



Dream, Reality and Fantasy: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *Sucker Punch*

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Abstract— This paper explores the 2011 movie *Sucker Punch* directed by Zack Snyder through the lens of psychoanalytic criticism. The movie projects the many worlds of the protagonist Baby Doll in an attempt to mitigate the on-going psychological battle within her psyche. Utilizing the psychoanalytic theory the main character's journey within the movie will be analyzed. Baby Doll's projection or interpretation of her reality in other worlds where she sees her desires manifested in a character which differs absolutely with her reality is the crux of this paper. Using the theories propounded by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan an attempt will be made to situate and redefine the characters and their stories to understand them in a different light.



Keywords— *Dream, Fantasy, Reality, Archetype, Asylum, Conscience.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Everyone has an angel, a guardian who watches over us; we can't know what form they'll take, one day old man, next day little girl. But don't let appearances fool you. They can be as fierce as any dragon. Yet they're not here to fight our battles, but to whisper from our heart, reminding that it's us. It's every one of us, who holds that power over the worlds that we create.”

These are the opening lines of the movie *Sucker Punch* directed by Zack Snyder released on March 2011. The last sentence of the quoted lines mentions that there is a world that we create and that we, as the creator, have the power to do what we want within that world that we create. It is in this world that we become who we choose to become, a hero, a superhero, or sometimes a villain. This creation of a world where we become the supreme being is a direct manifestation of our *id* governed by the pleasure principle according to Sigmund Freud and thus is extraordinary in its existence. The angel or the guardian that is spoken of seems to be our conscience i.e., our *superego* the force that controls the *id* under the morality principle.

Dreams and fantasies sometimes seem necessary and useful for a temporary escape from life's harsh, painful, and unsympathetic realities. But some dreams and some fantasies have the potential of ultimately becoming an alternate reality for the person who is dreaming and fantasizing, thereby narrowing the gap between that which is real and which is not, pushing them to the limit. Differentiating between a dream, fantasy, and reality can become an impossible task sometimes. This paper will attempt to study the nature of dreams, reality, and fantasy and how they operate in the realm of the real world in *Sucker Punch* using psychoanalytic criticism.

II. SUCKER PUNCH

Sucker Punch is about a girl named Baby Doll, who has lost her mother and her sister, and who is now admitted to a mental asylum by her evil stepfather who wanted to inherit all the wealth of his late wife. The stepfather also bribed Blue, one of the orderly of the asylum to make arrangements to perform lobotomy on Baby doll so that she forgets everything. Baby Doll befriended four girls in the asylum - Rocket, Amber, Blondie, and Sweet Pea-

whom she convinced to aid her in her attempt to escape from the mental asylum. Baby Doll identified four items needed to escape from the asylum namely a map, fire, a knife, and a key. The mental asylum has a psychiatrist named Dr. Gorski who is trying her best to help the patients. Through a series of events, it is suggested that Blue and his associates have been physically assaulting and molesting the patients in the asylum, and as such everyone is afraid of Blue. Baby Doll to escape her reality in the mental asylum transports herself to another world where she becomes a dancer in a brothel. In this fantasy world, she has not fully achieved mastery over her world and therefore she again is under the evil brothel owner Blue, dancing for him if and when he pleases. So, Baby Doll transports herself yet again from this alternate reality to a deeper level of fantasy where she is in total control of her surroundings i.e., she becomes a sword-wielding super warrior who is undefeatable in her newly constructed world. Here she battles giant samurais, a dragon, lifeless Nazis, etc..... all these battles that she fought are direct representations of her dancing scene in the second world which is yet again a direct representation of her sessions with Dr. Gorski and their attempts in recovering those items needed to run away from the mental asylum. Eventually, in the course of their attempts to escape from the mental asylum, three of her newfound friends died and, in the end, she sacrificed herself so that Sweet Pea could escape from the mental asylum.

III. BABY DOLL'S DREAMS

Sigmund Freud in his interpretations of dreams said dreams are 'wish fulfillment' and 'gratification of unfulfilled wishes and longings'. He also said Dreams are, "...royal road to the unconscious". So, our unconscious desires are manifested in the form of dreams. We dream of being in that reality where there is no limit, where the impossible disappears and the possible is distorted to our liking. Dreams allow us to become what we are not in reality. Therefore, dreams are sometimes created, it may not be a conscious effort but we do create our dreams through our wishes which remain to be fulfilled through our dreams. Baby Doll in the movie *Sucker Punch* had to go through a lot of hardship, losing her mom, losing her sister, being accused of being mentally sick, and then being thrown into a mental asylum where she had to face the orderly Blue Jones. In short, Baby Doll's life was a misery. She wanted release, a world where she could be a superhuman being, where she could defeat all her enemies and opponents. And so, she dreams of this world where she and her friends in the mental asylum all become dancers, belonging to Blue, dancing for Blue. But here in this Dance Club she again does not have full

control over her world, she is still owned by Blue. Baby Doll therefore dreams another dream, a dream within a dream, where she now is fully in control and where she is indestructible. In this dream, she and her friends become warriors ready to take on anything. Baby Doll's dream became her reality. There is a connection between these three worlds that she has created. Whenever something happens in the third world, e.g., the death of Rocket becomes a reality in the real world, but still is manifested or represented only in the second world. Baby Doll loses control of her fantasies or dreams. The desire to dream away the realities of life could be due to many things but for Baby Doll, it's the lobotomy and the doctor who is going to perform it out that she dreads.

Baby Doll's dream within the movie can be explained as having different levels. The different levels are representations of the real-world situations faced in multiple situations or places.

III.1, The Mental Asylum (Ego): "...the rational governing agent of the psyche" (Guerin, 130). This is Baby Doll's first reality. This reality is painful for Baby Doll. Therefore, this world has become a sort of fantasy for her. Reality has forced her to be in this fantasy world. Reality was the death of her loved ones, her mother, and her sister. She did not retaliate when she was admitted to this asylum nor did she protest in any way. This could be because she could not grasp this reality that has dawned on her properly. Everything seems to be a fantasy for her in this world. This stage or level of reality can be seen as the *Ego*, the *reality principle* of Sigmund Freud at work. This stage helps Baby Doll realize her reality, no matter how much she dreads being in it.

III.2, The Dancers Club or the Brothel (Super Ego): "*The superego is the moral censoring agency, the repository of conscience and pride*" (Guerin, 130). When reality becomes too much for her to cope with, she retreats into a world where she and her friends are beautiful and talented. And in some way freer. This is Baby Doll's second reality and her first escape from reality. But this again became her alternate reality and somehow controlled her. This stage becomes the *Super Ego*, the *morality principle*. Here in this world, she is confronted by what is right and wrong, her desire to do good prevails and she even helps Rocket, risking her own life, who was physically assaulted by the cook.

III.3, The Warrior's World (Id): "*The Id is, in short, the source of all our aggressions and desires. It is lawless, asocial, and amoral*" (Guerin, 130). In this world, Baby Doll and her friends became ultimate warriors. In this world, reality is distorted and nothing seems to be normal anymore. Baby Doll and her friends defeated samurais, dragons, Orcs, lifeless Nazis, and most importantly Blue in

this world. This world therefore is a manifestation of the *id* or the pleasure principle. Baby Doll becomes what she wants to become in this world. She no longer is a victim of suppression nor is she afraid anymore. Instead, she wields her sword and always manages to fulfill her desires to overcome the many obstacles that lie before her.

IV. DREAM SYMBOLS

The message our unconscious expresses in our dreams, which is the dream's underlying meaning or latent content is altered so that we don't readily recognize it through processes called displacement and condensation.

IV.1, Condensation: "Condensation occurs during a dream whenever we use a single dream image or event to represent more than one unconscious wound or conflict" (Tyson, 18). The baby dragon in the warrior's world is a representation of the Mayor in the Brothel world. The Baby dragon lies on the bones of his victims, which represents all the victims the mayor has abused. The mother dragon again is the representation of Blue he is the one who has been feeding the baby dragon.

IV.2, Displacement: Baby Doll portrays her stepdad as a priest who is giving away a child when in reality her stepdad is no priest and does not care for her well-being at all.

IV.3, Projection: Rocket is the projection of Baby Doll's Desire to escape. According to Sigmund Freud, projection is a psychological defense mechanism whereby one "projects" one's undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings onto someone else. Rocket's desire to escape from the mental asylum is enormous just like Baby Doll. This strong desire of Baby Doll to escape from the mental asylum is directly reflected in Rocket's desire to escape from the asylum. Rocket seems infatuated by the idea to run away from the asylum much to the dismay of her sister Sweet Pea.

IV.4, Resignation and sublimation: Baby Doll identifies herself with the character of Sweet Pea both having baby sisters and both sisters no longer alive. Baby Doll's resignation from life is seen in her decision to let Sweet Pea escape from the asylum. Sublimation occurs in that same instance when Baby Doll's desire to take revenge is sublimated in her effort to do good by sacrificing herself to let Sweet Pea escape from the asylum.

V. CHARACTER INTERPRETATION

The different characters in the movie can also be seen in a different light when Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is applied:

V.1, Amber who is an action-seeking go-getter, can be construed as the representation of the *id* of Baby Doll because Amber is the one controlling the robot fighting machine in the fight against the Nazis in Baby Doll's dream world. She is also the pilot, flying a World War II bomber plane and a chopper. She enjoys action and fights and is portrayed as a fearless girl who just enjoys danger. The *id* according to Freud is a part of the unconscious where urges, impulses and libido resides. This interpretation justifies her survival instincts and irrationality. The *id* operates on the pleasure principle; hence, Amber's actions can thus be vindicated through this angle.

V.2, Blondie is a compassionate and scared little girl who could be seen as the *super ego* of Baby Doll. Blondie is the reason why Blue manages to catch Baby Doll and her friends. The morality principle is at work here when Blondie refuses to act against the rules laid down by Blue. According to Freud, the *super ego* contrasts with the *id's* desire and leans towards moral righteousness and internalized societal values. Blondie's actions or inaction clearly illustrates this interpretation.

V.3, Sweet Pea is the voice of reason and responsibility, the *ego* of Baby Doll. Sweet Pea though initially teamed up with Baby Doll realizes the danger that they have embarked upon and constantly reminds her friends that they should abort their mission. She speaks on behalf of her sister mostly. Sweet Pea acts as a mediator between Amber (*id*) and Blondie (*super ego*) following the reality principle.

VI. ARCHETYPAL IMAGES

Carl Jung's archetypal images can also be seen manifested within the movie. Some of the character in the movie can be identified as such:

VI.1, The wise old man: Baby Doll is assisted in her dream world by a wise old man who sometimes is shown as a martial arts master, a commander, and at the end of the movie as a bus driver. This old man advises Baby Doll and her friends regarding how they should work together and about their missions. He was the one who told Baby Doll about the four items needed to escape from the asylum. He is also the conscience of Baby Doll. He is the father figure Baby Doll never had in her real life. He offers guidance, encouragement, and life lessons that she desperately needs during these dark times. He cares for her, wanting nothing more than for her to succeed.

VI.2, The mother figure - Dr. Gorski: Dr. Gorski is a psychiatrist in the mental asylum. But apart from being just a psychiatrist, she acts as their friend and their mother. Someone who looks out for them and their well-being. She is the perfect mother figure. She helps them overcome

their fear, and she also helps them face their problems through her sessions as a psychiatrist. She even told Blue that she teaches the girls how to survive him.

VI.3, Evil - Blue: Blue is represented as the typical bad guy. The personification of evil. In both the mental asylum and the dancer's club, he is portrayed as an evil man, corrupting the girls for his good. He even forges the signature of Dr. Gorski to let lobotomy be performed on the poor patients. There is no good in Blue. He has no feeling of remorse. Towards the end of the movie when he and his associates are trying to abuse Baby Doll, he is the one who insists even though his friends no longer want to take part in it. He does not feel bad about whatever he has done to the girls in the asylum.

VII. LACAN'S OBJECT PETIT 'A'

"... the universal lost cause of human desire, something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has been separated..." (Waugh, 286). The object petit 'a' stands for the unattainable object of desire. For Baby Doll her object of desire is freedom, which comes at the price of a lobotomy being performed on her. She thought she was going to be able to escape from the mental asylum, but she realized that the fifth object that was told to her by the wise old man of her dream world deemed necessary for an escape from the asylum was her. She had to sacrifice herself for Sweet Pea to run away from the asylum. She gained her freedom still, but not physically but mentally. The paradox is that her freedom comes at the price of her losing her memory.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In movies such as *A Beautiful Mind*, *Fight Club*, *The Truman Show* and *Inception*, reality takes another form for all the main characters. The character of John Nash as portrayed in the movie *A Beautiful Mind* suffered from hallucinations. His reality is, therefore, altered and shaped by his imagination. He sees what others don't see. Consequently, reality to him is something different from what others perceive. He later learned how to cope with his hallucination thereby suggesting that he gains control over his reality. In the *Fight Club* the narrator of the movie Edward Norton who also is the main character in the movie, creates his alter ego in the form of Tyler Durden. Tyler does anything and everything that Edward Norton could not do. Reality therefore is again manipulated by the existence of Tyler Durden, Edward Norton refuses to understand the reality that Tyler Durden is him. For Truman in *The Truman Show* his reality is constructed. What he thinks is real or what was his reality is rather a television show through which the producer gains money. So, for Truman, there is no reality. Cobb on the other hand

in *Inception* recreates memory, thus altering his reality and merging it with his past. So, his reality is therefore, designed to fit his need, a reality which in itself is dreamlike. Reality for some can be something else for others. When Baby Doll decides to live in her second world, she is substituting her reality with something else, a different world. It's her conscious choice, a wish fulfillment. She, deliberately, like Edward Norton chooses to forget her existence in the mental asylum, maybe because of the abuse that the orderlies used to inflict upon the inmates. Baby Doll, however, designs her other world or fantasy like Cobb in *Inception*. The ambiguity of the movie *Sucker Punch* is what makes it interesting. The director and writer of the movie Zack Snyder succeeded in mesmerizing his audience with his obsession with seeing and portraying scantily clad beautiful and gorgeous girls with guns and swords fighting and winning impossible battles. On a deeper level, the movie has been interpreted in many different ways and this paper is one among many interpretations.

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