

## In Response to the Freudian Will to Pleasure: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Dan Millman's Way of the Peaceful Warrior (1980)

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### Abstract:

This paper examines Dan Millman's standpoint toward the Freudian pleasure principle through a psychoanalytic reading of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (1980). It aims at exploring the central character's source of dissatisfaction and the driving force that motivates him to overcome life obstacles. While Freud holds that Man's main motivation in life is pleasure, Millman shows that following the hedonistic drive does not guarantee happiness. He leans toward the Franklian perspective in advocating meaning as the central driving force for humans. Millman's protagonist could survive his 'existential vacuum' only when opting for a conscious change of attitude.

**Keywords:** Pleasure Principle; Freud; Millman; Frankl; Meaning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Several literary artists try to uncover the mysteries of human life by means of their literary productions in which they share their personal lived experiences. The American gymnast champion and author Dan Millman could transform a personal life tragedy into a life-changing philosophy embedded in his bestselling novel *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (1980). Millman's autobiographical piece of literary prose attributes the author's real name to the protagonist who undergoes a blend of real-life events and fictional occurrences that lead to a remarkable transformation of the central round character's thoughts, personality, and perception of life.

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Dan Millman's twisting plot dives into the human psyche and shows how greatly possible it is to overcome life ordeals and find infinite joy. Opting for immersing the central character in psychologically stirred stimuli in his search for happiness, one expects the Freudian doctrines to take the lead and confirm the applicability of the pleasure principle on Millman's fictional human characters, especially when they are a projection of the author's self. *Way of the Peaceful Warrior's* ideas about happiness and the essence of human quest in life, however, seem to have different teachings that defy Sigmund Freud's principles. On his official website, Millman declares that "all seeking -for knowledge or achievement, for power or pleasure, for love or wealth or even spiritual experience- is driven by the promise of happiness" (Millman, 2018). The very same concept is advocated by Sigmund Freud, yet the peculiarities surrounding this search for happiness per se seem to be different.

Despite the scarcity of studies conducted on *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, the few available academic reviews and critical documents that analysed Millman's standpoints in his literary production approached the novel from differing perspectives. Ho-Ling Hsu, in his analysis of this novel's cinematic adaptation, points out that the human's direct search for happiness can, paradoxically, lead him further away from it whenever unexpected or undesirable circumstances are encountered (2015, p. 05). Without making reference to the Freudian claims, Hsu enumerates three sources for Dan's dissatisfaction in life; resentment or indignation, not getting what he wants, and abandoning what he loves (p. 06). Hsu neglects the latter's emotional state after the satisfaction of all cravings, but in a way, he advances the feasibility of terminating human suffering or dissatisfaction "by refuting these irrational premises" (p. 21), just as Dan eventually learns to do.

Fengjuan Wu and Zhengshun Han, as to them, confer the "paradoxical elements" (2015 p. 718) that appear both in the written novel and in its cinematic adaptation. They report that Millman's protagonist whose "psyche is a barren field of desolation, emptiness [and] suffering from restlessness" (ibid.) becomes a different person after having met Socrates; the wise old man. Their analysis ignores the symbolic interpretation and metaphoric representation of this character whose role is vital in the protagonist's transformational process. They slightly verge on the concept of happiness and agree with Ho-Ling Hsu on the novel's innovative thoughts along with its paradoxical dimension in relation to reality, but disregard highlighting the human driving force that pushed Dan to embrace life and led to accepting these paradoxes.

The novel's specific philosophy is still not clearly established in academia. Professor Chifen Lu, when approaching it from a social psychological perspective, took into consideration the fact that Dan

Millman was a world champion gymnast prior to becoming an author and classified the book as sports literature. She thinks that this work is mainly about “the improvement of skills and maturing of attitude required for mastering the sports” (2014, p. 263) per se. Although she agrees that Millman’s novel differs from other pieces of prose in terms of its representation of Man’s attitude and growth, and that this work’s main emphasis is put “upon spiritual enlightenment” and “personal growth” rather than “physical excellence” (p. 264), Chifen Lu neglects diving deeper into the human psychological motives that led Dan toward similar types of excellence in life. This paper seeks to explore the driving force of Dan, the central character, which motivates him to overcome life obstacles and ensures his survival. It aims at analyzing Millman’s standpoint toward the Freudian perspective in terms of the human pursuit of happiness through a psychoanalytic reading of the selected novel. As such, a different perspective on the author’s stance within the realm of psychology is offered through analysing and examining the applicability of the Freudian Pleasure Principle on the author’s thoughts. Therefore, tracing Dan’s will to pleasure, its engendered consequences, the protagonist’s promoted Franklian driving force and the symbolic interpretation of the character who led Dan’s transformational process will be the main focus of the following sections of the study in this paper.

## **2. Dan’s Will to Pleasure**

Sigmund Freud announces his axiomatic belief that all humans “strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so” (1961, p. 23). In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, he explains that Man is *instinctively* driven toward avoiding pain or suffering as a means of finding happiness and pleasure (ibid.). He theorizes that the fundamental quest of human beings revolves around, what he calls, the pleasure principle. Freud built on his pioneering division of the human psyche into three layers: the Id, the Ego and the Superego, and concludes in one of his earlier essays, entitled *The Ego and the Id* (1923) that the Id, which takes the dominant part in the human mind construction, is in charge of procuring pleasure so as to ensure survival (p. 23). He enumerates three strategies, referred to as “palliative measures” (p. 22), which are put in play at an unconscious level to avoid life misery and pain. For him, ‘deflections’, ‘substitute satisfactions’ and ‘intoxicating substances’ are indispensable mechanisms that govern human reactions and make one live according to the pleasure principle. This deterministic vision appears to be followed only to be countered by Millman who offers a different formula for happiness.

Throughout the novel, the author seems to rely much on delayed decoding in showing his personal stance toward the presented themes. Right from the beginning, the interpretation of the central character’s recurrent

dream can attest to a distinction of two different phases that are offered beforehand to foreshadow Dan's upcoming life events. The nightmare which awakens him almost every night foretells how a "white-haired man" (p. 16) would save him from a threatening ghost. That gloomy specter which stares at him in "deathly silence" can stand as a representation of his life prior to meeting Socrates; a phase of life that chokes him with its depressing feelings, while the appearance of the latter within the plot much resembles the dream's savior who is Dan's "only hope of escape" (ibid.) which stands as a turning point toward the change he witnessed in his own life. The appearance of Socrates denotes a clear shift of perspectives and awakens the protagonist to some aspects of happiness he was not aware exists.

Dan's life, in its initial phase, appears so fulfilling and pleasant; an athlete with loving parents, a secure environment and a clear determination to become a gymnast champion. He seeks happiness through abiding by the pleasure principle and satisfying any arising biological needs or urging instincts. Besides having the habit of gulping all kinds of food to feel happy, Dan testifies to the Freudian libidinal drives when he reports having been paid "amorous visits more and more often" by Susie (p. 16), having "washed out on every discipline" (p. 122) with the seducing Valerie, having spent nights "of intimacy" (p. 158) with Linda and that, he felt on top of the world as "women smiled" at him (p. 16). Although he felt a heart inclination towards Joy whose age had not yet permitted a marital engagement, he rather preferred not to wait and indulged himself in a failed marriage relationship with Linda because he finds her attractive. As such, Dan attests on actively seeking pleasure and on applying the Freudian "substitute satisfactions" (1961, p. 22), one of the latter's aforementioned theorized 'auxiliary constructions' (ibid.) for compensating the lack of pleasure.

The two remaining strategies, i.e., deflection and chemical intoxication, are both present in the novel. Freud posits that resorting to professional achievements or scientific activity is a means to "make light" out of one's misery (p. 22). Thus, Dan's striving for excellence in gymnastics can be read as an act of deflecting from pain to seeking pleasure. Dan affirms so when he says "I trained to exhaustion, [...], I wanted a physical reason for the ache inside" (p. 68). He then "drowned [himself] in books" when he wanted to forget about his urging need to encounter Joy. Dan also declares his desire to opt for following his passion through writing a book when he finally decides to retire from gymnastics, and this can be seen as another intellectual mechanism to achieve happiness when he drained the pleasure he used to physically get from sports.

As for intoxicating substances, alcoholism seems to be Dan's refuge whenever he feels bad. When he experienced the pains of his depression,

Dan asserts that he “got as drunk as [he] could, [and that he] was grateful for unconsciousness” (p. 68). He consciously states his yearning to intoxicate his body just to lose himself to a void of pleasure. The author did not deny Dan’s inability to control the force of his urging inner need and the temptation to drink that “special wine” (p. 122), nor did he hide his strong disagreement with the idea of ceasing alcoholic drinks when proposed by, his mentor, Socrates.

Such a one-sided approach to the novel, under the lenses of the Freudian pleasure principle, may show that the hedonistic drives are the main leading force which pushes the central character forward in his search for happiness as he seems to be fully led by his id drives and well catered into enjoying the pleasures of life. Dan Millman, however, shows the protagonist’s dissatisfaction, his depression and melancholy right after having drowned him in the Freudian ways of contentment while opposing, both, his methods and their engendered results with those of his enigmatic mentor whose philosophy, with its consequential elevated feelings, is totally different. He demonstrates that Dan’s way of life which is much dictated by the Freudian doctrine needs to be revised, amended and changed.

### **3. Dan’s “Existential Vacuum”**

Designating Socrates to lead Dan’s transformational process validates the author’s countering position towards the Freudian perspective and hints at his preferred orientation. Dan Millman leans more towards the ideas of Viktor Emil Frankl; the founder of the third Viennese school of psychoanalysis. While Freud holds that Man’s main motivation in life is pleasure and that the reason for human malaise is an internal frustration at the libidinal level, Viktor Frankl, considers “Man’s search for meaning [as] the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives” (1984, p. 105). Just like Frankl, Millman shows that Dan’s main reason of unhappiness is not a libidinal conflict but rather an existential matter.

The protagonist’s life, under the pleasure principle, embodies a clear phase of ‘existential vacuum’ (Frankl, 1984, p. 111). Dan’s fluctuating feelings, prior to the changes he eventually underwent, loom toward depression and misery. He declares, more than once, that his “life no longer makes sense” (Millman, 1980 p. 47), “it was a general disappointment” (p. 53) and it ultimately “became an ordeal” (p. 69). Although he had some instances of excitement in the gym, Dan confirms that he felt “melancholy in the midst of all [his] achievements” (p. 16). He was not aware of the root cause of his malaise and kept trying to satisfy his instinctual urges to halt his choking feelings. Right after getting his needed libidinal gratification from Susie, he expected to find happiness but realized his tastelessness of any pleasures. He voiced his thoughts of wonder saying: “I should feel good” [...] but my mood was grey like the fog outside” (p. 39). The central

character provides a confirmation that despite having fully fed his instinctual drives for the sake of pleasure, the palliative strategies he relied on seem to yield negative results instead of procuring enjoyment. Accordingly, unlike what Freud puts forward, the satisfaction of libidinal urges seems to rather lead Dan to displeasure. The pains he underwent could neither be avoided that way nor eased through displacement or deflection.

In fact, Dan's predicament appears to have roots in his very early ages; for even when recounting his childhood memories along with the feelings he held throughout his future life, Dan mentions the fact that despite all the gifts and toys he used to have, he was "bored [and] tired" (p. 52), and despite being "the top high school gymnast in Los Angeles" (*ibid.*), he sees his life as a mere superfluous routine. Dan has always been able to instantly respond to his cravings and satisfy his internal instinctual needs to silence his pain and procure enjoyment. Yet, when he sank into a depressive episode and tried to sort himself out of it via a search for pleasure, he asserts that "the movies [he] sat through had lost their colors, the food [he] ate tasted like paste" (p. 69), "drugs could give [him] no solace" (p. 70) and that he even lost control over his mood, over his emotions and over his life in spite of all the efforts he spent. Therefore, the unconscious methods put in play rather seem to worsen his case and lead to experiencing undesirable feelings that make life seem meaningless for Dan. He considers his whole existence futile and rather pointless.

#### **4. Dan's Will to Meaning**

What seems to work best for Millman's protagonist is the contrary of what Freud hypothesizes. Socrates, in his process of changing Dan, instructs him to "sharpen [his] instincts" (p. 117) instead of feeding and satisfying them. For him, the Id drives can be controlled and managed rather than being given the leading role for survival. He openly orders Dan to strictly control what he eats, to stop taking all sorts of drugs and to refrain from any preoccupation with libidinal gratification so as to train him on bearing the responsibility of managing his different instinctual urges. He insists that Dan's process of maturation is not an easy task, but advises saying "no matter what urges you may feel; be guided by a superior discipline" (p. 123). Being conscious in dealing with one's desires and unconscious driving forces is considered a practice of superior warriors. Despite the difficulty encountered in getting adapted to Socrates' rules, Dan himself reports being through his former "slave[ry] to random impulses" (p. 124). When he experienced the force of his conscious self-mastery, he felt the real inner freedom and could eventually reap remarkable positive fruits.

Socrates taught him that following one's unconscious drives and instinctual urges does not guarantee happiness. It rather leads to short instances of comforting oneself through erroneously sympathizing with

one's victimized unconscious side. He taught Dan that he can choose to be a victim or anything else he decides to be, and informs him that "the warrior acts [...] and the *fool* only reacts" (p. 31). In clear disagreement with Freud's deterministic view and reactive mechanisms, the author puts forward that life, in its totality, is built on conscious choices instead of unconscious responses. In fact, the mentor wants Dan to embrace freedom and be fully responsible; through his efforts to change his attitude and reverse his old ways of living. He makes him aware that "[his] state of health, happiness, and every circumstance of [his] life has been, in large part, arranged by [him] -consciously or unconsciously-" (p. 37). He, accordingly, sets him free of the said-to-be deterministic Id prison he previously puts himself into.

Ironically, the central character was meant to go through a phase of self-victimization when everything about his life was ready to drench him in the different Freudian sources of pleasure, yet only when he truly fell under a predicament that made him, externally seem like, a victim of life's harsh occurrences that he could discover his inner strength which has ever since been tied to his own internal perception. When Dan broke his leg and was bound to give up on his life dream of competing in the international gymnastics game, he starts consciously acting on adjusting his attitude and thereby succeeds at discovering his boundless state of inner freedom.

With Socrates' guidance, Dan learnt to change the angle from which he perceives the fact of shattering his leg. Instead of taking it as an obstacle or an ordeal, he considers it an opportunity for improvement (Hsu, 2015, p. 20). Here, he attributed a meaning to this incident and enabled himself of seeing the bright side of this accident, per se, and of life's painful events in general. By training himself on activating his conscious faculties, Dan realized that even in the midst of pain, humans could rejoice at long-lasting feelings of peace and happiness by means of their attitude. What could ultimately cure him is his will to meaning and not his search for pleasure. Millman meant by juxtaposing Dan's instinctual need to meet Joy, the girl he loves, with his decision to buy the motorcycle which led him towards his momentary suffering, that the accident, per se, is in fact his source of joy. He needed to readjust and cultivate his understanding of life's occurrences through undergoing a process of maturation that requires a strong change of attitude. Hence, the fact that the author conceals Joy's real age before putting Dan on the first steps of his transformational ladder, and then revealing her relatively young age, to hinder Dan from establishing lasting bonds with her, indicates that Dan's joy at that stage was still too young and immature. He needed more time to change the way he sees, what might have seemed as, life's misfortunes, to reach the level of welcoming the accident which happened to let him experience a different taste of happiness. Eventually, when Dan overcame his dilemma and matured his attitude, he

could get married to Joyce in whom he finds a refined version of Joy. Dan was always curious about Socrates' secret of happiness prior to having his own accident, but when he finally experienced the power of consciously managing one's own attitude, he could eventually come to that very state of happiness despite the difficulty of all hindering circumstances.

Previously, Dan was forcing his body in the gym looking for a tangible physical pain that justifies his existential ache, but after activating his inner warrior's peaceful way, Dan finds pleasure in the physical pain he was naturally having while training his body to cope with his broken leg. The accident led him to reverse his old ways of seeing things; to the extent that pain seemed enjoyable and rather fine. When reaching this stage, he could make himself feel happy without searching for any reasons that may give him glimpses of pleasure. Probably, he would have never had that lasting feeling of peace, serenity and satisfaction had not he undertaken that shift of perspectives which let him undergo pain joyfully. Unlike what Freud theorises, human beings are endowed with the capacity to feel happy and rather enjoy pain when they have a strong reason to bear it in mind.

### **5. Death of the False Self and Reconciliation with the Self**

Within an existential vacuum and in the absence of meaning, dark or extreme perceptions of life, like those held by Dan, may generally push individuals to either opt for death or fully embrace life. Millman shows that his protagonist passed through the first phase in order to find peace and real happiness in the second. Within his former mental state, Dan's only solution to his deep feelings of melancholy and depression seemed quitting life as he noted that he "wouldn't mind disappearing" (p. 68). He declared his intention to put an end to his inner ache, more than once, informing the psychiatrist "I'm going to kill myself" (p. 71), "I want to kill myself" (ibid.) then again emphasizing and justifying to Socrates "I don't want to live" (p. 72). The two death instances referred to in the novel are rather symbolic. In his first, the central character sought relief from his deep pain and agony through committing suicide, and in his second, he was making sure death would give him eternal solace. In both occasions, Dan is accompanied by Socrates.

Symbolically, when Dan eventually applies what Socrates taught him, he comes to witness the decease of his own illusions and unauthentic self; he detached himself from his erroneous identification with his own thoughts, sought things clearer and learnt how to master his driving biological instincts and cravings. Dan, after surviving his suicidal urges and depressive episodes, decided not to embrace self-victimization anymore and to rather bear the responsibility of his own life, of his own thoughts and actions. He felt the change and attests saying: "something in me was dying--I knew this for a certainty and something else was being born" (p. 45). When Dan followed the new teachings of his mentor, he



could eventually get out of his existential vacuum. In fact, what could die in Dan in both aforementioned death instances is his false-self which used to drown him into fake roads of pleasure. Its decease pushed him toward sorting out his misconceptions about who he truly is and thus permitted reconciliation with himself. Dan accounts for the positive changes, the extreme enjoyment and the eternal peaceful life he could finally reach when following and experiencing the new teachings of Socrates.

This mentor, within Dan Millman's plot, is the sole person who most exemplifies a life of pure happiness. The reader is triggered to doubt the concrete existence of this character and is much driven to take him for a more metaphoric representation. Throughout the novel, he seems to have a symbolic stance. Since he represents the ideal image the protagonist ultimately seeks to resemble, he may stand as Dan's higher-self. The eponymous allusion to the philosopher Socrates blatantly calls for a will to meaning and explains Millman's standpoint. Socrates personifies the teachings he encourages Dan to follow, and his way to happiness is utterly different. Right from their very first encounter, Dan is described as a hungry cold boy who walks aimlessly and wears an insincere smile when talking, while Socrates as a comfortable man who stands still and replies with an innocent smile (p. 21); a portrayal that reflects each one's ways of conducting life. Contrasting Dan's life to that of Socrates through juxtaposing both characters' thoughts, feelings and reactions throughout the novel shows the ineffectiveness of the pleasure principle and the possibility of defying any unconscious, instinctual Id drives so as to get lasting positive feelings. It confirms the feasibility of leading a conscious life.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The author gave his central character the right to take various sorts of roads that may lead to procuring pleasure, but after each attempt, the experience proves to yield no lasting effects. Dan could finally find peace and pleasure; he sought copying from Socrates, when he decides to become fully responsible for his own actions and opts for activating the freedom faculties of his conscious states of being. As such, Dan Millman conveys his disagreement with the Freudian deterministic view which is postulated through his theory of the pleasure principle. Millman shows that following the hedonistic drive does not guarantee happiness but rather leads to unwanted feelings and engenders serious negative results, whereas cultivating the instinctual urges leads to more power and strength to resist life's ordeals. In accordance with Viktor Frankl's theory, what could save Dan from his melancholy and depression, which is brought about by his existential vacuum that resulted in his tastelessness of life, is rather the force of meaning he attributed to his life's events. Dan witnessed the death

of his false self and could reach reconciliation with his authentic self. Through changing his attitude and seeing the bright side of life's occurrences, Dan could find pleasure even in the midst of pain.

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