

YOU'RE NOT GOING OUT LIKE THAT, ARE YOU?

Written in 1891, *Spring Awakening* created a scandal for the 26 year old playwright, Frank Wedenkind (1864-1918). It took 16 years for German Censorship on the drama to be lifted and then with crucial concessions.¹ In 1906 it was put on in Berlin by Max Reinhardt. In England the play was banned from public performance until 1963. In its first performance at the National Theatre London in 1974 the lead role was taken by Veronica Quilligan from Rathmines. The play is a series of brief scenes dealing with the awakening of sexuality in three adolescents, Wendla, Moritz and Melchior.

This drama prefigures Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" by 15 years. Freud himself commented on the piece at a meeting of the Wednesday Psychological Society in Vienna in 1907 (13th February).

¹ The French version of *L'Éveil du Printemps*, translated from the German by Francois Regnault, with a preface by Jacques Lacan (translated by Cormac Gallagher) sometimes differs significantly from the published English version (F. Wedenkind, *Spring Awakening*, translated and introduced by Edward Bond, Methuen, 1980). Therefore, for the purposes of clarity and consistency all quotations for *Spring Awakening* are from this published English translation.

There Freud characterises Wedekind's work as "meritorious" and adds "we must assume that Wedekind has a deep understanding of sexuality".

A masked man makes his entrance towards the end of the play. Lacan wrote a preface for a French production of *Spring Awakening* in 1974 and comments in particular on the role of the masked man saying that "among the Names of the Father there is the one of the masked man".

Wendla is fourteen years old today. But, here is no celebration of young adulthood – instead her birthday is regarded as a curse to be cut short like the hem of her dress.

"Why have you made my dress so long mother?" "You are fourteen today. I'd willingly keep you exactly as you are darling". As Lacan reminds us:

"in every usage of clothes there is something which participates in the function of transvestism --- clothes are made not only to hide what one has in the sense of having it or not, but also precisely what one has not got. Both functions are essential. It is not just about hiding the object, but also to hide the lack of object."²

Frau Bergmann (mine digger) finds a precious object in the Imaginary dialectic between herself and her daughter. She wishes to keep the veil over the illusion of her daughter as being her phallus – one that has to be kept hidden so that the length of the dress becomes as described by Freud,

"this symbol of horror upon her dress worn by the Virgin Goddess Athene. And rightly so, (Freud continues) for thus she becomes a woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires since she displays the terrifying genitals of her mother"³.

Her modesty insists that the veil should not be lifted so that the mystery can be kept intact. But is there not a deeper mystery in language itself? And so Frau Bergmann is an expert in the art of rationalisation. As Lacan formulates it in R.S.I., "the fact that the symptom in the social is defined by all sorts of unreasonableness does not prevent it being signalled by all sorts of rationalisation as regards each one."⁴ She tells her daughter "only so that you don't catch cold". Is it not then anxiety with regard to the meaning of her own *Spring Awakening* which speaks here? But the girl knows you don't catch cold through the shins and replies with another rationalisation "You don't feel cold when you're my age". Perhaps the most deadly cold one can catch is through the mouth? And so the function of the Real comes to be

² Lacan, J. *La Relation d'objet 1956-1957. Le Seminaire*. (Paris :Seuil, Mars 1994) p. 166. Author's translation.

³ S. Freud, "Medusa's Head", SE XVIII, pp. 273-74.

⁴ J. Lacan, *R.S.I.* Book XXII. Trans. C. Gallagher, 21 January 1975

carried out through the fantasy of ordinary reality. “I did nothing to you my dear mother hadn’t done to me”.

Here we have the sexual as real on the mothers side as being that which is utterly unthinkable.

This mother wishes to keep the girl for herself. “My little angel” – a mother who does not want her child to grow up because, if she does, she will be able to separate from her and then become her rival. Wendla finds it difficult to sleep at night because she is plagued by dark phantoms which find themselves in her head.

Freud tells us in his article on Femininity that “almost everything that we find later in her (the girl’s) relation to her father was already present in this earlier attachment and has been transferred subsequently on to her father – “We cannot understand women unless we appreciate this phase of their pre-Oedipus attachment to their mother”.⁵

In Wendla’s case it is the mother who transmits – it is she who has knowledge about love, but about love in the abstract as a concept to be filled out which Wendla does through her future doomed actions.

When under duress from her daughter as to how a child comes into the world, Frau Bergmann tells Wendla: “to have a child – the man – to whom you’re married – you must love – love him with your whole heart in a way that can’t be put into words”.

Did she forget to mention desire? Or is desire so difficult to articulate here because that would involve accepting lack? And besides, who is ever able to speak about desire?

This is a mother who is so concerned with her wifely duties that she forgets about her husband’s desire and his word. There is silence around the father’s function from which we can deduce that the father is a voice.

Lacan notes that “a father has only a right to respect, indeed to love, if the aforesaid love, the aforesaid respect, is, you are not going to believe your ears, per-versely oriented, namely, made by a woman, the small object which causes her desire”.⁶ He reminds us elsewhere “we must begin with this supposition that there is someone somewhere who can fully take up the position of the father. Someone who can respond “I am the father”.⁷

What kind of voice does the father incarnate for Wendla? She longs for a sign that perhaps she will be like her friend Martha who is beaten every night with whatever they can lay their

⁵S. Freud, “Femininity” Lecture XXXIII. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*. S.E. XXII. p. 119.

⁶J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op. cit., 21 January 1975

⁷J. Lacan, *La Relation d’object*. op. cit., p. 205. Author’s translation.

hands on. Freud describes in “A Child is being Beaten”⁸ how the three stages of this fantasy are achieved. Briefly, the first stage is “my father is beating a child whom I hate”. This usually coincides with the birth of a rival, brother or sister, and so there are three aspects: the one who is being beaten, the father and the subject. The dreamer feels privileged by the fact that she has escaped this beating. But Wendla passes directly onto the second stage: “I am being beaten by my father.”

This situation which excludes every dimension, except that of the one who is being beaten with the person who carries it out, is as Lacan reminds us the classical essence of masochism. Here Wendla finds herself in a reciprocal situation with her father. This is filled with erotism and marks the entry for her into both sexuality and sadism. She has truly entered into a dual relationship with her father in phantasy. Masochism takes the place of desire for her and when she meets Melchior (one of the three wise men!), she implores him to beat her and he ends up by “thrashing the hide off her”. Later when they meet up in a hay loft Melchior stirred by *his* Spring Awakening gives her a gift of his phallic enjoyment, something which he has and which she doesn’t want for the moment. Here there is forcing of the Real and the Imaginary together and the Symbolic is momentarily annulled.

Melchior intuitively realises this. He says to Wendla “there is no such thing as love, it’s all self, all ego”. Six months later, Wendla is very ill. “The dirty beast is within me”. The doctor diagnoses anaemia. Suddenly a knock comes to the door. Freud Bergmann insists “it’s just Mrs. Schmidt our neighbour from Garden Street”. But there are no flowers blooming today. Complications arise from the abortion and this girl who wishes to remain so in the act of becoming someone else – we realise we have lost her.

Wendla’s desire was always chased (chaste?) towards death. But she is not alone. Melchior who is aged 14 has a friend Moritz who is a year older. Moritz wants to know what we are doing in this world – what are we here for?

This is a typically adolescent question especially in the light of an eruption of phallic enjoyment. “Last winter I dreamed I whipped our Rufus so long he couldn’t move”, he tells Melchior. He remembers at the age of five being really ashamed of his thoughts when he saw a lady’s décoltee. “But the latency period intervened and I forgot. But these days I can hardly speak to a girl without thinking of something abominable”. His question seems to be the same which plagues Melchior - how can his desire fit into the general desire of the human community since he tells us that he is haunted by the first eruption of these phantoms which “have been a Golgotha for me”. As Charles Melman has remarked “with adolescent boys suddenly the Real is totally invested with reference to the phallic object”.⁹

⁸S. Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion”, S.E. Vol. XVII. p. 175-205.

⁹C. Melman, *Clinique Psychoanalytique. Articles of communication*. (Paris : A.L.I. 1973-1990), p. 182.

What can he do? As Charles Melman suggests the adolescent has the choice of accepting to participate in the social game, thereby trying to realise an ideal or sublimation or otherwise “he can maintain a critical stance and judge everyone else harshly as being at fault.”¹⁰ “Why couldn’t they let me sleep on a little longer till things become quiet again? Now I feel responsible”. Moritz knows that it is strange being at fault in a game being played on him by adults and then they tell him that “we’re supposed to be grateful”.

Moritz doesn’t choose either of these options for what he chooses is to be an exception. He wants Melchior to write all his sexual information for him word by word. He wants to read about it not to have to undergo it with all its questions, pain and suffering. He doesn’t want to situate himself - as Lacan notes “to take his place among his fellows”. Lacan also states that “anyone whatsoever must be able to make an exception in order that the function of the exception may become a model. But, the reciprocal is not true. The exception must not be found in just anyone to constitute, by this fact, a model”.¹¹

This making of himself an exception turns him “into a girl” as his friend Melchior reminds him with: “have you seen a girl?” Moritz: “Yes”. Melchior: “Everything?”

This, Lacan implies, leads Moritz to kill himself because he is “shut out in the beyond. It is only there that he counts himself: not by chance among the dead, as shut off from the real”.¹²

Freud in his paper “On Some Character Types Met With In Psychoanalytic Work”, tells us that with the exceptions he “succeeded in discovering a common peculiarity in the earlier experiences of these patients’ lives. Their neuroses were connected with some experience of suffering to which they had been subjected in their earliest childhood, one in respect of which they knew themselves to be guiltless, and which they could look upon as an unjust disadvantage imposed upon them.”¹³

Moritz takes a critical stance against himself and, borne down with too much guilt and despair and longing, the mists part and he hangs himself.

Moritz’s father doesn’t lack for any comforts in life but he lacks the ability to care for his son. He denies that Moritz is his son even in death: “that boy wasn’t mine” – “that boy wasn’t mine”.

Lacan, commenting on the father’s role, reminds us: “what matter if he has symptoms – but that whether he wants to or not he takes paternal care of them” (his children).¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op. cit., 21 January 1975

¹² J. Lacan, “Preface to *The Awakening of Spring*”. Trans. C. Gallagher, *The Letter. Irish Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 43 (2010) 105-108 at 107.

¹³ S. Freud, “The Exceptions”, SE XIV, p. 313.

¹⁴ J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op. cit., 21 January 1975

If there is no barrier to enjoyment death may provide the final one.

Freud tells us

“for analysis has explained the engine of suicide in the following way: probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself, unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place is turning against himself a death wish which had been directed against someone else.”¹⁵

Melchior goes to the graveyard where Wendla and Moritz are buried. The wind whistles on each gravestone in a different key. We are indeed walking in the kingdom of the dead. Who or what will rescue us from this palace of mirrors?

Melchior too wants to die. He says: “no one ever walked over graves and been so full of envy”.

Moritz appears to him without his head, among the dead, looking for his hand.

Melchior is hanging on to life by a single thread and searches desperately for the last bit on to which to hold.

Lacan reminds us to “hold fast to the cord, means that when the other hand of the cord is knotted you can hold on to it”.¹⁶

Freud says of this meeting, that the two characters should certainly be understood as two currents in the boys’ soul: “as the temptation to suicide and as the temptation to live”.¹⁷

A masked man then makes his appearance. Melchior asks: “Will you tell me who you are?”. Masked man: “No. I’ll make you a proposition: put yourself in my hands ... I’ll take you out into the world. I’ll give you a chance to widen your horizon in astonishing ways. I’ll introduce you to every single interesting thing in the world”.¹⁸ The masked man offers Melchior a way through his despair. Is this not also one of the functions of psychoanalysis? His function seems to be to tie the knot differently, to save Melchior from the grip of Moritz. For Lacan “among the names of the father, there is that of the masked man”.¹⁹

¹⁵S. Freud, “A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman”, S.E. XVIII. p. 162.

¹⁶J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op. cit., 14 January 1975

¹⁷S. Freud, “Discussion” in H. Numberg, E. Federn (eds.), *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association I: 1906-1908* (New York: International Universities Press, 1962), p. 114

¹⁸F. Wedekind, *Spring Awakening*, op. cit., p. 56

¹⁹J. Lacan, “Preface to *The Awakening of Spring*”, op. cit., p. 107.

The masked man appears as a support of the function of awakening. Lacan states in *R.S.I.*:

“the awakening is one of my old refrains. It is a flash of lightening. It is situated for me at the moment when effectively I am emerging from sleep. I have a moment of brief lucidity that does not last of course, I enter like everyone else into the discourse of which I form part and among which I try to open up for you the path of analytic discourse. It is a very painful effort”.²⁰

The masked man is there not only to save Melchior from the grip of Moritz but, as Lacan adds, “Wedekind dedicates him to his fiction, held to be a proper name”.²¹

It’s because his fiction constituted for Wedekind a proper name that he could dedicate something to it - in this instance the masked man.

At the time of writing this paper the *Irish Times* writes: “at least 188 young people who were in care or in contact with social services have died over the past decade according to new figures from the Health Service Executive. (H.S.E.) The majority of these deaths were due to unnatural causes (102). Most of these people died as a result of suicide (26), drug overdose (19), unlawful killing (12), road traffic accidents (18), and other accidents (27). A further 86 deaths were linked to natural causes or health conditions”.²²

Carl O’Brien, Chief Reporter, adds: “when they combed through his belongings at the hostel where he lived everything fitted into Danny’s single black plastic bag. There was also a handwritten note detailing some of the horrific events of his life. It ended with the words “my life has been ruined”.²³

Why is it and how has it come about that the function of the masked man does not seem to be effective in Irish discourse?

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²⁰ J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op. cit., 11 February 1975

²¹ J. Lacan, “Preface to *The Awakening of Spring*”, op. cit., p. 107.

²² *The Irish Times*, Saturday, 5 June 2010.

²³ Ibid.