

## The concept of happiness in *Night Zoo*

Viktória Gergelyová

The author is a first-year PhD student at the Faculty of Central European Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. She studied Hungarian Language and Literature and English Language and Literature at CPU. Her research mainly focuses on mapping and improving reading comprehension skills in primary schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction in Slovakia. In addition, she is interested in literature and psychoanalysis, mainly in the way the ID – EGO – SUPEREGO concept appears in literary works.

### Abstract

*This paper deals with a psychoanalytic interpretation of the titular story. It is part of the first volume in the Hungarian anthology series entitled Night Zoo – An Anthology of Women’s Sexuality (‘Éjszakai Állatkert – Antológia a női szexualitásról’). The analysis focuses on the story Night Zoo (‘Éjszakai Állatkert’) written by Zsófia Bán according to Freud’s personality theory. The theory regards our psyche as divided into three parts. The id is the instinctual part of our mind that represents our sexual and hidden desires, the superego contains the moral conscience and the norms, and the ego mediates between the wishes of the id and the rules of the superego. The chosen short story seems to revolve around unfulfilled love between two people. But after critical reading, it is obvious that this is not a love story of two people, but the relationship lies between the narrator and her unfulfilled desires. There is an immense conflict between instincts and social expectations. The narrator’s id has a desire; she just wants to be happy and have harmony in her life. But the superego does not allow her to fulfill the desire. The ego is therefore instrumental in deciding what the correct decision is.*

### Introduction

This paper aims to interpret the concept of happiness in the short story entitled *Night Zoo*. The story was written by contemporary Hungarian writer Zsófia Bán. It was first published in Hungarian in an anthology entitled *Night Zoo – An Anthology of Women’s Sexuality (‘Éjszakai Állatkert – Antológia a női szexualitásról’)* which is the first volume of the anthology series *Uncovered Psyche*. It was later translated into English and German.

We aim to analyse this short story according to Freud’s personality theory and to show how instincts and social norms direct the narrator’s life. On first reading, the story seems to be an ordinary love story between two people, but after analysis, we can see that it is about the relationship between the narrator and her desire. The title itself indicates that the subject matter

and resulting themes are intended for a mature audience. The night symbolizes an enigma, a mystery that invites the reader to explore it. The zoo complements this by pointing to wildness, to the primal instinct. There is an immense conflict between instinct and social expectations – a conflict between the ID – EGO – SUPEREGO.

### **Psychoanalysis and Literature**

Psychoanalytical interpretation is based on the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. These two disciplines are very closely related to each other. Even Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, used many examples from literature. Fundamentally, psychoanalysis researches the human mind and serves as a method of treatment for mental illness and it is also a meta-psychological system (IPA).

Its basic method is free association, whereby the individual can say anything regardless of the context. There are consciously inaccessible relationships unfolded in this process which will eventually lead to the causes of internal conflicts. These unresolved conflicts are based on unfulfilled desires which affect our behavior, dreams and lives. Interestingly, this method had already been used in the time before Freud, however not in psychology, but in the arts. Börne, a romantic poet, also cites this method to improve writing. We do not know if Freud started the writing development method, or if he had no idea that it already existed. In any case, it can be stated that the method of free association is originally an artistic technique and it was transformed into a treatment and later returned to arts (Bókay, 1990, p. 165).

According to Freud's hypothesis, people are crushed between instincts and norms, as well as desires and taboos. According to him, the human personality is composed of three parts: ID – EGO – SUPEREGO. These three elements together govern our lives and define our behavior. The ID represents instincts, that which we want, and the superego represents social rules. The EGO has to decide whether to follow the ID or the SUPEREGO. For example, if someone has a sexual desire, but social norms do not allow it to be fulfilled, the ego must decide what the subsequent correct steps are (Jánk, 2015). If the desire does not achieve fulfilment, it will not disappear, but it will merely be displaced from the consciousness to the unconscious and it will appear somewhere else, such as in dreams or writings (Freud, 1997, 39-40). Our lives can be called ideal if the EGO can fulfil the wishes of the ID and the expectations of the SUPEREGO at the same time (Freud, 1982, p. 412-413). So the EGO needs to find balance between the volition of instincts and norms, so that people can achieve happiness and live a balanced life.

### ***Night Zoo* representing secret desires**

The chosen short story *Night Zoo* is the title story of the anthology of the same name. It is not a coincidence that this story was chosen as the title story. The word night in the title can refer to adult themes, darkness, mystery and secrecy. The zoo represents wildlife, savagery and instinct. While human civilization is dominated by social organizations and moral norms, the lives of animals are controlled only by their instincts. So, the zoo is classified as a free medium, free of social expectations.

While there is a continuous conflict in the human personality between id (instinct), ego (self) and superego (morality), the animal world is free of this discordancy. For animals the superego doesn't exist and there are no limits, only freedom. On the other hand, animals in a zoo live in cages. This is also the case with people's desires. Desires are imprisoned just as animals in the zoo – deprived of agency, under the rule of something superior.

On first reading the story seems to be an ordinary story of unfulfilled love between two people. "I felt my cells once again come alive, my pores open up, my senses spark into action with an almost impossible precision, as if under the influence of some drug" (Bán, 2010, p.43). During the first reading, it seems to merely be about a couple that meets secretly in the zoo at night. The evidence of love and sexuality is obvious in many parts of the story: "I loved sniffing behind your ears and at the curve of your neck" (Bán, 2010, p.43). The behind-the-ear and neck areas are distinctly known as erogenous zones on the human body.

But after analytical reading, we realize that it is not a secret relationship between two people, but the relationship between the narrator and her unfulfilled desires. We can implement Freud's gender theories to further investigate the close relationship between psychoanalysis and femininity. This paper draws from psychology and gender studies respectively in order to utilize the results of their combined research. According to Freud's theory, every person is bisexual. Both genders bear the marks of a second sex in varying proportions. The main divergence between the genders is their level of sexual activity. Freud denotes men as sexually active, and passivity is therefore a female trait. He further considers other typical female qualities to be envy and jealousy, which are the consequence of anxiety caused by penis envy (Chodorow, 1996). The reference to desire appears as a symbol represented by an elephant. The elephant is often a symbol of wisdom and luck. According to the dictionary of symbols, it can be a symbol of power and immortality, and in Christianity, it represents Christ, virginity and innocence (Pál-Újvári, 2001). However, according to Freud, the elephant is a sexual symbol, so the narrator may be communicating a sexual desire. One of the ways in which this association can be created is its long trunk, which is an obvious phallic symbol. As stated by Freud, everything long and

animated, or in some form similar to male genitalia, is a male sexual symbol, i.e. sticks, umbrellas, trees, etc. But these are also objects that may cause injury to the body, for example, knives, swords, pens, snakes etc (Freud, 2006, p. 127).

### **The clash between ID – EGO – SUPEREGO**

Freud's personality theory is highly observable in the story. The narrator's instinct wants to fulfil her desire of entering the elephant's body, thereby achieving harmony in her life. But the superego prohibits it: "We had to take care not to draw the attention of the authorities, for in this country our love was banned, it counted as a crime, and one did not recover overnight from the legal consequences of discovery" (Bán, 2010, p.42). This means that due to social norms the superego did not allow the fulfilment of the desire. The EGO must decide what to do, either follow the rules of society and give up desires or spitefully act out against moral norms and fight for the fulfilment of desires.

The narrator listens to her instincts and goes to the zoo. She wants to be with the elephant, to be one with its body so she can fulfil her desires. But when she is standing in front of the animal she finds herself halting: "we were hardly ten steps away from each other, from a volcanic surge of satisfaction. An intense trembling now took hold of my entire body, and I felt unable to cross the remaining distance between us" (Bán, 2010, p. 47).

Fear and longing can be observed in several places in the story. Instead of going to the elephant right away, she closes her eyes, waiting. When she finally decides to approach and make herself happy, something happens. She feels a hand on her shoulder: "all at once a hand slammed down upon my shoulder. 'you are coming with us,' said a voice, and already they'd turned me around and had begun taking me away" (Bán, 2010, p.47). So, the superego, morality, represented by acquired social norms didn't allow her to fulfil her desire. The narrator is sad, she is unhappily taken away. But the story does not end.

The whole story consists of two parts. At the beginning and the end, a frame story is presented. The frame narrative contains an inner story. It starts on a beach in Borneo, where a message in a bottle is found. Usually, a message in a bottle contains a plea for rescue. This message, however, contains the story of *Night Zoo*. While it can be interpreted as a call for help, it's meant in more of a psychological way. As mentioned before, the main character just wants to be happy. She doesn't want anything more, just to fulfil her desires. But she is not allowed to do so.

At the end of the story, we return to the beginning, because the frame story at the beginning and the end starts with the same sentence: “by the sea of Borneo” (Bán, 2010, p. 41). In the original Hungarian version: “Messze Borneoban” (Bán, 2005, p. 292) it’s very similar to the psalm entitled “Messze Babilonban” (web1). Zion, which symbolizes all of Christianity, salvation and heaven, is mentioned within the psalm. It gives hope to the narrator.

The story ends with the lines of the mentioned psalm: “you will prosper, after all, your oppressors kept at bay, and he who now subdues you will come to rule the day” (Bán, 2010, p. 47). This Christian psalm gives further hope for happiness to the narrator of the inner story. It gives her hope, that not all is lost, if she simply believes in the fulfilment of her coveted desire, helping her achieve salvation.

When the narrator enters the night zoo, she starts to think about what sort of differences there are between the nighttime and daytime within the zoo: “Just who’d cooked up the idea of opening a night zoo. I do not know, but clearly, it was not the work of an everyday mind. Like every brilliant idea, though, this one was simplicity itself. It doesn’t take a brain scientist, much less a biologist, to know that most animals are active at night, especially the wild ones. While in a day zoo we typically see the inhabitants wallowing around, prostrated by the heat, unwilling to stir the slightest bit except at feeding time, life in the night zoo becomes stirred with a spellbinding force: everyone coming and going, caressing, eating, lovemaking, bathing, visiting with the neighbors – in a word, living” (Bán, 2010, p. 41 – 42). This quote can be found in the short story and as well on the first page of the whole anthology. The animals seem to have two different selves. The daytime self, pointing towards the outside world, is an idle, lazy picture. The other self is the nighttime self, which is much more active and animated. Similarly to animals, this can be attributed to people. On average, people reveal something different to the outside world than they feel. Social requirements often determine how people behave, so they are not allowed to express their real desires. Thus, like animals in the zoo, people also live a double life.

### **Free associations in the story**

In the narrative, sentences are constantly extended. At the beginning and the end of the story, we can observe simple and short sentences. The longest sentences are in the middle of the story where one sentence may run over several pages. Norms control the short sentences; they follow the rules of conscious writing. But in the middle of the story, this consciousness is lost. The conscious writing is replaced by a subconscious one, manifesting the desires of the subconscious in the form of free associations.

The longest sentence, located in the middle of the short story, consists of 94 lines. It is an extensive, labyrinth-like sentence that describes a memory – a fantasy, where the narrator is finally at one with her desires. Within this one sentence, a meeting-house, the army of gods and various Christian symbols appear. An image of a priest's funeral can be observed – the body of the old priest is placed within a body of a bull made of wood, then burned. The priest has achieved the desires of the narrator – in death, he enters the body of a large animal while remaining a servant of God and receiving salvation.

Similarly, to the elephant, the bull can be a symbol of power, but it is also the symbol of death (Pál-Újvári, 2001). So the priest can reach salvation only after his death by penetrating the bull and being set ablaze. The hearse is decorated with swans, which in folklore are usually interpreted as a bird of life and a symbol of immortality (Pál-Újvári, 2001), guaranteeing the priest's life after death. It seems as if everyone is made aware of this fact and the continuation of his life after death within the story, as the people attending the funeral are all dressed in colorful festive clothing.

## **Conclusion**

This paper deals with the psychoanalytic interpretation of the provocative short story *Night Zoo*. The title itself refers to secret desires. The night is the symbol of mystery, secret and darkness and the zoo refers to the wild, instincts and untamed nature. While human society is dominated by social norms, the wild is governed only by instincts – represented by the zoo, as it's free of moral and social expectations. People pay host to a constant clash between their desires and norms, that is, between ID (instinct), EGO (self), SUPEREGO (morality). But since animals have no morality, they are freed from these conflicts. The first reading of the short story plays with the reader, introducing a classic love story, even more scandalously, a secret love affair. However, by the end, we realize that it is about the relationship between the narrator and her secret desires. The desires appear in the form of an elephant, which is often associated with wisdom, fortune and immortality. Freud himself claims that the elephant is a sexual symbol because of its long trunk.

The conflict between ID – EGO – SUPEREGO can be clearly observed in the story. The narrator has secret desires that are prohibited by society. Her EGO must decide whether to follow her instincts or social norms. The inner fight between these two can be seen in the different lengths in the sentences within the story. The beginning and the end of the story contain short, simple sentences edited by conscious writing, representing her inner will to maintain social norms and boundaries, while the middle of the story consists mostly of long

sentences created by the unconsciousness of the author, representing her desires and her inner animal, trying to claw its way out. The longest sentence goes on for 94 lines.

The narrator of the story has her desires, which she wants to be fulfilled, but at the last moment, her unconscious efforts are thwarted by social norms and restraint, preventing her from achieving true happiness. The end of the story offers us a hint of a potential happy ending for this character, as not everything might be lost and maybe one day she can achieve happiness and harmony in her life.

### **Works cited:**

- Bán, Zs. 2005. "Éjszakai állatkert" [Night Zoo]. In: Forgács-Gordon-Bódis (eds): *Éjszakai állatkert – Antológia a női szexualitásról [Night Zoo – Anthology of Women's Sexuality]*. Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest.
- Bán, Zs. 2010. "Night Zoo." In: *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, Vol. 32, No. 2 (SPRING 2010), [cit. 2019-01-02] pp. 41-47. Available at: <[https://www.jstor.org/stable/40600303?read-now=1&seq=3#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40600303?read-now=1&seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents)>.
- Bókay, A. 1990. "A múzsák, pszükhé és tudományaik" [Muses, psyche and their science]. In: *Helikon*, 1990/2-3, [cit. 2018-11-12]. Available at: <[http://realj.mtak.hu/1218/1/HELIKON\\_1990.pdf](http://realj.mtak.hu/1218/1/HELIKON_1990.pdf)>.
- Chodorow, N. 1996. "Feminizmus, nőiség és Freud" [Feminism, femininity and Freud]. [cit. 2019-04-08]. Available at: <[http://www.mtapi.hu/thalassa/a\\_folyoirat/e\\_szovegek/pdf/\(07\)19\\_96\\_1/037-052\\_Chodorow.pdf](http://www.mtapi.hu/thalassa/a_folyoirat/e_szovegek/pdf/(07)19_96_1/037-052_Chodorow.pdf)>.
- Freud, S. 1982. "A pszichoanalízis foglalatja." In *Sigmund Freud esszék*. Gondolat Kiadó.
- Freud, S. 1997. *Pszichoanalízis. Öt előadás 1909-ben, a Worcesteri Clark Universityn, [Psychoanalysis. Five performances in 1909 at Worcester Clark University]*, Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest, 1997.
- Freud, S. 2006. *Bevezés a pszichoanalízisbe. [Introduction to Psychoanalysis]* Budapest, Gabo Kiadó.
- IPA. International Psychoanalytical Association: "About Psychoanalysis." [cit. 2018-12-12], Available at: <[http://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/Psychoanalytic\\_Treatment/About\\_Psychoanalysis.aspx](http://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/Psychoanalytic_Treatment/About_Psychoanalysis.aspx)>.
- Jánk, I. 2015. "Egy kis Hiperkarma, egy kis pszichológia." [A little Hiperkarma, a little psychology], [cit. 2018-12-18], Available at: <<http://www.nyest.hu/hirek/egy-kis-hiperkarma-egykispszichologia>>.
- Pál – Újvári (eds.): "Szimbólumszótár" [Dictionary of Symbols]. 2001. Balassi Kiadó. [cit. 2018-12-20], Available at: <[http://www.balassikiado.hu/BB/netre/Net\\_szimbolum/szimbolum\\_szotar1.htm#d0e1010](http://www.balassikiado.hu/BB/netre/Net_szimbolum/szimbolum_szotar1.htm#d0e1010)>.
- Web1: 137. zsoltár: "Messze Babilonban." [137. Psalm: Far in Babylon], [cit. 2018-12-22], Available at: <<https://www.szepi.hu/nota/zsoltar/z137.png>>.

*Viktória Gergelyová*  
*Institute of Hungarian Linguistics and Literary Science*  
*Faculty of Central European Studies*  
*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra*  
*Dražovská cesta 4*  
*949 74 Nitra*  
*Slovakia*  
*viktoria.gergelyova@ukf.sk*