

Klein, M. (1929). Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creat... Int. J. Psycho-Anal., 10:436-443.



The International Journal of Psychoanalysis

(1929). International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 10:436-443

Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse¹

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My first subject is the highly interesting psychological material underlying an opera of Ravel's, now being revived in Vienna. My account of its content is taken almost word for word from a review by Eduard Jakob in the *Berliner Tageblatt*.

A child of six years old is sitting with his home-work before him, but he is not doing any work. He bites his pen-holder and displays that final stage of laziness, in which 'ennui' has passed into 'cafard'. 'Don't want to do the stupid lessons', he cries in a sweet soprano. 'Want to go for a walk in the park! I'd like best of all to eat up all the cake in the world, or pull the cat's tail or pull out all the parrot's feathers! I'd like to scold every one! Most of all I'd like to put mama in the corner!' The door now opens. Everything on the stage is shown very large—in order to emphasize the smallness of the child—so all that we see of his mother is a skirt, an apron and a hand. A finger points and a voice asks affectionately whether the child has done his work. He shuffles rebelliously on his chair and puts out his tongue at his mother. She goes away. All that we hear is the rustle of her skirts and the words: 'You shall have dry bread and no sugar in your tea!' The child flies into a rage. He jumps up, drums on the door, sweeps the teapot and cup from the table, so that they are broken into a thousand pieces. He climbs on the window-seat, opens the cage and tries to stab the squirrel with his pen. The squirrel escapes through the open window. The child jumps down from the window and seizes the cat. He yells and swings the tongs, pokes the fire furiously in the open grate, and with his hands and feet hurls the kettle into the room. A cloud of ashes and steam escapes. He swings the tongs like a sword and begins to tear the wall-paper. Then he opens the case of the grandfather-clock and snatches out the copper pendulum. He pours the ink over the table. Exercise-books and other books fly through the air. Hurrah! ...

The things he has maltreated come to life. An arm-chair refuses to let him sit in it or have the cushions to sleep on. Table, chair, bench and sofa suddenly lift up their arms and cry: 'Away with the dirty little creature!' The clock has a dreadful stomach-ache and begins to strike the hours like mad. The teapot leans over the cup, and they begin to talk Chinese. Everything undergoes a terrifying change. The child falls back against the wall and shudders with fear and desolation. The stove spits out a shower of sparks at him. He hides behind the furniture. The shreds of the

¹ Read before the British Psycho-Analytical Society, May 15, 1929.

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torn wall-paper begin to sway and stand up, showing shepherdesses and sheep. The shepherd's pipe sounds a heart-breaking lament; the rent in the paper, which separates Corydon from his Amaryllis, has become a rent in the fabric of the world! But the doleful tale dies away. From under the cover of a book, as though out of a dog's kennel, there emerges a little old man. His clothes are made of numbers, and his hat is like a pi. He holds a ruler and clatters about with little dancing steps. He is the spirit of mathematics, and begins to put the child through an examination: millimetre, centimetre, barometer, trillion—eight and eight are forty. Three times nine is twice six. The child falls down in a faint!

Half suffocated he takes refuge in the park round the house. But here again the air is full of terror, insects, frogs (lamenting in muted thirds), a wounded tree-trunk, which oozes resin in long-drawn-out bass notes, dragon-flies and oleander-flies all attack the new-comer. Owls, cats and squirrels come along in hosts. The dispute as to who is to bite the child becomes a hand-to-hand fight. A squirrel which has been bitten falls to the ground, screaming beside him. He instinctively takes off his scarf and binds up the little creature's paw. There is great amazement amongst the animals, who gather together hesitatingly in the background. The child has whispered: 'Mama!' He is restored to the human world of helping, 'being good'. 'That's a good child, a very well-behaved child', sing the animals very seriously in a soft march—the finale of the piece—as they leave the stage. Some of them cannot refrain from themselves calling out 'Mama'.

I will now examine more closely the details in which the child's pleasure in destruction expresses itself. They seem to me to recall the early infantile situation which in my most recent writings I have described as being of fundamental importance both for neurosis in boys and for their whole development. I refer to the attack on the mother's body and on the father's penis in it. The squirrel in the cage and the pendulum wrenched out of the clock are plain symbols of the penis in the mother's body. The fact that it is the *father's* penis and that it is in the act of coitus with the mother is indicated by the rent in the wall-paper 'which separates Corydon from his Amaryllis', of which the author says that to the boy it has become 'a rent

in the fabric of the world'. Now what weapons does the child employ in this attack on his united parents? The ink poured over the table, the emptied kettle, from which a cloud of ashes and steam escapes, represent the weapons which very little children have at their disposal: namely, the device of soiling with excrement.

Smashing things, tearing them up, using the tongs as a sword—these represent the other weapons of the child's primary sadism, which employs his teeth, nails, muscles and so on.

In my paper at the last Congress (1927) and on other occasions in our

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society I have described this early phase of development, the content of which is the attack made on the mother's body with all the weapons that the child's sadism has at its disposal. Now, however, I can add to this earlier statement and say more exactly where this phase is to be inserted in the scheme of sexual development proposed by Abraham. My results lead me to conclude that the phase in which sadism is at its zenith in all the fields whence it derives precedes the earlier anal stage and acquires a special significance from the fact that it is also the stage of development at which the Oedipus tendencies first appear. That is to say, that the Oedipus conflict begins under the complete dominance of sadism. My supposition that the formation of the super-ego follows closely on the beginning of the Oedipus tendencies, and that, therefore, the ego falls under the sway of the super-ego even at this early period, explains, I think, why this sway is so tremendously powerful. For, when the objects are introjected, the attack launched upon them with all the weapons of sadism rouses the subject's dread of an analogous attack upon himself from the external and the internalized objects. I wanted to recall these notions of mine to your minds because I can make a bridge from them to a notion of Freud's: one of the most important of the new conclusions which he has put before us in his *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*. I refer to the hypothesis of an early infantile situation of anxiety or danger. I think that this places analytic work on a yet more exactly defined and firmer basis than heretofore, and thus gives our methods an even plainer direction. But in my view it also makes a fresh demand upon analysis. Freud's hypothesis is that there is an infantile danger-situation which undergoes modification in the course of development, and which is the source of the influence exercised by a series of *anxiety-situations*. Now the new demand upon the analyst is this—that analysis should fully uncover these anxiety-situations right back to that which lies deepest of all. This demand for a *complete* analysis is allied to that which Freud suggests as a new demand at the conclusion of his 'History of an Infantile Neurosis', where he says that a complete analysis must reveal the primal scene. This latter requirement can have its full effect only in conjunction with that which I have just put forward. If the analyst succeeds in the task of discovering the infantile danger-situations, working at their resolution and elucidating in each individual case the relations between the anxiety-situations and the neurosis on the one hand and the ego-development on the other—then, I think, he will achieve more completely the main aim of psycho-analytic therapy: removal of the neuroses. It seems to me, therefore, that everything that can contribute to the elucidation and exact description of the infantile danger-situations is of great value, not only from the theoretical, but also from the therapeutic point of view.

Freud assumes that the infantile danger-situation can be reduced

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ultimately to the loss of the beloved (longed-for) person. In girls, he thinks, the loss of the object is the danger-situation which operates most powerfully; in boys it is castration. My work has proved to me that both these danger-situations are a modification of yet earlier ones. I have found that in boys the dread of castration by the father is connected with a very special situation, which, I think, proves to be the earliest anxiety-situation of all. As I pointed out, the attack on the mother's body, which is timed psychologically at the zenith of the sadistic phase, implies also the struggle with the father's penis in the mother. A special intensity is imparted in this danger-situation by the fact that a union of the two parents is in question. According to the early sadistic super-ego, which has already been set up, these united parents are extremely cruel and much dreaded assailants. Thus the anxiety-situation relating to castration by the father is a modification, in the course of development, of the earliest anxiety-situation as I have described it.

Now I think that the anxiety engendered in this situation is plainly represented in the libretto of the opera which was the starting-point of my paper. In discussing the libretto, I have already dealt in some detail with the *one* phase—that of the sadistic attack. Let us now consider what happens after the child has given rein to his lust for destruction.

At the beginning of his review the writer mentions that all the things on the stage are made very large, in order to emphasize the smallness of the child. But the child's anxiety makes things and people seem gigantic to him—far beyond the actual difference in size. Moreover, we see what we discover in the analysis of every child: that things represent human beings, and therefore are things of anxiety. The writer of the review writes as follows: 'The maltreated things begin to live'. The arm-chair, the cushion, table, chair, etc., attack the child, refuse to serve him, banish him outside. We find that things to

sit and lie upon, as well as beds, occur regularly in children's analyses as symbols for the protecting and loving mother. The strips of the torn wall-paper represent the injured interior of the mother's body, while the little old number-man who comes out of the book-cover is the father (represented by his penis), now in the character of judge, and about to call the child, who faints with anxiety, to his reckoning for the damage he has done and the theft he has committed in the mother's body. When the boy flees into the world of nature, we see how it takes on the rôle of the mother whom he has assaulted. The hostile animals represent a multiplication of the father, whom he has also attacked, together with the children assumed to be in the mother. We see the incidents which took place inside the room now reproduced on a bigger scale in a wider space and in larger numbers. The world, transformed into the mother's body, is in hostile array against the child and persecutes him.

In ontogenetic development sadism is overcome when the subject

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advances to the genital level. The more powerfully this phase sets in, the more capable does the child become of object-love, and the more able is he to conquer his sadism by means of pity and sympathy. This step in development is also shown in the libretto of Ravel's opera; when the boy feels pity for the wounded squirrel and comes to its aid, the hostile world changes into a friendly one. The child has learnt to love and believes in love. The animals conclude: 'That is a good child—a very well-behaved child'. The profound psychological insight of the author of the libretto—her name is Colette—is shown in the way in which the conversion in the child's attitude takes place. As he cares for the wounded squirrel, he whispers: 'Mama'. The animals round him repeat this word. It is this redeeming word which has given the opera its title: '*Das Zauberwort*' (*The Magic Word*). But we also learn from the text what is the factor which has ministered to the child's sadism. He says: 'I want to go for a walk in the park! I want most of all to eat up all the cakes in the world!' But his mother threatens to give him tea without sugar and dry bread. The oral frustration which turns the indulgent 'good mother' into the 'bad mother' stimulates his sadism.

I think we can now understand why the child, instead of peaceably doing his home-work, has become involved in such an unpleasant situation. It *had* to be so, for he was driven to it by the pressure of the old anxiety-situation which he had never mastered. The anxiety enhances the repetition-compulsion, and the need for punishment ministers to the compulsion (now grown very strong) to secure for itself actual punishment in order that the anxiety may be allayed by a chastisement less severe than that which the anxiety-situation causes him to anticipate. We are quite familiar with the fact that children are naughty because they wish to be punished, but it seems of the greatest importance to find out what part anxiety plays in this craving for punishment and what is the ideational content at the bottom of this urgent anxiety.

I will now illustrate from another literary example the anxiety which I have found connected with the earliest danger-situation in a girl's development.

In an article entitled 'The Empty Space' Karin Michaelis gives an account of the development of her friend, the painter, Ruth Kjär. Ruth Kjär possessed remarkable artistic feeling, which she employed specially in the arrangement of her house, but she had no pronounced creative talent. Beautiful, rich and independent, she spent a great part of her life travelling, and was constantly leaving the house upon which she had expended so much care and taste. She was subject at times to fits of deep depression, which Karin Michaelis describes as follows: 'There was only one dark spot in her life. In the midst of the happiness which was natural to her, and seemed so untroubled, she would suddenly be plunged into the

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deepest melancholy. A melancholy that was suicidal. If she tried to account for this, she would say something to this effect: "There is an empty space in me, which I can never fill!"

The time came when Ruth Kjär married and she seemed perfectly happy. But after a short time the fits of melancholy recurred. In Karin Michaelis's words: 'The accursed empty space was once more empty'. I will let the writer speak for herself:

Have I already told you that her home was a gallery of modern art? Her husband's brother was one of the greatest painters in the country, and his best pictures decorated the walls of the room. But before Christmas this brother-in-law took away one picture, which he had only lent to her. The picture was sold. This left an empty space on the wall, which in some inexplicable way seemed to coincide with the empty space within her. She sank into a state of the most profound sadness. The blank space on the wall caused her to forget her beautiful home, her happiness, her friends, everything. Of course, a new picture could be got, and would be got, but it took time; one had to look about to find just the right one.

The empty space grinned hideously down at her.

The husband and wife were sitting opposite one another at the break-fast-table. Ruth's eyes were clouded with hopeless despair. Suddenly, however, her face was transfigured with a smile: "I'll tell you what! I think I will try to daub a little on the wall myself, until we get a new picture!" "Do, my darling", said her husband. It was quite certain that whatever daub she made would not be too monstrously ugly.

He had hardly left the room when, in a perfect fever, she had rung up the colour-shop to order the paints which her brother-in-law generally used, brushes, palette, and all the rest of the "gear", to be sent up at once. She herself had not the remotest idea how to begin. She had never squeezed paint out of a tube, laid the ground-colour on a canvas or mixed colours on a palette. Whilst the things were coming, she stood before the empty wall with a piece of black chalk in her hand and made strokes at random as they came into her head. Should she have the car and rush wildly to her brother-in-law to ask how one paints? No, she would rather die!

Towards evening her husband returned, and she ran to meet him with a hectic brilliance in her eyes. She was not going to be ill, was she? She drew him with her saying: "Come, you will see!" And he saw. He could not take his eyes from the sight; could not take it in, did not believe it, could not believe it. Ruth threw herself on a sofa in a state of deadly exhaustion: "Do you think it at all possible?"

The same evening they sent for the brother-in-law. Ruth palpitated with anxiety as to the verdict of the connoisseur. But the artist exclaimed immediately: "You don't imagine you can persuade me that you painted that! What a damned lie! This picture was painted by an old and experienced artist. Who the devil is he? I don't know him!"

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Ruth could not convince him. He thought they were making game of him. And when he went, his parting words were: "If you painted that, I will go and conduct a Beethoven Symphony in the Chapel Royal tomorrow, though I don't know a note of music!"

That night Ruth could not sleep much. The picture on the wall had been painted, that was certain—it was not a dream. But how had it happened? And what next?

She was on fire, devoured by ardour within. She must prove to herself that the divine sensation, the unspeakable sense of happiness that she had felt could be repeated.

Karin Michaelis then adds that after this first attempt, Ruth Kjär painted several masterly pictures, and had exhibited them to the critics and the public.

Karin Michaelis anticipates one part of my interpretation of the anxiety relating to the empty space on the wall when she says: 'On the wall there was an empty space, which in some inexplicable way seemed to coincide with the empty space within her.' Now, what is the meaning of this empty space within Ruth, or rather, to put it more exactly, of the feeling that there was something lacking in her body?

Here there has come into consciousness one of the ideas connected with that anxiety which, in the paper I read at the last Congress (1927), I described as the most profound anxiety experienced by girls. It is the equivalent of castration-anxiety in boys. The little girl has a sadistic desire, originating in the early stages of the Oedipus conflict, to rob the mother's body of its contents, namely, the father's penis, faeces, children, and to destroy the mother herself. This desire gives rise to anxiety lest the mother should in her turn rob the little girl herself of the contents of her body (especially of children) and lest her body should be destroyed or mutilated. In my view, this anxiety, which I have found in the analyses of girls and women to be the deepest anxiety of all, represents the little girl's earliest danger-situation. I have come to realize that the dread of being alone, of the loss of love and of the love-object, which Freud holds to be the basic infantile danger-situation in girls, is a modification of the anxiety-situation I have just described. When the little girl who fears the mother's assault upon her body cannot see her mother, it intensifies the anxiety. The presence of the real, loving mother diminishes the dread of the terrifying mother, whose image is introjected into the child's mind. At a later stage of development the content of the dread changes from that of an attacking mother to the dread that the real, loving mother may be lost and that the girl will be left solitary and forsaken.

In seeking the explanation of these ideas, it is instructive to consider what sort of pictures Ruth Kjär has painted since her first attempt, when she filled the empty space on the wall with the life-sized figure of a naked

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negress. Apart from one picture of flowers, she has confined herself to portraits. She has twice painted her younger sister, whom she invited to visit and sit to her, and, further, the portrait of an old woman and one of her mother. The two last are described by Karin Michaelis as follows: 'And now Ruth cannot stop. The next picture represents an old woman, bearing the mark of years and disillusionments. Her skin is wrinkled, her hair faded, her gentle, tired eyes are troubled. She gazes before her with the disconsolate resignation of old age, with a look that seems to say: "Do not trouble about me any more. My time is so nearly at an end!"

This is not the impression we receive from Ruth's latest work—the portrait of her Irish-Canadian mother. This lady has a long time before her before she must put her lips to the cup of renunciation. Slim, imperious, challenging, she stands there with a moonlight-coloured shawl draped over her shoulders; she has the effect of a magnificent woman of primitive times, who could any day engage in combat with the children of the desert with her naked hands. What a chin! What force there is in the haughty gaze!

The blank space has been filled.

It is obvious that the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself was at the bottom of the compelling urge to paint these portraits of her relatives. That of the old woman, on the threshold of death, seems to be the expression of the primary, sadistic desire to destroy. The daughter's wish to destroy her mother, to see her old, worn out, marred, is the cause of the need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty. By so doing, a daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavour to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait. In the analyses of children, when the representation of destructive wishes is succeeded by an expression of reactive tendencies, we constantly find that drawing and painting are used as means to make people anew. The case of Ruth Kjär shows plainly that this anxiety of the little girl is of great importance in the ego-development of women, and is one of the incentives to achievement. But, on the other hand, this anxiety may be the cause of serious illness and many inhibitions. As with the boy's castration-dread, the effect of his anxiety on the ego-development depends on the maintenance of a certain optimum and a satisfactory interplay between the separate factors.

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