

A FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CAROL SHIELDS 'THE STONE DIARIES'



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ABSTRACT

Carol Shields is a socially conscious and thoroughly human historian of hitherto marginalized characters. Her novels reveal a deep understanding of the human personality and the way it is shaped by the experiences encountered by the subject during the various stages of life. Some of her characters reveal her familiarity with Freudian psychology and psychoanalysis. Cuyler Goodwill of The Stone Diaries is a classic example of this evolution of character through encounter and experience. We find in Cuyler a slow evolution from Id to Superego passing through the stages of libido and ego. The personality of Cuyler metamorphosis from that of a drudge to that of a successful businessman and orator, shaped by the experience of love, tragedy and artistic creation. He grows from withdrawn loner into an active and attractive participant in life. His is also a story from rags to riches. He grows by adaptation to life's inevitable processes. This paper examines the evolution of Cuyler Goodwill from a Freudian perspective.

Keywords: *Id, Ego, Libido, Superego.*

Carol Shields was born on June 2, 1935, in Oak Park, Illinois, in a suburb of Chicago. The daughter of a school teacher and a candy factory manager, she has described her childhood as an essentially stable and happy one. She attended Hanover College in Indiana, graduating with B.A. in 1957. During a semester studying at Exeter University in England, she met Donald Shields, a Canadian graduate whom she married upon completion of her college degree. The couple lived in Canada, and Shields worked as a homemaker, raising their five children while her husband pursued an academic career in Engineering. During this time, Shields wrote several journalistic

stories, which were sold to the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) and the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). At the age of 33, she enrolled in the graduate program in English at the University of Ottawa, where she completed a thesis on the nineteenth-century Canadian writers. Then, her career as a fiction writer started and developed in two distinct phases. Her early novels and short stories were conventional in form, exploring themes of individual identity and interpersonal relationships. *Small Ceremonies*, *The Box Garden* (1977), *Happenstance* (1980), and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982), all belong to this first phase. In the second phase of her career, she developed a wider international readership. The works written in this phase were *Mary Swann: A Mystery* (1987), *A Celibate Season* (1991), *The Stone Diaries* (1993), *Larry's Party* (1997), *Unless* (2002).

Shields is best known for her highly celebrated novel *The Stone Diaries* (1993), for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and Canada's Governor General's Award. Shields, whose novels have achieved best-seller status, has been recognized for her experimental use of narrative form in fiction that examines the everyday lives of average men and women with honesty and compassion. Her recurring thematic concerns include personal identity and self-perception, as well as love, marriage, and family. She is a historian and analyst of the human mind. Her novels have great psychological interest. They reveal her familiarity with modern theories of psychology.

This paper presents a Freudian perspective on Cuyler Goodwill the protagonist of 'The *Stone Diaries*'. Freudian theory has been criticized by many, but still remains the focus of discussions on the human psyche. Freud's view is that the human personality as an adult is formed by the early experiences- parenting and schooling. Early experiences are consciously and unconsciously processed within human mind's developmental stages and shape the personality. But at the same time not every person completes the necessary tasks of every developmental stage. If they don't, it results in mental condition requiring psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, unless self-managed and outgrown.

Freud emphasises on the five developmental stages of psychosexual development. As a child passes these stages unresolved conflicts between physical and social expectations may arise. These stages are Oral, Anal, Phallic, Latency, Genital. It is during these stages of development that the experiences are filtered through the three levels of the human mind, i.e., Id, Ego, and Superego. It is from these structures and the inherent conflicts that arise in the mind that personality is shaped. While there is interdependence among these three levels, each level also serves a purpose in personality- development. As the child grows older, the superego develops, and is responsible for conscience. According to Freud, it causes a person to recognize the consequences of his own

actions and experiences. Within this theory the ability of a person to resolve internal conflicts at specific stages of one's developmental determines future coping and functioning ability as a fully –mature adult.

Cuyler Goodwill's family consisted of his mother, father and he. He is the only child of his family which made him remain a child forever. It seemed they were victims of the strict, old, and untidy country which gave all of them an aroma of impotence; they were lanky in spirit and frail of body. The house they lived faced directly on the lime kilns of Stonewall. It was at the end of a dirty road, its porch askew. The windows flecked with yellow ash from the kilns, went unwashed for many years together and the kitchen roof leaked. In the rainy season the chimney smoked. Most of the wages of his father had been spent on repairs or small luxuries which were kept in an old jam pot. The dollar bills were heaped up there like crushed leaves, soiled, aromatic. Bread baked at their house was scarce, uneven and heavy.

Cuyler's family remained isolated from the people of Stonewall. They never participated in any form of recreational activities in the town. Normally during summer time the entire towns people gathered at the corner of Jackson and Maria for a game of horseshoes, but Goodwill men- neither father nor son were asked to take part in the game. The reasons for their exclusion were not clear. It is assumed that either they lacked essential skills or were in different to forms of recreation, or people feared they might contaminate the others with their peculiar joyless depletion. On the other hand, Mrs Goodwill, due to some worn-out Christian wiles, pinned a hat to her head each Sunday morning while attending services at the Presbyterian Church, but she never took Cuyler along with her. No inquiries were made from church or hospital about Cuyler. His opinions were never expected or considered. His talent as stone cutter was also rarely remarked by his parents. His parents never mentioned his birthday; he never got any gifts from them, no cakes, no bustle of ceremony. When he turned fourteen his father instructed him to join the Stonewall Quarries where he worked and asked him to discontinue his schooling. After that his wages also went into the jam pot as savings. This went on for twelve years.

Nothing in his life has prepared him for the notion of love. Some early damage –a needle –faced, a dishevelled stick of a mother, the absence of brothers and sisters- had persuaded him he would remain all his life a child, with a child's stunted appetite.(19)

Shields telescopes the stone-cutter's formative years of Cuyler's life into a short timeframe of repeated routine. His real potency, strength, feelings and emotions are overshadowed by tedium of stonecutting, feeding and sleeping. A great part of his life was bound up with waste and opacity. For such a long duration of time, he rose early in the morning, ate a bowl of oatmeal porridge, walked across the road to the quarry where he worked a

nine-and -a-half-hour day ,then returned to the chill meagreness of his parents' house and prepared for an early bed.

During these years, he ignored the overheard conversation between his fellow workers about imperatives of puberty, at times neglected the feelings that arose caught between the words of popular song, and stayed away from strong drinks. Moreover he observed from time to time that in the dead heart of his parents' house there existed minor alterations of mood, and varying tints of feeling. He was aware of everything going around him but remained passive towards all. His real strength, feelings and emotions of that time could never be back. Finally at twenty-six, he met his love who changed his life utterly. Subsequently his personality changed entirely. Here, he acted very furiously without bothering about anybody, operated on the pleasure principle; without thinking about anyone, followed his love.

Cuyler met his love, Mercy on a spring day at a Stonewall Home. He was called by Mercy to mend the main door of the Home. He was twenty six years old. When he saw her, he was at once taken up by her gentleness, her graciousness attracted him. Certain social obligations restricted him from moving closer to her. But he was completely moved beyond anything by her sheer somatic presence. The innocence in her face, her bare and clean arms, her rippling generosity of flesh stirred him deeply. The harshness of winter, bitter winds and deep frosts evoked his feelings for her.

Mercy is an orphan. She is brought in the Stonewall Orphan Home. She is as confined as a nun. She has been given elementary schooling, taught trade and assigned as housekeeper in the Home itself, first on a regular basis and then given full command. She is very corpulent. Her overweight did not affect the inner feelings of Cuyler. Moreover she is older than he. He felt her corpulence has swallowed up much of her face but has spared her pure, softly fringed eyes. He gathered courage to talk to her about his intentions. At first, he saw the difficulty; he would have to learn, of courtship, of marriage and its initiations. The thought of so much effort brought him close to discouragement, yet he felt to carried on. He promised her that within a month he would make her his wife and move to the village of Tyndall where he will work in a new quarry. He announced his intentions to his parents. They were stunned into silence. On his marriage, people smiled to see them together. He was timid with a boyish look and body but Mercy looked immense in front of him. Moreover it was observed that he was shorter by an inch or two than she.

From the beginning he knew that her ardour was inferior to his own. This seemed to him to be natural and rightful. The potency and fragrance of erotic love that overwhelmed him so suddenly in his twenty-sixth year was

answered by her with mild bewilderment. He was over-indulgent with her. She was not cold towards her but returned his in lesser way. They were very incurious, almost indifferent about their future. But the talk about a house will stirred a response in Mercy. She loved to have her own home to order and arrange and run as she pleased. On the other hand Cuyler knew nothing about women, and their twisted ideas. He had no idea about how to organise a household, where to begin and what might be expected. But Mercy made his life ordered and radiant, with comfortable arrangements for a new set of pleasures in the dreary routine life. All these made him care for her almost as a treasure.

He knows that without the comfort of Mercy Stone's lavish body he would have learned to feel the reality of the world or understand the particularities of sense and reflection that others have taken as their right. (25)

In his early days of marriage Cuyler came close to weeping as he observed the arrangements of his wife's kitchen shelves, the stacked plates and separated cutlery, the neatly stored foodstuff- rice, flour, sugar, that represent her touching, valiant provisioning for the future. In fact, it is only the present that he required. He felt that it is miracle for him to find that love lies in his grasp and can be expressed aloud now. His life was diffident, slow, thwarted by his poverty in the beginning. But he was able to put into words the desires of his heart and at the same time offer him the endearments a woman needs to hear. The language flowed straight from his heart. He, himself was shocked at this knowledge. He could not imagine, thinking back, why he had believed himself incapable of passionate expression.

Finally that day come into his life which he least expected. A chaos had fallen on him and his house. A crowd was gathered at his place which made him completely wretched but at the same time, he was eager to face the outcome. A delirium of helplessness bounded him. His wife died of Eclampsia, while delivering a girl child. Her mountainous body lay still, confusion, clamour and portent out, fear grief surrounded him so tightly, he remained speechless for hours together. A big mystery for him was that he was not aware of her pregnancy.

Cuyler's daughter was brought up by Mrs.Flett, his neighbour. Later she shifted to Winnipeg with his daughter. The girl was with her for eleven years. During this time, Cuyler's life took a turning point. His wife's untimely death did not change him up to a poet or drunkard or make him run after any other woman. But he felt the presence of God near him. Being a stonemason he set a gravestone on her grave, but it didn't satisfy him. He felt it was too inadequate and insubstantial for the creature who had been his sweetheart, his wife, his treasure. One day on seeing a rainbow he felt that it is some message from God and he decided to build a monument on his

wife's grave. After three months of his wife's demise, he started to build. He started collecting one or two stones from the quarry and chose them carefully, as he had formed an odd resolution that he will set it without mortar.

Gravity alone must hold them in place in place, gravity and balance, each stone receptive to the shape of those it rests against and in keeping with the abstraction that has lately filled his head like a waking reverie, a dream structure made up of sorrow mingled with bewilderment.(43)

Occasionally, he felt Mercy's silence as a betrayal, or even an act of hostility. Years later he admitted to himself that his love for his wife had altered because of her silence about the child in the womb. Anyhow the gravestone had risen into a hollow tower some thirty feet in height .He decorated the stone surface with an elaborate cipher with mottled colouring of Tyndall stone, which was considered to be resistant to fine carving. The carving was done on winter nights in the warmed untidy cave. After all he was a self-taught carver, grown skilful through long periods of trial.

His attention becomes concentrated as he moves from scratch to groove, as he joins line and curve, elaborating an image that is no more at first than an atom flickering in his brain, bringing to it all its possibilities while guarding its pure modality, its essence-this, always, is the hardest part- and preparing himself for the moment when they worked stone is complete.(47,48)

Cuyler Goodwill of Tyndall finally finished his tower after eleven years. People from various places came to visit this monument. Different people gave their views and opinions about the tower and the handwork of the artist. Every visitor tried to locate different pictures in the tower. Often, people commented that the beauty of the limestone resembled that of Italian marble. A few others compared it with the Taj Mahal in India which was built in memory of lost love.

Cuyler's fame reached far and near. As a result of that he received a letter from the President of the Indiana Limestone Company, Bloomington, in the United States. Now he has become a expert stone graver. In between this time, Mrs.Flett had passed away due to some injury. Her son asked him to take over the responsibilities of his daughter. So without delaying anymore Cuyler reached Winnipeg, he took his daughter and moved to Bennington forever. After some years he became a partner in the firm Lapiscan Incorporated. He became a popular personality in Bloomington, an energetic businessman.

Energy shoots from his very eyes- which have kept their youthful whiteness, their intensity of fixation. He is an impressive figure in the community, respected, admired. But it is when he opens his mouth to speak that he becomes charismatic.(61)

Cuyler himself believed that speech came to him during his brief two-year marriage to Mercy Goodwill. He accepted that his nearness with his wife was the moment when the stone in his throat came dislodged. Now at Bennington, he became a public person. He had developed the orator's knack for endurance, talking and talking without exhaustion.

Cuyler, in his twenties was a captive of Eros, in thirties he belonged to God, and still later, to Art. Now, in his fifties, he championed Commerce. But on the whole, his fascination gave from the same tortuous biographical root, then branched and flourished, attended by abstinence.

Life is an endless recruiting of witnesses. It seems we need to be observed in our postures of extravagance or shame; we need attention paid to us. Our own memory is altogether too cherishing, which is the kindest thing I can say for it. Other accounts are required, other perspectives, but even so our most important ceremonies – birth, love, and death- are secured by whomever and whatever is available.(27)

We find in Cuyler a slow psychological metamorphosis from an insensitive hardworking stone cutter, to an artist who can build a monument to his dead wife that some choose to compare with the Taj. We find in him a progress from the basic Id to Ego through libido and a Superego in his marital life with Mercy and this growth into the Superego evolves into an artistic sensibility and creativity through an awareness of divinity and the human potential for creative activity. This leads in the long run to his blooming as an entrepreneur and business tycoon. It also enables him to become an effective speaker capable of holding audiences captive.

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