

# Creative Writing as Psychotherapy



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## Abstract

This article contemplates creative writing as psychotherapy. It represents the human society as neurotic and suggests creative writing as an important mechanism to control the ailment. The article describes the three ways in which creative writing can act as check to neurosis and they include free association, substitute gratification and transference.

**Keywords:** Creative writer; Neurosis; Human Mind

## Introduction

The human mind is the engine house of all human activities. It is responsible for how humans think, react, and understand things. Hence, in its process of trying to grapple with the challenges of life, the human mind can be plunged into some kind of anxiety, or unreasonable fear, and behaviour or may get stressed up as a result of the need to repeat unnecessary actions. When the human mind finds itself in this kind of situation, the consequence is that it results to what is called neurosis. Terry Eagleton [1] explains that neurosis is caused by some kind of conflict in the human mind. He argues that the neurotic is a person whose “unconscious is most damagingly at work” or a person with “psychological disturbance of one form or the other” (158). Martin Gross [2] also notes that neurosis is mostly caused by stress which root-cause is anxiety. Gross explains further that “anxiety is the chief characteristic of neuroses” (320).

Of course, no human mind is free from the challenges of life. As a matter of fact, this is the fact that has earned the human race its description as neurotic. This description is also evident in Eagleton’s explanation of the term and his argument that the human society is peopled with persons who are faced with one challenge or the other. In every human society, there are persons who experience running battles with issues in their minds on daily basis. The battles are often caused by the unfavourable socio-political life situations, family challenges, and even the need to provide solutions to certain human problems. This perception has given birth to the claim that humanity is sick and that normality is almost unattainable: man is only preoccupied with the unending search for normality which he cannot attain.

In his book entitled *The Psychological Society* (1978) Gross argues: For in addition to diagnosing ourselves as neurotic, we see those surrounding us as suffering from this same gnawing undefined ailment. Our mates, friends, business associates, the

thousands who touch our lives seem to be living in a heroic, if fruitless, struggle for stability. (318) Gross [3] goes ahead to list eleven neuroses to which mankind is ostensibly prone and they include: “anxiety neurosis; hysterical neurosis; hysterical neurosis, conversion type; hysterical neurosis, dissociative type; phobic neurosis; obsessive-compulsive neurosis; depressive neurosis; neurasthenia neurosis; depersonalized neurosis; hypochondrical neurosis; other neurosis” (320).

Even though these neuroses do not have cure, they can at least be controlled. According to Gross, they can be controlled “by conversion, displacement and various other psychological mechanisms” (320). One major engagement with which these neuroses can be converted or displaced is creative writing. Creative writing has the ability to be a psychotherapy in that it produces, as Gross would say, “symptoms experienced as subjective distress from which the [sufferer] desires relief” (320). Lionel Trilling simply says creative writing can serve the purpose of a narcotic. Trilling explains that the creative writer is in “the same category with the neurotic” in that the creative writer suffers from some disturbing experiences which he purges by engaging in creation. By recreating that which disturbs him, the creative writer feels normal—even though the state of normalcy is only temporal. However, the creative writer advances into the state where his creative writing becomes a psychotherapy in three states that includes:

- a. Free Association (talking cure),
- b. Substitute gratification and
- c. Transference.

## Free Association (Talking Cure)

Free Association is a psychological form or a process through which a creative writer writes himself free of all feelings of pains

and worries. In other words, it is the act of talking or writing oneself to normality [4]. This is because the creative writer uses his literary creation as a means to engage in some free-for-all talks. This pays off as the creative writer who is prone to talking or whose disturbance is caused by some protracted activities may produce volumes of works. In order to properly explain this, Christopher Okigbo and Tenure Ojaide are used as examples. In the poem entitled, "Siren Limits 1", for instance, Okigbo acknowledges the art of poetry writing as an avenue to engage in some talks. This claim is evident in the line where he notes that he is "Suddenly becoming talkative/ like weaverbird" (19). The persona's free-for-all talk is also represented in his use of "circumlocution". Circumlocution as a figure of speech allows the poet to play around words as a talkative does. In "Lament of the Drums 1" this can be seen in the poet's persistent use of repetition. For instance, "we invoke you" is repeated in a number of lines.

In lines four, and nine, the word "Antelopes" is repeated and in lines two and eight, the phrase "Even if you are very far away, we invoke you" is repeated. In Ojaide's "Waking", a poem which is meant to represent the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the persona's mind, the persona also engages in some free-for-all talks. In the first three lines of the first stanza of the poem, the persona discloses: "Suddenly I wake from a nightmare/ to the chorus of the wind and birds" (71). In these lines the persona joins the wind and the birds in their noise-making activities [5]. The wind and the birds as used in the lines are symbols of different class of persons and other human activities that are capable of generating noise. Through these free-for-all talks, these creative writers talk away their disturbances. Once talked out, the creative writer become well again. If the creative writer is unable to find outlet for his disturbance in his creativity, his condition might become worst.

### Substitute Gratification

Substitute gratification is a psychological form or situation in which the creative writer perceives his creativity as alternative to reality. Through his creativity, things the creative writer is unable to achieve or do in reality, he tries to achieve or accomplish in his creativity. Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide's different poetry are also used for illustration here. As creative writers their creativity are used as opportunity to do what they could not do in reality. For example, in the poem entitled, "Elegy for Alto", Okigbo's persona addresses the politicians of Nigeria's first republic and the military in politics as robbers—of course he would not have been able to do this in reality. He maintains in lines one and twenty that with military men and the politicians in power the country is doomed. He emphasizes this by repeating the poetry line thus, "And the horn may now paw the air howling goodbye ..." (64). In Ojaide's "When soldiers are diplomats" we see a similar situation. In the poem, the persona addresses the soldiers with words and symbols that reveal his anger and worry over the involvement of soldiers in politics in the country.

Hence, he calls them "bedbug" in lines twelve and thirteen, thus: "The bedbug doesn't care/for the taste of your blood" (4) and in lines thirty-four and thirty-five, thus: "And the bedbug, that smug

cannibal/doesn't care for the rank smell of blood" (5). Sometimes, the creative writer also uses his poems as substitute to society where he says or does things he could not do in reality. In the poem, "Watermaid", Okigbo's persona finds himself "on the sea". This is evident in the very first line of the poem, thus: "Eye open on the sea,/ eyes open, of the prodigal" (8). It is possibly that in reality Okigbo [6] wishes to have a one on one communion with the watermaid. We see a similar situation in Ojaide's "No". In the poem [7], "No", Ojaide expresses his wish to be protective of any good person— a person who, in the words of Nietzsche, "does not do violence, does not attack or retaliate, who leaves vengeance to God, who, like us, lives hidden, who shuns all that is evil, and altogether asks very little of life"(494)—and then punish the bad—the person who like Nietzsche would say, "out of that instinct of self-preservation ... notoriously justifies every kind of lie" (495). Since Ojaide could not do so in reality, he resorts to doing so in his poem.

In the poem, Ojaide tells us through his persona that if your "friends", "enemies" or "the public" are always after you with one trick or the other to run you down: "before they devour you/for their own reasons your own fears/ stop them with an instant 'No'"(43). In his essay, Von Franz [8] affirms that, when the creative writer engages in substitute gratification, he makes progress only when in the process of creation he "lives out his innate human nature" (164). Most times, the creative writer does not just engage in substitute gratification out of his own will to do so. He is forced to embark on this by the forces that are responsible for poetic creation. When this happens the creative writer lacks the will-power to say no; so he cooperates because the lack of cooperation might result in some kind of psychic conflict. Von Franz goes on to make us realise that the feeling of cooperation is an intrinsic feeling in the mind of the creative writer that engages himself in substitute gratification.

### Transference

According to Eagleton, transference is a psychological form or the process of "ascribing to others of feelings and wishes which are actually our own" (159). In the course of his writing, the creative writer begins "to unconsciously transfer onto" the figure of his persona the psychological conflicts from which he suffers. If he had had difficulties with his father for example he may unconsciously cast his persona in that role. If he had a problem with his wife, for instance, he makes his persona punish the wife-characters in his poem—the way he wished he should have done it in reality. In Okigbo's "Newcomer", for instance, the worry about his double personality is cast on the personality of the persona. In the poem, Okigbo has made it known that he is torn between two personalities which he describes through putting the symbol, "mask", to use in line five and in the second stanza. Even though this worry is that of Okigbo, it is expressed using his persona in the poem.

Even though it is Okigbo's hate, it is also given expression through the use of his persona. And as we have seen in the poem, even though it is Okigbo who had attained these states of self-realisation, it is given expression through the personality of his persona. In "Now that I am forty," Ojaide is of the view that at forty he has become even more serious. In the course of expressing how

serious he can be, he casts his persona on a role where he has to “stand/ on a termite heap/gazing/at a cricket hole” (98) In the poem entitled “Visiting Home,” Ojaide captures a situation where the beautiful spring from where he drinks whenever he visits home is suddenly left in ruins. Even though, it is Ojaide who visits home and the spring, the whole actions that are described in the poem are transferred onto another personality, his persona.

For instance, in line one of the poem: “I have gone back to the spring at its abandoned/source,” (158) the pains that are inherent in Ojaide’s action and expression are transferred onto the persona. Jung is of the view that during transference, the creative writer learns how important it is to listen to his inner-self. Von Franz reiterates Jung’s view that in order to learn what the inner totality or the Self wants him to do, he gives in to this almost “imperceptible, yet powerfully dominating, impulse—an impulse that comes from the urge towards unique, creative self-realization” (167). When the creative writer has successfully transferred all his anguishes upon his persona or has successfully paid back wrong for wrong or aggression for aggression through his persona onto the representative enemy or friend poetic characters, he becomes calm again.

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