

SUPPRESSED DESIRES: FREUD AND AMERICAN MISUNDERSTANDING

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Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), rebelled against the staid mores of the Midwest which she ruthlessly exposed in her novels, short stories and plays. She co-founded the Provincetown Players, was acknowledged as a competent actress and director and contributed eleven works to their repertoire; these vied with Eugene O'Neill's for the attention of contemporary critics who unanimously recognized them as the most avant-garde and arresting of the Players' productions. Glaspell left the Players after seven years and wrote only one more play, Alison's House (1931), for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1936 Glaspell accepted Hallie Flanagan's offer of the post of Director of the Federal Theater Project's Midwest Play Bureau; but the bureaucracy and censorship appalled her and after eighteen months she retired to Provincetown where she worked on her novels which were always well received by both the critics and the public.

The Vienna School, according to an article published by *McClure's Magazine* in 1907, had established that «hysteria results principally from suppressed affective ideas, and can be cured by awaking anew the restrained thought»¹. Susan Glaspell had always protested at imposed patterns of behaviour which suppressed the real self: yet although she upheld that breaking out of the patterns established by society would allow for greater achievement she could never quite free herself from the old values that had governed the lives of her forebears. In 1913, as a mature woman approaching her forties, just married to George Cram Cook, she moved East, and became embroiled in the most radical and bohemian group of intellectuals of her times —the Greenwich Villagers². These were largely people who, like herself, had fled midwestern small town values and constrictions but, while rejecting traditional Puritan reticence, were too set in their Victorian ways to create vitally new role models. Psychoanalysis provided them with scientific justification for discarding certain standards of morality and yet

¹ Hugo MUNSTERBERG, «The Third Degree», *McClure's Magazine*, October 1907, p. 621.

² This period of American history is richly documented by its protagonists who almost all tried to relive the opening of the twentieth century in later autobiographies. Fascinating reading is provided by Mabel Dodge Luhan, in *Intimate Memories*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), by Hutchins Hapgood, in *A Victorian in the Modern World*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939) and by Floyd Dell, in *Homecoming: An Autobiography*, (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933).

offered «sublimation» as a valid excuse for tenacious adherence to other codes.

Rumblings of Freud's theories had reached the United States well before his first—and only—visit in 1909. The unconscious had fascinated the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth, hypnosis and the theory of associations were very much in vogue, assuring Freud an enthralled audience drawn from both lay people and the medical profession. Clark University, vindicating its reputation for unorthodoxy, invited Freud to lecture at the twentieth anniversary celebrations; on the advice of a friend who insisted that Americans were above all sanguine pragmatists, Freud surveyed the whole field of psychoanalysis, offering a condensed, optimistic and relatively simple version of the theories he had worked out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Three Contributions to a Theory of Sex*, *The Psychology of Everyday Life*, and *Studies in Hysteria*³. He himself, in fact, paved the way for later statements by proselytizers such as Max Eastman who joyously affirmed: «We have but to name these nervous diseases with their true name, it seems, and they dissolve like the charms in a fairy story»⁴.

Max Eastman was one of the circle of radicals Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook galvanized into theatrical experimentation when they founded The Provincetown Players in 1916. The venture could almost be said to be an outcome of psychoanalysis, the concepts of which were mulled over in the Liberal Club on Washington Square; Eastman and Floyd Dell held sway over the anxious, and at times cynical, Greenwich Villagers, convincing them to be «psyched» and thereby cured of all writer's blocks, marital infelicities, depressions and irritabilities. Preferring not to pay out the vast sums that awesome professionals such as A. A. Brill and Smith Ely Jelliffe demanded, the Villagers shed their inhibitions—those being pre-Prohibition days—and recounted their dreams in the hope of getting to the bottom of their problems: Floyd Dell, as he was later to write, had already taught them that dream analysis disclosed repressed complexes which, if not worked out, could lead to neuroses⁵.

Cook and Glaspell were intrigued by the deep meaning of dreams, but not fully convinced that all complexes so discovered had to be acted on.

³ Nathan G. HALE, Jr., *Freud and the Americans: The beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1917*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 5.

⁴ Max EASTMAN, «Exploring the Soul», *Everybody's Magazine*, 32, June 1915, p. 750.

⁵ «By means of the technique of dream-analysis, Freud has discovered that the «unconscious», the hidden part of the mind, is full of «complexes», knotted groups of emotions and thoughts, which have been «repressed», thrust back out of consciousness as shameful. He found, moreover, that these repressed complexes were sexual in character. Repression, that is to say, was shown to be one way in which the mind deals with emotional forces—«libido»—which cannot find free play in civilized life. It is, however, a poor way, for the repression may give rise to a symptom called neurosis.»

(Floyd Dell, «The Science of the Soul», *The Masses*, Vol. VIII, n.º 9, July 1916, p. 30.)

They had read Edwin Tenney Brewster, who had expounded on «Dreams and Forgetting», stating categorically that «Every dream, then, in the Freudian formula, is the more or less disguised fulfillment of a suppressed wish. ... The worst of it is that these same repressed wishes that appear in dreams affect also, most inconveniently, our waking lives»⁶. Working out hypothetical scenarios convinced them that the nostrum of dream-analysis, if taken to extremes, could have disastrous consequences, but it also revealed an inherent histrionicism which offered enormous promise for the theatre. Glaspell and Cook did not demur: they «tossed lines back and forth at one another, and wondered if any one else would ever have as much fun with it as we were having»⁷. The result, *Suppressed Desires*, was to be the Provincetown Players first production⁸.

This slight sketch gave Glaspell, working here with her husband whose mind was «far less scrupulous and more ungirdled» than hers, the opportunity to treat ideas less seriously than she was wont to⁹. A few years later Glaspell was described as a dramatist «of thought» and her work was juxtaposed with that of Eugene O'Neill, which derived purely from «feelings»¹⁰. Here, however, she relished the freedom «of comedy (not of character) but of ideas, or, rather, of the confusion or falseness or absurdity of ideas»¹¹. In later plays and in her novels, Glaspell's ambivalence towards the ideas she grapples with mars any incipient humour, but in *Suppressed Desires*, as she herself wrote, she was simply «having fun» at the cost of psychoanalysis.

Henrietta Brewster, in *Suppressed Desires*, has become addicted to the new fad and sees her analyst, Dr. Russell, regularly¹². Mabel, visiting her sister, is packed off to see him at the first «Freudian slip». Dr. Russell manages to work out all the dreams and desires in record time: in two weeks he affirms that Stephen Brewster's dreams of walls falling away from him have nothing to do with his profession—he is an architect—but are concise proof that he wishes to be free of his wife. Mabel's dream that she is a hen

⁶ Edwin TENNEY BREWSTER, «Dreams and Forgetting: New Discoveries in Dream Psychology», *McClure's Magazine*, October 1912, Vol. 29, p. 716 & 717.

⁷ Susan GLASPELL, *The Road to the Temple*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1927, p. 250.

⁸ *Suppressed Desires*, together with *Constancy* by Neith Boyce, was performed in Provincetown in 1915. Glaspell gives a full account in her autobiography of George Cram Cook, *The Road to the Temple*. See also Helen DEUTSCH and Stella HANAU, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931), and Robert KAROLY SARLOS, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment*, (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982).

⁹ Ludwig LEWISOHN, *The Drama and the Stage*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922, p. 104.

¹⁰ Isaac GOLDBERG, *The Drama of Transition: Native and Exotic Playcraft*, Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd, 1922, p. 472.

¹¹ LEWISOHN, p. 104.

¹² Henrietta is preparing a paper on psychoanalysis to give at the Liberal Club, and her husband's worktable is now strewn with the literature, including copies of the *Psycho-Analytic Review* (Max Eastman had in April 1914 encouraged the readers of *The Masses* who wished to «understand the daring ideas of Sigmund Freud» to subscribe to it).

told to «step lively!» is slightly more complicated, but is unravelled to show that she wishes she were HENrietta, for she loves her sister's husband, STEP/HEN B(e)Rooster. Stephen and Henrietta finally decide to ignore the analyst's dictum and stay together: Mabel is told to «keep right on suppressing» her desire for Stephen, and is persuaded that «Psychoanalysis doesn't say you have to gratify every suppressed desire»¹³.

The play clearly draws on popularized notions of psychoanalysis that could be gleaned from after dinner talk with Floyd Dell¹⁴. It is very doubtful that its authors had read Freud, or even Dr. Brill, who according to W. David Sievers «distinguished between *repression*, which is an unconscious process, and *suppression*, which is a conscious disciplining of one's impulses as required by civilization». Sievers then points out that «Susan Glaspell's satire should rightly have been called *Repressed Desires*»¹⁵. However, strictly speaking, it should have been *Repressed and Suppressed Desires*: Mabel is told to *suppress* —for the good of the Brewsters— desires that are no longer *repressed*, since the analyst has brought them to the fore in explaining them (Glaspell and Cook do not seem to have been aware of this—they use «suppressed» throughout.) The confusion is justifiable in that, as we have seen, Edwin Tenney Brewster uses the two terms indiscriminately (as, in 1971, does Nathan G. Hale, Jr.), while Hugo Munsterberg, Harvard professor of Psychology whose work the Cooks would certainly have known, uses «suppressed» throughout his 1907 article in McClure's Magazine¹⁶.

More striking than the misuse of a scientific term, is the preoccupation with the suppression of an individual's right to be herself, central to all of Glaspell's plays and novels. The young protagonist of an early story, «The Rules of the Institution», questions the validity of breaking out when this would hurt so many loved ones: «It seemed that affection and obligation were agents holding one to one's place», and yet Judith finally decides that «she owed no allegiance to an order that held life in chains»¹⁷. The novel *Fidelity* (1915) painfully explores a young girl's «right» to walk off with someone else's husband and the consequences of such an act. In both cases Glaspell recognizes the right of the individual to self-expression, but is sadly aware of the heartache caused others.

In the play *The Verge* (1921), Glaspell examines what will happen to the protagonist who does not suppress her own desires in our society; the play

¹³ Susan GLASPELL and George CRAM COOK, *Suppressed Desires*, in; Margaret Gardner Mayorga, ed., *Representative One-Act Plays by American Authors*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1922, p. 320.

¹⁴ Floyd DELL, «Speaking of Psycho-Analysis: The New Boon for Dinner Table Conversationalists», *Vanity Fair*, 5 December 1915, p. 53.

¹⁵ W. David SIEVERS, *Freud on Broadway*, New York: Hermitage House, 1955, p. 27.

¹⁶ Nathan G. HALE, Jr. *Freud and the Americans*, p. 400 and 405. Munsterberg, pp. 614-22.

¹⁷ Susan GLASPELL, «The Rules of the Institution», *Harper's Monthly*, January 1914 (Vol. 128), p. 208.

was acclaimed by members of the Heterodoxy—a radical woman's club—with almost religious respect: here was a playwright who dared show how society takes its revenge on women¹⁸. Claire Archer, the protagonist of *The Verge*, overcomes set patterns in nature and creates a new life form. In a man, this Nietzschean over-reaching would be considered a normal function of male aggression: in a woman, it amounts to the arrogation of faculties reserved for God—and for men. Claire has rejected the roles of wife, mother and mistress that are open to her and rebels against the suppression of self that society would enforce on a woman only to discover that the penalty is total alienation: she is seen as a hysteric, by her family and by most audiences of the play. In *Suppressed Desires*, the triviality of the argument allowed for lightheartedness but in *The Verge*, Susan Glaspell's relentless investigation of the secrets of our civilisation reveal tragedy to be the only possible outcome. Hence the ambivalence which disconcerts Glaspell's reader: she hailed the new freedoms of the age of psychoanalysis but her Victorian heritage disposed her to doubt their pragmatic value; the suppression of some of humankind's desires seemed essential for the preservation of society.

¹⁸ The Heterodoxy was a club for «women who did things and did them openly» (Mabel DODGE LUHAN, Vol. III, p. 143) which according to Nancy COTT «epitomized the Feminists of the time» (*The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Yale University Press, 1987, p. 38).

