurors were photographed with the acquitted girl. The crowd behaved as if not the two young people had been accused, and had been set free, but as if they, the innocent onlookers, had been accused, had felt their guilt, but had still been proved innocent. Before everyone's eyes, and in actuality, the guilty unconscious was declared free of guilt and criminal punishment set aside. It was a total absolution of everybody concerned.

Something similar seemed to have happened in the collective mind of the jury. They felt that circumstantial evidence could not be accepted,

because it seemed possible to use it against everybody with a guilty conscience.

They freed themselves by not accepting anything but confession or “objective” proof.

The Return of the Repressed as the Possible Ultimate Grime

It would be fantastic and no longer scientific to compare the analysis of the primal crime against the mother with a total destruction of mankind in a future war. The primordial mother was cruel, and most mother goddesses have been cruel and cannibalistic. The mother could give life and could take it away. The primordial mother was lawless and promiscuous. It was the organized brother horde which decreed law, order, rational thinking, property, and orientation in time and space. The same man who felt so inferior to the life-giving mother, who denied his dependence upon her, created out of his fear of being a parasite time and space and finally the machine. All this he achieved by sublimation and repression.

But the return of the repressed may result in re-creating the primordial situation. This would be the situation before the first crime, before the Garden of Eden, even before time: When There Was Chaos.