

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 24
Literature and Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud (I)

Hello friends and welcome back 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 20th century was characterized by the opening up of a number of new fields of inquiry and each of these new fields, then went on to generate distinct schools of literary theory with their own distinct sets of critical vocabulary and their own distinct sets of key ideas. And we have already seen this with Ferdinand de Saussure's synchronic linguistics as well as Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.

Today we will see how the works of Sigmund Freud, opened a distinct field of human inquiry and how that then went 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 20th and 21st 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.

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Sigmund Freud
(1856 - 1939)



Source: Wikipedia

Freud like Husserl was born in Moravia, in the region of Moravia and the year in which Freud was born was 1856; however, very soon Freud shifted to Vienna. In fact, he was only 3, when he shifted to Vienna, the Austrian capital and in this city that Freud continued to live and work till he was 82. Now 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.

Now, we will have to remember here that when, Freud started his career as a doctor what we today consider to be psychological disorders were primarily understood and treated as disorders of the nervous system. But Freud started moving away from this purely physical understanding of the psychological disorders 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 and different from how physical ailments were usually being treated 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 disease that, we today study under the rubric of psychoanalysis. The first major step that, Freud took in this direction in defining this new field of psychoanalysis was publishing a book titled *Studies in Hysteria* and this book Freud wrote with another Viennese physician, whose name was Josef Breuer. But of course, the most well known manifestation of this new field of psychoanalysis came in 1899.

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Die Traumdeutung (1899) was translated in English under the title *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

This was in fact, the year when Freud published his landmark book, which bore the German title *Die Traumdeutung* and which was translated in English as *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 actually not very different to guess. Firstly, the fundamental theory of psychoanalysis that, Freud laid out in this book was such a radical departure from the existing ways, in which human ailments were understood and were treated by contemporary doctors that it; obviously, aroused a lot of skepticism a lot of doubt. And secondly and perhaps more importantly the reason why the interpretation of dreams received a muted response, during the time of its publication was because, Freud insisted that it was the sexual desires that guide our psychological life and also how mental diseases were formed, were caused.

Now, pleasing such tabooed subjects like sexual desire and incest. In fact, at the heart of his theories was deeply troublesome for the conservative Viennese society of the late 19th and early 20th century and this aspect of Freud's writing might still make psychoanalysis unacceptable to certain groups of people. 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 recognized as a major scholarly figure.

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- *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*
- *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*
- *The Ego and the Id, Civilization and Its Discontents*
- *Moses and Monotheism, etc.*

Now, Freud was a prolific writer and throughout his fairly long life, he published a number of books, which are today regarded as classics of western scholarly tradition. These books include apart from of course, the books that I have already mentioned they include names like *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *The Ego and the Id*, *Civilization and It is Discontents*, *Moses and monotheism*, etcetera. Freud's fortunes; however, turned for the worse, when the Nazis came to power and when they annexed Austria and took it over as part of their own kingdom right.

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Mass Burning of Books by Nazi Germany



Source: germanculture.com.ua

Freud himself was of course, 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 burned 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 he sought exile in London and that is where he stayed till his death in 1939. So now, from his life let us move on to a study of his work.

Now, since a Freud inaugurated an entirely new field of inquiry and since this field of inquiry has its own unique concepts and distinct vocabulary, we will first try to familiarize ourselves with the broad outlines of Freudian psychoanalysis and then we will move on to a discussion of, how psychoanalysis can provide us with a new understanding of the literary process. And the place where I wanted to start is Freud's research on hysteria, which ultimately resulted in the publication of the book *Studies in Hysteria*.

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The term hysteria comes from the Greek root word *hysteron* which literally means womb.

Now, the term hysteria comes from the Greek root word *hysteron* which literally means a womb. Now the reason that this disease which is identified as hysteria, got a name that derived from the root word womb is because, it was originally believed to be a disease that was caused by quote, unquote the wandering of womb away from its original place within a woman's body. In the mid 1880s, when Freud started working on hysteria, the

mainstream opinion about the disease had of course, 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 of Jean Martin Charcot, who believed that hysteria, had nothing to do with the reproductive organs rather, Charcot argued that hysteria was a result of inherited brain damage and as such the disease could be found both in males as well as in females. Now 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 and the causes of hysteria cannot be really traced back to in his specific problem in the patient's body.

Freud argued in his turn that the cure to hysteria can only be achieved, if the doctor looked into the patients mind rather than studying his or her biological body. 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 it resulted from the patient's efforts to forcefully refuse to acknowledge in a conscious state of mind the memory of a past trauma. Now this analysis of the disease led, Freud to work on a kind of cure that was very different from how hysteric patients were being treated by doctors, who believed in the biological cause of the disease. And this new cure involved allowing the patients to talk about their own past and to talk about them freely. So, that after a certain point the repressed memory of their trauma is brought to the consciousness.

What Freud and Breuer argued was that remembering and confronting the memory of the traumatic past, actually produced a release of emotions and it resulted in something like a cathartic effect, which ultimately cured their hysteria. And the role of the doctor in this line of treatment consisted in carefully listening to the narratives produced by the patients and in helping them to interpret them where the aim of the interpretation was to sift through the narrative in such a way that the patient can identify the repressed traumatic even 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, to convert it is cause, as well as it is prospective cure into the process of telling a story and interpreting, a story. The historic patients were the tellers of the story and Freud's role as a doctor was much like that of a literary critic, who would analyze and interpret these stories and 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, here we need to understand something very important, which is that the very fact that something can be so repressed in our mind, that it goes beyond the grasp of our consciousness, means or at least 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 by Freud as the unconscious. The rule 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 historic patients, the patients almost inevitably ended up talking about, how as children they were seduced and sexually engaged by an older figure who was in most cases identified as the father himself. Now, this led Freud to what is now called the seduction theory and in this seduction theory, the idea is that the child who was seduced by the father figure, experiences a sense of trauma, but Freud argued that this trauma was not experienced, when the older father figure engaged sexually with the child. This trauma was only later realized when the child was growing up and when this memory of the sexual engagement started becoming more and more traumatic to recall and because, it became more and more traumatic to recall because of course, the child then comes to realize that this is not socially acceptable. The growing child learns to repress, it learns to push it away from the pail of consciousness to the area of the unconscious.

Now, this seduction theory is a neat enough theory, but Freud pretty soon rejected the seduction theory and he came up with a new theory regarding the cause of psychological disorder like hysteria and this new theory would actually effectively reverse the earlier understanding of the seduction drama. In this new theory, Freud proposed that the sexual event in the childhood might not be a real event at all, but it might just be what he called phantasy, now this term phantasy is very important to Freudian psychoanalysis in general as well as psychoanalytic literary theory in particular. So, we will need to understand this.

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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, what is phantasy? Well in psychoanalysis, phantasy means creating an imaginary scene that would allow someone to fictively enact his or her own desire that is too problem to be admitted or enacted in reality. And why this notion of phantasy is important in the study of psychoanalytic literary theory? We will come to it, when we discuss Freud's essay on daydreaming later in one of our future lectures, but here we are faced with a question, which is that 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 enable the patients to enact in their imagination and in a distorted form their sexual desire towards their parent figure. Now therefore, what was being repressed, was actually not the trauma of being sexually defiled, but what was

being repressed, was the sexual desire of the child. Because the child while growing up comes to learn that such a sexual desire directed at a parental figure is socially taboo and then the child starts repressing it and pushing that desire into the unconscious.

Now, it was this stress 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 causes of all psychoanalytic diseases within the sexual desires of his patients. Yet rather than abandoning this theory of psychoanalysis based on sexual desires, Freud actually elaborated on it and made it the cornerstone of his 1899 publication the interpretation of dreams.

This book it is a wonderful book, not only because of its content, but also because of its style and it includes the narration and analysis of a number of dreams, including many dreamt by Freud himself and it can be read at a number of different levels. So, at one level it can be read as an elaboration of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, but of course, the book has many other facets and therefore, they can be read equally fruitfully as pieces of Freud's autobiography, which the dreams which come together to form this book or even the book can be read as a history of dreaming and a history of interpreting dreams.

My favorite way to read the book of course, is like 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 Freud like a good detective leads us through an analysis of these clues to a comprehensive understanding of what they really represent and what is their underlying reality, underlying truth. Now the question is why did, Freud decide to write a book on dreams at all, after he had worked on hysteria? Well as I mentioned just a few moments earlier, the concept of an unconscious mind played a very important role in Freud's engagement with hysteria.

If a certain memory 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 as they were doing, when his hysteric patients were talking about their past. Now, 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 minds of his 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 directly indeed, one might even doubt its very existence. Freud; however, realized that the unconscious can actually be approached through studying a person's dream, which usually plays out in the gray zone between our consciousness and our unconscious mind. So, when we go to sleep the boundaries of our consciousness are relaxed and a limbo between the consciousness and the unconscious mind is exposed.

Dreams are actually products that get generated within this limbo, but what is interesting is that they are still very frequently available to us even when we wake up and even when the boundaries of our consciousness crystallize 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.

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Freud discovered that these remembered dreams can act as he called and I quote the royal road to the unconscious and in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, this royal road to the unconscious leads the reader 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, what I would like to do is, I would like to focus on how Freud reads the narrativized dreams as manifestations of the unconscious. Now, Freud argues that the dreams that, we dream do not transparently mirror the unconscious, but rather reflects it in a distorted form, this translation of the unconscious content into the dream is what Freud describes as dream work. So, to begin with we will first try and understand this dream work and it is with an analysis of this dream work that, we will end our lecture today.

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The translation of the unconscious content into the dream is what Freud describes as **dream-work**.

So, again to start with the dream work relates 2 different things, this is the first thing that we need to understand. Dream work is a translation of one thing into another thing. So, what are these 2 things within which this translation happens? Well first there is something, which Freud refers to as the latent content and then there is something, which Freud refers to as the manifest content.

Dream work happens, when latent content is translated into manifest content, but then what are these 2 contents, well the latent content is the unconscious content that underlines a dream and because it remains hidden Freud refers to it as the latent content, the hidden content.

The manifest content is what we register as the dream, which is a distorted version of the unconscious latent content. Now here, we are going to keep aside for the time being at

least 2 very important questions, but I would like to state these questions here, 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 in other words, why cannot our dreams reflect like a mirror, exactly what is there in the latent, content. Now both of these questions are significant and we will take them up in our future lectures.

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This transformation or dream-work primarily involves two main processes:

- **condensation**
- **displacement.**

But right now let us see, what are the processes through which latent content gets transformed into the manifest content? In other words, what is the mechanism of dream work?

Now this transformation, this mechanism of dream work primarily involves 2 processes, one is condensation and the other is displacement. So, what is condensation? Well one of the ways in which the dream work, distorts the latent content is by clubbing together, by bringing together, a number of objects, people, places and representing all of this variety through a single dream image. So, the images that we see in our dreams are most often, they are like shorthand symbols, which signify in a compressed form a variety of things. Let us say that, I have a crucial exam and I go to sleep the night before that exam worrying not only about how I will perform in it? But also about, what will happen if it rains and if 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. Now 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 hall in time. But this hat that I see in my dream also reminds me of the peculiar kind of academic headgear, that one usually wears during a graduation ceremony, which also has a flattened top.

Now, since this academic headgear signifies academic success, you wear it to your graduation ceremony. It can be seen as relating to my worry about how well, I will be able to perform in my exam? Whether I will be successful or not? So, as you can see in this example, the hat that I see in my dream fuses within itself, at least 2 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. So, the hat that I see myself wearing in my dream is a condensed image of various different things like the umbrella for instance or the academic headgear.

Now, this process of condensation results in dream images being over determined, this is also a very important word and this actually should be a familiar term to you, because we have already discussed this term in the context of Althusser's theory. And from that discussion, we know that over determination 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 of an academic headgear. Freud refers to the manifest contents of our dreams as over determined and this should also show you that there is the one to one correspondence between, what appears in the manifest content and what is there in the latent content.

So now, let us come to the other thing that goes on in the dream work, which is 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.

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Freud argues that the connection between manifest representation and latent content is so flimsy, 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.”

In fact, the connection is so flimsy between the manifest representation and the latent thing that is being represented that, when this connection is revealed Freud sees that and I quote, it gives the impression of being a bad joke or of an arbitrary and forced explanation dragged in by the hair of it is 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 and our next lecture, we will come to the point as to why this shift, why this move away from the latent content happens in our manifest content. But right now let us discuss an example of displacement, which Freud gives when he refers to a patient, who has this strange dream of strangling a white puppy. Now when it was this particular dream was finally, connected to the latent content by Freud, it was discovered that the white puppy, the dog actually stood for the patients sister in law, this lady, the sister in law, who was intensely disliked by the patient had an excessively pale complexion and in one argument that she had with the patient, she was abused by the patient 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 displacement in the form of an image of the patient strangling a white puppy. So, 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 as well as his unique map of the human mind.

Thank you for listening.