

Lecture 24

Literature and Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud (I)

Introduction

Hello friends and welcome back again to another lecture in this series on literary theory. Now, as I have already mentioned in some of my previous lectures, the beginning of the twentieth century was characterized by the opening up of a number of new fields of enquiry. These new fields then went on to generate distinct schools of literary theory with their own distinct set of critical vocabulary and key ideas. We have already seen this with Ferdinand de Saussure's synchronic linguistics and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Today we will see how the works of Sigmund Freud opens a distinct field of human enquiry and how that then goes on to create a very unique kind of approach to literature. This new field of theoretical approach is what is referred to as psychoanalytic literary theory and it has been one of the most dominant schools of literary theories throughout the twentieth and twenty first century. But like always, before we delve into the literary theory founded on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, we will start by familiarizing ourselves with a few biographical details.

Biography

Freud was born in the region Moravia in 1856. However, his family shifted to Vienna when he was three and it is in this city that Freud continued to live and work till he was eighty-two. In 1873 Freud enrolled as a medical student in the University of Vienna and by the late 1880s he had already established himself as a consulting doctor for psychological disorders. However, we will have to remember here that when Freud started his career as a doctor, what we today consider psychological disorders were primarily understood and treated as disorders of the

nervous system. But Freud started moving away from this purely physical understanding of psychological disorder quite early in his medical career. He believed that these disorders were forms of mental illness which required a special kind of medical approach that was very distinct from how physical ailments are usually approached by the doctors. This departure from the mainstream medical approach of the day ultimately led Freud to the formulation of his theories of human mind and mental diseases that we today study under the rubric of psychoanalysis.

The first major step towards this direction came in the form of a book titled *Studies in Hysteria* which Freud wrote with another Viennese physician named Josef Breuer. But the most well-known manifestation of this new field of psychoanalytic study came in 1899. This was the year when Freud published the landmark book which bore the German title *Die Traumdeutung* and was translated in English under the title *The Interpretation of Dreams*. However, it is interesting to note that during the time of its publication, the reception of this book was rather muted. And the reason for this is not very difficult to guess. Firstly, the fundamental theory of psychoanalysis that Freud laid out was such a radical departure from the existing ways in which human ailment was understood that it aroused obvious skepticism. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the reason why the book received muted reception was because of Freud's insistence that it was sexual desires that guide our psychological life. Placing such tabooed subjects like sexual desire and incest at the heart of his theories was deeply troublesome for the conservative Viennese society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and this aspect of Freud's writing might still make it unacceptable for some. However, the acceptance of Freud and his theories saw a gradual rise over the years, and by 1908, when the first international psychoanalytic congress was held in Salzburg, Freud was already recognised as a major intellectual figure.

Freud was a prolific writer and throughout his fairly long life he published a number of books which are today regarded as classics of the Western scholarly tradition. These include, apart from the two books that I have already mentioned, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *The Ego and the Id*, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, *Moses and Monotheism* etc. Freud's fortunes however turned for the worse when the Nazis came to power and annexed Austria. Freud himself was an atheist, but since he was born to Jewish parents the Nazis came to regard his publications as expressions of what they believed to be the decadent and immoral Jewish culture. His books were therefore ceremonially burnt in 1933 along with those of several other major intellectuals including Karl Marx. Freud himself was however able to escape Nazi Germany in 1938 and seek exile in London where he stayed till his death in 1939.

Hysteria

So from his life, let us now move on to a study of his work. Now since Freud inaugurated an entirely new field of enquiry and since this field of enquiry has its own unique concepts and distinct vocabulary, we will first try to familiarize ourselves with the broad outlines of Freudian psychoanalysis before moving on to a discussion of how psychoanalysis can provide us with a new understanding of the literary process. And the place where I want to start is Freud's research on hysteria which ultimately resulted in his publication of the volume *Studies in Hysteria*.

The term hysteria comes from the Greek root word *hysteron* which literally means womb. Now the reason the disease identified as hysteria got a name derived from the root word womb is because it was originally believed to be a disease caused by the "wandering" of a womb away from its original place in a woman's body. In the mid-1880s, when Freud started working on hysteria, the mainstream opinion about the disease had moved away from the theory of wandering wombs. But it was still believed that the disease had something to do with the female

reproductive organ, and consequently, hysteria was believed to be an affliction that was suffered exclusively by the females. This established theory was, however, already being challenged by a French doctor by the name Jean-Martin Charcot who believed that hysteria had nothing to do with the reproductive organ. Charcot argued that hysteria was a result of inherited brain damage and as such the disease could be found both in males and females.

Though Freud briefly worked with Charcot on hysteria, he did not agree with Charcot's attribution of hysteria to an impairment of the human body. On the contrary, Freud believed that hysteria was a psychological disease which cannot be traced back to any specific problem in the patient's body. Freud argued that to cure hysteria what needs to be looked into is the patient's mind. In the book *Studies in Hysteria* that Freud coauthored with Breuer, he asserted that hysteria was caused by the patient's efforts to repress a traumatic memory – that is to say forcefully refuse to acknowledge in a conscious state of mind the memory of a past trauma. This analysis of the disease led Freud to work on a kind of cure that was very different from how hysteric patients were treated by doctors who believed in the biological cause of the disease. This new cure involved allowing the patient to talk about his or her own past till the repressed memory of the trauma is brought to the consciousness. What Freud and Breuer argued was that remembering and confronting the memory of the past actually produced a release of emotions and resulted in a cathartic effect which ultimately led to the cure of hysteria. The role of the doctor, according to this line of treatment, consisted in carefully listening to the narrative produced by the patient and helping her to interpret them. The aim of this interpretation was to sift through the narrative in such a way that the patient can identify the repressed traumatic event which was at the root of their suffering.

Now here I want you to notice one thing. Freud's major shift in understanding and treating hysteria consisted in his ability to convert the disease, its cause, and its prospective cure into the process of telling a story and interpreting that story. The hysteric patients were the tellers of the stories and Freud's role as a doctor was much like a literary critic who would analyse and interpret these stories. This focus on narratives and interpretation of narratives would remain the central concern of Freud's psychoanalysis and it therefore gives us a clue as to why Freud became so influential in the field of literary studies.

In any case, moving on with our discussion on hysteria, Freud found that the repressed traumatic memory that was causing the hysteria was very frequently being related by his patients to some incident of sexual violence experienced in childhood. Now the very fact that something can be so repressed in our mind that it goes beyond the grasp of our consciousness meant for Freud that our mind has a large area beyond what is available to our consciousness – and this area which could only be indirectly approached was identified as the **unconscious**. The role of this unconscious in Freud's psychoanalytic theory is paramount and we will talk more about it when we will later discuss in details how Freud mapped the human mind. But for now let us come back to the repressed memory of childhood sexual trauma. Freud discovered that there was a common pattern underlying the narratives of his hysteric patients. They almost inevitably ended up talking about how as children they were seduced and sexually engaged with by an older figure, who was in most cases identified as the father. Now this led to Freud coming up with what he called the seduction theory. The child who was seduced by the father figure would not usually be traumatized at the time. But later, as she grew up, the memory of that childhood seduction would become too traumatic to recall, leading to its being repressed in the unconsciousness.

Now, this was a neat enough theory, but Freud would pretty soon reject this seduction theory and come up with another theory regarding the cause of psychological disorder. And this new theory would effectively reverse the earlier understanding of seduction drama. In this new theory Freud proposed that the sexual event in the childhood might not be a real event at all but a phantasy. And this term phantasy is important to Freudian psychoanalysis in general as well as psychoanalytic literary theory in particular. So what is a phantasy? In psychoanalysis, phantasy means creating an imaginary scene that would allow someone to fictively enact out a desire that is too problematic to be admitted or enacted in reality. So how does this new theory based on phantasy address the cause of hysteria and such other psychological diseases? Well according to Freud, the scenes of seduction by the father depicted by the patients were actually phantasies which enabled the patients to enact in their imagination and in a distorted form their own sexual desire towards the parent figure.

The Interpretation of Dreams

It was this emphasis on sexuality that made Freud's psychoanalysis a difficult theory to be accepted within the social mainstream. Indeed, his collaborator Breuer parted ways with Freud precisely because he was not comfortable with Freud's locating of the cause of all psychoanalytic diseases within the sexual desires of a patient. Yet rather than abandoning his theory based on sexual desires, he elaborated on it and made it the corner stone of his 1899 publication *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This book, which includes the narration and analyses of a number of dreams including many dreamt by Freud himself, can be read at one level as an elaboration of his theory of psychoanalysis. But the book has a number of other facets and can equally fruitfully be read as an autobiography or a history of dreaming and interpreting dreams. In fact, it can also be read as a collection of mystery stories where each dream like a scene of

crime in a detective novel presents us with a number of cryptic clues and then Freud like a good detective leads us through an analyses of these clues to a comprehensive understanding of what they represent and what is their underlying reality.

But why did Freud decide to write a book on dreams at all? Well as I mentioned a few moments ago, the concept of an unconscious mind played a very important role in Freud's engagement with hysteria. If certain memories were being repressed out of the conscious mind, then they were definitely being stored somewhere because otherwise these memories would not be able to resurface at a later point in time. Freud believed that these unacknowledged memories were being stored in the unconscious area of the mind and that this unconscious formed a basic characteristic of all human minds and not just the mind of hysteric patients. Now the problem with this conceptualization of the unconscious is that since it exists beyond the pale of our consciousness it is very difficult to know anything about it. Indeed, one might even doubt its very existence. Freud however realised that the unconscious can be approached through studying a person's dream which usually plays out in the grey zone between our consciousness and unconsciousness. When we go to sleep the boundaries of our consciousness are relaxed and a limbo between the conscious and the unconscious is exposed. Dreams are products that get generated within this limbo. But what is interesting is that they are still frequently available to us even when we wake up and even when the boundaries of our consciousness crystalise again. That is to say we can still remember some of our dreams that we had dreamt in our sleep even after we have woken up. Freud discovered that these remembered dreams can act as "the royal road to the unconscious", and in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, this royal road to the unconscious leads one to the seat of uninhibited sexual desires, which according to Freud animates all human mental life. But we will discuss Freud's understanding of sexual desires in our next lecture.

Right now I would like to focus on how Freud reads the narrativised dreams as manifestations of the unconscious.

Dream-work

Now, Freud argues that dreams do not transparently mirror the unconscious but rather reflects them in a distorted form. This translation of the unconscious content into the dream is what Freud describes as dream-work, and we will end our lecture today with a discussion of the mechanism of this dream-work. So to begin with we will have to understand that the dream work relates two different kinds of things: one is referred to as the latent content and the other is called the manifest content. What are these two contents? Well the latent content is the unconscious content that underlies a dream and because it remains hidden Freud refers to it as the latent content. The manifest content is what we register as the dream which is a distorted version of the latent content. Now here we are going to keep aside for the time being two very important questions. The first question is what exactly constitutes the unconscious latent content? And the second question is why does the latent content have to be distorted and transformed so as to make way into our dreams? Both these questions are significant and we will take them up in our next lecture, but right now let us see what are the processes through which latent content gets transformed into the manifest content of the dream.

This transformation or dream-work primarily involves two main processes, namely **condensation** and **displacement**. So what is condensation? Well one of the ways in which the dream work distorts the latent content is by clubbing together a number of objects, people and places and representing all of this variety through a single dream image. So the images that we see in our dream most often act as a kind of short hand symbol which signifies in a compressed form a variety of things. Let's say that I have a crucial exam and I go to sleep the night before

that exam worrying not only about how well I will perform in it but also about what will happen if it rains in the morning and I fail to reach the exam hall in time. Now let us assume that in my dream I see myself wearing a black hat with a large flattened top. This black hat is obviously representative of a black umbrella held over one's head, and it clearly connects with my fear of it raining in the morning and the possibility of my failing to reach the exam centre on time.

However, this hat with a flattened top is also reminiscent of the peculiar kind of academic headgears that one usually wears during graduation ceremonies. Since this academic headgear signifies academic success, it can be seen as relating to my worry about how well I will be able to perform in my exam. So as you can see in this example, the hat that I see in my dream fuses within itself at least two different and unconnected objects. It is this process of fusing together different things in the form of a single image that Freud refers to as condensation. Now, this process of condensation results in dream images being **overdetermined**. This should be a familiar term to you because we have already discussed this term in the context of Althusser's theory. From that discussion we know that overdetermination happens when a single thing is related to multiple causes. Now since a condensed dream image has a number of constituent elements which fuses to form it – just like the image of the black hat was formed by fusing together the images of an umbrella and an academic headgear – Freud refers to the manifest content of our dreams as overdetermined.

Now let us come to displacement. Freud argues that certain aspects of the latent content often gets represented in the manifest content through images which are not connected to it in any integral manner. In fact, the connection is so flimsy between the manifest representation and the latent thing that is represented that when the connection is revealed, it “gives the impression of being a bad joke or of an arbitrary and forced explanation dragged in by the hair of its head.”

Indeed, the very purpose of displacement seems to be the obscuring of the latent content through a moving or a shifting away from it. Freud gives an example of this displacement by referring to a patient who dreamt of strangling a white puppy. When it was finally connected to the latent content it was revealed that the white dog stood for the patient's sister-in-law. This lady, who was intensely disliked by the patient, had an excessively pale complexion and in one argument that she had had with the patient she was abused as a "dog who bites". So in the manifest content of the dream, the murderous rage that the patient felt towards the sister-in-law gets displaced in the form of the image of the patient strangling a white puppy. With this explanation of the dream work we end our lecture today. In the next lecture we will take up for discussion Freud's understanding of sexuality and also the unique map of the mind that Freud came up with. Thank you.