

Freud, S. (1909). Family Romances. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*, 235-242

THE liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizably determined by their having failed in this task.

For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. The child's most intense and most momentous wish during these early years is to be like his parents (that is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his father and mother. But as intellectual growth increases, the child cannot help discovering by degrees the category to which his parents belong. He gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them. Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents, and for using, in order to support his critical attitude, the knowledge which he has acquired that other parents are in some respects preferable to them. The psychology of the neuroses teaches us that, among other factors, the most intense impulses of sexual rivalry contribute to this result. A feeling of being slighted is obviously what constitutes the subject-matter of such provocations. There are only too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least *feels* he has been slighted, on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents' love, and, most of all, on which he feels regrets at having to share it with brothers

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and sisters. His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child. People who have not developed neuroses very frequently remember such occasions) on which—usually as a result of something they have read—they interpreted and responded to their parent's hostile behaviour in this fashion. But here the influence of sex is already in evidence, for a boy is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than towards his mother and has a far more intense desire to get free from *him* than from *her*. In this respect the imagination of girls is apt to show itself much weaker. These consciously remembered mental impulses of childhood embody the factor which enables us to understand the nature of myths.

The later stage in the development of the neurotic's estrangement from his parents, begun in this manner, might be described as 'the neurotic's family romance'. It is seldom remembered consciously but can almost always be revealed by psycho-analysis. For a quite peculiarly marked imaginative activity is one of the essential characteristics of neurotics and also of all comparatively highly gifted people. This activity emerges first in children's play, and then, starting roughly from the period before puberty, takes over the topic of family relations. A characteristic example of this peculiar imaginative activity is to be seen in the familiar day-dreaming¹ which persists far beyond puberty. If these day-dreams are carefully examined, they are found to serve as the fulfilment of wishes and as a correction of actual life. They have two principal aims, an erotic and an ambitious one—though an erotic aim is usually concealed behind the latter too. At about the period I have mentioned, then, the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing

¹ Cf. 'Hysterical Phantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality' (1908a), where a reference will be found to the literature of the subject. [See above, p. 159.]

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them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing. He will make use in this connection of any opportune coincidences from his actual experience, such as his becoming acquainted with the Lord of the Manor or some landed proprietor if he lives in the country or with some member of the aristocracy if he lives in town. Chance occurrences of this kind arouse the child's envy, which finds expression in a phantasy in which both his parents are replaced by others of better birth. The technique used in developing phantasies like this (which are, of course, conscious at this period) depends upon the ingenuity and the material which the child has at his disposal. There is

also the question of whether the phantasies are worked out with greater or less effort to obtain verisimilitude. This stage is reached at a time at which the child is still in ignorance of the sexual determinants of procreation.

When presently the child comes to know the difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers in their sexual relations, and realizes that '*pater semper incertus est*', while the mother is '*certissima*',¹ the family romance undergoes a curious curtailment: it contents itself with exalting the child's father, but no longer casts any doubts on his maternal origin, which is regarded as something unalterable. This second (sexual) stage of the family romance is actuated by another motive as well, which is absent in the first (asexual) stage. The child, having learnt about sexual processes, tends to picture to himself erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind this being his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs.² In this way the child's phantasies, which started by being, as it were, asexual, are brought up to the level of his later knowledge.

Moreover the motive of revenge and retaliation, which

1 [An old legal tag: 'paternity is always uncertain, maternity is most certain.']

2 [Freud returned to this in the first of his papers on the psychology of love (1910h), *Standard Ed.*, 11, 171-2.]

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was in the foreground at the earlier stage, is also to be found at the later one. It is, as a rule, precisely these neurotic children who were punished by their parents for sexual naughtiness and who now revenge themselves on their parents by means of phantasies of this kind.

A younger child is very specially inclined to use imaginative stories such as these in order to rob those born before him of their prerogatives—in a way which reminds one of historical intrigues; and he often has no hesitation in attributing to his mother as many fictitious love-affairs as he himself has competitors. An interesting variant of the family romance may then appear, in which the hero and author returns to legitimacy himself while his brothers and sisters are eliminated by being bastardized. So too if there are any other particular interests at work they can direct the course to be taken by the family romance; for its many-sidedness and its great range of applicability enable it to meet every sort of requirement. In this way, for instance, the young phantasy-builder can get rid of his forbidden degree of kinship with one of his sisters if he finds himself sexually attracted by her.¹

If anyone is inclined to turn away in horror from this depravity of the childish heart or feels tempted, indeed, to dispute the possibility of such things, he should observe that these works of fiction, which seem so full of hostility, are none of them really so badly intended, and that they still preserve, under a slight disguise, the child's original affection for his parents. The faithlessness and ingratitude are only apparent. If we examine in detail the commonest of these imaginative romances, the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents are equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him. Indeed the whole effort at replacing

1 [This last point is found in Freud's letter to Fliess of June 20, 1898 (Freud, 1950a, Letter 91).]

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the real father by a superior one is only an expression of the child's longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women. He is turning away from the father whom he knows to-day to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his phantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days have gone. Thus in these phantasies the overvaluation that characterizes a child's earliest years comes into its own again. An interesting contribution to this subject is afforded by the study of dreams. We learn from their interpretation that even in later years, if the Emperor and Empress appear in dreams, those exalted personages stand for the dreamer's father and mother.¹ So that the child's overvaluation of his parents survives as well in the dreams of normal adults.

¹ Cf. my *Interpretation of Dreams*, **1900a**, *Standard Ed.*, **5**, **353**.

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Editor's Note to "Family Romances"

Der Familienroman Der Neurotiker

(a) GERMAN EDITIONS:

(1908 Probable date of composition.)

1909 In O. Rank, *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, 64-8, Leipzig and Vienna: Deuticke. (1922, 2nd ed., 82-6.)

1931 *Neurosenlehre und Technik*, 300-4.

1934 *G.S.*, 12, 367-71.

1934 *Psychoan. Päd.*, 8, 281-5.

1941 *G.W.*, 7, 227-31.

(b) ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS:

1913 In Rank, *Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, *J. Nerv. Ment. Dis.*, 40., 668-71, 718-19 (Tr. S. E. Jelliffe, F. Robbins.)

1914 The same, in volume form, 63-8. New York: Nervous and Mental Diseases Publishing Co.

'Family Romances' 1950 C.P., 5, 74-8. (Tr. James Strachey.)

The present translation is a very slightly modified reprint of the one published in 1950.

When this first appeared, in Rank's book, it bore no heading of any kind and did not form a separate section. It was simply introduced into the course of Rank's argument with a few words of acknowledgement. The work was only given a title in German when it was first reprinted. Since the preface to Rank's book is dated 'Christmas, 1908', Freud's contribution was probably written in that year. The idea of these 'family romances', and even their name, had long been in his mind—though at first he attributed them specially to paranoics. See his letters to Fliess of January 24, and May 25, 1897 and June 20, 1898 (Freud, **1950a**, Letter 57, Draft M, and Letter 91 where the term is first used).