

Marisa Sandoval

Jessica Maucione

English 308

30 May 2008

Unconsciously Desiring Jack: Vanessa's *Ghost Dance* with Cocaine

“When [Marta] returned she held something wrapped in a white cloth. Slowly she unwrapped it. It was a hypodermic needle. ‘Cocaine,’ she whispered, ‘was not meant to be snorted. Believe me. I know’” (Maso 149). With her new friend Marta’s sensual encouragement, Vanessa Turin, the protagonist of Carole Maso’s novel *Ghost Dance*, begins her tumultuous journey with intravenous cocaine and, consequently, her lover Jack. Written in a lyrical manner, *Ghost Dance* reflects the desires of Vanessa, a young Vassar student. Narrating this complex novel through personal accounts relating to her family, Vanessa attempts to satiate her desire for familial love by filling the void with her various creations of her vibrant imagination. During each of these inventive episodes, Vanessa’s psychological “unconscious,” her instinctual desire, becomes evident through the mysterious character Jack. This division between knowable reality and unconscious desire becomes skewed due to her addiction to cocaine, blurring the differences to both Vanessa and the reader. Throughout *Ghost Dance*, Vanessa Turin constantly battles with her psychological unconscious and vivid desires as manifested in the character Jack, striving to differentiate between what is created by her unconscious desires and reality, all the while struggling with her addiction to illicit drugs.

Like many psychoactive drugs, cocaine and heroin both provide a sense of release for the user. Expressed physically and psychologically, this release takes the user to a different plane of action, providing images and feelings not offered by reality. In his book *The Street Addict Role*

Richard Stephens explains several theories behind an individual's choice to use illicit drugs. The most common psychiatric theory argues that "the individual's psyche is in some way flawed and the individual uses psychoactive drugs to cope with or ameliorate the emotional or intrapsychic distress, depression, or low self-esteem he or she feels" (108). An addict uses drugs to escape trauma, past or present. Stephens expands upon these ideas while explaining the psychiatric and psychoanalytic theories behind the causes of drug use among young women. Among these "the role of maternal neglect and lack of love, maternal dominance coupled with passive and ineffectual father figures" (Stephens 109) and, as described by Sigmund Freud, "early childhood experiences, especially the interaction with the mother" (Stephens 109) lead a woman to abuse illicit drugs. These causes soundly resonate in the novel *Ghost Dance*. Feeling depressed and alone in her world, Vanessa moves from silently coping with her neglectful mother and dreamy father to physically injecting release from this pain, a classic example of a young woman addicted to drugs.

Even though she is a fictional character, Vanessa's behavior mimics that of an actual cocaine or heroin addict. In his scientific paper "The Reward System and Cocaine Abuse," George F. Koob illustrates the positive and negative effects of cocaine addiction on the user. To begin, Koob explains that cocaine is used often as an anesthetic in clinical situations, suppressing intense feelings (340). Consequently, when an addict experiences withdrawal from cocaine, this loss of medicinal pain-reliever causes severe anhedonia, the inability to feel pleasure. In response, an addict requires another dose of cocaine to feel pleasure (Koob 349). This paradox mirrors Vanessa's relationship with drugs: to subdue the pain caused by maternal neglect, Vanessa turns to the anesthetic effects of cocaine and heroin; in turn, this causes Vanessa to become more depressed, fervently desiring the therapeutic pleasure resulting from her opiate

lover Jack. Vanessa deeply desires to be released from her reality and intravenous drugs offer an outlet.

Extracted from Lentricchia and McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Judith Butler's essay "Desire" offers various explanations for literary desire. Due to Vanessa's choice to use intravenous drugs, her unconscious desires become an intentioned action: "In Aristotle, desire is figured as that which persists between the natural and the psychic domains, mediated by an *ethos* or a domain of regularly practiced habits. To a certain degree, desire is the effect of a deliberate choice" (Butler 376). Although she does not openly acknowledge what she wants most from her mother, love, she decides to free her mind by submitting to cocaine. Butler also argues: "...irrational and arbitrary desire is considered passive, merely undergone, suffered, but not structured or determined by the subject as a rational agent" (376-377). In other words, Vanessa is allowed to endure her painful desire because of her choice to take cocaine, to liberate her desire rather than aggressively acting against it. At the end of the novel, Vanessa finally does take action; she and her brother Fletcher cast out the ghost of Christine with black cornmeal and pine incense (Maso 275). Reflecting this moment in *Ghost Dance*, Butler suggests: "Desire is never fulfilled, for its fulfillment would entail a full return to that primary pleasure, and that return would dissolve the very subject which is the condition of desire itself" (381). By the final chapter Vanessa leaves her abusive lover whom she previously desired to fill the gap created by Christine. Instead of fulfilling this desire, Vanessa performs an otherworldly ghost dance and achieves closure—expressed maternal love.

Because Vanessa's unconscious mind transcends her desire, it is necessary to understand the literary significance of the unconscious. In his essay "Unconscious," Françoise Meltzer classifies "the unconscious" in purely Freudian psychological terms; it is "by definition

unseeable; its existence is inferred (rather than empirically demonstrated) by occurrences in life which are not consciously motivated” (Meltzer 149). According to Meltzer, the mind may be divided into two mental states: the conscious and the unconscious. When the mind actively makes decisions, acts on its own accord, and thinks critically on world events, the conscious mind controls the unconscious; this is what is knowable to a person. However, when the mind rests, the unconscious may dominate. The unconscious will then influence the conscious and, thus, a person’s notion of reality: “The irony is that the unconscious can only be described in, or understood in, the realm and the rules of ‘consciousness’” (Meltzer 149). To understand this division between the two mental states, one must realize that the unconscious becomes discernable in dreams, fantasies, and desires, all outside of reality. These unconscious desires, according to Freud, may suddenly become evident in the conscious mind; breakthroughs such as slips of the tongue are “proof” that the unconscious not only exists, but also remains active under the conscious mind (Meltzer 151).

Throughout *Ghost Dance*, the unconscious constantly affects Vanessa. Even though Meltzer argues that analyzing fictional characters is futile, due to their inability to speak to the reader (153), characters still deserve a critical analysis. By using Maso’s biographical information, it becomes possible to scrutinize *Ghost Dance*’s characters in order to gain insight into the novel’s plot. Having inherited her mother’s poetic and vivid imagination, the character Vanessa relies her mind to create a world of her own: “What I wished for every night, staring at the ceiling before I dozed off, was a point of view, something I believed, a way to respond to the world that would be distinctly my own” (Maso 81). According to Louise DeSalvo, Vanessa not only relies on this creation to fulfill her individual desires for stable affection, but also because she has been directed to do so by her mother Christine: “The reason people are what they are is

part miracle, part mystery. The answer to her character, she tells her daughter, is to be found in legend, in story, and not in memory or in rational discourse” (DeSalvo). Because of this belief, Vanessa must rely on what is unknown, her unconscious, to invent what may be real, her imagination’s creation—Jack.

DeSalvo suggests: “the most useful, the most dangerous thing Vanessa has learned from her mother is how to use the fit of her imagination.” In her experiences with drugs, Vanessa allows her imagination to take control. Echoing a previous incident with Christine, Vanessa’s initial experience with intravenous cocaine allows her imagination to run wild, freely removing herself from the pain and into another world: “The ballroom is gigantic!” (Maso 52, 150). Both Christine and Marta use metaphorical gowns and orchestras to eliminate Vanessa’s painful reality (caused by a bicycle accident and later depression) and transport her to a glorious, ethereal ballroom. Vanessa effectively escapes reality and arrives in a world where she is elegantly dressed—perhaps like Grace Kelly—and loved the way she wishes, loved by her mother.

Because of her desire for love, Vanessa generates a personality to satiate her needs. Whether he is real or imagined, the character Jack fills the gap between the conscious and the unconscious. In *Ghost Dance* the appearance of Jack causes the reader to question whether Vanessa is narrating her conscious reality or her unconscious desires. As Vanessa’s mysterious, and possibly imagined lover, Jack “is as unreliable and unknowable and as unknown as her mother, as mysterious and undependable as her father, and as toxic as both her parents” (DeSalvo). Throughout her childhood, Vanessa desired the tender care of her parents. However, because of Christine’s madness and her father’s blind commitment to her, Vanessa and her brother Fletcher find themselves alone, loved only through distant relationships. Because of this

separation, Vanessa depends on Jack to fulfill this need for love; in this manner, he both satisfies and destroys her through maddening sessions of love interspersed with abusive encounters. Jack is “a phantom, a ghost-lover, a perfect, though dangerous, partner for her, for he is like her distant and distracted father and like her perpetually leave-taking mother” (DeSalvo). What her parents deny her, Jack supplies. Not only does he provide an outlet for her pain of daily life, but also he allows her conscious mind to rest, giving way to the unconscious. Meltzer refers to this relationship as the “master-slave conflict” (157). In his beautiful rage, Jack becomes the slave, Vanessa’s unconscious, while the master, the conscious Vanessa, attempts to control Jack. However, the association between who controls whom becomes skewed, ultimately becoming a cyclical association where the slave has power over the master. In a particularly brutal scene, Jack declares, ““You have the ability to escape, Vanessa, but you don’t want to”” (Maso 189). With Vanessa’s meek reply of ““I want to,”” Jack strikes back: ““Not badly enough. You are in charge of your own life. You are in charge even now”” (Maso 189-190). This oscillation between love and pain reflects Vanessa’s struggle with her unconscious and great desire for affection, despite the misery caused by her imagination.

As her addiction to cocaine grows, so does Vanessa’s relationship with Jack: “He was coming to my apartment now more and more often; we were leaving our hotel life behind” (Maso 94). Vanessa becomes accustomed to Jack: they move from secretive experimentation to regular and indiscrete visitation. Despite his increasing physical abuse, Jack still offers affection. Because of this, Vanessa is unable to seek outside help to cope with both her unconscious and her addiction; she is unable to retain her identity as master. According to Barbara Lex, many cocaine and heroin users experience feelings of “hopelessness” (181). Jack brings hope to Vanessa, a loving figure in place of her inattentive mother. For Vanessa, abandoning this hope,

this love, this beautiful character might be more difficult than enduring the pain caused by maternal neglect.

Toward the end of the novel, when pondering Jack's origin, Vanessa demands answers: "Who was he, I wondered? Whose life was this that I hung on to so tenaciously?" In reply, Jack answers "Invent me... I will not exist if you do not invent me" (Maso 266). With this statement, it becomes apparent that Jack is a creation of Vanessa's imagination, her unconscious mind. Jack's physical body extends fluidly into the ethereal world; his body eclipses Vanessa's refrigerator and he loves her in an animalistic way, harsh like a wolf (Maso 142). He is larger than life: "I had accepted it: with Jack I knew that everything would always be out of proportion" (Maso 141). As a result of her desire for love and fantastic use of intravenous cocaine, Vanessa's mind is constantly shivering outside the boundaries of reality. Jack is a figment of Vanessa's unconscious, constructed outside the confines of realistic perspective, shattering the boundaries of romantic love and pressing into abusive ownership—a dangerously handsome lover.

Throughout *Ghost Dance* the psychological unconscious greatly influences Vanessa's desires, particularly that for love. According to Meltzer: "What is desired is always displaced, always deferred, and reappears endlessly in another guise" (Meltzer 160). In the novel, the unconscious designs and imagined events in Vanessa's life cause a frustrated and precarious reality. The manifestation of Jack fills the void formed by her parents' abandonment. Despite this, Vanessa constantly questions Jack's origins and personal information. An illusion of cocaine-caused highs, Jack is not an actual figure in Vanessa's life. Following the tragic death of Christine, Vanessa begins to regain a sense of sanity. Even though she originally required Jack to fulfill her needs, Vanessa realizes her ability to be independent, to reclaim control as "master." Though initially hesitant, she leaves Jack: "Oh Vanessa, don't you see? ...It is you who is

leaving me” (Maso 266). With this dismissal, Vanessa ends her brutal relationship and begins to mend the wound between her conscious reality and her unconscious mind, on a path toward mental stability.

In the final chapter of the novel, Vanessa joins in a ghost dance with the other characters of the novel: Fletcher, Angelo, Sarkis, and Christine, among many others. With this dance, Vanessa finds closure for her pain, ending her relationship with the metaphorical Jack and the literal hypodermic needle. Struggling to let go of Christine’s memory, Vanessa cries to her mother, ultimately receiving an answer to what she desires: “‘I have loved you,’ she says, ‘my whole life’” (Maso 275). With her mother’s declaration, Vanessa is released from the strong bonds of drug addiction and strong arms of Jack. Both Christine and Jack become ghosts, expelled by her dance. With this, Vanessa fills with peace; the void is filled.

As addiction to illicit drugs becomes an extreme dependence on behalf of the user, Stephens states: “If persons taking drugs in order to escape the pains of living, to cope with intrapsychic stress or as a result of some more fundamental underlying disorder, it is difficult to understand why individuals are often able, of their own free will, to give up the use of [drugs]” (121). With this, it could be argued that Vanessa never actually ends her use of intravenous cocaine. The ghost dance that she performs with Fletcher involves characters that have passed away (literally, ghosts), figures from history such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (Maso 273), wind and snow. This last chapter is indicative of an extreme cocaine high, an imagination gone wild. Even though this may be the case, Vanessa still finds closure by allowing the memory of Christine to move on to an afterlife. Through this action, she surrenders her claim to Jack, eliminating her desire’s cruel personality.

Carole Maso insists that writers “really dream and insist on their dreams” (Moore). So do characters dream. Vanessa dreams of love, desires affection. Despite his enigmatic nature and exposed flaws, Jack permeates her unconscious, a fantasy formed by her vivid imagination, her dreams. The initial creation of Jack satiates her desire for love, the empty space in her unconscious mind. As suggested by J. Hillis Miller in his essay on narrative, perhaps Jack did not actually satisfy Vanessa’s desire: “It could be that we always need more stories because in *some* way they do *not* satisfy” (72). The creation of Jack as a fictional character did not actually satisfy Vanessa; thus, neither did intravenous cocaine. Instead, by battling Jack at the end of *Ghost Dance*, Vanessa effectively struggles against her desires, making a distinction between unconscious instability and sane reality.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Desire." Critical Terms for Literary Study. Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas Mclaughlin, eds. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. 369-386.
- DeSalvo, Louise. "'We Will Speak and Bear Witness': Storytelling as Testimony and Healing in Ghost Dance." Review of Contemporary Fiction (RCF) 1997 Fall; 17 (3): 144-56.
- Koob, George F. "The Reward System and Cocaine Abuse." Biological Basis of Substance Abuse. Korenman, Stanley G. and Jack D. Barchas, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 339-351.
- Lex, Barbara W. "Women and Illicit Drugs: Marijuana, Heroin, and Cocaine." Women and Substance Abuse. Gomberg, Edith S. Linsansky and Ted D. Nirenberg, eds. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1993. 162-190.
- Maso, Carole. Ghost Dance. New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1986.
- Meltzer, Françoise. "Unconscious." Critical Terms for Literary Study. Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. 147-162.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Narrative." Critical Terms for Literary Study. Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas Mclaughlin, eds. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. 66-79.
- Moore, Steven. Interview with Carole Maso. An Interview with Carole Maso. "Review of Contemporary Fiction." Center for Book Culture.org. Summer 1994. Volume 14.2.
- Stephens, Richard C. The Street Addict Role: A Theory of Heroin Addiction. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.