

# THE JOURNALS OF CHARLOTTE FORTEN GRIMKE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** In conceptual terms a diary or a journal is an account of a person's experience and feelings. Journals being notes of a person's first-hand experience can serve as a significant tool to understand and analyze someone's psychological perspective. The paper will explore the personal life of Charlotte Forten Grimke (August 17, 1837 – July 23, 1914); an exceptional woman, anti-slavery activist, poet, and educator, through her journals. She was one of the first blacks to teach the whites. The journals of Charlotte Forten occupy a special position because of its historical significance. Her dedication towards education shaped her journals. She is recognized for her participation in Sea Island Experiment as one of the first black teachers. She maintained journals, which are major tools to analyse her life very closely. To interpret her journals psychoanalytic criticism will be used. The study will concentrate on sensitivity of Charlotte's character and her psychological attitude within the ten years of her life from 1854 to 1864. It will be psychoanalytical study of Charlotte's relationship with her own people as well as whites.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Forten Grimke, Diary, Psychological Perspective, Relationship With People.

**Introduction:** Every person maintains a diary to share his/her feelings, thoughts, sensation, intuition, etc. At times diary can be a text which reveals a person's fear, frankness, realization, pain and pleasure, which a person only want to share with himself/herself without any hesitation. It is a thoroughly knitted affirmation between a person and his/her persona. Diary has long been a literary tradition. It is a form of auto-biographical writing, which is a record of writer's personal experience, ostensibly for author's use alone but eventually some diaries are published. This tradition is so firmly accepted by the readers that some people intentionally write diaries for publishing purpose. Being someone's record of firsthand experience, diaries are best tool to study that person's psychology. African-American anti-slavery activist, educator and writer, Charlotte Louise Bridges Forten Grimké was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 17, 1837. She started keeping journal after six months of her arrival at Salem. She attended the Higginson Grammar School, where she was the only African American student. She matriculated from the Salem Normal School and completed her graduation under a teacher-training school in 1856. She was given opportunity to join as a teacher at the Epes Grammar School, an all-white institution in Salem. The federal government launched an experimental program to educate the former slaves abandoned by the slave owners of the plantations during the Union forces' control of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina in 1861. Charlotte was among the first African-American woman to enroll herself under this program as a teacher. Charlotte left for Helena Island in 1862 and served there for two years. Her decreasing health forced her to leave teaching position after her second year and she came back to New England. Charlotte died in her home in Washington on July 22, 1914, at the age of seventy-six. Throughout her life Charlotte continues to write poems and essays.

This paper will analyse few journals of Charlotte Forten; *Journal One: Salem* (May 24, 1854- December 31, 1856), *Journal Two: Salem* (January 1, 1857- January 27, 1858), and *Journal Three: Salem and St. Helena Island* (January 28, 1858- February 14, 1863) and *Journal Four: St. Helena Island* (February 15, 1863- May 15, 1864) in the light of psychological theories. These four journals give us a detailed view of events occurred in her life from the age of sixteen (the time she commenced writing journal) to the age of twenty six (her return to New England from St. Helena Island). Here journals which are other form of diary will be used as a medium to understand her psychological perspective.

Psychologist Carl Jung in his theory of 'Collective Unconscious' believed that each of us is motivated by certain emotionally toned experiences inherited from our ancestors. Charlotte's mother, father, grandfather, aunts, family and friends were active anti-slavery abolitionists. This has a profound influence on her. In the first journal we come across many instances of her frequent attachment with anti-slavery movement. She read a lot of anti-slavery papers and attended meetings and lectures. Her closeness to this can be understood by her statement "I crave anti-slavery food continually" (*The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke*, 169). She also has a

desire to become anti-slavery Lecturer, as she wrote “I often say I should like to be – an anti-slavery Lecturer” (*The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke*, 92).

Charlotte was influenced by her grandfather, father, mother, sisters and other family friends to become an anti-slavery activist. The problems faced by her and by her people were the reason of great depression and frustration to her. She suffered from inferiority complex. The reason of her distress was also the death of her dear Mrs. Remond. Whom she used to consider as mother figure, as Charlotte is a motherless child from early childhood. Charlotte had some ‘preliminary goals’ to fulfill, such as helping her people, desire to go to foreign land and self-education.

According to Adler in striving for their ‘final goal’, people create and pursue many ‘preliminary goals’. These ‘sub-goals’ are often conscious, but the connection between them and the ‘final goal’ remains unknown. In part of Charlotte teaching is one of these ‘preliminary goals’. Teaching is such a profession which keeps someone indulged to frequent reading and writing. With the final goal to become a writer, teaching is one of those steps which helped Charlotte to move forward. Charlotte’s attempt to become a good teacher to fulfill her father’s desire, at an unconscious level added a significant perspective towards her own desire. Teaching is not the only ‘sub-goal’ in case of Charlotte. Her attachment towards foreign land is another aspect. This love for foreign land had strong impressions in journal two and three. Her reading habits were also related to it, as she described in journal two: “Spend the day at home reading “Eleven weeks in Europe”. It is very interesting; like it exceedingly- as well as if not better than any book of European travel I have read.” (*The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke*, 188)

Reading about foreign land was a thrilling experience for her. But this made her realise about the deprived situation, she was in. She considered herself among those who were ‘shut out from society’ and barred from the pleasure of reading human creations. Charlotte contemplated herself as a lonely one, which raises a question about her identity: “And they are doubly this when one is shut out from society as I m, has not opportunities of studying those living, breathing, *human* books, which are , I doubt not , after all, the most profoundly interesting and useful study. From that kind of pleasure, that kind of improvement I am barred; but, thank God! None can deprive me of the other kind.” (*The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke*, 362)

The goal to become a teacher was stimulated by her father. When ill health forced Charlotte to leave it she was badly affected by it. It became a major reason of her distress. All the sub-goals helped Charlotte in achieving her final goal which was to become a writer. She had a dream to gain immortal fame. Her desire to visit foreign lands was accelerated in Journal Two. As a woman of free elite black of antebellum period she suffered from identity crisis. It was hard for her to relate herself to both the blacks and whites. She never suffered from the acute form of racial discrimination so she was upper than that level. But she was a black woman so she was unable to attach herself to the whites.

Her detachment from her father caused her a lot of grief. Freud in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* wrote of the “opposition between death instinct and life instinct.” In this book he wrote about death drive which describes conflict between eros(life instinct) and thanatos(death instinct). The death drive opposes eros. It results as an instinct of death in a person. Charlotte’s desire for death may be because of this death drive. Charlotte’s unhappiness, frustration and depression accounted in first three journals was not only because of the sense of failure regarding her mission but was also because of her deteriorating relationship with her father, Robert Forten. Wish to get love from father was never fulfilled and because of this she thought of leaving this world to meet her mother in the world of immortals. She had thoughts about death because of lack of parental care. She faced a struggle because of ‘death drive’. The struggle between her ‘death drive’ and ‘life drive’ was such that they never let her to commit suicide instead of her strong thought about death.

During her stay in St. Helena Island Charlotte recovered from her depression and frustration up to a great extent. The change of atmosphere had an effect on her. From the beginning she was fond of blacks she came in contact. But the cultural and intellectual difference was a matter of distinction. In the tenure of her stay in South she came in contact with many whites. But in the journal four we find her closely attached to the whites. In fact somehow she was in a romantic relationship. This created a question about her identity. She neither belonged to blacks nor to whites.

The major cause of her psychological change was identity crisis and inferiority complex. The hope to help her people (blacks) was an aspiration. In the beginning of her life she was not able to visualize this dream. The suffering of her people was causing her internal turmoil. Later in her life when she got a chance to help her people with a lot of enthusiasm, she tried to help them. But within this period of time her social position and intellect changed the angle of her relationship with them. Before this she used to think herself as one among them but later she started to look down upon them. Being a woman of elite free black family she was neither able to associate herself with the blacks nor with the whites. During her stay in St. Helena Island she was close to the blacks but she never developed any kind of relationship with them. Instead, her relationship with the whites was much closer. In fact she was almost in a romantic relationship with one of the whites. Though she was in love with whites still it was hard for her to leave the circle of blacks as she is a black woman.

The biggest psychological distress was caused by her identity. She suffered from an identity crisis and inferiority complex which may be one of the reasons that she stopped writing journal after return from St. Helena Island.

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