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Psychoanalytical Approach to Literature: A Reconsideration

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Abstract

This paper traces the past and present of psychoanalytical approach to literature. Sigmund Freud was the pioneer in developing the ideas of psychoanalysis of an author and his works. His contemporaries, disciples and critics further developed the theory of psychoanalysis with the help of which literary or fictional issues involving characters, their behavior and actions, settings and symbols which baffled otherwise came to be better understood. If applied judiciously, it would reveal the latent and hidden meanings in a literary works. Its vertical character ensures provocative and fresh insights. The present study presents the nature and contribution of the psychoanalytical approach to literature and brings out its limitations as well. It depicts the changes in the approach that happened with the passage of time.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis; Psychoanalytical Theory; Psyche; Characters; Unconscious.



Psychoanalytical approach to literature is based on Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Like other approaches, it also strives to interpret literature and its problems. Freud applied his findings and theories about psychoanalysis to explore and explain certain baffling problems of literature and artistic creation. Actually in his system an attempt was made to study the nature of human mind and its activities including artistic and literary activity. In Lionel Trilling's words "Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries" (Trilling 34).

"The word 'psychoanalysis,' strictly speaking, refers solely to the theories of Freud and the method of psychotherapy and investigation based thereon" (Brown 1). The reason why psychoanalysis speaks about literature and attempts to relate psychology and literature is that it has something to say about language. Freud recognized the fact that man is a linguistic beast and gave much importance to the unconscious aspect of utterances like slips of the tongue. Jokes and other parapraxes which are beyond doubt forms of language. He analyzed such utterances and showed that the mechanism working in them are analogous to certain mental and linguistic processes. The psychoanalytic criticism makes use of Freud's ideas about instincts and their repression, the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the unconscious, Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality.

According to Freud, artistic activity is essentially related to the secret gratification of infantile and forbidden wishes repressed in the unconscious. Since these wishes and urges are repressed in the unconscious, there is a tendency, because of the pleasure principle in every human being to find substitute gratification through play, fantasy, dream and literary activity. Freud writes:

There is a path that leads back from phantasy to reality - the path, that is, of art. An artist is once more in rudiments an introvert, not far removed from neurosis. He is obsessed by excessively powerful instinctual needs...but he lacks the means of achieving these satisfactions. Consequently, like any other man he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and his libido too, to the wishful constructions of his life of phantasy, whence the path might lead to neurosis. (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 423).

Freud believes that all people have fantasies, the intention of which is wish-fulfillment. A writer is distinguished from a neurotic in the sense that whereas a neurotic has got impaired his ability to cope with reality and fails to create a formal fantasy and sinks into chaos, an artist has the ability to sublimate and neutralize the conflict and make it communicable. Freud has also established a similarity between dream and literature. In fact Freud's views about art and literature can be better understood if his views on dream and dream process are known. The raw material of the dream is a conglomerate of unconscious wishes whose gratification is the function of the dream. However, this content called the latent content is not the dream we remember. A dream converts the latent content into the manifest content or the dream we remember by the process called the dream work which involves the censor and certain devices or mechanisms like displacement, condensation and symbolism. These mechanisms cause distortion. So the manifest content hides behind it the real intention of the dream - the latent content. The creative process can be understood to involve similar activities. The writer also works on his repressed wishes and creates fantasies on this basis and through formal techniques transmutes a private fantasy into a socially valid and acceptable form.

Thus, according to psychoanalytical approach, a work of art is a concealed expression of the unconscious desire of the author. The nature of a creative work can be understood if the psyche of the author is known. The biographical details, the analysis of early childhood experience of an author help to understand his works. Psychobiography can be framed on this basis. Thus the direct relationship between the author and his work is established. Psychoanalysis of fictional characters can be made on a similar basis. It must be pointed out here that Freud did not present a coherent and systematic theory of art because he was primarily interested in the working of the human mind and not in literature. He alluded to literary references only to corroborate his findings. Never the less he was deeply influenced by his vast reading of literature. He acknowledged his debt to literature saying that the poets and philosophers before him had discovered the unconscious and he only discovered the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied.

In order to study the practice of psychoanalytical criticism, one should begin with Freud himself. His illustrations from literature throw light on specific issues and situations in a literary work and enhance our understanding of them. For example Freud explains the case of Othello's rage at Desdemona's loss of handkerchief by the mechanism of displacement in which "the ideas of feeble potential by taking over the charge from ideas which have a stronger initial potential, reach a degree of intensity which enables them to consciousness" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 81). Freud's comments on *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* are also remarkable and insightful. He rejects the traditionally accepted view regarding *Oedipus Rex* that the play derives its power from the dramatization of fate and foredoomed efforts of humans. According to Freud the great impact of the play lay in the fact that the play "fastens upon one compulsion with which everyone is familiar for he has felt its existence within himself. Each person in the audience was once potentially and in fantasy such an Oedipus and before the distorted dream fulfillment which is

thus brought into reality everyone shudders back with full force of the repression” (Fraiberg 10). Freud opined that *Oedipus Rex* represented the level of repression that the Greek society had attained. It was not very strong and therefore the theme is quite openly treated by the dramatist. However, in *Hamlet* the theme is treated in a much more veiled manner because in Elizabethan England, the repression had been much stronger. While in *Oedipus Rex* the deed was actually done; in *Hamlet* only the unconscious desire to do it is presented. Hamlet is unable to act because he identifies himself with the killer of his father and seducer of his mother. He himself desires what Claudius has achieved. Freud conjectured that the actual writing of *Hamlet* was motivated by an event in Shakespeare’s life namely, the death of his father which reactivated his dormant infantile feelings. He also worked out in Dostoevsky’s novels, particularly in his *Brothers Karamazov* the theme of Oedipus complex. In the case of Dostoevsky, Freud clearly established a relation between the psychic life of the artist and the characters as well as the determination of the theme because of the unconscious wishes of the author himself. There are many more examples in which Freud has applied his theories of psychoanalysis to fictional characters like Lady Macbeth, Rebecca of Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, King Lear, Prince Hal and Norbert Hanold of Jensen’s *Gradiva*. In all these cases, he reached to the biography of the author, as in the case of Dostoevsky, through a study of his fictional characters or alternatively, through biography to the fictional characters and their actions.

Freud’s followers elaborated and developed his applications of the theories of psychoanalysis to the interpretation of literature. Gradually, psychoanalysis criticism began to take shape and established itself as one of the main approaches to literature. Ernest Jones elaborated Freud’s views on *Hamlet* in his *Hamlet and Oedipus*. Jones solves the riddle of Hamlet’s “delay and self-frustration exhibited in the endeavour to fulfil his father’s demand for vengeance is that to Hamlet the thought of incest and patricide combined is too

intolerable to be borne. One part of him tries to carry out the task, the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it” (Jones 79). Jones pursues the problem further to the biography of the author and says that Oedipal guilt was present in Shakespeare’s unconscious and he introduced this element in the play unconsciously.

The aspect of psychoanalytic criticism in which the psyche of an author is related to his works, was extended by Edmund Wilson in his *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (1941). Wilson demonstrates an organic link between a writer’s life and his creative works. He starts with Freud’s notion that “an artist is not far removed from neurosis” and he creates art to get rid of his neurotic feelings. According to Wilson, there are certain traumatic experiences in the life of every author, and in his writings he explains them to himself and also in relation to the world. Thus the nature of his work is guided by his traumatic experiences. Wilson uses Philoctetes myth to illustrate his point. Philoctetes was a Greek hero endowed with the gift of marksmanship as he had the bow of the great Heracles. But he also suffered from a wound which emitted a foul odor and the foul odor caused his comrades keep away from him. But at the same time he was needed in the war to ensure victory. Similarly an artist or writer is wounded for he has suffered and the price of suffering is his literary ability which is the ‘bow.’ In other words the wound refers to psychic trauma and the bow to the healing power of insight. And a writer uses art as a way of transcending trauma. Wilson applies the wound-and-bow theory to seven authors viz. Dickens, Kipling, Casanova, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Sophocles and explains the nature and strength of the work of each author in terms of his ‘wound’ or neurotic suffering.

Miss Marie Bonaparte a disciple of Freud wrote a full length psychobiography of Edgar Allan Poe. In her book *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* she demonstrates that Poe’s works strongly reflect his personality. She

gives an account of the biography of Poe and says that Poe never knew who his father was. He was separated from his mother at an early age. He suffered from mother fixation throughout his life and even could not consummate his marriage with his wife Virginia who was sick and consumptive like his mother. This explains the recurrence in his tales and stories of pretty but sickly women with pale faces and burning eyes. According to Elizabeth Wright, “Bonaparte takes the characters in Poe’s stories as images, that is as internalized images which are the result of past experience, which have made their way from Poe’s unconscious into his tales” (Wright 147). In fact Poe’s tales are taken up by the analyst as a manifest part of the dream from which the analyst has to recover the latent part. Joseph Wood Krutch’s book *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius* (1956), also psychoanalyses the biography of Poe and relates it to his works.

For the last five or six decades, the psychoanalytic theory has responded sensitively to many changes, new ideas and hypotheses. Many of the earlier Freudian ideas like the sexual nature of all repressions, the Oedipus complex and the relationship between art and neurosis have either been repudiated, or changed or toned down. The theories of Jung, Rank and Adler have also influenced the psychoanalytic criticism.

The relationship of psychoanalytic theory to literary criticism has undergone many vicissitudes as developments in both domains have brought about changes in critical practice. As a result the critical focus has shifted from the psychology of the author - or his stand-in, the character - to that of the reader and further to the relations between author, reader, text and language. (Wright 145)

The main trends and changes in this approach till now are discussed below:

Initially, traditional psychoanalytic criticism was based on Id-psychology the basis of which was the invasion of the id or the unconscious and its impulse to seek expression in a work of art. Later on, the emphasis shifted from id to the ego and the psychology was called Ego-psychology. The criticism

based on Ego-psychology was developed using a theory of creativity given by an American psychoanalyst Ernst Kris. Freud in his essay “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” had emphasized how fantasies of childhood could provide the imaginative base of the writer’s work. Kris argues that such retrogression could be considered a “regression in the service of the ego.” He considers the managing abilities of the ego as a key to the understanding of the creative process. The ego modifies the unconscious wishes through the operations of the preconscious. Erik Erikson developed the concept of ‘ego identity.’ His work gave psychoanalytic interpretations of literature a firmer foothold by emphasizing the cohesive, integrative role of the writer’s ego identity on the one hand, and her or his place within the context of the social, cultural and historical forces on the other hand (*Encyclopedia of Psychology* 313).

Simon O. Lesser in his *Fiction and the Unconscious* (1957) presents a new trend in this approach. He sets out to find why people like literature and what are those ever present and changeless patterns in fiction which appeal generation after generation. He is of the view that fiction provides compensation for meager satisfactions that life provides. Literature enriches our emotional life by presenting those experiences which life may not offer. It provides an outlet for idealistic and contemplative tendencies thwarted in one’s daily life. It is in a sense devil’s advocate because it expresses all kinds of repressed desires. Lesser believes that form, from the psychoanalytical point of view is unanalysable and cannot be separated from content because logically content cannot exist without form. Lesser’s contribution to the development of this approach lies in the fact that he has talked about the emotional aspects of the reader and brought to the surface the value of reader’s psychology along with the writer’s psychology.

Harold Bloom, a literary critic, in his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) has made bold forays into psychoanalytic criticism by advancing a theory of literature. The anxiety of influence refers to the psychological

struggle of budding authors to overcome the anxiety caused by the influence of their literary predecessors. Bloom applies Freudian concepts in a different way to interpret literary history in terms of Oedipus complex. In general, he emphasizes rhetorical tropes in poetry as manifestations of mechanisms of defense. For example, irony is reaction formation, hyperbole is regression and metaphor is sublimation. Bloom is concerned with the thesis that repression as a defense operates importantly with their literary precursors. Repression operates by causing writers to misread their important precursors and by otherwise distorting their influence (*Encyclopedia of Psychology* 314). According to Bloom, influence is unavoidable and inescapable. Every writer manipulates or assimilates to some extent the subject matter, style or form of their literary masters. They must do so to look original or innovative. So no poem is ever original. Every new composition is a misreading or misinterpretation of an earlier poem. In this way, a new writer carves a place for himself. Bloom's idea that all reading of prior texts is a misreading of these texts has brought to the surface the psychological bases of the reader's response to literature. Norman Holland in his *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968) has taken up this problem of what goes on between the reader and the text. "He sees this relationship in terms of id-fantasies and ego-defenses; that is to say, for Holland the source of the pleasure we get from literature lies in the transformation of our unconscious wishes and fears into culturally acceptable meanings. Like Bonaparte, Holland sees literary texts as concealments, coded systems that act as a disguise. But unlike Bonaparte, who viewed the text as evidence of the author's psychology, Holland sees it as the scene of collusion between author and reader, upon which he founds aesthetics of response... What draws us as readers to a text is the secret expression of what we desire to hear, much as we protest we do not" (Wright 149). Based on psychoanalytic theory of identity, Holland believes that writers create texts as expressions of their personal identities and readers re-create their own identities when they

respond. In this way, Holland assigns a passive role to the reader as the text seems to do all the work for him. But Holland in his *Five Readers Reading* (1975) has shifted his emphasis from text to the reader. Now as per his reader-response theory, it is not the text that transforms a fantasy in to a meaning; it is the reader who does that. In other words, literary experiences are shaped by readers' identities and not by the texts they read. Thus the text appears a complex stimulus capable of evoking a number of different responses. But this does not make reading an inter-subjective process which means the overtaking of another's meaning

Another psychoanalytic critic is Lionel Trilling who has been acknowledged as the most perceptive and authentic critic. He has extended the psychoanalytic approach beyond its own declared intentions and made a creative use of the Freudian theories in understanding the nature of aesthetic emotion. His intelligent remark that “poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind” (Trilling 52), makes it clear that the very structure of aesthetic experience involves psychologizing. “Of course, he applies liberal humanist and cultural criteria to works of literature in addition to and in conjunction with Freudianism...” (Maini 38). Trilling believes that psychoanalysis, historically, grew out of 19th century romantic literature with its glorification of the self and the poet's ceaseless search for identity and peace in a socially repressed world. A wealth of psychological wisdom can be found in the works of the poets of this period. Trilling particularly mentions the name of Keats and Coleridge in this context. He does not endorse Edmund Wilson's wound-and-bow theory.

A significant and fruitful trend in psychoanalytical criticism was introduced by a few structuralists and post-structuralists, notable among them were Jacques Lacan and Derrida. They have combined structuralism with Freudian psychology and have arrived at a new understanding of literary text. Lacan views the unconscious in a totally different way. He believes that the

unconscious is structured like a language. It is complex and structurally sophisticated like consciousness itself.

Freud's view was that the unconscious existed before language took effect. Lacan sees the unconscious as coming into being simultaneously with language. When words fail to fulfill their promises of satisfaction, then the unconscious breaks out, making its appearance in the mis-match between language and desire...In the Freudian scheme the unconscious exist as a mass of instinctual representatives; in Lacan's scheme the unconscious is the result of the structuring of desire by language... Desire invests the signifier with meaning.... The unconscious is desire which has been meant but not recognized. (Wright 153-154)

Lacan has rewritten the Oedipus complex in terms of language and it is in this that his real contribution lies. According to Lacan when an infant is born, the distinction between the external and personal identity is blurred. When the child looks into the mirror an undivided self-image appears. Ego develops because of this imaginary identification. When the father enters the child's world, the harmony is disturbed and child separating from reality sinks into the empty world of language. The child now moves from one signifier to the other (desire) along a linguistic chain. When the child enters language, it means he is severed from his mother. According to Lacan since the unconscious originates from language and is linguistic in nature, therefore it shows itself to be creative within the structure. Therefore, "for a Lacanian psychoanalytic, criticism of a text will be first and foremost a discourse of desire, with the result that the emphasis will be not on an appropriation of the author's meaning but on an expropriation by the reader" (Wright 161). In this way, Lacan's emphasis is on reader, text and language as is clear from his analysis of Poe's story "The Purloined Letter." He shows it to be a linguistic version of repetition compulsion.

Having gone through all the major trends in psychoanalytic criticism, it is now appropriate to discuss some of its major limitations, as pointed out by Frederick Crewes in his *Out of My System* (1975). One of the most general complaints against classical psychoanalytic approach is that “the psychoanalytic view of the writer as a neurotic is presumptuous and condescending. Psychoanalysis is unequipped to describe the way writers really work” (Crewes 10). In this regard, it should be noted that Freud never said that the artist is directly neurotic. In fact, as Trilling explains that Freudian psychology has tried to relate poetry to the very constitution of the mind. An artist is able to control and sublimate his neurotic feelings. Freud has acknowledged his debt to art when he says that the poets and philosophers before him discovered the unconscious and he only discovered the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied. So it is not true that Freud treats art contemptuously. Modern trends in this approach have shown that style and technique in writers like Faulkner and Henry James cannot be understood without aid from psychoanalysis.

Since this approach assumes that literary works express the unconscious and repressed wishes of the artist, one runs the risk of oversimplification that is always using the biography of the author to decipher the hidden codes and signatures of him. Van Wyck Brooks’ book *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) was strongly criticized on this ground. Or alternatively, one may try to reach the biography of an author from his chosen themes and fictional characters. But this charge is rather a vulgarization of Freudian concepts.

Another most important charge ascribed to this criticism is that of reductionism which means “the effective denial or denigration of all meanings but the reductive one that is being revealed” (Crewes 169). This charge is true because many psychoanalytic critics, like Jones and Norman Holland have committed this error. There is a need of distinguishing between proposing a

reductive idea and reductionism. This pitfall can be avoided with carefulness. An unusual importance given to the unconscious in Freudian psychology has led critics to believe that Freud wanted the unconscious to have a free play. This error was committed by many writers and critics like Thomas Mann and Norman Brown. But Freud was a rationalist and he wanted reason to prevail. The theory of psychoanalysis does not call for such a position. Finally, another limitation of some importance may be ascribed to the charge that psychoanalytic criticism has failed to perform the central task of criticism which is the evolution of art or consideration of value judgments. No doubt a normative perspective is absent in psychoanalytic criticism. Celine Surprenant says, "Psychoanalytic literary criticism does not constitute a unified field. However, all variants endorse, at least to a certain degree, the idea that literature ... is fundamentally entwined with the psyche" (Surprenant 200). The attempt to explore the hidden meaning of a work implies a literary judgment which makes it a valid critical approach.

The value and contribution of psychoanalytical approach to literature to our understanding and appreciation of literature should be crystal clear from the above discussion. It has made us aware of the latent and hidden meanings in a literary work. The scope of this criticism has widened considerably by the development of ego-psychology and influence of other branches of criticism like Structuralism and Marxism. In the beginning it sought to establish relation between the author and his works (text). Then with Ernst Kris and Norman Holland's views, the emphasis was placed on the author, reader and the text. With structuralism the author was excluded and a significant importance was given to language. In fact, by its very nature, psychoanalysis is a discipline whose limits and frontiers cannot be defined. Its vertical character alone ensures provocative and fresh insights (Maini 44). But it must be noted that it is not a sovereign approach like any other approach. As Basler points out, it is not the key to the mansion of literature. It is a key to certain doors (Basler 8).

Like other approaches, it also helps us to understand and solve many literary symbols, settings, actions, characters, themes and related issues.

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