

PLAY AS IMITATION OF LIFE: THE RELATION BETWEEN MOTHER, CHILD AND TOY IN *LITTLE BROTHERTM*

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Abstract: Bernard Shaw describes the important role of play in the cultural development of the individual with his famous quotation: "We don't cease to play because we grow old; we grow old because we cease to play." On the other hand, Donald Winnicott summarizes his basic thesis claiming that "Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested as play." In this study, I aim to analyse how the mysterious interaction between mother and child appears in Bruce Holland Rogers's story named Little BrotherTM through the lens of Freud's, Jung's and Winnicott's theories.

Keywords: Donald Winnicott, Little BrotherTM, play, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of play, which most of us do not treat so seriously in general, is, indeed, one of the first and most important steps for our cultural development. As a matter of fact, it has a significant lifelong function, helping and guiding human beings especially in the artistic creations and mental disorders in virtue of its irresistible fictional force coming from the depths of the unconscious. The reason for this situation can easily be realized when the domination of the unconscious, especially over the early childhood period, is taken into consideration. Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of Analytical Psychology, mentions the possibility of the child's falling back into the unconscious:

The conscious mind is caught in its conflict-situation, and the combatant forces seem so overwhelming that the "child" as an isolated content bears no relation to the conscious factors. It is therefore easily overlooked and falls back into the unconscious. ... It represents the strongest, the most ineluctable urge in every being, namely the urge to realize itself. (Jung 1968:170)

For this reason, the adults still keeping in touch with that little child who is in existence quiet and retired in the depths of the psyche have more potential both for coping with the problems and for spiritual refreshment than the ones unaware of this inner child.

2. The Importance of Play as Imitation of Life

With his famous sentence "We do not cease to play because we grow old; we grow old because we cease to play" (Lloyd 2010:253), Bernard Shaw summarizes the significant role of play in the cultural development of the individual with a single and simple sentence. On the other hand, Jung states that we owe the creation of something new to the play instinct stemming from the inner requirement, not to intelligence because "The creative mind plays with the objects it loves" (Jung 1953:155). According to him, not only the artist but also every creative individual owes all the important things in her/his life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, though it seems incompatible with the basic principle of the serious matters because of its childish aspect. Yet, no creative work can come into existence without playing by fantasy; in this sense, our debt to the play of imagination is of an incalculable amount. This early diagnosis by

Jung about the creative, connective and healing function of play and fantasy would be the precursor of the advanced treatment techniques in the fields of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Sand play therapy techniques, for instance, is a kind of treatment developed by Dora Kalff, a Jungian analyst; it is used to provide a treatment by depicting inexpressible and unattainable feelings and experiences with the help of figures drawn on the sand (Kalff 1991:1). Kalff, also with the guidance of Jung, is inspired by Margaret Lowenfeld's "World Technique" (cf. Hutton 2004). It is a highly effective treatment method, ensuring the healing in both children and adults.

A series of events that Jung experiences in his personal life are also sufficient to persuade him about the fact that playing games has a significant role in the treatment of mental disorders. As far as we learn from his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he enters a problematical dissonance period and feels suppressed continually after he has separated from Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, ending their cooperative scientific research eventually. After long-acting and weary efforts to determine the problem, reviewing all his life and especially his childhood, he consciously decides to finally cave in to his stream of unconscious. The first thing he found was the memory in which he played a game of building with blocks, bottles, stones and mud: "'Aha', I said to myself, 'there is still life in these things. The small boy is still around, and possesses a creative life which I lack. But how can I make my way to it?'" (Jung 1989:174)

He returns to playing the building game in despair and ashamedly in order to be able to restore his connection with that period because there is no other way but to return to the childish plays. After a game-playing period in which he builds a village with its cottages, castle and church made of stones he picks from the lakeshore and the water, he states that he discovers his own myth. This activity takes the pressure off:

In the course of this activity my thoughts clarified, and I was able to grasp the fantasies whose presence in myself I dimly felt. ... This sort of thing has been consistent with me, and at any time in my later life when I came up against a blank wall, I painted a picture or hewed stone. Each such experience proved to be a rite d'entrée for the ideas and works that followed hard upon it. (Jung 1989:174-175)

Joan Chodorow, one of Jung's modern followers, is another important figure spelling out the relaxing and healing influence of play on the psyche in its clearest way. According to her, what is essential in plays, active imagination and creativity is the unity of consciousness and the unconscious. Active imagination cooperates with the natural healing function of imagination, while desire turns into image. Imagination, instead of the raw desire in the unconscious, creates the symbolic images and stories that express feelings and moods in a more bearable way. This process, which is purely natural, takes place in the self-generated symbolic plays of children and guides the on-going process of the psychological development (Chodorow 2006:223-224). With respect to this point, Chodorow defends that all the creative art therapies, especially therapies of painting, music, dance, drama, psycho-drama and poetry developing separate occupations by the 1960s and 1970s, owe heavily to these earlier ideas of Jung's about the healing power of play.

On the other hand, what aroused Freud's interest were the common points between children's play, daydreams and works of art and their function in the satisfaction of unfulfilled wishes. He discusses this matter thoroughly in his famous writing "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming" (1908), with examples from various works of art, especially literary works. Considering that the works of art satisfy the unfulfilled unconscious desires imaginatively, Freud claims that the phenomenon of daydream in which the structure of the psyche is reflected upon the work of art can be traced back to childhood. Using its imagination while creating an idiosyncratic world with the play it builds, the child places the concrete objects of the real world into a fictional order, transforming them into the imaginary objects and situations he creates in his mind. Similarly, the artist separates the imaginative world s/he creates from the real world by

means of enriching it with the emotional factors as well. In the same work, Freud explains this similarity:

In the light of the insight we have gained from fantasies, we ought to expect the following state of affairs. A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. ... from some experiments I have made, I am inclined to think that this way of looking at creative writings may turn out not unfruitful. You will not forget that the stress it lays on childhood memories in the writer's life – a stress which may perhaps seem puzzling – is ultimately derived from the assumption that a piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood. (Freud 1953:27-28)

Moreover, he claims that this very similarity is also reflected on language:

Language has preserved this relationship between children's play and poetic creation. It gives [in German] the name of Spiel ["play"] to those forms of imaginative writing which require to be linked to tangible objects and which are capable of representations. It speaks of ... ["comedy" or "tragedy": literally, "pleasure play" or "mourning play"] and describes those who carry out the representation as ... ["players: literally "show-players"]. (Freud 1953:25)

However, in the adulthood stage, playing games is replaced by daydreaming, which means imagining, because one cannot give up the pleasure of fiction. Being ashamed of daydreaming due to the act of breaking out of the serious and rigid lines of the real world, the adult is not so honest as children are in revealing her/his daydreams. By looking at the explanations of neurotics who share their daydreams in the process of treatment with their doctors, Freud infers that these secret daydreams can also be imagined by healthy people. Accordingly, the unfulfilled desires are the starting point of daydreams which are not the products of happy people, but of dissatisfied ones; because satisfaction is provided by counteracting the conditions in real life that prevent the fulfilment of wishes in daydreams.

Donald Winnicott (2009:135, 147), an adherent of Freud's, who has managed to carry his ideas and theories one step further, explains his main thesis in the following lines:

Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. ... Nevertheless, playing and cultural experience are things that we do value in a special way; these link the past, the present, and the future; they take up time and space.

His lines emphasise the significant role playing has in the lives of individuals. As playing contributes to the process of growing up, it is a sign of health and is universal as well. It also has a myriad of functions: for instance, it serves as a good start for group interaction or it could be a means of communication in healing the psyche. Furthermore, "psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others" (Winnicott 2009:56). To Winnicott (2009:86),

[o]n the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence. No longer are we either introvert or extrovert. We experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals.

An unquestionable intermediate area such as art or religion may save the individual from the tension of separating the inner reality from the external one and, more interestingly, it actually forms a large part of *the playing field of the little child losing himself while playing* (Winnicott 2009:18). This intermediate area is of vital importance for the beginning of a relation between a child and the world, as it forms a third area that is not to be found either within the

individual or in the shared world of reality (Winnicott 2009:148). This is a potential space in which the child feels safe and can play creative games. This potential space, which could change from one individual to another, forms the basis for an intermediate lifestyle where the child goes through a positive or negative experience and where s/he also begins to separate the non-self from the self with the trust s/he has developed for the mother and the others (Winnicott 2009:147-148). In this context, the key aspect is the mother's ability to provide a sense of trust in the child and an experience of omnipotence in this potential space that both unites the mother with the child and sets them apart at the same time. If the mother fails to provide these conditions, this critical process in which the child could initiate an autonomous self-development, becomes unsuccessful, potentially creating a lack of creativity, a desperate search for the self, anxiety and lack of self-confidence – problems the child may experience in her/his future life. Winnicott (2009:139) elaborates on this issue in the following lines:

The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living. By contrast, exploitation of this area leads to a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself.

If the mother can provide the necessary conditions, every little detail of playing may serve as an example of creative living; for, given the opportunity, the child starts living creatively by using the objects through which s/he can demonstrate her/his creativity. Winnicott (2009:136) asserts that:

There is no set game, so everything is creative, and although playing is part of object-relating, whatever happens is personal to the baby. Everything physical is imaginatively elaborated, is invested with a first-time-ever quality.

3. Play in *Little BrotherTM*

Little BrotherTM by Bruce Holland Rogers, which is the focus of this study, is a short story that exemplifies, quite strikingly and in a grotesque manner, both a mother's interference into a playing space where she cannot create a sense of trust and "the restlessness of the deprived child" (Winnicott 2009:137). Built on a play-within-a-play structure, the story is centred round a strange child-mother relationship. The story begins with its protagonist, Peter, receiving a gift he has wished for the last three Christmases: a Little Brother doll, which is claimed to be no different from a real life baby. Things run rather smoothly for Peter at the beginning, but after a while he gets troubled as the doll ruins the games he plays just like a real baby would, and therefore, Peter switches it off a couple of times by using a push button he has found on the neck of the doll by chance. The doll cannot move when switched off, Peter's mother informs us, but it continues to have feelings. The mother, thus, forbids Peter to switch it off; however, she cannot prevent Peter from doing so two more times. The story ends with the mother completely losing her temper with her son and at the very end, it is implied by the narrator that she switched Peter off by using a button on his neck instead of giving him a smack.

Little Brother is one of Peter's playing-objects, or simply put, it is one of his toys. His playing area, the intermediate area we have termed as the potential space, is restricted and later on threatened both by his mother's controlling attitude and also by Little Brother's irritating behaviours. This causes Peter to get gradually more and more ill-tempered, because one of the grave dangers presented by this situation is "the restlessness of the deprived child". Winnicott (2009:137) claims that: "The 'deprived child' is notoriously restless and unable to play, and has an impoverishment of capacity to experience in the cultural field."

Besides, Peter does not feel safe in this area. Nor are his toys safe there. To Winnicott (2009:137):

There is, in cases of premature failure of environmental reliability, an alternative danger, which is that this potential space may become filled with what is injected into it from someone other than the baby. It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it.

The other gifts Peter receives are a realistic fire truck (the second best gift in Peter's consideration), a few talking books, a train and a number of wooden toy blocks. All the games he plays with these toys are violated by Little Brother who, for instance, destroys the towers Peter makes out of the wooden blocks, or prevents him from playing with the talking book by turning the pages quickly. Little Brother's smashing of the fire truck results in Peter switching it off a third time, causing him to get into trouble with his mother. As the mother constantly and gradually more sternly warns her son to treat the doll as if it were a real baby and asks her son to tidy and clean his room messed up by Little Brother, Peter develops hatred for his favourite toy and rebels against his mother because the toy belongs to him and he must be allowed to do anything he likes with it. He asks his mother to take the doll back to the shop she bought it from, and threatens to switch it off again and hide it somewhere she will not be able to find it unless she takes it back. This makes his mother much angrier than ever before but Peter hardly cares. Winnicott (2009:67) explains this when he writes: "When an organizer must be involved in a managerial position then the implication is that the child or the children are unable to play in the creative sense of my meaning in this communication."

The interruption of the child's experience of omnipotence over an object or toy not only annihilates the secure playing space but also brings out feelings of anger and aggression in the child. Peter's failure to exercise his omnipotence over Little Brother results in feelings of aggression and destruction in the boy. The arousal of these feelings is clearly observed in his efforts to send Little Brother back to the toy shop and in his threat of hiding it somewhere impossible to find. Winnicott (2009:63) suggests that objects are rejected by children only to be accepted later on and perceived objectively as a result. An important duty of the mother under these circumstances is to let the child encounter the first example of survival against the attack of the objects – an experience s/he will have to go through numerous times in life (Winnicott 2009:124). After carrying out this rather difficult and exacting duty for some time by switching Little Brother on a couple of times, Peter's mother gives in to impatience and punishes her son the same way Peter has punished the doll. The act of switching Peter off as if it were a doll symbolizes the stagnancy of the traumatic process Peter has been through after experiencing tense and frightening moments. Nevertheless, it also highlights the mother's efforts to exercise omnipotence over Peter whom she seems to consider as a toy/transitional object.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can say that some of Winnicott's theories shed light on the relationship between mother, child and toy/play. He postulates that play, which takes form in the realm of fantasies with the help of substantial images coming from the depths of the unconscious and toy as the actualization object of play, reinforce the creativity of the individual and function as the threshold of cultural life. It may not be a coincidence that the mother plays such an important role in forming the background of the individual's creative mind, the compelling power rising from the unconscious, namely 'the realm of mothers', in Jung's own words. It can be easily observed that these theories appear in Rogers' *Little BrotherTM* in a sparkling and significant way accompanied by an impressive theme and the increasing tension of the narrative.

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