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Arthur Schnitzler's Dream Story: Fridolin's Dream as Schnitzler's Subconscious

Abstract

Arthur Schnitzler's short story Dream Story offers a unique insight into the subconscious of Schnitzler himself, provided through the choices of character names, and the experiences he details throughout the story. The character of Fridolin provides a stunning foil to Schnitzler's own life. Additionally, Schnitzler serves as an emblem of the fin-de-Siècle Vienna personality: sexually liberal with a chauvinistic bent.

Keywords

Arthur Schnitzler, Dream Story, Traumnovelle, Fridolin, Sex, Subconscious, fin-de-Siècle Vienna, Freud

Arthur Schnitzler's *Dream Story*: Fridolin's Dream as Schnitzler's Subconscious
Sarah Moir

Arthur Schnitzler's novella, *Dream Story*, is a complex and blurred account of the nighttime encounters of a middle-aged married doctor, Fridolin. Meandering around Vienna at night, Fridolin comes across Marianne, the daughter of a dying patient; Mizzi, a prostitute; the daughter of a costume shop owner dressed as a Pierrette; and a nameless woman at a basement orgy. Fridolin's thoughts and interpersonal interactions throughout the night are emblematic of Schnitzler's own life, including in the greater theme a representation of *fin-de-siècle* (end of the century) Vienna.

Fridolin has a very selfish attitude with regard to his wife and her perceived improprieties, whereas his attitude toward his own indiscretions is quite cavalier. For example, he highly values the premarital virginity of his wife. When she implies that the preservation of her virginity was not intentional, he is offended and marginally disgusted. He had had several lovers before their marriage, "many of which he had confessed to her...yielding to her jealous curiosity."¹ He justifies the existence of the prior lovers with the statement, "[I]n every woman I thought I loved it was always only you that I sought;" when she counters with, "[A]nd what if I had searched for you in others before, too?", Fridolin is disgusted at the thought that his wife might have been impure before their marriage.² Upon hearing Albertine's confession of a near-tryst before their marriage, Fridolin is scornful and full of disbelief. This double standard regarding virginity is also prominent in Schnitzler's own life, revealed through examinations of his diary. He had a mistress for three years, but he ended it due to "her admitted infidelity," although he was never faithful to his mistresses.³ Scholar Dagmar Lorenz notes that "Schnitzler engaged in affairs and erotic encounters, suspecting that his true love might be doing the same with men other than himself," precisely as Fridolin suspects may be true of his wife, Albertine.⁴

Fridolin's frequent interactions with women provide much evidence as to his attitudes towards women, and thereby Schnitzler's own attitudes. Marianne confesses her adoration for Fridolin, with such enthusiasm that she exclaims, "I don't want to leave here...I want to live near you."⁵ However, Fridolin reacts passively and expectantly, noting that "he had always known that she was in love with him or imagined that she was in love with him."⁶ His cavalier attitude is a bit egotistical, as though he is aware of his desirability among emotionally fragile women. After some time, Fridolin encounters Mizzi. After he turns down her offers of sexual favors, she exclaims that he is missing out, and "he walked over to her, wanted to embrace her, explained to her that he trusted her completely and was speaking the truth. He pulled her to him and wooed her like a sweetheart, like a beloved woman."⁷ When Mizzi accepts his declination of sex, he feels compelled to win her over; however when Marianne goes so far as to softly proclaim, "I

¹ Arthur Schnitzler, "Dream Story," in *Night Games and Other Stories and Novellas*, trans. Margret Schaefer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 207.

² Ibid.

³ Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, Introduction to *A Companion to the Works of Arthur Schnitzler*, ed. Dagmar C.G. Lorenz (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 2.

⁴ Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, "The Self as Process in an Era of Transition: Competing Paradigms of Personality and Character in Schnitzler's Works," in *A Companion to the Works of Arthur Schnitzler*, ed. Dagmar C.G. Lorenz (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 130.

⁵ Schnitzler, "Dream Story," 212.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 218.

love you;” Fridolin is uninterested and even pities her for her adoration.⁸ Even later, at the costume shop, Fridolin encounters the girl dressed as a Pierrette, and upon quite literally running into her, he enjoys her presence, noting that “he would have preferred either to stay here or to take the girl with him—whatever the consequences,” going so far as to assert to himself that “she was looking up at him seductively and childlike, as if spellbound.”⁹ Fridolin considers himself desirable to all women he encounters throughout the night, and when the encounter with Mizzi seems otherwise, he feels compelled to woo her.

This sexual compulsion and assertion of confidence is also something from which Schnitzler suffers. Arthur Schnitzler can be described in part as a “ladies’ man who proudly flaunted his conquests and yet never achieved happiness in his personal life;” much akin to how Fridolin acts in *Dream Story*.¹⁰ Schnitzler had a rabid appetite for women, and a quantifiable one at that, due to meticulous diary entries. He kept a record of his orgasms experienced with his various mistresses. Schnitzler and one mistress in particular, Jeanette, “had, on completion of the eleventh month of their relationship, tumbled to a climax exactly three hundred and twenty-six times.”¹¹ Schnitzler valued his desirability towards women, a fact that is underscored by his frequent affairs and mistresses. As scholar Peter Gay notes, “[A] catalogue of his adventures with women... would be long.”¹² Schnitzler’s fixation with constant attention from women is revealed within Fridolin’s assertive comments regarding his own desirability.

Fridolin’s character throughout *Dream Story* is also quite similar to Schnitzler’s actual life in terms of attitude and indeed actual life experiences. Fridolin’s nocturnal adventures begin with a house call he makes as a doctor, a profession he shares with Schnitzler. As an additional parallel, Fridolin encounters a prostitute named Mizzi, and Schnitzler too had had a relationship with a woman named Marie Glümer, who went by the nickname Mizi.¹³ The woman Fridolin meets at the party assumes a false name and an aristocratic title when she checked into her hotel, much like the süße Mädel that were prominent throughout *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Schnitzler himself coined the term, as a result of both his observations of society and his own sexual liaisons. With regard to those sexual liaisons, Schnitzler preferred virgins; indeed as noted by Gay, “[H]e desperately wanted his mistress of the moment to be a virgin and would suffer spectacular anguish when it became apparent that she was not.”¹⁴ Also noted by Gay, Schnitzler believed that “[w]omen are untrustworthy... nearly all of them whores;” however, “the thought that lovers like him made women into whores seems not to have occurred to him.”¹⁵ Schnitzler exhibited in reality what his character Fridolin exhibits throughout *Dream Story*: an extreme distaste for the thought that his love of the moment might have been made impure by prior lovers.

⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁰ Lorenz, Introduction, 1.

¹¹ Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor: Vienna 1888/1889* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 94. Schnitzler’s diary, however, is not merely a record of pleasurable sexual rendezvous. It was also “was an instrument tuned to every half tone of his psyche,” which allows for an accessible analysis of Schnitzler’s opinions toward women. Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 136.

¹² Peter Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture 1815-1914* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Ltd., 2002), 64.

¹³ Lorenz, Introduction, 2.

¹⁴ Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century*, 69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

It thus seems that throughout *Dream Story*, Fridolin serves as a foil for Arthur Schnitzler's subconscious. Fridolin analyzes his encounters as one might a dream, and indeed, his encounters may well be a dream—one of Schnitzler's. During his wanderings, Fridolin encounters the prostitute who shares the name of Schnitzler's former mistress, and when asked her name she comments, "Well, what do you think? Mizzi, of course."¹⁶ Additionally, when Fridolin attends the basement costume sex party, the password for the house is Denmark, a direct correlation to his earlier discussion with his wife about their vacation in Denmark. This sort of occasion, while an extraordinary coincidence in real life, is commonplace and accepted within a dream. In this way, it seems reasonable to assert that the nocturnal adventures of Fridolin throughout *Dream Story* serve as an examination of life for Schnitzler. He is writing a story about a dream-like state, into which he incorporates his own experiences and attitudes towards women. As asserted by Dr. Sigmund Freud, "[T]he dream [can serve] as a sort of *substitute* for the thought-processes, full of meaning and emotion, at which [he] arrived after the completion of the analysis."¹⁷ Schnitzler wrote *Dream Story* in an effort to analyze his life, much in the same way as Freud records his dreams to analyze his subconscious. Schnitzler died in 1931, five years after the publication of *Dream Story*. As asserted by Dagmar Lorenz, "[T]he older Schnitzler was plagued by depression and real and imagined ailments."¹⁸ With such a bleak demise, it is no wonder that Schnitzler attempted to reexamine his life, and through his a favored medium—prose.

Schnitzler created a character representative of his own personality, in order to detach himself from his feelings about his life and take a more interpretive, critical eye toward the events of his own life. He examines his life much the same way Freud examines his dreams: by quantifying his life into a fluid character with separate, albeit constructed, inner monologues, Schnitzler can attempt to understand his own opinions, attitudes, and experiences. At the conclusion of the story, the fate of the marriage of Fridolin and Albertine is in question, with the tantalizing phrase whispered by Albertine, "Don't tempt the future," closing the story.¹⁹ Schnitzler himself was married from 1903 until 1921, and his wife divorced him five years before the publication of *Dream Story*.²⁰ Examining the effect of one night's encounters on the couple serves as a further analysis with regard to Schnitzler's own life. Creating a character to justify or rationalize his attitudes toward women perhaps serves to calm Schnitzler's mind in his later, regretful years. Additionally, in constructing a character that experiences a dream, rather than analyzing a real dream of his own, Schnitzler takes a more defensive, self-preserving approach than Freud does.

Adding to his self-analysis, Schnitzler manages to incorporate some telling revelations about *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, recognizing a "dualism, the dual presence of upper and under-world; the respectable, sober, rational, decorous, noble, possible even sublime exterior or façade and the vital or demoniacally pathogenic" in the period.²¹ The party that Fridolin sneaks into is emblematic of this dual interplay within turn of the century Viennese life. Taking place in a basement, it quite literally follows the underworld evocations, yet the blunt eroticism and

¹⁶ Schnitzler, "Dream Story," 217.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "On Dreams," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Ltd., 1989), 147.

¹⁸ Lorenz, Introduction, 1.

¹⁹ Schnitzler, "Dream Story," 272.

²⁰ Lorenz, Introduction, 7.

²¹ Peter Heller, "Freud as a Phenomenon of the Fin de Siècle," in *Arthur Schnitzler and His Age: Intellectual and Artistic Currents*, ed. Petrus W. Tax et al. (Chapel Hill: Bouvier, 1984), 3.

sexuality of the party make it quite clear that this is not a high-class affair. And yet, all of the attendees are rumored to be disguised aristocracy. Through this bold inclusion of the underside of Viennese culture, Schnitzler is also including himself on both sides of the experience. Fridolin snuck into the party, and perhaps Schnitzler himself felt a bit as though he straddled the boundary between upper and lower class—his father ran in the high social circles, as a famous doctor²², but Schnitzler himself, “as a lover...ventured among women from the petty bourgeoisie of the outer districts.”²³ Arthur Schnitzler experienced all sides of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese culture and sought to portray them within one fictional dream-like night fraught with encounters. His own representation within *Dream Story* only further underscores the effectiveness of the cultural depiction.

Arthur Schnitzler, in his story *Dream Story*, succeeds in examining his life and creating a portrayal of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna through the nighttime encounters of his protagonist, Fridolin. The inner monologues and reactions of Fridolin throughout the story are not merely indicative of Schnitzler’s life experiences; they also serve as analysis toward understanding of Schnitzler’s life. Schnitzler follows a marginally different route than Freud, in that rather than interpreting his own dream in an objective and purely analytical way, Schnitzler creates a dream to function as a critical reflection on both his own life, and life within *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.

²² Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 95.

²³ Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century*, 4.