Chapter 23

Psychoanalytic Theory

Background

Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) writings on the unconscious mind were a defining moment for art and literature. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) dealt with psychological complexity, and the ideas of the fragmentation of the self. In “Dream Work” the author describes how “dream content” or images of dream are in reality the codes of “latent dream content” or “dream thoughts.” Freud uses the terms “condensation” and “displacement,” where the former is the process where dream-content contains multiple associations, the latter suggests the shift where the real subject of a narrative is outside the story.

Freud’s most controversial concept, the Oedipus complex, is the notion that every child sexually desires a parent and wishes to be rid of its rival, the other parent. Implicit in this is the theory of art and literature. Freud used the well-known example of *Hamlet*, who so swift in killing Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is hesitant to kill Claudius. Freud’s explanation is that unconsciously Hamlet too had desired his father’s death, and while striking at Claudius, he would be striking himself.

In his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) Freud posits that human sexuality---unlike animal sexuality---is not biologically pre-programmed. Although from birth every human being is inhabited by sexual energy (libido), the modes of satisfaction found are not pre-determined. Instead, the goals of sexual desire are determined by each person’s individual history.

In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud argues that belief in God is a neurotic wish fulfillment. Belief in God stems from our collective need for a lifelong parental authority (who can assure our safety and security), and is a neurosis arising from the Oedipal Complex.

Freudian Criticism

Akin to Sigmund Freud’s contribution towards literary criticism, such as his remarks on the Oedipal scheme in *Hamlet* (1899), his theoretical essay “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming” (1908), and his psychobiographical essay “Dostoevsky and Parricide” (1928), several of
Freud’s contemporaries as well as later writers produced studies of literary figures and literary works that established models of psychoanalytic criticism. Such works assumed interconnectivity between the fictional product and the creative artist, in other words, read psychoanalytically, the literary work disclosed the author’s unconscious fantasies. The aim of this criticism was essentially psychobiographical. The most popular examples of this style of criticism deploy the tools of psychoanalysis to explore the precise terms of language, metaphor, and character.

**Earnest Jones (1879-1958)**

Jones was the author of almost 200 essays in theory and applied psychoanalysis, including articles on dreams, literature, religion, war neuroses, female sexuality, Ireland, chess, ice-skating, and the common cold. He was instrumental in introducing Freud to the English-speaking world and presided over the origins of the British psychoanalytic establishment. He was the author of the first biography of Freud (1957), the best account until later biographies were produced by Ronald W. Clark (1980) and Peter Gay (1988). Jones’s monograph *On the Nightmare* (1910) demonstrates an effort to apply psychoanalytic perspectives to history and legend, sketching analyses of witches, vampires, Druids, and speculative etymology.

Whereas Freud used the example of Hamlet to support the Oedipus complex (Hamlet cannot punish Claudius because he has carried out the patricide Hamlet wished), Jones implicitly extends the psychoanalytic reading into a clinical analysis of deep ambivalence reading into a clinical analysis of deep ambivalence toward the mother.
otto rank (1884- 1939)

rank was one of freud’s brightest disciples. he eventually left over-theoretical and excessive castration as the originary model of personal deprivation. author of an essay entitled “the artist,” which he presented to freud in 1905, rank maintained his interest in art throughout his life. the myth of the birth of the hero (1909) is a scholarly work which brings together core motifs in cultural myths, including the hero, the double, and the theme of the service of grounding the oedipus complex for psychoanalysis, although he eventually disrupted this ground with his ideas about birth trauma and pre-oedipal separation anxiety. rank’s essay on the doppleganger (1914) uses literary examples from fyodor dostovesky, robert louis stevenson, oscar wilde, guy de maupassant, and edgar allan poe, combining brief biographical sketches with theoretical emphasis on narcissism and projection. according to rank, the double is both a reflection of self-love and a rival. his massive work on the incest-motif, das inzest-motiv in dichtung und sage (1912) is a broad survey of oedipal dynamics in european and world literature and mythology.

marie bonaparte (1882- 1962)

an early work on freudian analysis was by princess marie bonaparte. a great-grandniece of napoleon bonaparte, the princess was plagued by her own sexual frigidity and published papers on this subject in medical journals. she gallantly helped freud and his family escape the nazis in 1938, and wrote an immense study of edgar allan poe (1933). freud wrote a brief and highly literary preface to the work. bonaparte relied heavily on freud’s theoretical relation of the poet to the dreamer (“creative writers and day-dreaming,” 1908) and relied on the relationship between literature and unconscious wishes and fears, producing psychosexual allegories. her’s is a primary-process criticism that seeks to jettison
conventional forms of literary representation in favour of translations to unconscious origins. She views Poe as a writer who converted personal trauma into fiction, principally the death of his mother when he was two years of age (concept derived from Freud’s famous “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 1920). Poe’s literary ambition was to resurrect a living bond to a dead woman, an idea thrilling for some and terrifying to many. Bonaparte was especially attentive to characters, creatures, landscapes, and architecture as split or overdetermined representations of obsessive figures and themes. Her book is an extensive elaboration of Freud’s dreamwork replete with displacement, symbolism, and so on. Bonaparte’s Poe is a pathological genius haunted by obsessive fantasies he could not comprehend but had to live with. More recent psychoanalytic approaches to the mystery of Poe, are Daniel Hoffman’s *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (1972) and Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” (1972). This style of psychobiography achieved more intensity and currency in works by Phyllis Greenacre on Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll; and by Leon Edel on Henry James.

**Frederick Crews** (1938)

Along with Harold Bloom and Norman Holland, Crews was motivated by much of the psychoanalytic criticism practised in America since the mid-1960s. His seminal book on Nathaniel Hawthorne (1966) positions the writer of *The Scarlet Letter* beyond conventional moralistic allegory and illustrates the dark landscape of sexual ambivalence that colors his fiction. Hawthorne’s fascination with Puritans and the cultural history of guilt reflects his own unconscious impulses, which tend primarily to be Oedipal. In “Young Goodman Brown,” the protagonist flees his wife’s arms into a demonic forest full of sexual symbols and barely disgusted primal-scene fantasies, a place that reflects his own incestuous desires and guilt. Crews work involves analyses of metaphor, image, and character, pressed toward psycho-biographical conclusions about Hawthorne’s “incomplete resolution of early Oedipal feelings.”
Beginning in the mid-1970s, Crews developed a dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis. He rejected the claims of psychoanalysis to scientific or interpretive validity, and explained Hawthorne’s sexual fascinations, by locating him in the *Zeitgeist*, that is, the psychological atmosphere of Romanticism.

**Jacques Lacan (1901-81)**

Lacan was responsible for the formation of *Ecole Freudienne de Paris* in 1964, which he also caused to disband. His lectures were published as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977). Key concepts in Lacan are “phallocentric”, “mirror stage” and the “Symbolic.”

Basically Lacan’s work is a development of Freud’s theory which states that there is a radical split between consciousness and the unconscious (the ego and the id). Freud’s argues that most of us are often motivated by impulses and forces that we are not even aware of. Lacan identifies three main phases in the development of the child: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. He draws on Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, where the infant passes through the seduction, primal and castration phases.

The “mirror stage” posits that when a child sees its reflection in the mirror, and then looks back at another person (mother) and then again at the mirror, it predicts that one day it will become whole, complete, unified again, like the image in the mirror, which becomes an ideal. The idea of the self, according to Lacan, is always a vision, a fantasy of wholeness; therefore he refers to this stage as the “imaginary.” Lacan then discusses the child’s entry into language as a subject that coincides with its separation from the mother. The mother therefore becomes the child’s first experience of lack (absence) which leads to the creation of desire. The father steps in at this moment and further causes loss of union with the mother, precipitating the symbolic order. Lacan often refers to this stage as “the Name of the Father”, suggesting God-
Lacan emphasizes on the importance of the term “phallus” as penis (which the mother lacks) has a symbolic significance. The symbolic order is vital for what it signifies, which is the sexual difference. However, for Lacan, the phallus comes to signify both men’s and women’s lack. The father may be identified with the symbolic, but he too has been a child, and had felt inadequate and incomplete. No one thus possesses the phallus, leading us to the notion of “castration.” Another necessary concept in Lacan’s position is the “Other”. When the child becomes aware that it is separate from the world, the idea of the “Other” is created. This is accompanied by a sense of anxiety and loss.

Lacan’s theories have had a profound effect on gender studies as well as performance studies, mainly because of his ideas on the “mirror stage.” Laura Mulvey, for example, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), uses the concept as a heuristic for examining the gender politics in the way spectatorship is constructed traditionally.

**QUIZ**

1. **Answer in brief:**
   
i. What is the basic premise in the works of Frederick Crews on Hawthorne?

   ii. What is Marie Bonaparte’s contribution to psychoanalytic criticism.

   iii. Briefly outline Oto Rank’s concept of the Doppleganger.

2. **Fill in the blanks:**

   i. Freud’s theoretical relation of the poet to the dreamer are contained in his ………..
ii. Otto Rank’s …………………is a scholarly work which brings together core motifs in cultural myths, including the hero, the double

iii. Jones’s monograph …………….is an effort to apply psychoanalytic perspectives to history and legend, apart from analyses of witches, vampires, Druids, and speculative etymology.

**Answer key**

2. i.Creative Writers and Day-dreaming; ii- *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* ; iii- *On the Nightmare*

**Selected websites:**

- [https://sites.google.com/site/ucoanxiety/sigmund-freud-psychoanalytic-theory](https://sites.google.com/site/ucoanxiety/sigmund-freud-psychoanalytic-theory)
- [http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/rank.html](http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/rank.html)