

Literary Work and the Mind: Approaching Psychoanalytical Theory

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Abstract: Literary criticism is about literary creations or works of art and psychoanalysis is about minds. The only way by which one can know a work of art is through one's own analytical mind, through some human process of perception, or through some other person's interpretation about it. This means that there is a psychological component to any understanding about the literary works. The present study analyzes that how a reader perceives the world of literary creations and the world around him/her and how he/she responds when entering the obsessional, the escapist, the oral or the autobiographical world with its overwhelming rage and desire, of any writer. The focus is also on a reader shaping and changing those worlds to fit in his/her own characteristic patterns of fantasy and defense. It is also analyzed that how the presence of an element of personality in a critic moulds his role in conveying meaning to the reader.

Key Words: Literary work; the mind; psychoanalytic literary criticism.

1. Introduction

The field of psychoanalytic literary criticism is immense. The key to understanding the history of psychoanalytic literary criticism is to recognize that literary criticism is about literary work and psychoanalysis is about the faculty of mind. Therefore, the psychoanalytic critic can only talk about the minds associated with any piece of literary creation which are three: the author, the audience, and some character represented in or associated with that work. Freud applied the idea of 'oedipal conflict' to the audience response to Oedipus and to the character of Hamlet, Hamlet's inability to act, and he speculated about the role of 'oedipal guilt' in the life of William Shakespeare. From the beginning of this field to the present, that cast of characters has never changed: author, audience, or some person derived from the text.

2. Discussion

Thus the psychoanalytic critic addresses the three minds. How the psychoanalytic critic addresses these minds depends on the orientation of the critic, that is whether he/she is a classical psychoanalyst, or an ego psychologist, or a Lacanian, or a Kleinian, a member of the object-relations school, or a Kohutian, and so on (Holland 1993). Each of the various schools in the development of psychoanalysis necessarily produces a different style of psychoanalytic literary criticism.

The critics did little more than identifying Oedipus complexes and the occasional symbol or parapraxis in one or another work of literature in the earliest stage of psychoanalytic criticism. Usually the critic would relate the complex or the slip of the tongue or the phallic symbol to the mind of the author, as in Freud's studies of Dostoevsky

or da Vinci or Ernest Jones' studies of Hamlet or Marie Bonaparte's analysis of Edgar Allan Poe.

When psychoanalysts began to define the pre-oedipal stages—oral, anal, urethral, phallic—the range of fantasies that one could identify in a literary text expanded from oedipal triangles to fantasies about money, devouring and being devoured, going into dangerous places, fantasies about control, ambition, rage, and so on. These different levels of fantasies were all transformations of one another, superimposed, so that one could imagine the human being as a series of geological levels with oral fantasies at the deepest level, then anal, phallic and so on forming and leaving traces of themselves at the higher. This is, of course, consistent with the continuities we see psychoanalytically in the development of any human being. One could read from a writer's repeated themes to the writer's 'myth personnel' or, what is better said as 'identity theme.'

With the development of ego psychology, and psychoanalysis acquiring its complex theory of defenses, the literary critics became able in the 1960s and '70s to trace defenses as well as fantasies in texts. Again, we often read both the defenses and the fantasies back to the authors, and the result has been distinguished biographies by Justin Kaplan (1982), and Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1986), to name but a few of the many good psycho-biographers.

The literary forms functioned psychologically like various types of defense mechanism. Form works as a defense, both at the level of particular wordings and in larger structures. Our identifications with characters serve in this way, to modulate and direct our feelings as identifications do in life. The parallel plots of a novel or a Shakespearean play, for example, would act in the reader's mind and perhaps the author's as a kind of splitting. A shift of the sensory modality in a poem may serve as a kind of isolation. Symbolizing serves to disguise all kinds of

content in literary works. And, of course, omission functions like repression or denial (Rose 1980).

The form as defense meant that the literary critic could talk about literary works that had no characters at all, where one could only talk about form. He was no longer limited to plays and stories. He could talk about lyric poems. He could analyze non-fiction prose. Necessarily he related these to the mind of the author. Thus it could be said, for example, that Matthew Arnold's sentence structures expressed denial of physical contact, perhaps related to the general denial of sexuality in Victorian times.

Psychoanalysis today has become a psychology of the self, although there are wide differences in the way different schools address the self: British object-relations, Kohut's self-psychology, or Lacan's return to a verbal psychoanalysis. Various collections of essays use one or another of these familiar approaches: object-relations (Woodward, Schwartz 1986; Rudnytsky 1993); self-psychology (Bouson 1989; Berman 1990); Lacanian-psychoanalysis (Davis 1981; Stoltzfus 1996). In their various modes, these follow the general pattern of psychoanalytic criticism: applying object-relations, self-psychology, or Lacanian psychoanalysis to the reader, the author, or some person derived from the text. To me, the most significant breakthrough was the recognition that our relationship to a literary work is to a transitional or transformational object. Literature exists in potential space. The liveliest psychoanalytic criticism today also addresses questions of gender and personality in the personality of the author and most interestingly, in the mind of the reader (Flynn and Schweickart 1986).

The most interesting part of today's psychoanalytic criticism is its address to the reader. Nowadays we have psychoanalytically-oriented courses in literature and classes oriented to analyzing reader-response (Berman 1994). In such a teaching, a critic or a teacher can help readers understand what they are bringing to a given work of literature.

The direction psychoanalytic theory, including its theory of literature, needs to take in the twenty-first century is to integrate psychoanalytic insights with the new discoveries coming from brain research and cognitive science. These are very powerful and often quite in harmony with what psychoanalysis has been saying about people from an entirely different perspective and based on entirely different evidence. Psychoanalysis or psychology in general needs to put together the clinical knowledge derived from psychoanalysis with the new knowledge of how the mind works in perception, memory, learning, bilateralization, and, most important for a literary critic, in the way one uses language.

More difficult is integrating with literary criticism the things we are finding out about the brain and how it acquires and uses language with literary criticism. MRI and PET scans enable us to get pictures of the blood and oxygen flow and other things in the brain as that person fears or perceives or reads or listens to language. Scientists like Gerard Edelman or Hanna and Antonio Damasio have been showing how we understand words in our brains. There is

no simple correspondence between signifier and signified as Lacan claimed. Rather, just to understand one word, the brain must bring together a variety of separate features, the sound of the word, its grammatical role, and other words that it is like and unlike.

To arrive at the meaning of a literary word or any other, the brain assembles or coordinates these different kinds of information from different places in the brain. Furthermore, and most important for the psychoanalyst is—what information there is, where it is located, and what emotions accompany it are all highly personal. For each of us, the meaning of a simple word like 'dog' or 'cat' results from our unique history with that word. And, of course, for complex words like 'democracy' or 'psychoanalyst,' the results will be even more personal.

Each of us if interprets a word in an individual way, that is, a way that is both like and unlike everybody else's interpretation, then each of us will interpret a literary text consisting of a lot of words in an individual way. These new researches confirm what the reader-response critics have been saying for a long time. But more to the point, they confirm what every psychoanalyst has seen from behind the couch. That is, a word, an event—take, for example, a national catastrophe like the Kennedy assassination or the Challenger crash or the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-e-Salaam. Each patient will respond to that event out of his or her personal history and character. There is no fixed "meaning" "in" the event. Neither is there a fixed meaning in a literary text.

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is a fusion of insights derived from psychoanalysis with insights derived from neuroscience. The discoveries of brain science in a general way are confirming the theory behind psychoanalytic literary criticism, particularly reader-response psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Literary critics in the 1960s vastly expanded their subject matter to include just about anything that involves language. Nowadays, in literature classes or scholarly journals, one finds discussions, not just of this or that poem or story or play or writer, but of gender, race, politics, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, all kinds of sciences, and, of course, of psychoanalysis. The major aim is to focus on that part of this larger literary criticism that does talk about literature, particularly this or that particular poem or story or play or film, as psychoanalytic literary critics tend to do.

The aim of literature is to delight, to instruct to teach or to enlighten—that is to give a pleasurable experience. The delight is the experience of entering the imaginative world created by the writer (Apple 1998). For example, one can enjoy the manliness of Hemingway's hunters and soldiers, the intensely interpersonal mind of Mrs. Dalloway, enjoy the gallantry of Sir Walter Scott's romances or the avarice of Charles Dickens's world. In other words, one can take pleasure in the great human themes, both the good ones and the bad ones, by means of what I read.

The instruction literature itself offers the understanding of these experiences, these writers' minds, these alien worlds. Not judging them morally, not downloading

information from them, but understanding them as fully as we can so that they can become part of our total experience of living. The role of the critic is parallel to that of the writer: to delight or to instruct, but more narrowly than the writer. The critic delights or instructs in relation to literature. That is, the critic gives ideas that enable one to add to one's delight. The critic enables the reader to enter the world of the book in a more imaginative, more empathic, more satisfying way. In this way, a critic adds to one's pleasure in a book but also helps him to understand his pleasure. Criticism should help us to understand both our experience of literary pleasure and to understand ourselves as the experiencers. Criticism finally should enable both critic and ordinary reader to obey the primary command above the temple of the Delphic Oracle: 'Know Thyself.' The art gives us the experience. Criticism should give us some understanding of the experience.

That is how literary criticism helps literature achieve both its pleasure and instruction. Very occasionally, literary criticism is an aesthetic experience in itself—more often it is not. At least, though, literary criticism should help us to shape and articulate some other aesthetic experience to ourselves, to take it from the author's words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience and understand what we are doing. In other words instruction helps delight and delight helps instruction. In that sense, all literary criticism would benefit from psychological wisdom. The better the psychology, the better the criticism.

This ideal for criticism translates itself into psychoanalytic literary criticism in particular. For example in saying that Dickens is an obsessional writer, the critic names the quality the reader is experiencing. The critic gives a way of thinking about it by giving the opportunity of finding out what obsession is, what it feels like, what kind of imagination, what kind of world, such a person inhabits. By bringing in the psychoanalyst's clinical experience of obsession, the critic sensitizes the reader to the issues that dogged Charles Dickens, questions of control, aggression, possession, money, dirt. The reader can share his horrified fascination as he followed the Thames floating its filth and corpses down to the sea, another way of entering the imaginative world of, say, *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*.

The psychoanalytic literary critic's primary job is to foreground that psychological element in what he or she says about books. In other words, psychoanalytic critics should be interpreting their own, if you will, counter transference to the text or whatever else they are describing (Wright 1998). Good literary criticism can help us to shape and articulate that experience to ourselves, to take it from the author's words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience. Also, good psychological literary criticism can help us shape and articulate the psychological experience of the writer or the characters to ourselves, to form that psychological experience from the author's words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience.

Most of us would agree that mixed with all the delightful comedy in Charlie Chaplin's movies, is a great

deal of dreadful sentimentality. We could simply call it mush or treacle and dismiss it. But if it is offered a bit of psychoanalytic criticism, its interpretation has added meaning. Suppose it is observed that Charlie Chaplin, as Stephen Weissman (1996) has written, is dealing in his films with the problem of a promiscuous mother. At first, she had been a glamorous dancer onstage where the boy often admired her. At the end she was an impoverished seamstress, who perhaps prostituted herself, and who certainly suffered and eventually died from syphilis. The psychoanalytic critic combines this biographical information with the psychoanalytic insight.

We can understand why so often in his films his hero rescues and repairs damaged and fallen women. We can understand the ineptitude, the childishness of his tramp-hero as he tries to attract these women, like a child playing up to an elusive mother. Most people find these episodes repellently sentimental. We could simply write them off. But psychoanalytic insight offers us a chance to do better. We can enter into these episodes more fully, with better understanding and more empathy. We can rescue them by using our imagination as Chaplin rescued his mother in imagination. We can interpret the little tramp as a recreation of the boy Chaplin. In *Limelight*, we can understand differently the appalling sentimentality of the last scene: the aged music hall star dying offstage as his protégée dances her way back to stardom. We can ask ourselves, how would we feel if we had had a prostitute for our mother. We can imagine a small boy giving his life to the rescue of that shamed and failing mother, making her into something different from what she was, erasing the reality through his own creativity.

A psychoanalytic critic asks us to look at the women in Chaplin's films in a different light, not just as sentimentalized or demonized, but as detested and loved in a painful and complicated combination of fear, desire, and loathing. And through that understanding, we perhaps can experience these episodes more sympathetically, more empathically, more generously.

3. Conclusion

Thus the foregoing analysis shows that the purpose of psychoanalytic criticism is to open up art to us, to add to our empathy and understanding and through our empathic understanding, to add to the experience of art. In other words good psychoanalytic criticism instructs and delights its readers in the experiencing of their own human nature. Psychoanalytic criticism so far has been addressing the three persons involved in the literary transaction: author, reader, and textual person. However, psychoanalytic literary critics have a challenging future that lies in drawing on the rich insights of cognitive science. Also they must offer their readers both instruction and delight. They must keep endeavouring the human possibilities offered by the literary works.

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