

Reading the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Study of Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943)

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ABSTRACT:

With the advent of the 21st century the “traditional boundaries” between different genres of literature have been blurred due to the innovative analytical and research approaches introduced by the contemporary scholars. Therefore besides looking at the entertaining side of the Children’s literature, modern-day researchers are also inclined to explore its hidden socio-cultural and psychological perspectives essential for the balanced spiritual and intellectual growth of a child. In this perspective *The Little Prince* (1943) by Antoine de Saint Exupéry can be considered an apt example of an apparently children’s novella but with a much deeper psychological thread to explore. The story follows the expeditions of a young prince who visits various planets, including Earth, to gain wisdom, and addresses the themes of loneliness, friendship, love, and loss. This particular Qualitative research is focused on the philosophical observations of the novella about life, adults, and human nature, and draws an inherent connection between an individual’s unconscious memories and his conscious understanding of the physical world around him. In order to comprehend this connection between human conscious and unconscious the research follows the theoretical framework proposed by Carl Jung and discussed by Hamida Bosmajian in Peter Hunt’s *Understanding Children’s Literature* (1999). Thus the fantasy world of *The Little Prince* has been taken as an allegory for the better understanding of the Jungian perspective related to the symbiotic relationship between the worldly wisdom and the latent unconscious memories and images of an individual. In this way man’s attempt to acquire conscious understanding of the physical world can also be considered a step towards the spiritual enlightenment of his unconscious. The research is significant because it voices out that spiritual and intellectual growth is a life-long progress which continues throughout life and one’s personal and communal experiences play an active part in this process, as one notices in the case of the little prince.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the 21st century the “traditional boundaries” between different genres of literature have been dissolved or blurred due to the innovative analytical and research approaches introduced by the contemporary scholars and researchers. Hence the literature previously reserved only for the minor readers has now also been viewed via multiple lenses of adult perspectives, classifying it rightly to the category of “crossover fiction”. According to C. S. Lewis’s much-cited maxim, “a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story” (p.15). Therefore besides looking at the entertaining side of Children’s literature modern-day readers and researchers are inclined to explore its hidden socio-cultural and psychological perspectives essential for the balanced spiritual and intellectual growth of a child. Thus a number of texts, including Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) etc, previously related to children’s literature only, have now been studied through multiple adult approaches.

In this regard, Zohar Shavit in her 1987 study, *The Poetics of Children’s Literature*, claims that many children’s books with an “ambivalent status” address two implied readers: “a pseudo addressee [the child] and a real one [the adult]” (p.56). Hence most of the children’s stories convey a deeper message rather than just playing with the imaginative possibilities of the listeners or readers. According to Shavit, “the child, the official reader of the text, is not meant to realize it fully and is much more an excuse for the text rather than its genuine addressee” (p.57). Therefore various studies have been conducted during the postmodern era to highlight the implicit strands and the concerns yet unexplored in the domain of children’s literature.

For instance Peter Hunt in *Understanding Children’s Literature* (1999) classifies children’s books as “real literature” which “consists of texts which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers dealing with fundamental questions of communication and understanding between adults and children, or, more exactly, between individuals and individuals” (p.2-3). Thus in Hunt’s perspective a number of psychological and social approaches can be applied to children’s books considering them a befitting canvas to address the grave issues of the adult world. The allegories and symbolism used in these tales provide the subtle understanding of some of the basic existential dilemmas both at the personal and communal levels.

In this perspective *The Little Prince* (1943) by Antoine de Saint Exupéry can be considered as an apt example of an apparently children's novella but with a much deeper psychological thread to explore. From the perspective of Shavit's pseudo addressee i.e. the child, the story follows the expeditions of a young prince who visits various planets, including Earth, to gain wisdom, and addresses the themes of loneliness, friendship, love, and loss. But for Shavit's real addressee i.e. the adult, the novella is the impeccable example of an allegory, like Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988) and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922), which makes philosophical observations about life, adults, and human nature, and draws an inherent connection between an individual's unconscious memories and his conscious understanding of the physical world around him. In order to comprehend this connection between human conscious and unconscious within the narrative allegory of Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943), the theoretical framework proposed by Carl Jung as discussed by Hamida Bosmajian in Peter Hunt's *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999) can be proved quite helpful.

In Hamida Bosmajian's words, "It is evident how readily children's literature, especially when it has components of fantasy, connects with Jungian theories" (p.101). Therefore the fantasy world of *The Little Prince* can be better understood from the Jungian perspective of symbiotic relationship between the worldly wisdom and the latent unconscious memories and images of an individual. In this perspective Marie Louise von Franz can also be quoted who has written comprehensive studies of fairy tales which, according to Bosmajian, "the Jungian critic tends to see as allegories of the inner life that meet the deep-seated psychic and spiritual needs of the individual" (p.154). Hence as per the Jungian psychoanalytical approach man's attempt to acquire conscious understanding of the physical world can also be considered a step towards the spiritual enlightenment of his unconscious.

In this process of reading one's unconscious, imagination or fantasy plays a pivotal role. The broader the realms of one's fantasy be, the easier it will be to comprehend the latent desires, wishes and fears of his unconscious. In Jung's 'Psychic Conflicts in a Child', the child-patient, obsessed with the origin of babies, fantasized that she would give birth if she swallowed an orange. She was eventually enlightened by her father (p.8–46), but Jung concludes that, "while false explanation are not advisable, no less inadvisable is the insistence on the right explanation, for that inhibits the freedom of the mind's development through concretistic explanations which reduce the spontaneity of image-making to a falsehood (p.34). Thus in Jung's opinion the possibilities of imagination are actually the representations of one's

unconscious desires and fears which can be manifested via various culturally constructed archetypes and images.

Jungian criticism discovers that “archetypes are the basis for the images in a text” (p.74). This can be observed in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002) where a 9-year-old protagonist encounters the figure of “Other Mother” in a parallel world as a socially indoctrinated idealized image of maternal care. It can be observed in the beginning of Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (1943) when the images drawn by the narrator reflect his psychological understanding at the age of six. The narrator’s hat-like drawing of a “boa constrictor [who] swallow[s his] prey whole, without chewing it” (p.3) meets with a lot of criticism by the “grown-ups”, therefore he says,

The grown-ups’ response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar. That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. (p.4)

This response, in Jungian analysis, can be held as one resulting in inhibiting the “freedom of mind’s development” of a child. The frustration experienced by the narrator as a child is reflected in his statement when he says, “grown-ups always need to have things explained. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them” (p.4). A similar breach of understanding can be traced between Fern Arable and her mother in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) when Mrs. Arable fails to comprehend her daughter’s dedication towards the animals of the farm and says, “I never looked at it that way before” (p.56). However the importance of drawing pictures in the development of a child’s imagination has been vividly explained by J. Doonan. He believes that pictures have an “expressive power” which contributes to the “aesthetic development” of a child. These can be the physical manifestations of their abstract understandings and in the words of Doonan, “we have to deal with abstract concepts logically, intuitively and imaginatively” (p.7). That is why Jung has given special importance to the psychic and instinctive growth of an individual.

Jung voices out that spiritual and intellectual growth is a life-long progress which continues throughout life and one’s personal and communal experiences play an active part in this process, as one notices in the case of the little prince. Jungian analysis does not believe in “a complete individuation of the ego, but rather the analysand’s recognition that growth is a life-

long process, a quest, during which conscious and unconscious connect primarily through symbols and archetypes” (p.74). There are a number of incidents in Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* which fittingly establish this observation.

In the beginning of his story when the little prince decides to leave his planet in order to visit other planets and gain wisdom he recollects his time spent with his “only rose” at the planet and sums up his inadequacy in following the ideal course of action and states:

The fact is that I did not know how to understand anything! I ought to have judged by deeds and not by words. She cast her fragrance and her radiance over me. I ought never to have run away from her . . . Flowers are so inconsistent! But I was too young to know how to love her. (p.20)

It is only after his journey of knowledge and self-exploration that he comes to the essence that “you must be very patient...One must observe the proper rites” (p.46).

The most evident example of the connection between conscious and unconscious is the monologue made by the Little Prince after a philosophical conversation with the fox. This monologue represents his spiritual awakening and knowledge of his unconscious which he attains only with reference to the conscious symbols present in the teachings of the fox. He addresses a large field of roses and asserts the individuality and uniqueness of his rose, saying:

But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars; because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or ever sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose. (p.47)

The lesson learnt by the little prince is actually the essence of the novella, the underline message of the writer for the real adult reader and, from the perspective of Jung’s psychoanalytical model, presents the reality of the unconscious. The writer states, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” (p.47). This remark establishes Jung’s ideal with all its might that spiritual growth is a life-long process accompanied by varied life experiences and it is only in the unconscious where the salvation of an individual exists, therefore every conscious effort motivates an individual to explore the

hidden reality of his unconscious. Therefore in Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) it is only after her self-reflection when Coraline remarks, "I will be brave...No, I am brave" (p.59).

The study of the selected novella indicates that with knowledge comes responsibility. Exupéry states, "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed" (p.47). In the narrative web this understanding persuades the little prince to return to his rose and complete his incomplete responsibilities while to the "real reader" the writer proposes that escape cannot be an alternative for the duties towards our relations dear to us and also that out of millions of people in the world it is only our associations and relations with one another and the memories we make which make us unique, individual and special in ourselves.

In the selected novella Exupéry has used the metaphor of a train journey to symbolize the excursion and experiences of man within this world. According to Exupéry's observations, "No one is ever satisfied where he is" (p.48) and for the rational, sane and practical grown-ups, he says, "They are pursuing nothing at all" (p.48). In Jungian analysis this is so because their rat-race to attain material prosperity is making no contributions towards their spiritual and intellectual growth or identification of "self". Therefore Exupéry states for them, "They are asleep in there, or if they are not asleep they are yawning" (p.48). In this journey it is only the imagination and the curiosity of the children which inspire them for quest for unknown and look for the questions yet unanswered. Therefore Exupéry mentions, "Only the children are flattening their noses against the windowpanes" (p.48).

Exupéry has drawn an intense comparison between the psychological mechanism of a child and that of an adult. The stark contrast between the preferences, interests and priorities of a child and those of an adult reflects the range of breach between the conscious and unconscious of both age groups. As the little prince says, "To forget a friend is sad... And if I forget him, I may become like the grown-ups who are no longer interested in anything but figures" (p.12). The statement depicts the dilemma of the "grown-ups" when they exhibit more interest in the physical manifestations and material structures around them making them more unconcerned towards the memories of their unconscious.

In the selected novella Exupéry has also used the imagery of a plant hidden in the heart of a seed. From the perspective of Jungian analysis the image of a seed can be considered as human unconscious with a number of memories, desires and fears which are later surfaced with the help of conscious symbols. In the words of the narrator, "seeds are invisible. They sleep deep

in the heart of the earth's darkness, until someone among them is seized with the desire to awaken. Then this little seed will stretch itself and begin--timidly at first--to push a charming little sprig inoffensively upward toward the sun" (p.13). This "desire to awaken" is the process of growth or in terms of psychoanalysis a progression of "self" realization which is life-long and is aided by various conscious factors to bring out the true identity of unconscious.

One of the incredible characteristics of human mind is to identify or relate with the symbols or images manifested in the physical world. This feature is also discussed by Scott McCloud in his revolutionary writing, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* (1993), where he points out, "it is nothing short of incredible that the human mind can understand icons—symbolic representations or abstractions from reality, as readily as it does" (p.31). Hence the narrative symbols, allegories and imagery used in the selected novella can also be studied from the perspective of Jung's psychoanalytical conceptions. Carl Jung anticipated:

A personal unconscious consists of memories and images gathered during a lifetime, for the archetypes, as experienced by the individual, are in and of the world. This personal unconscious is raised to consciousness when the analysand connects the personal with the collective unconscious" (p.75).

In the selected novella the care and devotion of the little prince towards his rose on his parent planet; B612, surfaces to his conscious when he comes across a vast field of roses on Earth and, under the influence of the previous conversation with the fox, realizes his forgotten responsibility towards his "tamed" rose. He recalls the image of his only rose from his unconscious to conscious and says to himself, "My flower is ephemeral and she has only four thorns to defend herself against the world. And I have left her on my planet, all alone!" (p.36). In the words of the narrator, "That was his first moment of regret. But he took courage once more" (p.36). Hence it can be safely established that the site of a rose-field brings to him the image of his flower latent in his unconscious.

Similarly when the fox explained the concepts like individuality and taming to the little prince, it compared the golden hair of the prince with the image of the gold wheat fields which will always be the archetype for his hair color. Hence the otherwise insignificant wheat fields become significant only after their association with the image of the little prince's hair color which will be there in the unconscious of the fox after taming. The fox says, "The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the color of gold" (p.46).

The same concept of conscious archetypes associated with the images of the unconscious is explained by the little prince to the narrator when he asks him to imagine the little prince smiling in the twinkling of the stars. The underline message of his conversation, according to Jungian analysis, can be that it is the memories, images or associations in the unconscious of the individuals which make the conscious manifestations unique and special to him. Therefore one does not cherish the physical appearances rather it is the celebration of one's unconscious memory which gives him pleasure and courage to move forward in life. This is what the little prince means when he says to the narrator, "The house, the stars, the desert--what gives them their beauty is something that is invisible" (p.51). This "something" is personal and subjective for everyone and varies from person to person based upon their unconscious memory and images.

Thus it is the individuality of the unconscious which serves as the basis of subjectivity in the individuals with reference to their physical archetypes. In Jung's terminology this concept is called "individuation", where "the unconscious is brought to the conscious" (p.75), and is later explained in the selected novella by the little prince in detail when he says,

All men have the stars but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travelers, the stars are guides. For others they are no more than little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems. For my businessman they were wealth. But all these stars are silent. You--you alone--will have the stars as no one else has them. (p.58)

This notion of "individuation" can also be traced in Joy Harjo's poem, 'My House is the Red Earth', which establishes the idea that "center of the world" is different for different people owing to their diverse associations; what is important to one person may be completely insignificant to the other, it is all subjective to one's preferences. Harjo explains the phenomenon that, "Words cannot construct it, for there are some sounds left to sacred wordless form" (L.5-6).

What makes the Jungian approach attractive to interpreters of children's literature is that the theory assumes that "an original wholeness can be regained after alienation is overcome" (p.76). This coincides with the comic resolution of so many narratives for children and young adults. Children's literature in particular and world literature in general has always been viewed as a medium to inculcate the moral, religious and socio-cultural principles and values in the

personality of the reader. One of the oldest and most universal forms of crossover literature is folk and fairy tales, which are part of what Stuart Hannabuss refers to as “the common cultural pool” (p.32). Thus the relatable and universal content along with the identifiable characterization in children’s literature enables the listeners and readers to overcome their feeling of isolation and alienation and consider themselves one part of the greater fabric of civilization with shared feelings and circumstances.

This socio-cultural principle of valuing humanity can be seen in *The Little Prince* when after visiting five other planets, the little prince admires the character of a lamplighter on the sixth planet only because he is compromising his own comfort for the benefit of others, because he is cautious of his duties towards the larger cause. As the little prince remarks, “since it is beautiful, it is truly useful, he felt that he loved this lamplighter who was so faithful to his orders, ... he is the only one of them all who does not seem to me ridiculous. Perhaps that is because he is thinking of something else besides himself” (p.33).

It is always thinking beyond one’s own self which broadens the horizon of understanding of an individual. A larger part of Children’s literature is dedicated to instill these communal values in the personality of children. As in the novella the little prince refers to his responsibilities towards his planet and says, “It is a question of discipline...When you’ve finished your own toilet in the morning, then it is time to attend to the toilet of your planet, just so, with the greatest care” (p.13). These communal values and stress on the feelings of belonging can be seen in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) where a spoilt Mary Lennox only finds her true self and feeling of belonging after her association with Colin in the attempts to resurrect him and it is then “when new beautiful thoughts began to push out the old hideous ones” (p.67).

Following the similar school of thought, Jack Zipes, a distinguished American expert on children’s literature, folklore, and storytelling, believes, “it is important to try to instil a sense of community, self-reflecting and self-critical community, in the children to demonstrate how the ordinary can become extraordinary” (p.6). Zipes’s concept of “self-reflecting” community further elaborates Jung’s notion of “individuation”. As both of the ideals stress upon the phenomenon of giving subjective meanings to the common physical manifestations of the world. Both Jung and Zipes advocate that it is the images and memories of the unconscious which give uniqueness to the otherwise common originals of the world and this subjectivity of human unconscious brings beauty to human civilization giving rise to a self-critical community.

This concept of “individuation” can be traced in the selected novella when the fox explains the little prince the idea of “taming”. The memory or the image of a particular object or person in the unconscious of an individual makes the conscious symbols exclusive for him. As the fox says to the little prince, “If you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world” (p.45). Thus it is the unconscious of an individual which brings subjectivity to his approach.

The journey of growth or self-realization of an individual is actually recognizing the demons and memories of his own unconscious which is the ultimate and the most difficult task. As the character of the King points out in the novella, “Then you shall judge yourself...that is the most difficult thing of all” (p.24). The eventual purpose of all the conscious symbols, archetypes and even societal relations of a person is to help him understand his latent desires or fears; to know his unconscious. In the words of the King, “It is much more difficult to judge oneself than to judge others. If you succeed in judging yourself rightly, then you are indeed a man of true wisdom” (p.25).

K. Horney further elaborates the role of society in the process of self-discovery of an individual. According to Horney, “the goal of psychoanalysis is the patient’s discovery of the possibility of self-realization and the recognition that good human relations are an essential part of this, along with the faculty for creative work and the acceptance of personal responsibility” (p.334). Thus it can be inferred from Horney’s propositions of psychoanalysis that besides non-human factor meaningful human relationships also play a vital role in bringing an individual in terms with his unconscious. The philosophical and in-depth dialogues and discussions enable an individual to realize the latent fears and desires of his unconscious and evokes in him a true sense of responsibility towards his “self” and the “tamed” relations around him. Hence the journey of self-realization and spiritual wisdom is incomplete without the inclusion of sound human relationships which guide the thought process of an individual towards his unconscious where he may find all the answers to his unsolved questions.

This concept of mutual interdependence and the dilemma of the modern contemporary society has been very well discussed in the novella by the fox when it says, “One only understands the things that one tames...Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready-made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more” (p.46). Thus the novella suggests that the only possible way to

overcome the intrinsic loneliness of modern man is to develop meaningful human relationships and to embark on the journey of discovering one's own unconscious because only then man can attain wisdom and spiritual salvation.

Although Jung's theory of psychoanalysis explains most of the parts of the selected novella however it cannot provide adequate justification to the ending of the novella. The little prince dies at the end of the novella leaving behind his memories and philosophical thoughts. Jung's framework does not provide explanation of the role of separation, death and loss in the process of spiritual or mental development. The theory does not address the symbolic interpretation of one's conscious wish to die or the impact separation has on the unconscious of the related ones. In this regard there is no well explained justification offered by Jung.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be safely established that children's literature offers much more than mere entertainment for the children and Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is one such allegory with numerous and much deeper psychological strands to be explored. In the words of R. McGillis, "As long as we keep singing, we have a chance of passing along our singing spirit to those we teach" (p.206). Thus as Jung professes the process of growth is life-long therefore a number of researches can be held on the selected novella but one has to admit that it is mostly the unconscious of an individual which determines his spiritual salvation.

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