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ENGL 483_01

30 April 2023

A “Slip” and A Pastime: James Salter Meets Sigmund Freud

For being as sexually unambiguous and transparent as it is, James Salter’s *A Sport and a Pastime* received relatively little controversy at its publication in 1967. While the previous decade saw writers such as William S. Burroughs or Allen Ginsberg having trouble keeping some of their most notable works in print, Salter’s novel saw quite the opposite reaction from the general public. Thanks in no small part to the more significant cultural revolution of the 1960s in the U.S., works such as *Sport* found great success amongst a generation of young open-minded readers less concerned with the social taboos of their elders. The novel follows the scandalous affair of American Yale dropout, Phillip Dean, with a young femme française named Anne-Marie during his stay in France. It is a semi-autobiographical work based on Salter's own experiences in his early twenties and, perhaps unintentionally, exhibits a multitude of Freudian themes. The novel's unnamed narrator, who daydreams about the intimate details of Phillip and Anne-Marie's relationship, acts as a meta-commentary on the erotic level itself, as well as a pseudo self-insert of Salter as both writer and character. It’s no coincidence that Salter is frequently considered to be a “writer’s writer” by many critics, who consider his works as multi-layered and complex while presenting themselves to be fairly unassuming erotic fiction. The novel's short 200-page length is filled to the brim with unconscious desires, making *A Sport and a Pastime* a prime example of Freudian literature as well as an overlooked gem amongst the established canon of twentieth-century American texts.

While Sigmund Freud gets much of his fame for his pioneering work in psychoanalysis, his literary analysis can be just as fascinating. Freud's essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" explores the relationship between daydreaming, creative writing, and the unconscious mind. In this essay, Freud argues that creative writers are able to tap into their unconscious desires and fantasies, which they then transform into their literary works. According to Freud, daydreaming and creative writing are similar in that they both involve the imagination and the ability to create alternate realities. In daydreaming, individuals are able to imagine themselves in different scenarios, often ones that they desire but are unable to experience in reality. These can usually be considered unscrupulous to share with others, as these innermost "phantasies," as Freud calls them, can be something one is "ashamed of . . . hid[ing] them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions" (422). Similarly, creative writers are able to imagine and create new worlds and characters in their writing. Freud argues that the reason why creative writers are able to tap into their unconscious mind is because they are able to use their writing as a form of wish-fulfillment. In other words, they are able to express their deepest desires and fantasies through their writing. This process of wish-fulfillment is similar to the way in which dreams work, where the unconscious mind is able to express repressed desires through symbolic imagery.

Freud also discusses the role of the reader in the creative writing process. He argues that the reader is able to experience a sense of catharsis when they read a work of fiction, as they are able to identify with the characters and their struggles. This cathartic experience is similar to the way in which therapy works, as it allows individuals to confront and work through their own unconscious desires and emotions. Looking all the way back to the Ancient Romans with their Gladiator fights, to the plethora of violence in today's media, or even the ever-present

availability of pornography (and by extension prostitution) for those who seek it out, are just a few of these so-called cathartic experiences. Most well-minded individuals don't have desires to murder, or have the urge to be with a host of sexual partners, and as such these sources of entertainment and pleasure tap into an unconscious need to let off steam from the pressures of everyday life. As a more relevant example, Western society no longer considers the incredibly popular genre of romantic and erotic fiction, most of which is marketed towards women, as lascivious by any stretch. Entire sections of large retail bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble are dedicated to housing hundreds of these books; it's quite obvious that there's a market for it.

Freud finds two specific motivating wishes contained within: them being either wishes of ambition, which "serve to elevate the subject's personality" or more relevant to our case, those of the erotic (423). For Salter's *Sport*, one can find the latter all over the text, particularly with the narrator himself. As Jeffery Meyers writes in "The Sexual Novel: James Salter's A Sport and a Pastime," the narrator is "an unusual feature of the novel . . . he fervently imagines their sexual scenes. [He], in fact, cannot possibly know everything he describes and reminds us [this] throughout" (567). As the narrator says nearly halfway through the text, "I am not telling the truth about Dean, I am inventing him. I am creating him out of my own inadequacies, you must always remember that." (Salter 85). The narrator, in a genius move by Salter, is blatantly honest about the fiction he is presenting. A reasonable question a reader of the text would ask is, why have the narrator admit something like that? Wouldn't that break a reader's suspension of disbelief? While he does in fact admit it to be total fantasy (daydreaming), there is a level of objectivity to the narration that a first-person perspective wouldn't be able to provide at all. Meyers finds that the narrator "distances the erotic scenes while making them more vivid" (568). Freud actually specifically brings this literary dilemma into light; on the section on creative

writers he states that “the psychological novel . . . owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part-egos, and, in consequence, to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes" (426). Without Salter himself admitting to the obvious self-insert present with the narrator (he actually does in interviews), it’s obvious that this narrator acts as a kind of intermediary between the text and the reader. It is what elevates the crude depictions of aggressive sex into something far more artful and aesthetically pleasing. In a 2006 interview with Uni. of California, Davis Professor John Boe, Salter stays tight-lipped about the novel, however has this to say when asked about third-person voice: “As for *Sport and a Pastime*, well, the narrator’s essential" (Kahn, et. al., 86).

Between the coarse language (prick is used about twenty times, while the more objectionable cunt is reserved for merely three uses) are these incredibly realized descriptions, ones that just so happen to mix in vulgarities that clash with the picturesque scenery Salter paints: “In that blue Delage with doors that open backwards . . . The villages are fading, the rivers turning dark. She undoes his clothing and brings forth his prick, erect, pale as a heron in the dusk, both of them looking ahead at the road like any couple" (109). Depictions of sex acts are intertwined with visuals of barren landscapes that allude to the vanity of Phillip and Anne-Marie’s relationship. Fellatio in the Kerouac-inspired sports car (Phillip’s last name being Dean raises suspicion) takes on the same importance as adjusting the rear-view mirror, or noting how “its headlights [are] faded" (109). These aren’t merely perverted fantasies by an obsessed nobody, the narrator presents a sort of vicarious omnipresence to both the proclivities and mandanities of life, both treated with equal importance. Meyers, in another piece on Salter’s oeuvre titled “Salter’s Gift,” summarizes the existence of the narrator quite succinctly: “Dean enjoys the sex life the narrator lacks . . . carried away by the sexual encounters he describes,

takes more pleasure in recounting Dean's sex life than in having his own" (95). This connects beautifully with what Freud describes as what motivates fantasies: "[they are] the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality" (423). There is a strange dichotomy present between the three individuals, From writer Salter, to unnamed narrator, to fictionalized Phillip Dean. They are all different aspects to Salter in their own respective right; of course, Salter is associated with the work and his name is on the cover, the narrator is a creative tool Salter uses to mold the narrative to his will, and Dean is the idealization of Salter in his youth. The narrator lives vicariously through Dean's sexual adventures with Anne-Marie, but Salter also gets to relive that time in his life with an aura of "romantic nostalgia" (Meyers 569). William Dowie, in his own piece on Salter's works titled "A Final Glory," describes *Sport* and its narrator quite similarly to Meyers. He writes, "[The narrator tells] the story on the practical level and as an audience surrogate on the imaginative level, [seeing] ourselves in our various distances from the magical figure of Dean, carefree, natural, and as acceptable as the elements themselves" (Dowie 82).

There is a bit of a puzzling anachronism in the latter half of the novel, however. Phillip and Anne-Marie's futile relationship is starting to show its cracks, as Dean begins to fear the growing possibility of long-term commitment with her. As the narrator does have a presence in the novel as a character, one who personally knows the two lovers and on occasion converses with Dean (as well as Anne-Marie at the end after Dean's untimely demise), its realistic to assume Dean could have divulged such fears with the narrator over coffee, as people do. On the part of the narrator, where exactly does this need to materialize the breakdown of a relationship come from? What is shown to us is Phillip devouring Anne-Marie through all five of his senses in the start of the novel, to loath her existence by the end in subtle but increasingly frustrating ways. As Meyers notes, the narrator emphasizes some of the unpleasantries of intimate

relationships, “undermin[ing] the romance (supplied by the narrator) and suggests that her animal self and lust in action . . . has become repellent to him" (570). Perhaps Salter uses this harsh tonal shift as a snap back to reality. The relationship between these two star-crossed lovers isn’t meant to last, by all accounts. Dowie writes, “When Salter writes of ‘the secret life of France, into which one cannot penetrate,’ the sexual connotation is crucial. Passages of sexual exploration alternate with passages of travel. Sex becomes both a means and an analogy of the discovery of place" (81). There is no logical positive endpoint for where Phillip and Anne-Marie are going. Just as Dean is exploring the French countryside by way of his guide and mistress Anne-Marie, he explores her body, her aura, her being. His obsessiveness overshadows and spoils their relationship almost as soon as it starts. His need to go further and further into explicit sexual acts, all seemingly lifted out of the Kama Sutra, and particularly ending with sodomy, turn what could have been a loving connection into catharsis. How far can Dean go? How much will Anne-Marie take?

It’s no surprise that Dean, just as he escapes back to the United States thanks to a loan from the narrator for a plane ticket, ends up dead in a car accident. This sexual experience of the novel had to reach its climax at some point. His death screams of a certain death drive, to cite Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. He is seen constantly driving fast in his mid-century European sports car, nearly crashing, getting pulled over, and engaging in sexual acts in the vehicle as previously described. The phallic imagery of the car comes to mind, always penetrating the wind that submits to the thrust of the metal beast; the Deluge is always in mouvement perpétuel (Meyers 570). As for the narrator’s reaction to his death, he finds that he “never died–his existence is superior to such accidents. One must have heroes, which is to say, one must create them . . . It is we who give them their majesty, their power, which we ourselves could never

possess" (Salter 191). This ties in perfectly with what Freud talks about in what he sees in a lot of fiction, where wish fulfillment through daydreams and desires correlates directly with the multitude of stories with infallible heroes: "One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers, each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means" (425). By every possible means, in this case, certainly includes this elusive narrator. He isn't quite solely a first-person character, he is also acting in the third-person, with no qualms or shame of his biases and affections towards the lovers, particularly with admiration for Dean (perhaps as a kind of self-fellating or homoerotic undertone?)

Freud goes on to quote a phrase from a Viennese dramatist, who expresses that a hero of a story unconsciously exclaims 'Nothing can happen to me!' The irony in this case being that what is truly presented at that moment is what Freud calls "His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story" (425). It's impossible to separate oneself from the ego, even as a creative writer. Salter attempts to distill this through a few layers of obfuscation with the narrator and the stand-in lead, but it still shines through. The narrator cannot fathom even amounting to becoming a sliver of what Dean is (or what he portrays him to be), and he reminds you of it frequently. It's on one hand deeply confusing while simultaneously spell-binding. This, while often seemingly out of place and in your face, as you read the novel, seems to be something Salter kept secret as best he could, perhaps as to not ruin the magic of the work. He would go on to say in the 2006 interview, in response to how much of the narrator's retelling is true, "Very little, in my opinion [is invented or imagined]. I am impressed by his powers of observation and tend to trust his description of scenes" (Meyers 95). This is baffling, considering he wrote the book himself. His evasive attitude seems to suggest that it his intent as the author

isn't for the narrator to definitively have any kind of omniscient power or not in regards to the young lovers' lives. The narrator, to Salter, is just incredibly observant, curiously.

In the introduction to the 1995 reissue of the novel in paperback, Salter wanted to write a book that could be seductive on every page, one that was "flargrant but assured, of impersihable images and obsessions" (vii). Circling back to the origins of the novel, *A Sport and a Pastime* is heavily influenced and based on Salter's own experiences in France in his youth. As an Air Force pilot, he was stationed in France in the early sixties, and had an affair with a girl from Chaumont. Salter was at the time married, with his wife still in the United States during the time of him being in active duty. Feeling compelled to share his time in France with a short-term lover, he wrote *Sport* and reached immediate critical, if not bountiful commercial success. Through the complex lens he employs in the text, we find a triptych of voices, ones both real and fictional, influencing the narrative and outcomes of the characters.

Freud, at the end of his essay, brings home the point about how creative writers can use the elements of daydreams and fantasies to great effect in fiction: "We experience a great pleasure, one which probably arises from the confluence of many sources . . . The writers softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the . . . aesthetic yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies" (428). Salter, like some of the greats before him, including Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and D.H. Lawrence, truly incorporates the erotic and the psychological into a work of fiction quite like few other works. His novels provide a fascinating puzzle to venture deep into and find oneself lost in, as any great work of literature should.

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