Psychoanalytical Theory in Literary Criticism

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Within each piece of literature, there exist clues to guide the reader to a deeper understanding of the literary work, of the author of the work, and even of the inner workings of the individual reader. Using psychoanalytical theory to analyze a work of literature allows the reader to consider how the writing represents the author’s repressed desires, fears, and impulses. Psychoanalytical analysis also considers how the literature presents the author’s isolation from events or even the denial of the existence of certain events and circumstances through identification of the inner workings of the mind. Modern psychoanalytic theory, based largely on the work of Dr. Sigmund Freud, provides the literary critic with a guide to discovering, revealing, and examining the truths that are hidden in literary works. “After 1950, psychoanalytic critics began to emphasize the ways in which authors create works that appeal to readers’ repressed wishes and fantasies” (Murfin & Ray, 1998, para. 3). In addition to appealing to and revealing the unconscious desires of a work’s anticipated audience, authors reveal their own unconscious desires in their writing. The key components of psychoanalytical theory are the struggle among Freud’s Id, Ego, and Superego; Freud’s understanding of the unconscious; and literature as a representation of the inner workings of the mind. Psychoanalytic theory is a useful tool for evaluating literary works to gain a richer understanding of the work, the author, and the reader.

One of the key components of psychoanalytic theory is Freud’s concept of the Id, Ego, and Superego. The id is “[t]he part of the mind that determines sexual drives and other unconscious compulsions that urge individuals to unthinking gratification (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010, p. 2055). Opposing the id is the superego, which “seeks to repress the demands of the id and to prevent gratification of basic physical appetites” (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010, p. 2055).
The ego balances the primal needs of the id and the civilizing demands of the superego (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010, p. 2055). Freud is well-known for his attention to sexual desires as the primary need of the id. Psychoanalytical theory applies Freud’s Oedipus complex to literature by seeking images in the text that reveal the author’s unconscious sexual fantasies and desires. These images provide the critic a richer understanding of the writing, as well as insights into the minds of the author and the reader.

Freud “believed that literature could often be interpreted as the reflection of our unconscious life” (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010, p. 2054). Psychoanalytical theory works from this belief and seeks images in a text that will provide an illustration of the author’s unconscious life. “[L]iterary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author” (Delahoyde, n.d., para. 1). Even when an author is not writing autobiographically, the speech and behavior of the author’s characters and the descriptions of settings and events are usually imbued with some of the author’s personality, desires, and fear. In analyzing a literary work, the critic discovers clues to his or her own unconscious life by recognizing that the critic’s identification and interpretation of the images in a work is informed by the critic’s unconscious.

By projecting the author’s motivations on the characters of a literary work, sexual ideas may be revealed in the work. Similarly, displacing the author’s concerns to a subject in a literary work, or reversing a situation by attributing feelings to the object of those feelings can reveal sexual and other psychological undertones in the work. "An unconscious dynamism ... begins to influence the writer and even often imposes upon him forms of expression which he does not intend to use consciously" (Von Franz, 1980, p. 119). The author’s unconscious life leads to the more complex inner workings of the human mind, which are a combination of the conscious and the unconscious, and which are populated by the id, the ego, and the superego, and which
manifest in projection, displacement, and other literary techniques. Psychoanalytical criticism of literature “focuses on a work of literature as an expression in fictional form of the inner workings of the human mind” (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010, p. 2054). By creating a fictional representation, the author is able to explore an array of concepts in a non-threatening venue, and the literary critic is able to sift the original, inner thoughts from the writing. “A... concept so important to literary critics... is the Oedipus complex” (Knapp, 2004, para. 6). The representation of inner thoughts and ideas often exposes elements of Freud’s Oedipus complex in literature. The Oedipus complex is drawn from the famous story of a young man who kills his father and marries his mother, and it represents for Freud the primary inner conflict for any person. “The complete complex postulates a pre-oedipal desire for both parents... which must be transformed in the Oedipus complex in the interest of solid ego formation.” (Donovan, 2002, para. 1). Literary critics using the psychoanalytical theory seek images in texts that reveal the character’s or the author’s struggle to overcome the urge to remove the same-sex parent in order to form an intimate bond with the other parent. The author may not be aware of his or her Oedipal inclinations, but with attentive close reading, the literary critic is able to uncover hidden truths that may be translated into universal truths about the human condition. By so doing, the critic achieves a deeper understanding of the literary work, of the author’s inner thoughts, and of the reader.

Through use of Freud’s theories of the unconscious; identification of the elements of the id, ego, and superego; and recognition of the Oedipus complex underlying literary texts; psychoanalytic theory is a useful tool for evaluating literary works to gain a richer understanding of the work, the author, and the reader. The literary critic identifies symbols and images in a literary work that reveal the author’s unconscious desires and fears. The struggle of the ego to
balance the desires of the id and the superego informs the literary critic about the author’s struggle with his or her personal identity and with his or her balancing of primal needs and civilized responsibilities. The psychoanalytical critic is able to reveal the tricks of repression, displacement, isolation, reversal, attribution, and other factors to identify themes, ideas, and messages that are hidden in a literary work. Understanding the psychological messages in a literary work leads to an understanding of the author of that work. This understanding can guide the critic to deeper self-awareness.
References

http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/psycho.crit.html


