FR118 Strategies for Reading French Texts

The Unconscious of the Text

[TITLE SLIDE]

Introduction

In addition to the close analysis of literary, filmic, musical and philosophical texts, one of the aims of the Strategies course is to introduce you to a range of theoretical issues involved in reading *critically*. The point of critical theory is to ask questions about the common (but differing) assumptions that we—as the consumers of cultural objects—hold, and how these assumptions shape or prejudice our readings. Those assumptions that relate to our identity, as well as that of the author/character in a text, are very pertinent: which social class do you identify with? How would you describe your racial, sexual and gender identity? We have also seen, in the lectures on Authorship and Intentionality as well as History and Contextualisation, that the assumptions we *might* hold—with regard to the author of a text, the status of language, and historical context—need to be scrutinised.

So where does *psychoanalysis* and the concept of the *unconscious* fit within the process of questioning the assumptions that we bring to the study of texts? Psychoanalysis, of all the schools of twentieth-century 'theory' that we consider, is probably the most iconoclastic and influential in terms of its cultural reach. Here are some ideas, with which you will probably be familiar, that owe their popular existence to psychoanalysis: to have a *death wish*; to *fixate* on or have a *fixation* with something/somebody; to be *anally retentive*; *libido*; *neurosis*; *perversion*; *wish-fulfilment*; *phallic symbol*; *dream interpretation*; *the Oedipus complex*; *Freudian slip* (a slip of the tongue). So how are all these ideas connected?

What psychoanalysis fundamentally challenges is the idea that we do or can know ourselves fully. Psychoanalysis posits that there is a crucial aspect of our mental existence that remains *unconscious*, or outside of our immediate awareness: this hidden part of ourselves, when understood, helps explain why we do things we don't want to do, why we keep on doing them, and why we can't stop doing them with rational willpower alone. In popular parlance, the unconscious is sometimes called the 'subconscious', but this is not a term ever used in psychoanalytical discourse. According to psychoanalysis, the unconscious can be accessed, or brought to awareness, through the consideration of dreams, children's play, jokes, slips of the tongue, as well as patterns and symbols in art and literature.

[SLIDE: TODAY'S LECTURE]

So today, we are going to think about three things: first, we will spend some time thinking about the concept of our unconscious mental lives as understood by Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and some key post-Freudians; second, we will consider the critical implications of psychoanalytical ideas; third, and finally, we will consider some of the limitations of psychoanalytical readings, using the example of feminist reactions to Freud's schema.

[SLIDE: CHARCOT]

1. The Unconscious

Before we can begin to understand Freud's ideas, we need to consider the historical context in which his work was done. Freud was a doctor from Vienna who trained with the famous French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, in the 1880s in Paris. Charcot treated patients (mainly women) who suffered from what was then called hysteria: physical problems, but which had no apparent organic cause. Charcot set out to prove that hysteria was a neurological problem, i.e. something caused by physical lesions to the brain. Freud, in his book *Studies on Hysteria*, departs from Charcot's idea and suggests that hysteria has a *psychological* root cause. This work relates the now-famous case of 'Anna O.', a twenty-one-year-old woman was sent for treatment with Freud for unexplained symptoms such as nervous cough, partial paralysis, somnambulism, and disturbances of vision. Under Freud's treatment this patient 'invented' what she called 'the talking cure', whereby she would talk using a technique called 'free association' (just saying whatever came into her head) which would then be analysed by her therapist. Through this process, she found herself able to express the unconscious psychological distress that had manifested itself as a physical symptom, thereby relieving herself of the problem.

[SLIDE: PSYCHOANALYST'S COUCH]

This was the beginning of psychoanalysis, and provides the source of the common image we hold today of the patient lying on a couch talking to his/her therapist. Based on the interpretation of many patients, women and men, adults and children, Freud posits a dynamic model of the mind which shows that human beings, specifically those who live in Western, so-called civilised society, live in conflict with themselves. Psychoanalysis is a theory of human subjectivity, the unconscious, and of sexuality. Freud's suggestion is that the human psyche must manage a conflict between unruly primitive *drives* (animal instincts, if you like) and the powerful social forces of civilisation. Human beings, according to Freud, are wholly motivated by the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (what he calls the *pleasure principle*), but they must also obey the forces of civilisation that require us to delay gratification in the service of higher ideals (what he calls the *reality principle*). So we are like slaves serving two masters.

[SLIDE: FREUD'S STRUCTURAL MODEL]

Freud said that the human 'subject', or the 'self', is made of different components, which he called the *ego*, the *id*, and the *superego*. The *id* refers to these primitive drives, or libido—along with 'sexuality' a term used to refer to powerful human instincts. The *superego* refers to the repressive, disciplining force of the law and civilisation (rather like a conscience or parental authority). Both these parts of the psyche, Freud maintains, are largely unconscious, and function in conflict with each other. The *ego* is the conscious part of our mind that must mediate between these two powerful forces and provide a satisfactory course of action in the light of their demands. Fairy tales are often very productive examples of this conflict as experienced by children, and Bruno Bettelheim, who was a child psychoanalyst, argues that a tale such as 'The Three Little Pigs' deals with the choice between following the pleasure principle or the reality principle, for it teaches the child that we must not be lazy and take things easy, for if we do, we may perish.

[SLIDE: PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT]

Freud also says that early childhood is the key time/place when these conflicts are powerfully played out and, in a 'normal' person, healthily resolved. Freud says that little children go through three key stages of psychosexual development: the 'oral' (infancy), the 'anal' and the 'phallic'. This latter stage is when the Oedipus complex occurs, according to which the young child develops sexual fantasies about possessing the opposite sex parent and doing away with the other. This fantasy is relinquished by the boy under threat of castration, and he 'sublimates' his desire into creative activity. The little girl, who considers herself to be castrated, experiences penis envy and desires a child as a substitute for her lack.

Those of us who manage this conflict successfully are psychologically 'normal' and seem able to keep our instinctual drives sufficiently repressed: we develop happily (as far as this is possible) into men who build skyscrapers and women who have babies. But in a psychologically 'unhealthy' person, put very simply, if the forces of the superego (of repression) are too strong a person may suffer from *neurosis* (e.g. OCD, or anxiety or anorexia); but if the ego comes under the sway of the id then *psychosis* occurs (full 'madness', e.g. delusions, a loss of contact with external reality). But the crucial point to retain here, in terms of the importance of all this for the study of art and literature, is that if we take seriously what Freud says then his most important insight is this: *the normal human state has much in common with the pathological*. So-called normality comes at an enormous cost, and we must drive our desires underground into the realm of the unconscious. To be normal is, to some extent, to be in psychological turmoil.

[SLIDE: THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS]

In his most famous work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud famously said that dreams are the 'royal road' to the unconscious. Focusing on what he called the 'dreamwork', Freud saw that the structure of the dream revealed a latent or hidden content beneath the apparently meaningless or unrationalisable surface content. In order to be able to analyse this, Freud developed the notions of *condensation* and *displacement***.** In brief, condensation is lots of anxieties packed into one over-determined object, and displacement is one thing standing in for another. For example, Freud often interprets cupboards, locked boxes, and other enclosed objects as womb-like spaces. These operations are in many ways inherent in the construction of a poem, or a painting, as much as a dream, and certain artists of the day recognized the potentiality of this approach to the dream or to reality as a dream. In textual terms, condensation and displacement equate quite closely to the work of metaphor and metonymy.

[SLIDE: LACAN PICTURE]

Many influential psychoanalysts have developed Freud's thought over the course of the twentieth century and 'psychoanalysis' today is not a fixed entity. It has evolved with the times and under the influence of different practitioners. In terms of its significance to literary study, however, the French analyst Jacques Lacan (although clinically a marginal figure outside of France) has been very influential in the study of film and literature. His *Ecrits* (1966) is an original attempt to re-write

Freudian psychoanalysis, as Terry Eagleton says, 'in ways relevant to all those concerned with the question of the human subject, its place in society, and above all its relationship to language.'[1]

Lacan is a difficult thinker to get to grips with, and it would be impossible here to give you a simplistic overview without ironing out some of the important tensions in his work. Lacan argued that 'the unconscious is structured like a language', and proposed a structural theory of the human psyche based on contemporary linguistic models.

[SLIDE: LACAN]

For many analysts the point of psychotherapy was to restore the integrity of the ego and help it to function again—in other words, to make the patient 'normal'. Lacan wanted to challenge this normative view of the self and its rather pragmatically curative view of psychoanalysis, and he developed Freud's central insight about normal development coming at a great cost. He maintained that the ideal of the integral and stable identity is always a deception, a mis-identification of my reality with an image outside myself. Lacan's most well known paper is his 1936 lecture on the 'mirror stage' in child development. In this Lacan stated that the ego (our conscious self) is formed via a process of imaginary identification on the child's part with the image it has of itself in a mirror (or in the body of another child or playmate, say). But he crucially sees this identification as a form of misrecognition or *méconnaissance.* The illusory image of wholeness that it gives forms the basis of an early self-image or ego-ideal, which the child at this stage believes is whole and masterable. Lacan divides the internal (psychic) world into three realms of experience: the *imaginary* (the pre-linguistic child, the mirror stage, like Freud's 'ego'); the *symbolic* (the stage where language is developed; the 'law' and the 'name-of-the-father' corresponding the Oedipal stage of development and like Freud's 'superego'); the *real* (the stage before the imaginary where the infant experiences itself as one with the mother's body, the realm of desire and rather like Freud's 'id'). Importantly for Lacan, the 'real' is something that adults continue to desire but which cannot be regained, for the child's entry into language has marked a permanent separation from this natural state. This sense of complete oneness with the mother/world is something that human beings may experience fleetingly, perhaps when they fall in love, experience religious ecstasy, or during psychotropic drug experiences.

For us, Lacan's most important insight is that the impression we have of a stable sense of self is illusory: the inauguration of the self involves alienation because it depends on an image and a misrecognition. It is therefore somehow fictional. This fundamentally challenges the traditional Enlightenment view of human subjectivity, for Lacan represented by Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am), which assumes a unified and knowable human subjectivity. Lacan might say that as Copernicus displaced the centre of the universe, Freud displaced the centre of the human being. The implication for literary study is an emphasis away from the author's conscious intention, and a radical questioning of what it means to be human. You can see here that this grappling with the idea of identity is something that psychoanalysis has in common with literature. As Lionel Trilling asserts:

[1] Eagleton, p. 142.

[SLIDE: TRILLING QUOTATION]

> The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which, in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries. […] the human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art.[2]

[SLIDE: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND LITERATURE]

2. Psychoanalysis and literature/film

So let's now move on to consider some examples of how to analyse the working of the unconscious in texts. Freud himself analysed a number of literary texts. One example is his well-known essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919) which includes a discussion of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story, 'The Sandman' (1817). In this essay, Freud tries to account for the source of the feeling of the 'uncanny' in reading, a sense of repulsion and distress caused by something that seems familiar and yet strange at the same time. Freud says that objects such as waxwork figures, dolls and automata are examples of things that commonly generate a sense of the uncanny. He also says that the archetypally uncanny presence in literature is that of the double, or the *doppelgänger*. Freud defines the uncanny as what we call 'everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open'.[3] It is the return of the repressed. In this story, the young protagonist Nathaniel falls fatally in love with a doll, Olimpia, who is so lifelike that he confuses her with a real woman. Freud's interpretation concerns the fear of losing one's sight as exemplifying a castration anxiety. The 'Sandman' of Hoffmann's tale in traditional European folklore stands for the mythical figure who sprinkles sand into children's eyes to bring on sleep. In this version, the Sandman is transformed into an antagonist who steals the eyes of children who will not sleep and feeds them to his children. Nathaniel confuses the Sandman of his nightmares with a sinister and frightening friend of his father's, whom he then confuses with a series of other threatening figures (or doubles) in the story.

Even if his analysis of the tale is criticised by some as a somewhat overstabilised account—that is to say, it eliminates the doubt and uncertainty that is the story's great strength—what Freud succeeds in demonstrating is that the uncanny is not a rational response based on 'intellectual uncertainty'. It is an unconscious response: we somehow recognise the thing in the story, and it feels creepy, but we do not know why.

Beyond the analysis of a specific work of literature, the work of psychoanalysis, Lionel Trilling argues, has a much broader relevance to the study of art in general. For example, Freud's interrogation of human nature has much in common with past literary movements such as nineteenth-century Romanticism, the common characteristic being 'the perception of the hidden element of human nature and of the opposition between the hidden and the visible.'[4] In his focus on

[2] Trilling, p. 47.
[3] Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 132.
[4] Trilling, p. 48.

unconscious drives, Trilling argues that 'Freud's thought has significant affinity with the anti-rationalist element of the Romanticist tradition.'[5]

Psychoanalytical theory has also been used in studies of authors, and might be associated with the resurrection of the figure of the author as worthy of study. One of the best-known examples of this is Harold Bloom's study *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Bloom, an expert on the English poets Milton and Wordsworth, distinguishes between what he defines as 'great poets' and 'lesser figures' by offering a description of poetic influence in which the former manage to overcome—although at the cost of immense 'anxieties of indebtedness'—a fierce Oedipal struggle with other great poets who have gone before them; mediocre poets, according to Bloom, are so overcome by this struggle they are only able to create derivative work. Bloom argues that 'strong' poets make poetic history by misreading one another, in his words, 'so as to clear imaginative space for themselves'.[6]

[SLIDE: PSYCHO]

To turn back to Lacan, following Freud's example he analysed Edgar Allen Poe's short story, 'The Purloined Letter', which raised far-reaching questions about language and truth and which spawned a whole series of interesting responses from literary critics and philosophers. However, the example I would like to focus on here is the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on film theory. The most pertinent idea is that of the *gaze*, taken from Lacan's 'Mirror Stage'. This is useful when considering how we look at people on screen and the process of identification. The film theorist Laura Mulvey wrote an article in 1973 called 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. Mulvey argues that the cinematic techniques used in classical Hollywood cinema play on what she calls the *male gaze*. Mulvey is concerned with how we are made to identify with people on screen. The 'male gaze' of the camera reflects the perspective of heterosexual man and objectifies women, who in film are 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact'.[7] She draws from this the idea that this limited perspective forces women also to adopt the male gaze, for they are constantly aware of being looked at by men. Mulvey draws on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to theorise this unequal power relationship, and argues that women thus displayed represent the 'Other' to the man's image of himself (which is itself a misrecognition), evoking the ultimate castration anxiety; what she means by this is that images of women evoke pleasure but also anxiety for men, because 'castrated' woman, as an inferior being, illustrates to him the possibility that he might be less than himself.

3. Some of the limitations of psychoanalytic theory…

[SLIDE: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FEMINISM]

At this point, I expect some of you are beginning to feel puzzled by or frustrated with some of these ideas. In particular, Freud's account of the psychosexual development of children—that's to say ideas

[5] Ibid. p. 52.
[6] Bloom, p. 5.
[7] Mulvey, p. 715.

like the Oedipus complex, penis envy (as experienced by little girls) and the resolution this finds in our unbalanced gender identities if we develop 'normally' in a civilised society—sits uncomfortably with many people. It would be impossible to outline in this lecture all of the ways in which critics have taken issue with psychoanalysis, but it would be fruitful to look briefly at one key example: feminism.

Feminist thinkers have produced a range of interesting responses to Freud which essentially focus on the issue of whether psychoanalysis may be considered to be *descriptive* or *prescriptive*. Does psychoanalysis describe the way things are or the way things ought to be? Kate Millet's feminist polemic, *Sexual Politics* (1970), takes a strongly critical stance against Freud in particular and argues that his theories are sexist, insulting to women, and designed to relegate and maintain women in a subordinate position. She aligns Freud's alleged misogyny with that of some key English and American authors whose writings strongly denigrate women, such as Henry Miller in *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), a novel dealing with the experiences of a young author living in Paris in the 1930s. However, some more considered and well-informed analysis of Freud is provided by Millett's contemporary Juliet Mitchell. In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), Mitchell acknowledges that Freud's attitude to women shows that he was a man of his time, but she also defends him from the accusation of sexism by arguing that he insightfully describes the formation of gender relations under patriarchy. For Mitchell, we cannot begin to be able to dismantle patriarchal structures until we understand the way in which they are constructed. Toril Moi says that Millett fails to appreciate the fundamental insight of psychoanalysis, which is 'the influence of unconscious desire on conscious action.'

[SLIDE: TORIL MOI QUOTATION]

Moi helpfully summarises Mitchell's position in this way:

> Freudian psychoanalysis in fact sees sexual identity as an unstable subject position which is culturally and socially constructed in the process of the child's insertion into human society. […] Millett's theory of sexual ideology as a set of false beliefs deployed against women by a conscious, well-organized male conspiracy ignores the fact that not all misogyny is conscious, and that even women may unconsciously internalize sexist attitudes and desires.[8]

[SLIDE: DINNERSTEIN AND CHODOROW]

So Mitchell offers the compelling argument that psychoanalysis helps to explain how our unequal society came into being; we dismiss it at our peril, for, without it, we cannot hope to build an alternative way of being. Other feminist thinkers, such as Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (1987) and Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), have developed this idea. They both use psychoanalytical theory to suggest that we need to alter radically the way in which we parent children, in terms of the structures of society. Dinnerstein, for example, uses object-relations psychoanalytical theory, developed by Freud's follower Melanie Klein and which focuses on the influence of the child's very earliest years and the relationship to the mother (in other words, the pre-Oedipal phase).

[8] Moi, p. 28.

Klein focuses heavily on the intense ambivalence—the painfully mixed feelings— that a child experiences towards his/her primary carer. She goes as far as to say that the child feels both love and extreme hatred, before reaching a stage where he/she can cope with the parent's limitations. In terms of gender relations, Dinnerstein argues that because most early parenting is done by women all people grow up with intensely problematic (but unconscious) feelings towards women. These are then played out in society in a form of generalised misogyny: we all, on some deep level, hate and mistrust women. The solution, for Dinnerstein, is to re-model society with a more equal distribution of childcare: men and women should share childcare between them (and then we would hate men and women equally!) So these and other theorists offer a range of interesting ideas that may be helpful in the analysis of a theme such as mothering in literature, although feminists have had to remodel Freud's original ideas in order to do so and many remain fiercely hostile to psychoanalysis.

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis is a huge body of knowledge, and it would be possible to spend a whole lifetime studying Freud's writings and those of his theoretical descendants. The key for us, in conclusion, is to pinpoint how it is relevant to the study of literature, if at all. I want to suggest that its relevance lies in the questions it raises about what it means to be human, the very essence of the 'self', and whether or not this can be fully known or made accessible by either author or reader. Trilling says that the great value of psychoanalysis is that it offers us: 'the licence and the injunction to read the work of literature with a lively sense of its latent and ambiguous meanings, as if it were, as indeed it is, a being no less alive and contradictory than the man who created it.'[9]

[SLIDE: FREUD AND CIGAR]

However, one final point: when engaging in the work of unearthing the 'hidden' significance of a work of literature a clear warning comes from Freud himself: 'Gentlemen, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'!

[9] Trilling, p. 53.

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