

Freud Example Essay

As hypothesized by father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud, repression is the mind's defense mechanism, whereby unpalatable feeling, desires, and memories are (at least partially) submerged in the unconscious mind. This idea helps to explain how humans cope with psychological trauma, as it would be impossible to healthily function if all slights, failures, and disappointments were continuously experienced as acutely as when such emotions first occurred. In the short story “Yellow Fish,” Tamil writer Ambai documents such a process, since the protagonist Anu grieves for her daughter Jalaja, who has died from complications due to her premature birth. Seen through a Freudian lens, the story is about the process of coming to terms with tragedy in a way that allows for the possibility of reconnection with life-- the narrator recovering a healthier balance between the internalization of her trauma and her external interaction with the exterior world.

When the reader first encounters Anu, this balance is askew, as she is alienated from her setting. For instance, when encountering a commercial fishing operation on the beach, Anu perceives the brilliant “collage of colours” (27) of the fisherwomen's saris as intrusive-- defined more by their ability to wound than their capacity to delight the senses. This is why the colors blind and assault (20-21), as they “press upon the eyes” (25-26). Instead of enlivening the sand that “spreads like a desert” (3-4), or favorably contrasting with a “faded,” “ash grey” (12-13), and “shrunken” (3) sea, Anu perceives the colorful saris as “profound”-- even “demonic” (10-11). The implication is that she longs for the neutral and uninflected and that vibrancy is perceived as threat (as opposed to comfort or inspiration). In this, Ambai describes a woman living with a partially repressed grief experienced in the wake of her loss. Disconnected from life as it actually is (colorful and vibrant), Anu experiences life as drained of meaning (colorless and drab). Even the grammar suggests this. Though actually a first person narration, the word “I” first occurs halfway through the story-- when Anu encounters the discarded yellow fish languishing on the sand. Until this moment, Ambai exclusively uses third (and even second) person pronouns-- though the perceptions are clearly from a single point-of-view of a (as yet unidentified) character. Instead of Anu placing herself into her own story (inserting herself as the “I” in the narration), the language choices keep her at a remove: someone who simply observes without interacting (signified by the comparatively objective third person perceptions). Initially, then, Anu is a woman who seemingly lacks a personal connection to the vital setting surrounding her.

That the encounter with the yellow fish is the impetus whereby Anu begins her reintegration into the world is no accident, since she perceives a connection between the fish and her deceased infant Jalaja. If, in the aftermath of trauma, Ana feels isolated and alone, it would, according to Freud, be a perfectly natural response. The acute grief one feels at the origin of trauma cannot continue to be experienced with the same intensity if one is to productively function in daily life. Instead, such feelings are partially submerged in the repository that makes up the unconscious mind. Such a process begins almost immediately-- analogous to the way that the mind blunts the sting of physical pain after the initial experience of material trauma. Indeed, evidence of this process occurs in the story, as the grieving Anu, when confronted with the funeral urn holding Jalaja's ashes, responds with “loud racking sobs” (59)-- yet the sentence lacks a subject, an “I” that connects Anu to the experience in her memory. In other words, the alienation (signified by the language choice), begins almost instantaneously, as if confronting unmediated pain is too difficult for her to bear. At the same time, the process of healing, facilitated in the story by Anu's successful attempts to save the yellow fish, is similarly quick, since Anu displaces some of her grief for Jalaja onto the dying fish. Both entities, for instance, have a mouth that “closes and opens” (38), both gasping for breath. In making this

connection, then, Anu reinserts herself back into the world by discerning an opportunity to save the fish in a way that she could not with her daughter. When Anu accomplishes this task, returning the yellow fish to the sea with the aid of a fisherboy, the yellow of the fish becomes “clear” (80), rather than the pale or withered color of her earlier perception (31). In a similar way, the sea into which the fish returns is now “blue-grey-white” and no longer desiccated or redolent of death-- the “ash grey” (13) color at the beginning of the story. Hence, in displacing the object of the partially repressed grief onto the fish, her changed perception of color indicate a change in outlook. Anu is able to once again see herself as part of the world in its infinite variety; it no longer oppresses her mind or spirit. In this way, Freud would suggest how her psyche has more successfully integrated the grief into the unconscious, allowing Anu to once more healthily interact with her surroundings.

Thus, Anu’s character arc move from grief to acceptance through a Freudian process of repression, enabling the character to reconnect with the world of the living. Of course, it is glib to suggest that this process represents a triumph over tragedy, since Anu’s negative feelings are not so completely repressed that she has forgotten her grief. What does happen, though, is that Anu no longer fixates on her trauma, evidenced by how (at story’s end) she no longer experiences the world through the lens of her tragedy (or at least to the same degree). She sees, in other words, the possibility of transcending tragedy or, at the very least, making peace with it. It is in this way that Ambai suggests the healing power of solidarity with others (personified in Anu’s empathetic connection with the yellow fish), since isolation traps individuals into modes of thinking that only result in anxiety and stress of personal trauma. In such a view, though the world may be an intermittently tragic place, at the same time, it contains within it the means to embrace hope, rather than despair-- life, rather than death.