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Drawn to the Deep: Reading Theodore Finch's Death Drive Through Freudian Psychoanalysis in *All the Bright Places*

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Abstract:

Jennifer Niven's All the Bright Places (2015) introduces Theodore Finch as one of contemporary YA fiction's most psychologically complex characters, an adolescent who simultaneously seeks to live but also approaches death with unfailing commitment. Whereas scholarship on Niven's novel has so far been predominantly concerned with the narrative's treatment of mental illness and promoting greater awareness of YA suicidal ideation, this paper offers the first Freudian psychoanalytic reading of Finch's psychological disintegration, contending that his narrative journey can be most productively interpreted within the structure of Sigmund Freud's theory of Thanatos - the death drive. Based on Freud, the basic premise of the human psyche is the agential struggle, between its two unlike but interconnected drives: the life instinct of Eros, which is pulsating with love attraction union, and life, and Thanatos, which urges the mind on the road to self-destruction and dissolution. In Finch this paradoxical dialectic is rendered with striking literary force. From the early bells that symbolise Finch's largely anticipated spiralling death, to his scenic withdrawal from open Indiana fields into his bed, his wardrobe, and ultimately the river, the novel's architecture depicts a history of thanatotic dominance to which family, school and society turn a blind eye. This paper considers the significance of Finch's fragmented self-aspect-two selves, asleep and awake-as a signifier of the mind's failure to battle thanatos, and interprets his compulsive fascination with high places and water as its unthinking self-revelation. Using Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Mourning and Melancholia, this paper argues that All the Bright Places is not just a novel about mental illness: it is an epic dramatising of the death drive that society cannot see.

Keywords: Theodore Finch, Death Drive, Thanatos, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Young Adult Fiction, Ego Fragmentation.

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INTRODUCTION:

There is a kind of darkness that does not make itself known. It does not descend in a collapse, or come with a visible injury. It recedes quietly unwitnessed from the public space, from the sunlight, from other bodies, until all you are left with is a closet, a river, and silence; the darkness in which Theodore Finch lives in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015) is evidently one Freud would have seen.

Freud's theory of the two drives, most thoroughly elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), holds that we are governed not by one psychic force but by two forces locked in permanent, insoluble combat. The first is Eros, the life drive, which drives us forwards to unite us to what is outside us, to love, to learning, to creation, to self-preservation. The second is Thanatos, the death drive, which pulls us backwards, towards disconnection inanimation self-destruction. The healthy psyche is dominated by Eros. But eventually the injured one inflicted by all manner of unseen wounds, all manner of untreated illnesses, all manner of Un-see-able worlds succumbs to Thanatos. Niven meticulously chronicles the ways in which Thanatos gains ground -

chapter by chapter, place by place - until it is victorious.

This paper reads *All the Bright Places* Freudian psychoanalytically, suggesting that the character of Finch's story is most usefully understood as a literary dramatisation of the death drive. In a close analysis of the most important scenes of the novel (the bell tower; Indiana's wandering places; the shrinking's of domestic spaces; the river) it shows how Thanatos is established unconsciously in Finch, what happens to the fragmentation of his ego from the twin drives, and how the desensitised world surrounding these characters catastrophically fails to see the death drive in motion. In doing so, the paper argues that *All the Bright Places* is important for psychoanalytic literary studies a YA novel that does not simply depict mental illness, but dramatises the profound processes of mental fragmentation on which Freud spent a lifetime theorising.

Eros and Thanatos: The Dual Drive Tension in Theodore Finch

This is the genius of Niven's characterisation of Finch, that he is never simply suicidal in a

reductively clinical sense. From the first page he is a young man for whom both Eros and Thanatos are engaged in a brutal and overt war. What makes Finch tragic and rich in psychoanalytic terms is that he very much wishes to be alive. He loves Violet. He loves the wandering. He loves music and words and the forgotten corners of Indiana. Eros lives in Finch and this is precisely what makes the strength of Thanatos so painfully evident.

The novel begins with Violet and Finch standing on the ledge of the school bell tower quite literally on the brink of death. Here is the first intimation of the psychic war to come. And even in an achingly evident example like the opening paragraph, Finch's tone is simultaneously one of denotation and denial as when Finch, "I do this thing where I think too much and can't un-think" (Niven 3). What sounds such a faint comment is in fact a quite accurate account of the Freudian Ego imprisoned between two opposing poles, the mind incapable of giving Eros a voice that wills to keep Thanatos at bay no matter how loudly he demands to be heard.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud states that the death drive is in opposition to the pleasure principle it is not looking for

pleasure, but for abatement- of all tension, of all stimulation, of all life- to the silent slumber of inorganic nature. for Freud, this is not a choice, not a decision. It is an unconscious compulsion working beneath the surface of conscious life, expressed in behaviour which the individual himself can probably not explain or master. This is precisely how Finch enacts his relation to death- as not a conscious desire, but as a gravity which one cannot completely deny: "The thing is, I want to be good. I want to be brave and bold and everything. But I'm not" (Niven 78). The distance between what Finch craves, the Eros-oriented desire for virtue, boldness, and relatedness and the temptation to which he gravitates is the distance wedge between the life drive and the death drive, expressed in a voice that discloses no mythology to explain why his innards ache.

This struggle between Eros and Thanatos infuses every relationship Finch creates in the novel. His love for Violet is real it is arguably the novel's most powerful incident of Eros. The project of wandering with Violet, digging through the buried remains of Indiana, engaging her body, her hand in his, is Eros. But even in Eros's most audacious moments, Thanatos is lurking. Finch is

offstage. He is in hiding. Sometimes he's unresponsive. The death drive does not need love - it waits itself out, patiently and persistently, until Eros has worn itself out.

Ego Fragmentation: Asleep Finch and Awake Finch

Arguably the most profound psychoanalytical aspect of Finch's experience which makes it most relevant to psychoanalysis is his divided identity Asleep Finch and Awake Finch. This is not merely a plot device or a personality disorder. In fact, read through Freud himself, it is the textbook case of the ego split a consequence of the unbearable psychic pressure of conflicting drives.

Freud's structural model of the psyche, outlined in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), is comprised of three agencies: the id, which is the primitive source of drives and desire; the ego, which rests between the id and the reality principle; and the superego, the internalised voice of authority. If the ego is able to contain the pressure of these two opposing agencies, the self remains relatively intact. When the ego is overwhelmed by the death drive emanating from the id, the self-breaks up as well.

This kind of split is exactly what that division between the Asleep and Awake selves is. Awake Finch is dynamic passionate in love and receptive to him Eros takes shape in human form. Asleep Finch is reclined and impassive, lost and sinking. He is a self who has already begun to succumb to thanatos. Finch recognises this division but knows has no command of it: "I am broken and I am not fixed and my mind takes me to dark places" (Niven 180). The important word is 'takes', Finch doesn't go quietly to dark places ward: he is taken there by something within him that controls his conscious mind. This is the death drive in Freudian terms: not a desire but an impulse, not a decision but a pull.

The disintegration of Finch's ego becomes increasingly evident as the novel unfolds. Initially, the two selves are rhythmically oscillating with a certain authorial control Awake Finch assertively surfacing to wander, make music, while Asleep Finch creeps into the closet. By the end of the novel, Awake Finch is weak and infrequent. Asleep Finch in grave ascendancy. This is the gradual slide of the ego into total disarray; life-affirming Eros is inexorably giving way to death instinct Thanatos.

Most interestingly, Finch's closet in the novel is the spatial extension of this ego

fragmentation. It is the site of Asleep Finch (the dark, enclosed space into which his ego plummets as the burden of Thanatos becomes unbearable in the outside world.) In Freudian terms, the closet appears as the spatial incarnation of the unconscious: a dark interior space that maintains a barrier from the external world into which the death drive can operate free from any influence from social reality. When Finch escapes into the closet, he is not merely retreating from the world, he is embracing this inward turn of the death drive to the point of dissolution.

The Shrinking World: Landscape as Thanatos Made Visible

All the Bright Places arguably dramatises the death drive most powerfully through its detailed depiction of the shrinking of Finch's physical space. As the novel proceeds it maps, with a painful concreteness, the collapse of Finch's environments - from the sprawling, roaming landscapes of Indiana to his school, to his bedroom, to his closet, and eventually to the river. It is a map of Thanatos working.

Throughout the beginning part of the novel, Finch is wandering happily and freely outside. The wandering project he embarks upon with Violet takes them all over Indiana

to the Blue Hole, to Hooverville, to the Purina Tower, to Mudlavia. These wandering spaces are spaces of eros: place of motion excitement the possibility of life and each other. When Finch wanders, he is both most alive, most present, most able to ignore Thanatos, the pull of: "The great thing about this place is you can feel everything and feel nothing here at all" (Niven 152). This remarkable observation captures the paradox of Finch's relationship with open landscape - it is in wandering that he can hold both Eros and Thanatos at once, without either overwhelming him.

But as the appalling psychic state of the protagonist accelerates so the wandering retards. Finch refuses to go to school. he refuses to leave the house. he refuses to leave his room. He retreats instead to his closet. Each retreat signifies a stage of the death drive's victory over the self: the progressive reduction of life space for the agonising protagonist, the ever shrinkage of the universe until it is a tiny darkness in the mental mine, until it collapses into the nothingness that finally encompasses him. 'The aim of the death drive', Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is actually to regress to the lifeless state that preceded life and Finch's closet is just such a pregnant

regress: a womb-like retreat from the awful life to a state which anticipates, in unreal hours, his death.

The river marks the last stop of this journey of the negation. Finch drowns in the Blue Hole the same water in which he and Violet had been innocently unburdened of selves. The significance of the water is profoundly psychoanalytical (Freud), as the water symbolises the unconscious, the formless undifferentiated state that predates individuation, the return to the origin. The drowning in the water is death but also, in the Freudian sense, a return the ultimate affirmation of Thanatos that he has a run-up on the death drive which is ready and ready to erase the self, streamlining life into its fluid simple nothingness. Thanatos, patient and persistent, lead Finch from the Indiana plains, into the water, where its power is felt.

Mourning and Melancholia: Finch's Unresolved Grief

A further important note for reading Finch's mind can be found in Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). Freud draws upon the contrast between mourning- the health-full process of mourning grief that can be eventually come to an end while the ego stays healthy and melancholia an

abnormal grief which the unbearable grief was granted into being a part of the ego.

In fact, since the beginning of the novel, even Finch is grieving; he, a little child, is grieving everything he has never been able to grieve his father's absence and presence of violence, his mother's emotional unavailability, and his family's general neglect and instability. These, after all, are the griefs he has never been able to grieve in the world that has caused them: for the loss of his father, for the loss of a kind of childhood safety, for the loss of a mother's love. And so there are no grieving rituals around these griefs in the world that has caused them; there is no acknowledgement of damage, of place, in which they may be named; and they are mourned solely in the declaratory melancholic space of Finch's ego.

Freud's theory of melancholia illuminates precisely what is happening to Finch; Yes, Freud writes, the melancholy subject 'sends the hostility that the loss awakens in him not towards the thing, but into himself who has lost it: he destroys himself'. The hostile impulse turns inward on the subject: in Freud's words, 'self-reproach leads to self-diminution, which leads to self-destruction'. This is exactly what is happening to Finch;

frustrated in his capacity to objectify his loss, confused by its impossible extent, he condemns himself into silence. The self-loathing that surfaces periodically throughout the novel – “I am broken” (Niven 180), “I am a problem” is not merely low self-esteem. It is, in Freudian terms, melancholic self-aggression: the ego destroying itself because it cannot direct its grief outward toward its proper objects.

The importance of Finch dying with no diagnosis of his bipolar disorder, and so no diagnosis at all, and no treatment, cannot be overstated. He is never evaluated, let alone medicated, never given a language with which to express, albeit diagnostically psychologically what is happening to him. This is no accident; this is the crux of the social argument of the novel. Without any diagnosis or intervention, Finch begins a gradual accumulation of grief, loss upon loss, until he is just too heavy to carry anymore. Freud explains that mourning ends when the ego admits and confirms the loss, re-investing in the world, whereas melancholia continues to accumulate, ever increasingly, until the object of its focus is finally no longer able to fight the pull of Thanatos. Only now the force of that pull is so great that it is impossible to resist.

Society’s Failure: Nobody Sees Thanatos at Work

If *All the Bright Places* were simply a novel about a single teenager’s death drive, it would be psychologically nuanced but socially sterile. What’s of value in this novel, what’s necessary about it as a YA work, is Niven’s argument that Finch’s death is not simply a psychological tragedy but an inherently social one. Thanatos isn’t happening in a vacuum. It’s happening in a family, a school, a community - and all three institutions are blind.

Finch’s family is the primary and most essential location for failure. The violence and absence of Finch’s father, lay down the initial psychic scars which launch Finch’s Melancholia. His mother’s deep love for him is overpowered by her franticness, and is fundamentally absenting herself from his psyche; while his sisters themselves are children in a broken family. No adult in Finch’s life is able to see the death drive coursing through him, not because they are cruel, but because they are themselves living in a family system which never taught them to look.

This is the second institution Finch has failed the most powerful and where arguably it

hurts the most. We see Finch failing in school; he disappears, is called a poser, regarded as a delinquent rather than a young person in psychic crisis. The counsellor he is sent to see offers empty boilerplate not real appraisal. The institutional machinery of the school (the penalty machine, the pastoral system, all of it) are absolutely unprepared to even see the difference between the difficult student and the death drive quietly awakening. Finch fails every institutional net that the school might have used to save him until he is already in the river.

Even Violet and she love Finch unwaveringly and delicately is not able to really discern what Thanatos is up to. We see her react to his retreats, his vanishings, his increasing distance as failures of communication, rather than as symptoms of psychic disorientation. Not Violet's fault she is a teenager, not a clinician but it makes clear the book's central social argument: that the death drive in an adolescent cannot be pinpointed and halted by love, but only by institutional knowledge, clinical knowledge, a sociomedical system prepared to treat mental ill health as the medical emergency that it is. Whatever Thanatos is up to, no such sociomedical system exists in Finch's world.

The note Finch leaves for Violet a smattering of quotations and place names denoting their travels together could be the death drive in all its terrible irony. Even in death, the eros loops back through the landscape the only love map he has left behind. But Thanatos won long ago. It is all that remains when the map maker is no more: a record of resilience in the face of Thanatos.

Conclusion

Theodore Finch does not die because he wishes to die. He dies because a part of him older than desire, older than consciousness, more patient than love is calling him toward dissolution and nobody in his world has the knowledge or power to stop that call. Read through Freud's formulation of the dual drives, Finch's journey in *All the Bright Places* is not just a testament to adolescent mental illness or teen suicide. Instead, it is a fictional enactment of Thanatos in living flesh, wandering in empty rooms and drifting out to water.

This essay has made the case that Freudian psychoanalysis is among the most insightful methods of interpreting Finch's psychic disintegration: the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos accounts for the antithetical presence of a young man who loves life and

moves toward death; the notion of the fragmented ego accounts for the split between Asleep Finch and Awake Finch; the system of the melancholia accounts for the accumulation of unprocessed grief that gives Thanatos substance; and the narrowing of Finch's scenic world maps, literally in spatial terms, the progression of the death drive from the wide-open fields of Indiana to the evacuated silence of the river.

Aside from its literary value then this reading also has an immediate social consequence. If what kills Finch isn't just his individual mind, but an institutional darkness; the schools home communities that cannot hear the death drive alive in their youth then the novel is still a cry for help. Thanatos isn't always loud; it doesn't always ring its ears. Sometimes it rings in the closet, in the ceasing of wandering, in the closing of the mouth. Niven's novel proclaims, through Freud and through Finch, in voice and silence, that this silence has to be heard, before the river.

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