

Lecture 25

Literature and Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud II

Welcome back again to this lecture series on literary theory. From our previous lecture onwards we have been trying to familiarize ourselves with the key concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis in an attempt to study how psychoanalysis can help us gain a new perspective on literature. In our preceding lecture we have seen how Freud establishes the notion of the unconscious as the site of repressed sexual desires first through his study of hysteric patients and then through his study of dream-work. We have also seen how, in both his study of hysteria and his study of dreams Freud's focus has been on narratives and the problematics of interpreting narratives. This, as I have pointed out, establishes an obvious connection between Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and the field of literary studies. Today we are going to explore some more fundamental ideas underlying Freudian psychoanalysis. And we will especially talk about Freud's understanding of human sexual desire which according to him plays a guiding role in shaping our mental life. In today's lecture we will also explore the map of the human mind that Freud came up with to provide a schema for his psychoanalytic theory. But before we delve into these topics, we will be discussing a little about what is known as parapraxis or more commonly as Freudian slip.

Freudian slip

Now, as I have already mentioned in my earlier lecture, the unconscious and its workings became central elements in Freud's study of the human mind right from the days when he started his research on hysteria. And whereas his book *Studies on Hysteria* referred to the unconscious only vis-à-vis the mental world of psychological patients, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud was using this concept of unconscious and repression of sexual desires as a universal

phenomenon. If dreams are accepted to be manifestations of an unconscious latent content, then it is to be accepted that all of us have an unconscious because all of us dream. In the next major work that Freud published after his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserted that the unconscious informs our lives in an even more ubiquitous manner than was earlier suggested. The argument was that it was not only psychological diseases or dreams that were connected with the unconscious but even our more mundane forgetfulness or everyday errors in speech had their roots in the drama that was playing out in our unconscious mind. The book in which Freud delineated this thesis was, therefore, aptly named *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

The key word that Freud introduced in this new book to discuss the ubiquity of our unconscious was parapraxis. So, what is parapraxis? Well you must have noticed that in our day to day conversations we often forget names or words that are otherwise very commonly known, or make errors in pronunciation, or substitute a wrong word for a right one. Freud names these slips or errors as parapraxes and argues that these errors are manifestations of the repressed emotions and memories that are shunted out from the conscious mind and relegated to the unconscious. So just like the hysteric symptoms or the dreams are distorted manifestations of an unconscious content, the everyday parapraxes or Freudians slips too are distorted manifestations of a hidden unconscious content.

Let us try and understand this by looking at an example provided by Freud which will help us in two different ways. Firstly, of course it will help us to understand the phenomenon of parapraxes better. But secondly, and more importantly for our purpose, it will help us to get a feel of what a psychoanalytic approach to literature might look like. Because in this example of parapraxis we start with a narrative or a story which is then followed by Freud's analyzing the text so as to reveal its deeper intricacies and its connections with the unconscious. And this in a way forms

the bedrock of psychoanalytic literary criticism where the critic engages with a literary text to uncover the drama of repressed and unconscious desires and fears seething underneath the surface.

So first let us start with the story. The incident of parapraxis that Freud narrates has to do with the forgetting of a foreign word. Once on a train journey Freud struck up a conversation with a young man who, like Freud, was of Jewish ancestry. He believed that being a Jew in the contemporary society put him at a disadvantage. As Freud writes, he “bemoaned the fact that his generation, as he expressed it, was destined to grow crippled, that it was prevented from developing its talents and from gratifying its desires”. To underline his lament, he brought in the reference to the lament of Dido as narrated in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In Virgil’s epic, Dido is a queen who falls in love with the protagonist Aeneas. Her love is initially reciprocated by Aeneas and they start living like a couple. But this was resented by King Iarbas, who had earlier tried to unsuccessfully woo Dido.

Iarbas’s father was the mighty god Jupiter, and Iarbas appealed to him to separate Dido and Aeneas. Jupiter, in order to keep his son’s request, ordered Aeneas to leave the land in which he was living with Dido and Aeneas obeyed him. This in turn infuriated Dido who threw herself in a funeral pyre while cursing Aeneas with the Latin line that you can now see on the slide.

[Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor] In English this line translates into the sentence: “Let someone arise as an avenger from my bones”. The young man of Jewish origin whom Freud met in the train, wanted to end his lament by quoting this line from Virgil, but could not recall the word *aliquis* which was later pointed out to him by Freud.

This forgetting of the Latin word is interpreted by Freud as an instance of parapraxis. The way Freud connects this parapraxis with the repressed unconscious is through “free association”.

Now free association was a method that Freud had devised during his research on hysteria and then used extensively throughout his career. It is a method in which one is encouraged to say unhesitatingly all that comes to the mind without trying to control either the stream of thoughts or trying to create a logically coherent discourse. When Freud asked his fellow traveler to do a free association and tell him whatever comes to his mind when he thinks of the word *aliquis*, the young man came up with a string of words like “reliques – liquidation – liquidity – fluid”. This reveals that these other words though initially absent from the discourse had cast a shadow on the word *aliquis* which the young man had wanted to utter but could not. For those of you who are familiar with Derrida will notice that “reliques – liquidation – liquidity – fluid” resembles a chain of signifiers over which the meaning of the word *aliquis* is both differed and deferred. The traces of these other words haunt the word *aliquis*, and it is these traces that Freud explores to bring out the connection between the forgetting of the Latin word and the young man’s unconscious. Now apart from the chain of words that I mentioned, the young man also comes up with the names of a number of Christian saints including most notably that of St Januarius. He even narrated to Freud a ritual associated with the saint. The young man told that a phial containing some blood is kept in a church in Naples as the relique of St Januarius and every year at certain specified dates a miracle happens and the blood of the saint transforms from its clotted state to a liquid state. The young man also told that if this liquification of the blood does not happen then it gives rise to great consternation and worry among the believers. Finally, the young man mentioned to Freud that the word *aliquis* also reminded him of a woman that he knew. Indeed, he was dreading that he might receive a message from her which can be very worrisome to him.

Freud connected all these thoughts, ideas, and words that the free association has thrown up and that has haunted the young man's remembering of the word *aliquis* by relating it to his worry about the woman of his acquaintance becoming pregnant. The fear that the young man had repressed from his conscious mind is that the woman might have missed her regular menstrual cycle which would be a sure sign of her being pregnant by him. This fear had got attached with the word *aliquis* because the young man associated it with fluid and with the process of liquification. In his chain of association this was further connected with the ritual liquification of St Januarius's blood which in itself is evocative of a woman's menstrual cycle.

If you now recall the story of Dido that I had told you will realise how the young man's fear could have been unconsciously triggered. In the Dido story Aeneas went away from Dido like an unfaithful lover much like the young man was going away from the woman. The word *aliquis* appears in the speech of Dido which she used to curse Aeneas. For the young man the fear of this curse gets transmuted into the fear of an embarrassing incident of pregnancy. Now since the young man was trying to repress this fear it became difficult for him to remember the word *aliquis* which had got entangled in his unconscious mind with the feared pregnancy. This is what according to Freud led to the particular instance of parapraxis resulting in his inability to remember the word.

Now this discussion of parapraxis brings us to one of the fundamental points of Freudian psychoanalytic literary theory. Any discourse, or, to use Saussure's term, any parole, be it the speech of lament produced by Freud's young acquaintance on the train, or a more patiently crafted piece of literature, is underlined by the unconscious desires and fears of the speaker or the author. The aim of psychoanalytic literary theory which takes its cue from Freud is to dwell upon this connection between the text and the authorial unconscious. So as I had pointed out in

some of my previous lectures, though the general thrust of twentieth century literary theory has been to move away from the figure of the author, psychoanalytic theory has kept alive our interest in the authorial mind and its deep intricacies. This connection between literature and the author's unconscious would become even more evident when we discuss Freud's essay on "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" in our next lecture. But for now let us move on to the understanding of sexual desires which is at the very core of Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

Sexuality

Now one of the most controversial claims made by Freud was that sexuality is not something that develops in human beings with the onset of puberty. Rather, according to Freud, sexual desire was something that characterizes every human being even while he or she is a baby. This basic instinctual sex drive which informs our existence right from our childhood is what Freud identifies as libido. Freud argues that as a child, each of us directs this libido towards our mother who, being our first caregiver and provider of food, is the closest person that we know. The focus of this libido is initially on the activity of breast feeding. As Freud points out, a baby comes to feed on the breasts of its mother not merely to draw nourishment but also to experience pleasure which goes beyond the mere requirement of food. In Freud's own words:

The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed *sexual*.

Now, within the family structure, a baby soon realises, that the mother is not exclusively occupied with it. The father is also someone who demands and receives the attention and care from the mother. This leads the baby to conceive its father as an opponent, who vies with him for

the love and attention of the mother. And this results in what Freud famously terms as the Oedipus complex. Now here the reference is of course to the Greek myth of Oedipus which we have already discussed in detail in our lecture on Levi Strauss. If you recall that lecture you will know that Oedipus was a figure who killed his own father, Laios, and married his own mother, Jocasta. According to Freud, a baby, while growing up, resembles something like this mythic figure Oedipus who wants to “kill” its father – or at least remove the father from the scene so that it can receive the uninterrupted love and care from its mother.

Now with the introduction of the father in the scene, the baby’s desire for its mother also gets underlined by a sense of fear. It realises that the father is a much stronger person and can potentially cause harm. For the baby, who by this time has discovered its penis as one of the primary locus of sexual pleasure, this fear of being harmed by the father takes a more specific shape – it translates into the fear of being castrated by the father. This fear of castration or castration complex is, for Freud, one of the fundamental aspects informing our psychoanalytic life.

Now, as the baby grows up and gets acquainted with the social expectations and prohibitions it realises that harbouring murderous intentions towards one’s own father is socially tabooed. The baby therefore represses this desire into the unconsciousness and rather than treating the father as a competitor comes to regard him as a role model. The baby comes to believe that if it can become like the father someday it will be able to win the complete love and affection of someone like its mother. Now the reason I said, “someone like its mother” and not the mother herself is because the baby also realises that sexually desiring one’s own mother is again a social taboo and therefore that too needs to be repressed in the unconscious. The best one can consciously wish for is a lady who will be the substitute of the mother. So as you can see, the growing up process,

according to Freud results in the repression of a number of desires and fears which then inform our subconscious and manifest themselves in distorted forms through symptoms of psychological diseases or through our dreams or through everyday parapraxes.

Here we need to note two things. The first is that with this explanation of how Freud conceptualized sexual desire vis-à-vis the growing up of a child we have already arrived at an answer to the two questions that we had raised in our previous lecture. The first question was what constitutes the unconscious latent content that ultimately gets revealed in the form of the manifest contents of our dreams. Well now we know that the latent content is constituted by the repressed libidinal desires and fears that we have just discussed. The second question was why was this latent content distorted by the dream work? Well as we can understand now, the latent content of the unconscious is too disturbing to be admitted by the conscious mind of a grown up human being. In our dreaming state, the mechanism of censorship through which we prevent the repressed contents of our unconscious from making way into our conscious mind, relaxes a little. This is why we get a glimpse of our unconscious desires and fears. But even in the dreaming state the mechanism of censorship is not completely switched off. Therefore, the unconscious content cannot be transparently reflected in our dreams. Consequently, the reflection is muddled and distorted through the process of dream work which we have already discussed earlier.

The second thing that I want you to notice is that Freud while explaining the sexual desire of a child takes as his example a male child. The masculine sexuality is the norm as far as Freud's psychoanalysis is concerned. Freud does work on female sexuality but clearly treats it as a distorted version of the normative male sexuality. We do not have enough time at our disposal to go into the details of Freud's explanation of female sexuality but if you read about it you will

understand why it remains a fiercely disputed theorization – especially contested by the feminists.

Map of the mind

Let us now take up Freud's mapping of the human mind which will be the final topic of today's discussion. Throughout his career, Freud kept revising the structure underlining the human mental activities so we don't really have a definitive version of Freud's map of the mind. But more or less the basic contour of this mind map created by Freud is well established. Our mental activities, according to Freud, when taken together have three aspects. They are Id, Ego, and Super-ego. Now here it is important to note that these three names that I just mentioned are three aspects of the mental dynamics and they are not physical parts of our brain. In other words, id, ego, and superego do not have specific physical locations within the anatomy of our brain. So now that we know what they are not, let us try and understand what they really are.

Let us start with id. According to Freud, id is constituted of all our instinctual desires which I have identified a few moments earlier as libido. The main guiding principle of id is what Freud calls the pleasure principle. In other words, the instinctual drives informing the id always seeks pleasure and it comes across as something like a petulant and demanding child who keeps repeating the phrase "I want...". Indeed, this metaphor is not very superfluous because if we look at it from the Freudian perspective then the unchecked manifestation of the desires informing the id is what characterizes our childhood. At this early stage, we do not need to control or repress the id because we are at the centre of our parents', especially our mother's attention and all our demands for pleasure are almost immediately satisfied. It is only when we grow up and learn to negotiate the world as independent social beings that we realise that all our

desires cannot be instantaneously met. And some desires like the killing of one's own father or the marrying of one's own mother cannot be met at all. At that stage, we form what Freud calls the ego which tries to negotiate between the constant demands of the id and the social realities. This is how Freud explains the relationship between the id and the ego:

Thus in its relation to the id [ego] is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. The analogy may be carried a little further.

Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own.

The final aspect that informs the human mental processes is super-ego. Super-ego is constituted by an awareness of all the restrictions, taboos, demands and interdictions that the society imposes upon us. This is the borrowed force that was mentioned by Freud in the quoted lines. Now remember here that according to Freudian psychoanalysis, while growing up we first learn to restrict and suppress our desire out of the fear of our father. Consequently, at a later stage, when we have a strongly developed superego we often associate it with the dictum of the father. And since God is often assumed to be our universal father, super-ego is often perceived as the moral restrictions laid down by God himself.

So, with this elaboration of the Freudian map of our mind, we come to the end of our lecture today. In our next lecture we will take up for discussion Freud's take on literary creativity. Thank you.