

Lecture 26

Literature and Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud III

Introduction

Hello and welcome back all of you to this series of lectures on literary theory. During the course of the previous two lectures, we have familiarized ourselves with most of the key ideas informing Freudian psychoanalysis. In today's lecture we will discuss how these key ideas can be brought together to produce a general understanding of literary creativity. Now, in our previous lecture we have mentioned that psychoanalytic literary criticism primarily proceeds through the critic engaging with a piece of literature to uncover the drama of repressed desires and fears seething underneath the surface. Instances of such an approach to literature can be found in Freud's own writings. So, for example in Freud's 1907 work titled "Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*" we find an analysis of Wilhelm Jensen's novel *Gradiva* from a psychoanalytic perspective. Freud shows, through his reading of the novel, how the hero suffers from psychological complications arising out of repression which is gradually cured as the novel progresses.

Apart from this psychoanalytic profiling of fictional characters, appearing in novels and plays, psychoanalytic theory can also be used to profile the author. One of the finest examples of this approach where a piece of artistic creation is used to delve deep into the recesses of the creator's mind is Freud's 1910 psychobiography titled "Leonardo de Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood". In this essay Freud relates how Leonardo de Vinci's repressed childhood sexual fantasies animates his creative works in later life. And though Freud accesses the unconscious of the creator, Leonardo de Vinci, via an analysis of one of his paintings, the same method may also be

applied to literature in which a particular piece of text may be analysed to interpret the repressed structures of desires and fears framing the psychological life of the author. In this lecture, however, we will not take up for discussion Freud's psychoanalytic readings of specific literary characters or creative artists. Rather we will focus on Freud's views on literary creativity in general and see how that can be connected with the intricacies of human psychology.

Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming

One of the best pieces through which we can study Freud's interpretation of literary creativity in general is his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming". It was first delivered in 1907 as an informal lecture at the house of the bookseller and the member of Vienna Psycho-Analytic Society, Hugo Heller. And it came out in its final published form in 1908. The essay broadly divides itself into two parts. The first part works out the relationship between child's play, phantasy and day-dreaming, and the second part connects this relationship with the process of literary creativity. In our lecture today we will follow this pattern laid down by the essay because that will help us understand the chains of equivalent relationships through which the argument progresses.

Now to begin with, Freud draws our attention to the aura of uniqueness that usually surrounds the creativity of a writer. Some of us can author wonderful stories, poems and other literary pieces while others cannot. So within almost every society, creative writers are regarded as special beings and, as Freud writes:

we laymen [...] always [remain] intensely curious to know [...] from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an

impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable.

Now, please note here, that in this quotation Freud focusses on two aspects of the creative writer. The first aspect is the way in which the creative writer creates his literary product by drawing upon certain kinds of materials, and the second is the way in which that literary product influences the readers by arousing in them strong emotional responses. We will have to come back to these two aspects later. But for now, let us follow how the essay develops. Freud, in order to study this unique creativity tries to equate it with a more mundane and more universally occurring psychological phenomenon so that it can become relatable to everyone. He finds this universal phenomenon in the play of children, and he discovers in the psychological dynamics underlying the mind of a child at play the equivalence of an author's creative energy. Let me quote from the essay here:

Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?

Child's play

For the child at play, this imaginative recreation of a world of its own is not a jest. As Freud observes, the child is in fact quite serious when it is playing and treats the world created by him through his imagination with utmost earnestness. A child's play is therefore not to be contrasted with its other activities performed in seriousness. In Freud's words, "[t]he opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real". Now this distinction that Freud draws between child's play and

reality brings us to the already familiar terrain of wish fulfillment. As we have noted in our previous discussions on hysteria, on dreams, and on parapraxes, one of the crucial aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis is the study of how those wishes are engaged with and at least partially satisfied which cannot be enacted or admitted in reality. These wish fulfillments therefore always proceed by creating a cleavage with reality and opening up a zone akin to that of phantasy.

Phantasy

Now, if you have followed the previous lectures carefully you will know that phantasy is defined from within the field of Freudian psychoanalysis as the creation of an imaginary scene which allows one to live out the repressed wishes that cannot be fulfilled in the reality because our mind is too inhibited to even acknowledge them in the public. Freud explains that a child's play is an early form of phantasy. Or rather, it is the other way round. Phantasy is the adult substitution for the child's play. Now this needs some explanation so we will proceed step by step. A child usually wants to be like the adults that he sees around himself. The way in which the child fulfills this wish is through creating an imaginary scene in the form of play, in which he enacts out his desire of being an adult. If, for instance, a child has seen his father driving, then in his play he might create an imaginary scene in which he assumes the role of a driver and keep zooming across the room sitting on a chair and pretending that to be a car. This fictional situation that the child plays out produces for him a high yield of pleasure, which is otherwise denied in reality. Now, Freud argues that as the child grows up, such mechanism of wish fulfilment through playing games is no longer available to him. Yet, the pleasure that the playful creation of an imaginative scene of wish fulfilment offered someone as a child cannot be very easily forfeited by him as an adult. So rather than give up playing, an adult transforms it into the activity of creating phantasies. As Freud writes:

As people grow up, [...], they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams.

So here we encounter the word day-dreams, which will be one of our key terms in understanding literary creativity through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. But before we can take up the concept of day-dream for further discussion let us dwell a little longer on the transformation that happens between the child's play and the adult's phantasy. Freud observes that one of the key distinctions separating child's play from phantasy is that the imagined objects and situations that constitute the former are often linked with tangible and visible things of the real world. Thus for instance the child trying to fulfil his wish to be a driver like his father might make use of a real chair and pretend that it is a car. In case of phantasy, however, no such linkages can be observed. Indeed, the adult very carefully protects his fantasies from any external manifestations. So much so that if asked, he would even deny the existence of his phantasies. This is however sharply different from how a child behaves at play. A child may not have any desire to exhibit his play in front of the adults but then he doesn't make any special effort to hide his play either. A child at play is indifferent to whether someone else is observing him or not. This contrast between the child's indifference to observers spying on his play and the adult's desperate attempt to keep his phantasies a secret is not very difficult to understand. The wishes that the child enact in his

imaginary world while playing are not particularly repressed wishes because the entire mechanism of repressing desires only gradually develops as one grows up. However, for an adult the mechanism of repression is already well established and consequently the imaginary engagement with wishes that cannot be fulfilled in reality becomes an embarrassing fact. These imaginary engagements or fantasies are pleasurable, but they represent a form of guilty pleasure which the adults need to keep hidden. Thus, as Freud notes, the form of phantasy, which he identifies as day-dream, is rarely admitted by anyone in spite of being universally engaged in. This gives a clue as to what kind of wishes and desires constitute our day-dreams. But before we move on to these wishes and desires, let us focus on the term day-dream and its relation with the other kind of dream that we experience while asleep.

Day-dreams

Well, as we have already discussed, dreams which arise from within the limbo between consciousness and unconsciousness manifest our libidinal desires and allow us to engage with them. Since these are desires which an adult person has come to regard as shameful, they appear in the dream only after being sufficiently distorted by the mechanism of dream-work. The phantasies of a day-dream are also similar engagements with “shameful” desires, with the only difference being that in day-dreams these desires are engaged in the woken state itself. The stigma associated with these desires nevertheless remain very strong even in a day-dreaming person and consequently it becomes very difficult to make a person confess his phantasies. Indeed, as Freud notes, it is often easier to make a person confess his misdeeds than to make him confess the phantasy that plays out in his day-dream.

Ambitious wish and Erotic wish

Now let us come to the contents of the phantasies that constitute our day-dreams. Freud states that the nature of day-dreams differ from person to person depending on their sex, character, and circumstances. But irrespective of these individual variations, day-dreams primarily fulfill two different kinds of desires or wishes. The first Freud calls ambitious wishes and the second he calls erotic wishes. The former relates to a person's desire to be regarded as socially elevated and powerful, whereas the latter relates to a person's repressed sexual desires. According to Freud, in the day dreams of young men the ambitious wishes mostly surface whereas a young lady's day dream is more likely to be dominated by her erotic wishes. And this distinction also makes clear the motives of concealing one's day dream. Thus, as Freud writes, a young lady is allowed only a minimum of erotic desires by the patriarchal bourgeois society. Therefore, any excess of erotic desire has to be repressed by her and engaged with only in the private imaginative space of day-dreams. A young man on the other hand needs "to suppress the excess of self-regard which he brings with him from the spoilt days of his childhood, so that he may find his place in a society which is full of other individuals making equally strong demands". But having made this distinction Freud also goes on to point out that the distinction does not mean an absolute opposition or rigid compartmentalization. Often the day dreams overlap both these wishes. Thus, for instance a young man might phantasize in his day dreams of performing some heroic exploits which satisfies his ambitious wish. But in the same day dream he might also imagine himself performing those exploits to win the affection of his lady-love, which in turn satisfies an erotic wish.

Now, we need to note one thing here, which is that though day-dreams might have at their core either the ambitious wish or the erotic wish, the mise-en-scene or the setting of the day dream of each individual person differs. This is because, and I am quoting from the essay here, day-dreams “fit themselves in to the subject’s shifting impressions of life, change with every change in his situation, and receive from every fresh active impression what might be called a ‘date-mark’”. To explain this, Freud gives the example of a possible day-dream that a poor orphan might indulge in on his way to meet a prospective employer. In his day-dream, he might imagine himself as meeting the employer and getting the job. He might then imagine himself brilliantly succeeding in his job and winning the trust of his employer and getting accepted within his family. In his day-dream, his brilliant career culminates in his marrying the charming young daughter of the employer and then finally inheriting the business from him. Now note here that the setting of the day dream is almost entirely influenced by the poor orphan’s present situation. He is on his way to meet a prospective employer and therefore his day-dream is about getting the job and doing exceptionally well in it. But what happens when we look beneath the surface of the story that plays out in this particular day-dream, which is unique to the situation of the moment? Well, we find the same cluster of ambitious wish and erotic wish that provide the universal content for all day-dreams. Thus the exceptional career that the poor orphan imagines fulfills his desire for social elevation, whereas the part about his getting married to the charming daughter of the employer fulfills his erotic wish. So a day-dream, just like the usual dream or like parapraxes presents us with a narrative which, if interpreted from the psychoanalytic perspective, reveals the presence of deep-seated desires.

Day-dream and time

Now, while elaborating on the example of this possible day-dream of a poor orphan, Freud draws our attention to the sequence of time that underlies the phantasy. In Freud's words,

The relation of a phantasy to time is in general very important. We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times - the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish.

This comment becomes easy to understand if we go back to the example of the day dream of the poor orphan. That particular day dream is integrally tied to the orphan's present. As I explained just a few moments ago, the orphan's day-dream is about a job because he is at present on his way to a prospective employer. But this event that informs the orphan's present moment triggers a day-dream precisely because it strongly harks back to the memory of an earlier experience. In case of the orphan boy it might be the memory of his family and the affection that he used to receive while his parents were still living. The reason the present event triggers this past memory is because the future holds a prospect of his regaining his position within an affectionate family—in this case the family of his prospective employer. So what the day-dream does for the orphan boy is to allow him in his imagination of the future a chance to regain the childhood that he has lost. In other words, the day-dream strings together the three times of the past, present and the future.

Day-dream and creative writing

But what has all of this to do with our understanding of literary creativity? Freud argues that just like the phantasies of the day-dream are transformed forms of child's play, popular novels, romances and short stories are transformed forms of day-dreams. Now here it is important to note that Freud begins his discussion of literature and literary creativity in the second part of the essay by making a distinction. He says that his focus will be on popular novels and stories which are entirely products of their author's imagination and not on the literature produced by critically acclaimed writers or on ancient epics and drama which uses ready-made material to build their story. So does that mean that psychoanalytic theories can only be applied to certain kinds of literature and not to others? Well it is a question that I will have to leave open for you to decide. But moving on with Freud's essay: the argument that is being made is that the popular fiction produced by authors are similar to day-dreams produced by each one of us. Thus, just like a day-dreamer, the creative writer too gets inspired by a strong experience in the present which triggers in his mind some earlier childhood memory. This childhood memory appears in the present as a desire or wish which then finds fulfilment in the creative work. In other words, just like a day-dream, a creative work too is underlined by its authors desire for wish fulfilment, and again just like a day-dream the creative work too strings together the past, present and the future.

Moreover, popular creative writings like novels, romances and short stories also resembles day-dreams in having ambitious wish and erotic wish at their core. Thus for instance the hero of a popular romance or a novel seldom comes to any harm or seldom dies. Even if he is found to be injured or in trouble at the end of a chapter, he is soon discovered to have fully recovered or miraculously rescued from trouble. This is a manifestation of the ambitious wish in which the subject always imagines himself as powerful and absolutely invincible. Think here of our run of

the mill Bollywood scripts where even if the hero is beaten black and blue, even if he falls from a high-rise, or even if he gets caught up in a car crash he comes out unscratched almost like a divine figure. The erotic wish also plays an important part in popular creative writing, and for that matter in popular Bollywood scripts as well. In these stories we see the hero being imbued with a charm that is so irresistible that all the young beautiful women around him inevitably falls in love with him. And this clearly connects to the subject's repressed sexual phantasies.

But having pointed out these similarities between day dreaming and creative writing, Freud brings up for discussion a very crucial difference between the two. Now a day-dream is the phantasy of an individual and is associated with the fulfilment of his very personal desires. Indeed, as Freud points out, that if we were to tell our day-dreams to others our narration would most probably repel them or at the very least leave them cold. This is not very difficult to understand. Imagine one of your friend's telling you his day dream in which he performs great heroic acts and in which he saves the world from destruction. Now this day-dream though it yields a high degree of pleasure to your friend would leave you uninspired because it does not fulfil any of your desires or wishes. That is to say, your friend's day dream does not make you feel heroic. Yet, a popular novel, in spite of being akin to the day dream of its author seems to yield pleasure to the reader as well. How does this happen. Well Freud argues that a creative writer allows others to participate in his day-dreams and reap pleasure from them by two different ways. The first way is that the creative writer uses his ability to write and to structure the narrative beautifully, and this formal beauty of the creative writing attracts the readers to it. Freud calls this the "incentive bonus" or the "fore-pleasure". This fore-pleasure experienced through the literary form leads the reader to experience a still greater pleasure from the content of the creative writing. And a reader can experience this pleasure from the content because the

creative writer is able to “soften the character of his egoistic day-dream by altering and disguising it”. In other words, the creative writer narrates his own day-dream in such a way that it loses its private or personal character and allows the reader to participate in it. The personal phantasy of the author is sufficiently altered and disguised for us the readers to project our own images on to the hero of the fiction and fulfil through him our ambitious and erotic desires. And since through literature, we can indulge in these wishes more openly than through our day dreaming, we feel liberated from the tensions of our minds. That is to say the feeling of shame that is attached to day-dreaming is gone when we engage with literature. Yet, in both the cases the goal remains the same – fulfilment of our repressed desires. So as you can see here, Freudian psychoanalysis can help us create not only an author centred literary theory but also a reader-centred literary theory. And indeed, as Freud tells us in his essay, approaching literature through the lens of psychoanalysis and through such psychological phenomenon like day-dreaming brings us to the threshold of new, interesting and complicated enquiries. We will continue with these new and complicated enquiries in our next lecture when we take up for discussion the work of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Thank you.