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Stolen Feelings: A Psychoanalysis of “The Stolen Child”

There are many times in life when one hears the common phrase, “too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.” However, the phrase is not complete. The speaker of that phrase should follow with, “too much of a not too terribly bad thing can be detrimental,” as living purely for fun and frivolity does not make life aesthetically pleasing. Sometimes it is not until one has delved into what seemed at first to be pleasurable activities that he or she senses how numb life has become. Without living through the mundane or trying times of life, one cannot know true joy. When he or she realizes this principle, it can sometimes be too late, as the escape into what psychoanalytics call the id—the unconscious, irrational part of the human psyche—can steal a person completely from reality. In “The Stolen Child,” the faerie world that William Butler Yeats describes does not seem inherently bad at first glance. It “contains no active malignity—merely sorrow” (Dettmar 73). However, Yeats shows that giving into id like behaviors and living purely by the pleasure principle numbs an individual from feeling the simple joys of life.

The fantastical images the faeries give to the human child, although enticing, represent the aspects of the id of psychoanalysis. According to Sigmund Freud, the id’s sole duty is to “fulfill the urges of the pleasure principle.” The pleasure principle of the human psyche is the part that “craves only pleasures and instantaneous satisfaction” (Bressler 145-46). The faeries themselves live within the realm of the id. Their world is full of pleasures, such as the “reddest, stolen cherries” (8). The faeries tempt the child with this olfactory image of a bright red, juicy cherry, with the promise that if he follows them, he will receive the cherry and experience that

instantaneous satisfaction. The world itself that the faeries live in seems more pleasurable than the simple farm where the child lives. The faeries world is a “leafy island” (3), a world where “moonlight glosses” (13), and “water gushes from the hills” (29). The image presented is a fantastical wonderland, a neverland, where the child need not be worried about the world so full of sorrow, or what seems to him to be sorrow, in which he lives in. He can live out his existence in a place of wonderment, where he can “foot it all the night” (16) and “chase the frothy bubbles” (21) to his heart’s desire. By accepting the faeries offer to “come away” (9), the child is giving into his id, the house of his “darkest wishes” (Bressler 146). He is accepting the belief that his life is so terrible, that only by living out his desires with the faeries will he lead a happy, joyful life.

Although the faeries give the intriguing images, their world is not the entirely idyllic setting they present. The faeries try to entice the child by telling him about giving the “slumbering trout...unquiet dreams” (32, 34). What may seem like a fun activity is actually a dark trick, the “most intense fear” perhaps, of the id. The faeries do not give nice, happy dreams, but “unquiet,” fitful dreams that go against the pleasurable backdrop they are trying to set up. This ironic image is followed with another, “ferns that drop their tears/ Over the young streams” (36-7). The image presented is of a plant, dripping so much water into a stream, that it appears as though the fern is crying. The faeries are trying to bring the child away from a world “more full of weeping” (12), yet the image they present shows that within their fantasy world, weeping occurs there as well. But the child still chooses to enter the faeries world, showing that he would rather risk “unquiet dreams” and weeping ferns to experience the “instantaneous satisfaction” of the id world.

The faerie world is also presented as being so full of wonder, when in actuality, it is deadening. The animals within the realm are not awake and thriving, they are sleeping. There are the “drowsy water rats” (5) and the “slumbering trout” (32), all being described with words associated with sleep. These sleeping animals show that the only living people in the world are the faeries themselves. It is hard to imagine that a normal, human child would bode well within a supernatural land. Not only do the animals bring the connotation of slumber and death, but the landscape, when looked at with a careful eye, can be seen as dark and dreary. The sand is not warm and white as seen with real world sand. It is “dim” and “gray” (14). The faerie world is only described as being nighttime as well. The “moonlight glosses,” which at first might seem a fantastical sight, becomes the darkness that is also associated with the id. The faeries dance “all the night” (16) instead of during the day. This focus on night and sleep shows how the child will become like the “slumbering trout” and “drowsy water rats” when he enters the faeries pleasure land. His own slumbering represents the numbness he will experience as he leaves the awakening reality full of feeling behind.

By choosing to live in the faeries’ id resembling world, the child misses the experiences of real life that may seem boring, but are actually necessary in order to live a fulfilling life. For the child dreaming of the faerie world, it is no surprise that his world of “brown mice” (48) and “oatmeal chests” (49) would be considered boring when compared with “water rats” (5) and “red stolen cherries” (8). To him, these simple and mundane aspects of his real life hold no value. This is typical of most human children, that what they do not have is exactly what they want and crave the most. If allowed to, most children would live their entire lives by the pleasure principle. However, by living their entire lives by pleasure and satisfaction alone and never experiencing real life, children would never know what true joy and happiness were. Such is the

case with the child in this poem. The faeries comment that he will “hear no more the lowing/ Of the calves on the warm hillside” (44-5). The image of a warm, sunny hillside compared to the damp, island in which the faeries live is inviting and welcoming. But the “solemn-eyed” child (43) does not realize this until he has moved away from the hillside. He realizes that he will never again have “the kettle on the hob/ Sing peace into his breast” (46-7). Being filled with peaceful singing is more pleasant than “whispering...unquiet dreams” (33-4). But the child chooses to give up the peace for the unquiet, which seems an unfair bargain when looked at from afar. It is true some never know how important the simplicities of life are until they ““stand-off far enough to see it as an element qualitatively distinct” (Whitmore 21).

The child’s detachment from reality leaves him feeling numb, as is seen by his “solemn-eyed” expression. Continually living in a world of pleasure is like an anesthetic, it numbs and sedates, leaving the child void of any feeling. He no more feels “peace [in] his breast” (47); he no more feels the warmth on the hillside, and although it may not be a particularly happy feeling, he will never again feel the sorrow that must come with the joy. There are no feelings within the faerie realm besides the instantaneous satisfaction of the id. But once that satisfaction wears off, the child is left with no other feelings. Although his previous world had been “full of weeping,” he never could understand why it had to be until he started living his life by the solely by the pleasure principle and answering the faeries’ call to “Come away” (9, 53).

Too much of a not too terribly bad thing can be detrimental. The stolen child comes to this realization at the end of the poem. He comes to see that what was once boring and mundane has become lively, and what was once seen as fantastical and intriguing is in fact not as desirable as it was the first time it was offered. Because the child was anxious and gave into the instantaneous pleasure of the id, he did not give the faeries world a second look over. If he had,

he might have sensed that the deadening and numbness that would accompany his journey to the faeries realm, which looked much more enticing than it did before he got there. He realizes that his chances of experiencing true feelings again, no matter how simple, mundane, or sorrowful they are, are very small indeed. It is no wonder that the lasting image Yeats leaves his reader with to show the anesthetic affect is a “solemn-eyed” child, who cannot understand why the world must be so full of weeping.

Works Cited

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