

Sample Analytic Essay

Baby Don't Hurt Me: Love and Power in Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Dora*

In Hélène Cixous's play *Portrait of Dora*, the dream sequence in lines 731-769 involving a bewildering conversation between Dora and Mrs. K., with its drastic change from innocence to violence, seems to shift in characters and tone as to be so ambiguous that it defies meaning at all. The erratic nature of the scene on the surface suggests that the unconscious is indecipherable, serving the play's general purpose of subverting Freud's original analysis. However, we can view the dream as a coming-of-age arc with a logical sequence rather than a wild tangle of sweetness and aggression. Reading the scene through this lens helps us understand the transmutation of love and power from childhood to adulthood that can answer the central question Mrs. K. raises in the scene: "But what does that mean? To love?" (754). The expression of love is contingent on the changing level of power one holds, namely as a child and as an adult.

It will be useful for my argument to make sense of the narrative structure of the scene as two distinct halves, which together deal with Mrs. K.'s essential question. The first part begins with the sudden appearance of Mrs. K., marking the transition from the scene of the analysis session into the dream. For several lines, Dora repeatedly asks Mrs. K. for her love, while Mrs. K. gently deflects her pleas. Seemingly out of nowhere, Dora breaks her series of questions: "One day, I would like to be lying against you. Not sitting—Lying against you... There would be blood all over. I would have blood on my face" (763-764). The extreme shift in tone in these lines marks a break between the sweetness of the first part of the dream and the aggression of the latter part. While the two halves appear disjointed, the dream as a whole can be understood as an escalation from innocence to sexual desire and finally to violence. The hard turn from a seemingly loving, naïve Dora is part of the Cixous' depiction of love as difficult to define and

ever-changing. While Mrs. K. at first seems to equivocate with a rhetorical question, “But what does that mean? To love?” (754), the answer can be unraveled in two parts: what it means to love as a child and as an adult.

Before we examine the relationship between childhood and adult desires that could clarify the link between innocence and aggression, we must first distinguish between children and adults in terms of intensity of love. Near the close of the scene, Dora herself defines childhood as “when one has too much love” (768). Cixous’ word choice of “too much” connotes excessiveness and lack of restraint, even to the point of being unhealthy. Having “too much love” as a child manifests in the first part of the dream as devotion—in Dora’s case, to Mrs. K.—bordering on obsession. Dora’s love is a source of jealousy and intense need for her adoration to be reciprocated, as she demonstrates in her pleas for Mrs. K.’s validation. Furthermore, the repeated use of first-person pronouns in Dora’s series of questions to Mrs. K., especially as she asks, “You don’t love me at all then? I don’t appeal to you at all?” (756) ties her need for acceptance to her sense of personal identity. The first half of the dream characterizes Dora as a child with overflowing, deeply personal feelings of love.

If “too much” love as a child lies on one end of the spectrum, then “too little” love as an adult naturally lies on the other. In contrast to Dora’s display of emotion in the first part, note the roundabout way Mrs. K. expresses her love for Dora as she says, “You are lovable. Someone will love you. I love everything about you” (756-757). Although Mrs. K. appears to reassure Dora of her affection through the repetition of “love,” she withholds a direct answer to whether she loves Dora as a person or just “everything about” her. Through her evasive speech, Mrs. K. detaches herself from her feelings. The only instance Mrs. K. affirms that she loves Dora, she carefully qualifies her statement: “I can love you a little” (754). The strength of the action “love”

is diluted by “can,” which implies her love is a theoretical ability to care for Dora rather than the visceral desire Dora feels. “A little” further restricts the extent of this ability to love. Throughout the first half of the dream, the intensity of Dora’s emotions aligns her mindset with that of a child, while Mrs. K.’s restraint puts her in the position of an adult.

The dramatic shift in tone from the innocence of the first half to the violence of the second half of the scene can be understood as a figurative shift from childhood to adulthood in terms of changing power dynamics. Parallel to the imbalance in strength of emotion between children and adults is the imbalance of power, or the ability to exert one’s will. Throughout their conversation in the first part, Mrs. K., as the established adult, holds power over Dora, the child. From the outset, Dora adopts a pleading tone as she asks Mrs. K, “Can’t you love me a little? Just a little bit?” (753). As discussed previously, Dora humbly vies for the attention Mrs. K. chooses to withhold. Dora’s transition from childhood to adulthood occurs in the lines separating the first and second parts of the dream as she declares her desire to “lie against” Mrs. K. The power dynamics have switched: Dora assumes the role of an adult as she asserts her sexual desire. The erotic overtone suggests Dora sees herself as a worthy sexual partner to Mrs. K. The dream then enters its second act as Dora’s jealous love as a child for someone above her transforms into passionate desire as an equal. The equalizing of power as some flows back to Dora in this transition represents her maturity. Within a line, Dora’s intense desire escalates further to the point of violence as she fantasizes “blood all over”—over both Mrs. K. and herself.

The progression from sexual desire to murderous desire is a further escalation of power, which can connect adult desires and expressions of power to their roots in childhood emotions. Dora paints a grisly scene as she describes, “There would be blood all over. I would have blood on my face” (764). Although this bloodshed plays out only in Dora’s imagination, the violence

she dreams of committing represents her aspiration for power not only equal to, but even greater than an adult's. Taking another adult's life is the ultimate act of dominance; Dora emphasizes the display of Mrs. K.'s blood, especially on her own face, as evidence of her personal power, that is, capacity for inflicting harm. The direct relationship between expression of love and of power is clarified in Dora's justification for her desire to see Mrs. K. dead: "So that no one could touch you. Or see you" (766). Despite the extreme gory conclusion, Dora's motives are feelings of possessiveness associated with passionate desire. These intense feelings of jealousy appear to be linked to the obsession of being loved as a child. As an adolescent, Dora is transitioning from being a child to being an adult and is perhaps both simultaneously. Dora's sudden outburst of sexual and murderous desire, then, becomes a reconciliation of the excess of love as a child and the excess of power as an adult. The sense of possessiveness is the link within Dora's unconscious that translates desire as a child to desire as an adult.

The evolution of love and power laid out within the dream sequence can give insight into how the expression of love corresponds with power dynamics in Dora's life outside the dream. The relationship between Dora and Mrs. K. depicted in the dream can serve as an exaggerated representation of Dora's complicated relationships to other figures in her life, particularly Freud. Present in her relationship with her analyst are elements of power imbalance due to age explored earlier, as well as Dora's mixed feelings of jealousy and lust. However, applying the linear logic of Dora's and Mrs. K.'s conversation within the dream to Dora's earlier exchange with Freud does not perfectly work out. We can think of this conversation between Dora and Freud as the real-life scenario the dream sets out to explain in reverse. Whereas in the dream, Dora begins from the natural first stage as a child under the control of an adult and eventually grows into greater power, the power dynamics between Dora and Freud in real life operate in the opposite

way. As in the dream, Dora at the start of the session poses the supposed authority figure a series of questions to tease out some admission of their feelings toward her. Her tone as she asks Freud, “Why are you looking at me that way? So insistently?” (731) is not that of a child craving love and validation, but that of a flirtatious adult recognizing that she is desired. Asserting her sexuality establishes her love as an equal to Freud and even as someone in control of him. From there, Dora insinuates Freud is “playing secrets” about his relationship to a woman she has seen in his office (745). As she questions the doctor, she lapses into jealousy that parallels her possessiveness toward Mrs. K. in the dream. Dora’s insecurity that her intense feelings toward an older figure—in this case, Freud—are not reciprocated relegates her to the role of a child. When she lashes out by parroting Freud’s words, Freud reasserts his authority as her analyst: “Come now, don’t act like a child. Believe me. And tell me about your dream” (747). Through imperative statements, especially the command “don’t act like a child” that implies Dora’s immaturity, Freud regains power as an adult figure over Dora. He, like Mrs. K. in the first half of the dream, inhibits the expression of his love and exhibits control by refusing to entertain Dora’s advances.

The change in power dynamics from adult to child in this dialogue is much subtler than the obviously divided segments in the dream; Dora also begins with power and slowly loses it as she assumes the status of a child. How does the play reconcile the differences between Dora’s conscious life and her unconscious one? One answer could be that Dora recognizes her lack of power as a patient in real life, so she regains some control by unconsciously reversing the power dynamics in the dream. The structure of the dream could also be a response to the contradiction that is being both an adult and a child as a young woman. Her unconscious mind makes sense of this in-between period of her growing up by creating a miniature coming-of-age arc with clearly

defined stages of life, omitting the awkward transition time of adolescence. Cixous provides no clear answer—I almost hesitate to separate dream from reality in my argument, as the play itself blurs the lines between the conscious and the unconscious. Considering the absence of stage directions and the nearly instantaneous interchange of characters in the foreground, the change from one scene to another—from real-life analysis to dream—can only be assumed. Perhaps by giving dream and reality space to coexist on the stage, Cixous proposes that the inseparability of the conscious and the unconscious is itself its own reconciliation.