
Life is such Stuff as Dreams are Made on: An Interpretation of Strindberg's *The Dream Play*

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Abstract:

The Dream Play, a semi-autobiographical piece by Augustus Strindberg, written during his 'inferno crisis' is a metaphor for life itself with its twists and turns and ups and downs. The play structured in a dream mode, takes one through the intricate alleys and by-lanes of man's inner world of emotions and thoughts and the unpredictability, mystery, conflict and insecurity associated with the world outside. The Dream Play tries to successfully achieve this mastery of dual portrayal, both thematically and structurally. The play is probably the first of its kind in adopting a dream mode as a genre in itself. This kind of a theatrical presentation is made possible by the excessive use of symbols and poetic images which literally float across the text, lending it a haunting, surreal experience. The paper is an attempt to interpret the play with special emphasis on the symbols and images employed by the author.

Key words: Dream Play, Strindberg, symbols, syncretism, surrealism

The Dream Play, a semi-autobiographical piece by Augustus Strindberg, written during his 'inferno crisis' is a metaphor for life itself with its twists and turns and ups and downs. The play structured in a dream mode, takes one through the intricate

alleys and by-lanes of man's inner world of emotions and thoughts and the unpredictability, mystery, conflict and insecurity associated with the world outside. *The Dream Play* tries to successfully achieve this mastery of dual portrayal, both thematically and structurally. The scenes in the play transgress spatio-temporal logic, and are fluid in nature, imitating the disjointed shape of a dream, the medium in which the story itself unfolds. This kind of a theatrical presentation is made possible by the excessive use of symbols and poetic images which literally float across the text, lending it a haunting, surreal experience.

In the 'dream,' God Indra's daughter reincarnated as Agnes descends on earth to find out the rationale behind mankind's ceaseless complaints and also to have a firsthand knowledge of human suffering. As the play unfurls, Agnes witnesses the joy and depravity of human experience. When she encounters humans undergoing different kinds of suffering, she comes to accept and realize the fact that gods should sympathize with humans as revealed in her oft-repeated phrase "Men are to be pitied." Her return to heaven signals an awakening from the dream-like state, and a kind of *niravana* is attained.

Strindberg originally wrote *The Dream Play* in 1901 during a personal crisis and marital breakdown. He calls this play his "most beloved play," the child of his "greatest pain." The play also reflects his own marital discord with his third wife Harriet Bosse. Strindberg's spouseless solitary life of forty days pushed him to believe that life is an illusion that never fulfils one's dreams and the play results from this melancholia. Freudian analysis generally states that dreams employ symbolism to give "a disguised representation to their latent thoughts. Among the symbols thus employed there are, of course, many which constantly, or all but constantly, mean the same thing" (Freud 1953, 232). In the context of this statement, one cannot ignore Strindberg's personal crisis which is

recurrently referred to in the play. All the same what makes the play extraordinary is the fact that the play is replete with symbols and poetic images that the playwright employs to heighten the thematic aspects of the play, leaving it universal in its appeal.

Agnes, the Daughter of Indra - the king of the Gods, has her name rooted in Christianity. The name alluding to one of the Christian saints, Agnes also means 'Lamb of God,' again symbolizing a female Christ who has come down to redeem mankind. Strindberg juxtaposes two world views, one 'Eastern' inspired by his discovery of Buddhism, the spiritual source that rescued him from his inferno, the second inspired by a Christian world that lives in the shadows of Adam's sin and Christ's suffering. The syncretism involved or the allusion to two different faiths from two different worlds also hints at the fact that suffering is universal. On Agnes's very descent into the earthly quarters, she experiences suffocation, an indication of both the physical and metaphorical pollution resulting from the capitalist, modernizing world. This asphyxiation is also symbolic of or premonition to the miseries that she is going to encounter during her earthly experience. The suffocation involved in an incompatible marriage, too cannot be dismissed in the framework of the author's strained marital relationship. The concept of ideal love usually undergoes a strangulating experience when it encounters the reality of practical life and this is a recurrent motif in his plays. She finally descends from a cloud to a castle built on a dung-heap and surmounted by a flower bud, a characteristic surreal image.

Her sight of a castle growing out of dung, but crowned with a flower, at the outset symbolizes the upward striving of man towards the ideal and the 'beautiful,' an oft-repeated idea in the play. It also stands metaphorical for the eternal struggle between flesh and spirit and the triumph of life over death, in other words it represents the very cyclic nature of life itself

which is rooted both in the very subjective 'ugly' and the 'beautiful.'

As the whole plot is in the disjointed form a dream, a linear narration of events is impossible. The central design of *The Dream Play* coincides with the circular journey of Agnes. An attempt to study the play from the symbolic aspects takes one to the common theme of suffering among the earthlings. As Agnes descends down she meets the Glazier near the palace, who takes her to the imprisoned Officer. He is probably caged within the psychological, social or even sexual barriers that prevent him from consummating his love. He suffers from the pangs of separation and is seen to have spent his whole life waiting for his lady love. Here, Agnes momentarily frees the imprisoned Officer. But the prisoner is skeptic and fears happiness because he knows that he would have to pay for it "with twice its measure of sorrow (30)," an autobiographical echo being evident. There is an indication that ideal love persists with its romantic notions as long as love is not consummated and tied in marital bliss. The Keatsian overtones with regard to the 'Bold lover:' "For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" is highly relevant in the context. The Officer, after visiting his parents, stands at the stage door of the opera, waiting, as he has done for seven years, for his lover, Victoria to emerge. The next scene between the mother and the father points to a strained relationship resulting from long years of "adjustment." The fact that the Officer makes a reference to his mother being dead ten years earlier keeps the readers engaged in the dream mode of the play. However, the parents' loveless life stands in stark contrast to the unconsummated, ideal love of the prisoner. The parents, thus, become universal paradigms for incompatible partnership.

Indra's Daughter is next seen to become the Stage-Door Keeper, so that she can have a better understanding of human unhappiness. She wraps herself with the "shawl of suffering" borrowed from the Portress. The Portress is an aged woman

who had given up her passion for ballet dancing after her lover ditched her thirty years back, leaving herself to wallow in grief. Moreover, she is shown to carry the burden of others' sufferings by listening to their woes. When the Officer, now aged from his constant waiting, is forbidden from opening the intriguing 'door with a clover leaf,' he goes to the Lawyer to seek an injunction. The Lawyer, contaminated from years of dealing with other people's crimes, is denied a doctor's degree during the convocation ceremony. His ghastly, chalk-white face only points to his inner blackness. Nevertheless he too is not free from pain. His argument is that he is forced by his duty to commit wrong. He is also constantly bugged by the fact that no good looking girl would ever marry him. Feeling sorry for him, Indra's Daughter marries him. Despite his warning that he is poor and that his dislikes may turn out to be her likes, Agnes goes ahead optimistically with the idea of mutual understanding in marriage and consents to the marriage. Again one easily discerns the playwright's personal distress in the lawyer's apprehension.

Agnes is soon found unhappy with the squalor and bickering of her marriage. The Lawyer's notion of beauty is completely different from hers. He is thoroughly practical and believes in orderliness, simplicity and tidiness where as her sense of aestheticism lies in decorating the house with expensive bric-a-brac:

THE DAUGHTER. Everything else might be borne if I could only have some beauty in my home.

THE LAWYER. I know you are thinking of flowers . . . but a flower costs half a dollar, which will buy us six quarts of milk or a peck of potatoes.

THE DAUGHTER. I could gladly get along without food if I could only have some flowers.

THE LAWYER. There is a kind of beauty that costs nothing – but the absence of it in the home is worse than any other torture to a man with a sense for the beautiful.(54)

The lawyer hates fish which Agnes loves and she hates cabbages which the Lawyer loves. They try to pull on and bear the pain of adjustment for the sake of their child. This kind of incompatibility is again reminiscent of Strindberg's own personal struggle in marriage and his extreme love for his own children. Robert Brustein in his analysis refers to Strindberg's problems with his partners and his tendency to "accuse his female partners of infidelity, lesbianism, careerism, uncleanliness, sloppy bookkeeping, and trying to emasculate him" (Brustein 2001, par. 3). His other play *The Link* also revolves around the theme of an estranged husband and wife who are "linked" by their child. But Strindberg is more impartial in his attitude in this play towards his female counterparts as opposed to the plays written during his pre-inferno period where the image of the castrating female reigns supreme. Rachel Thomas states that "A cycle of adoration, repulsion, and paranoia repeated itself through all of Strindberg's turbulent relationships. Brustein reports that Strindberg eventually realized this cycle had less to do with the women themselves and more to do with his own psychic disorder" (Thomas 2013, 13). Contrarily the female protagonist in *The Dream Play* is portrayed to be soft-spoken, empathetic and caring. What is to be noted here is that the idea of life being not ideal but an illusion is oft-repeated by presenting such frailties of conflicting relationships. Unable to cope, Agnes leaves her husband and child and travels with the Officer to the seashore, arriving at 'Foulstrand' rather than the intended 'Fairhaven.' The names of these places highlight the theme of reality versus illusion or to put it more precisely reality versus idealism. The conflict arising out of expectations and reality lies at the root of the play. The resident Quarantine Master fumigates an Old Dandy, a Coquette (the bride for whom the Officer had been waiting) and an ineffectual Poet. The way Strindberg weaves in the same character to play different roles seamlessly holds the audience in a trance; images are sifted and

shifted, giving out a complete chimerical experience. When the dainty Victoria suddenly takes on the role of a Coquette, the audience is forced to unearth more meanings and thereby deconstruct notions of idealism.

The quarantine station stands illustrative for those suffering from physical and mental ailments. The two optimistic young lovers are soon disappointed by their foul surroundings. They wish to immortalize their happiness in death rather than endure the squalor of life. A blind man who they come across also is burdened by the sadness of his missing son. Most of the people suffering from illness here are the wealthy ones. The quarantine station itself stands for the never-ending misery that man is subjected to irrespective of his class, race or gender and seems to echo that suffering is democratic.

Torture and despair start right from school. Next the Officer finds himself back at school, being disciplined by a fearsome Schoolmaster. Strindberg makes an acidic dig at the grinding educational system. The absurdity of logic is brought out when the Officer tries to prove that "two times two is two." The four faculties, belonging to medicine, philosophy, theology and jurisprudence are deliberately incorporated to emphasize the irony associated with the various teaching faculties that sling mud at each other by claiming themselves supreme, contrary to the true motive of education. Strindberg ingeniously satirizes the members of the academia who are resolute in confusing the youth and spoiling their future. The pain and struggle of learning and the atrocities of the contemporary teaching methods are foregrounded. Educational institutions themselves become symbols of anarchy and atrocity.

The Daughter then is found returning to her Lawyer husband, and together they visit a beautiful beach with the hope of reconciliation, but she learns from the Coal-Carriers at the beach that the so-called place of bliss is also not untouched by distress and torment. This incident runs parallel to a

passage in Strindberg's *Occult Diaries* where he comments on the nature of 'ideal' relationship as opposed to a realistic one:

We are fond of each other on a higher level, but we cannot be in the same room, and we dream of a reunion, dematerialized, on a verdant island with only the two of us, and possibly our child. I remember a half hour when the three of us were actually walking hand in hand on the shore of a verdant island, and I had the impression that this was heaven. Then the dinner bell called and we were back on earth, and soon afterwards in hell. (extrapris.com par. 8)

The vast expanse of the beach initially comes across as a source of consolation and peace but the idea of everlasting happiness is soon subverted as the sea itself stands for the ebb and flow of life.

The idea of class division and the torture inflicted by the materialistic world is evident in this part of the "dream." The catchphrase is that the ones "who work hardest, get the least food." The coal-heavers suffer so that the wealthy can enjoy:

FIRST HEAVEN. And yet we are the foundations of society. If the coal is not unloaded, then there will be no fire in the kitchen stove, in the parlour grate, or in the factory furnace; then the light will go out in streets and shops and homes; then darkness and cold will descend upon you – and, therefore, we have to sweat as in hell so that the black coals may be had." (80)

This in fact can be related to the palace growing on dung shown in the opening scene. The dung-palace image underlines the parasitic tendencies of a capitalist society. There are also constant references to Christ who died for the redemption of others' sins. The Lawyer echoes similar thoughts when he states that people who try to improve their lot end in prison or the madhouse. Visiting Fingal's Cave with the Poet, Indra's Daughter sees how the sea has taken the lives of many and wonders if she has dreamt everything as in a dream. Implication of a 'metadream,' again emphasizes the notion of all

pervading 'Maya'. The Poet's verses on human suffering only accentuate the perennial nature of human misery operating on the earthly canvas, but at the same time his announcement: "Love conquers all" turns out to be a mockery of the idealist's notions of life. Poetry according to Agnes is "Not reality, but more than reality-not dreaming, but daylight dreams" (86).

Water too serves as a multi-forked symbol. Water is shown to be a sign of redemption as well as destruction. But then, again death can be taken to be the final Redeemer. Moreover both Agnes and the poet experience a sense of déjà vu, once again reinforcing the dream-like structure of the play. Symbols in this play like the dream sequence is never constant. Meanings are evasive.

It could be argued that *The Dream Play* was probably the first drama to employ the oxymoron dream-reality as a genre in itself. There have been plays that have included dream sequences as a part of the plot, but no play was ever made with its entire plot woven into a dream sequence. By incorporating such a method Strindberg thematically and structurally heightens the mission of the play. Strindberg abandons conventional perceptions of time and space and of stage realism in the hope of discovering what "is concealed behind the door." He had reduced his original theme, of the man waiting unsuccessfully for the ever elusive lover to a sub plot; his chief character now being Indra's Daughter who comes down to earth to live among mortals. After experiencing and enduring the tragic predicaments of the earth bound, she sheds her mortal flesh and returns to her father. This powerful theatrical trope of the circular journey, in fact represents Strindberg's own wholesome journey from despair to enlightenment. All the symbols point to the flux of human predicament, the perpetual existential angst man is subjected to and the hopes and challenges that keep mankind alive and going. The play is a kind of stoic acceptance of the pitfalls of existence that holds a huge share of what one calls life.

The Dream Play, Strindberg's most innovative work is widely regarded to have had a huge influence on later modernist drama. The play is also an important precursor to dramatic movements like Existentialism, Expressionism and Absurdism. Martin Lamm called him "the boldest [-] experimenter in modern drama" (Lamm 1953, 1925). The play is also naturalistic in the sense that it addresses realistic concerns such as love, marriage, materialism, class struggle, faulty educational system, gender role struggle, confrontations with physical disease and suffering. The kaleidoscopic nature Agnes' experiences contribute to the expressionist design and include images from earthbound Hell and Heaven. Moreover the dream-like format accommodates his fullest exploration of expressionism, in which haunting staccato-like characters heighten the emotional appeal. Styan states that Strindberg's fervent desire to "strip the soul naked, uncover its illusions and at the same time make his meaning as transparent as possible" is what led him to adopt the methods of symbolism and expressionism (Styan 1968, 118). Absurdist philosophy of boredom is echoed when the lawyer sadly states "All life is nothing but doing things over again" (75). Existential ideas dominate the play as 'Life' itself remains at its core. The pangs of living and loving; the pull between conscience and desire; idealistic pursuits versus realistic concerns; clash between the bodily and the spiritual; thoughts of being and belonging – these are all conflicts that mark human existence. Strindberg's existential ideas seem to be rooted in suffering and remorse as stated by the Lawyer, "What is pleasant is sin" and "If I have had a pleasant day or night, then I suffer infernal pangs and a bad conscience the next day" (75). When the Poet questions Agnes from what she suffered most during her earthly sojourn, she quips: "From- *being*: to feel my vision weekend by an eye, my hearing blunted by an ear, and my thought, my bright and buoyant thought, bound in labyrinthine coils of fat" (102). The characters' search for the meaning of life is evident and the

answer obviously seems to be concealed behind the mystifying door.

The closed door appears to be a mystery in the world of misery from the very beginning. On Agnes's return to the opera house, she commands that the anonymity behind the closed door be finally exposed: "For there is a suspicion that the solution of the world-riddle may be hidden behind it" (92). When the door is finally opened after much debate, there is mass disappointment in finding nothing there. The essence of existence amounts to nothing. All the deans and the so called "right-minded people" accuse Agnes of cheating. Agnes, having experienced pain and suffering by being half a mortal, wishes to shed her mortal life in the burning flames of the palace. In spite of all her attempts to appease suffering and solve the mystery of life, she is threatened with flogging. She bids adieu to the earthlings and goes back to the rising castle, where the chrysanthemum has started to bloom emphatically. As she takes leave of the Poet and the other characters, Agnes reassures them that she would make a mention of their sorrow to Indra, her father. Even then she is not very hopeful of the human predicament and comes to the pessimistic conclusion that life is a "tragic contradiction, a struggle between irreconcilable opposites such as spirit and matter, love and hate, the male and female principles. These are the conflicts that split the human heart in two, forming the basis for her repeated perception" (Brustein 2013, par. 5) that "Men are to be pitied." This for Strindberg was the answer to the riddle of life. Man survives by way of the energy that transpires between the conflicting entities: "Craving for suffering comes into conflict with craving for enjoyment" (100). Indra's daughter explains: "Conflict between opposites produces energy, as fire and water give the power of steam" (101). It is perhaps upto man to establish equilibrium between the earthly and the spiritual. Agnes refuses to further explain the riddle and leaves it to the

discretion of mankind to keep the world alive through the energy derived from such contradictory forces.

Before her return to Indra, Agnes also enlightens the poet about the sinful seduction of Brahman (the divine primal force) by Maya (the worldly) resulting in their offsprings, products of their sin. Thus, she says “world, existence, mankind, are nothing but a phantom, an appearance, a dream image” (100). Perhaps she indicates that salvation could be achieved only through self-denial and suffering, despite man’s desperate race for earthly cares. The wall of human faces questioning, grieving and despairing at the end of the play against the backdrop of the burning castle seems to accentuate the fact that life is an illusion, a phantom, perhaps even meaningless, but the bud on the roof opening into a gigantic chrysanthemum flower signifies the cyclic nature of life itself and the accompanying hope- the spirit that keeps man going and this is the stuff of which dreams are made.

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