Fantasy and Dream work in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*
By Rachel Freeman

The silent expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* exposes psychological guilt and insanity through the main character's fantasies and delusions. This character, Francis, brings the viewer into a nightmarish world through his story-telling. He recounts the story of the mad Dr. Caligari and the somnambulist Cesare who is under his control. The doctor's arrival in Francis' hometown results in a string of murders, the death of his best friend Alan and the kidnapping of his beloved fiancée Jane. Francis tells this story as if it were true, but in the end he is revealed as a patient in a mental hospital. The film does not confirm whether Francis' story is reality, but Freudian theory suggests that this story is a wish fulfillment. Francis' neurotic mind created and mistook this fantasy for reality in order to displace the guilt over his friend's death by means of dream work and displacing his guilt onto the somnambulist Cesare.

Neurosis is characterized by a retreat into one's imagination and alienation from reality. According to Freudian theory, this is also typified by believing a fantasy to be the truth. "Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable; the most extreme type of this turning away from reality is shown by certain cases of hallucinatory psychosis which seek to deny the particular event that occasioned the outbreak of their insanity" (Freud, 301). In this passage, Freud describes the psychological techniques that a neurotic mind uses in order to cope with a traumatic event. Instead of coming to terms with their trauma, the mind will alter the events and shape them around a delusion in order to produce a more pleasing conclusion. A neurotic person will adopt this altered story or hallucination as reality. Alan's death is the traumatic event that pushes Francis into a state of denial. He creates a fantastic story in which he is completely absolved of blame. The fervor with which he tells this story can be understood as the result of neurosis. Francis' retreat into his mind is best illustrated when he begins the story; in his mind Francis can see the story unfold. He has become so engrossed that in the opening scene the image of Dr. Caligari causes him to exclaim "that's him!" Francis lives in his delusion even when confronted with reality. Nobody confirms Francis' claims and the characters he brought into his story have no recollection in the real world of these events.

In addition to being the manifestation of a neurotic mind, Francis' story also displays typical traits of creative writing. These traits imply that this narrative actually took place in Francis' unconscious and the story of Dr. Caligari is only a fantasy. According to Freudian theory, creative works are distinguished by characters "sharply divided into good and bad; the 'good' ones are the helpers, while the 'bad' ones are the enemies and rivals, of the ego which has become the hero of the story" (Freud, 441). A work of fiction gives characters distinct traits that easily divide the world into two sides. The conflict between good and evil is dimensionless in creative works; in other words, there is no ambiguity as to the side to which they belong. The story is clearly a battle between a good main character and an evil opponent. Francis places himself in the central role of the hero and Dr. Caligari as villain. This simplified categorization of people connects to
Freud's theory of creative writers and therefore further develops the perspective that the story of Dr. Caligari is a fantasy.

Freud claimed that fantasies are like our waking dreams and therefore function in a manner similar to the fantasies one has while asleep. Francis envisions many fantastic settings that demonstrate the fictional and dream-like attributes of his story. The unnatural and dramatic forms of the landscapes and cities distort reality to create a sinister and theatrical atmosphere. These extraordinary visuals demonstrate how Francis is creating a delusional world and, at the same time, reveal how this story functions as Francis' wish fulfillment. The visual nature of dreams is an important aspect of Freudian dream theory. A major characteristic of dream representation is that it "consists principally, though not exclusively, of situations and sensory images, mostly of a visual character" (151). Dreams often do not mirror the real world; instead, they are perceptions created by the subconscious. The fantastic nature of Francis' story is shown in the transition between the hospital and his vision of the small town Holstenwall. The town is the first scene Francis imagines and is characterized by its distorted design. The backdrop is made intentionally unrealistic so that everything is noticeably manmade. The characters in this scene are nearly as tall as the two-dimensional backdrop of houses. In this and subsequent scenes, nothing has a natural form, as opposed to the hospital where Francis is seen sitting beneath trees.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari further reflects Freudian dream theory through the creation of characters. The people in Francis' story are largely fictional and produced by the condensation of two or more people. Physical features are derived from fellow patients and staff at the hospital and receive many traits of people from his past. Francis' fiancée Jane, the somnambulist Cesare, and Dr. Caligari were all created through condensation. The fellow patients, as they are encountered at the end of the film, are nothing like Francis' description. Cesare, most obviously, is awake, proving that somnambulism was drawn from another source. Further supporting this, Cesare was found dead at the end of the fantasy, yet is still alive in the hospital. The character Dr. Caligari was formed through the condensation of stories Francis had heard about a famous criminal and the director of the mental hospital. "At last I understand the nature of his madness. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari. Now I see how he can be brought back to sanity again." This proclamation, made by the director of the hospital, reflects Freud's theory on condensation.

Guilt is inevitably a great source of psychological pain for Francis. Although Francis' exact role in the murder is not known, it can be assumed that he played an important part in Alan's death. Francis cannot simply deny what happened to his friend because he is constantly surrounded by reminders of the murder. Alan's absence from his life, along with references others inevitably would make to him, hinders any psychological denial of the murder. The irrepressibility forces Francis to find another way to displace the blame for the murder. He therefore represses his guilt by transferring the blame onto Dr. Caligari and Cesare. The two serve this function to complete Francis' wish fulfillment, because Dr. Caligari is the villain of the story.
Cesare's role in the story is further compounded by his opposition to Francis. In Francis' mind, the two characters are complete opposites. The stark differences allow Francis to absolve his guilt by clearly transferring it to Cesar. This opposition is especially clear in their responses to erotic and aggressive desires. Freud described the aggressive and erotic drives as characteristics of the unconscious that are then filtered out through the rational conscious mind. Through this, Cesare and Francis represent the conflict between instinct and rationality present in all people. Francis portrays himself as a rational person with complete control over his actions. In the reminiscence, emotion never overwhelms his ability to manage his behavior. Meanwhile, he depicts Cesare as a creature without the capacity to resist Dr. Caligari's psychological power and his own instinctual drives. The control the doctor possesses extends from basic needs such as nourishment to forcing Cesare to murder. Caligari manipulates Cesare's permanent state of unconsciousness to force the somnambulist to follow his command. Caligari uses Cesare's unrepressed aggression drive to wreck havoc on the small town.

The two characters also respond to their erotic drives in contrary ways. Freud believed erotic desires to be the product of the unconscious. The conscious mind is responsible for repressing these urges, which make desire and reason opposing forces. These two forces correspond to the ways in which Francis and Cesare respond to their erotic drives. They are both attracted to Jane but respond quite differently. Francis handles his desire in a completely rational manner. He and Alan are both in love with Jane, yet they never dispute over this. "Alan, we both love her, but no matter who she chooses, let us remain friends." This agreement shows that in his imagination, Francis represses his erotic desires with rational decisions. Cesare, in contrast, has an instinctual reaction to his attraction. His unrepressed response to his sexual desire for Jane is to kidnap her. The real Francis is a combination of these traits, which shows that the two characters are pieces of his own psyche. After Francis has told his story, he makes "passionate entreaties" with the woman he believes is his fiancée (Janowitz). This does not correspond to the rational Francis of his fantasy; it shows that in reality, Francis is not free from his instincts. He expresses feelings that are not controlled by his rationality, which shows his personality contains certain traits shared by Cesare.

The opposition of characters can also be connected back to Freudian dream theory, which plays an important role in the analysis of Francis' fantasy. Freud and Cesare represent two sides of the psyche; the conscious and unconscious. Cesare, in his permanent state of sleep, is driven by instinct. His role as Francis' unconscious can be further explained by applying Freudian dream theory to the symbols that surround Cesare. Dr. Caligari keeps the somnambulist hidden in a casket, which contains two symbols important to Freudian dream theory, namely caskets and hiding. Through this symbolism, Freudian theory connects Cesare to women and erotic desire as well as to death. In his essay "The Three Caskets," Freud describes caskets as "symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself" (111). Another important dream symbol that appears in relation to Cesare is hiding, which Freud describes as an "unmistakable symbol of death in dreams" (114). In addition to these themes, the casket also carries a direct connection to death. These symbols can be applied to The Cabinet of Caligari to explain the intention involved in the creation of Cesare's characteristics. This emphasizes the importance of
Caligari's instinctual behavior and the motivation behind the creation of this character. The symbolism shows how Francis' mind intentionally created Cesare with certain characteristics in order to split himself into two separate personas. He is able to transfer all the instinctual and uncontrollable qualities to Cesare while retaining rationality. Cesare's actions prove that he was controlled by erotic and aggressive drives. These unrepressed actions are sources of guilt that Francis' psyche yearns to transfer. Dream symbolism proves that Francis' unconscious mind intended to mold the character in this fashion to accomplish this wish fulfillment.

_The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari_ relates the story of a murderous doctor and his unaware somnambulist, which is subsequently revealed to be the product of mental illness. Alan's murder causes Francis to turn away from reality because he is not able to deal with the psychological pain it causes. In order to cope with this, Francis fantasizes that he is not the target of blame for his best friend's murder by blaming Dr. Calgari. His fantasy extends to a point where he is seen as the hero by challenging Dr. Caligari and Cesare. The dream work that his unconscious mind uses to produce this story is clearly identified through Freudian dream analysis. Francis uses classic dream work mechanisms and symbols to produce this wish-fulfilling fantasy. In addition, Dr. Caligari and Cesare are not real people; they are fragments of Francis' psyche and serve the purpose of objects onto which the blame is displaced. The film's ambiguous ending leaves the validity of Francis' story unknown because his illness is not explicitly confirmed. However, Freudian theory clarifies this uncertainty by showing that Francis has fantasized the entire story to satisfy his guilty mind.

Bibliography


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