UNIT 22

Psychoanalytic literary theory

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> for one who'd lived among enemies so long:
> if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
> to us he is no more a person
> now but a whole climate of opinion
> under whom we conduct our different lives...
> (W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud', *Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, London, 1991)

As Auden suggests, Freud's influence on modern thought has been a lasting one even though his theories have been a continual subject of controversy and a source of challenge. This is especially true in the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism where, despite constant revisions and refinements, new developments have tended to be assimilated into the old framework, with the effect that all psychoanalytic criticism has its origins in Freud's theories. Psychoanalysis aims to understand individuals by uncovering desires hidden deep within the mind and revealing their connections with the conscious surface, and it is this approach which psychoanalytic literary critics take to the text.

For the critic undertaking a psychoanalytical reading, three interrelated Freudian categories are essential: the unconscious; the sexual origin of human motivation in repressed infantile incestuous desires; and the symbolic manifestation of unconscious wishes in dreams, jokes, errors and significantly in literary works. According to Freud, we each harbour an unconscious mind which operates by more primitive rules than those of consciousness. Our earliest childhood desires and fantasies, primarily sexual in origin, remain permanently lodged in our unconscious minds because they are so frightening and guilt-producing. This is linked to Freud's theory of human psychological development. For Freud, the myth of Oedipus as dramatized in Sophocles' play expressed a profound insight into an important stage of development in that it can be seen to be a tribal wish fulfilment of the taboos of patricide and incest (see Freud, 1953, Vol. VII). Freud saw this as a consequence of the child's close involvement with the mother's body throughout the pregnancy and feeding process. The child's love for the nurturing mother remains dominant throughout the formative years and eventually, according to Freud, the boy-child

begins to see the father as a rival for this love, to the point where he fantasizes about killing him. What persuades the boy-child to abandon this incestuous desire is the father's unspoken threat of castration. By perceiving his mother's lack of a penis, the child begins to imagine that this is a punishment which might be used against him, and so represses any incestuous desire; he detaches himself from the mother and identifies with the father as a symbol of a power to which he can eventually aspire. The boy-child has therefore been introduced into the symbolic role of manhood. He has become a gendered subject but in doing so he has repressed his forbidden desires.

The most famous example of the Oedipus complex is, of course, *Hamlet*, and Freud himself was first to point this out in his footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) in which he sees Hamlet's inability to kill Claudius as a projection of Shakespeare's own unresolved Oedipus complex. Certainly the character of Hamlet and the reasons for his delay in revenging his father's death are more easily understood in psychological terms. Freud speculated that at the beginning of the play, Hamlet, like all mature males, had gone through the Oedipal stage and repressed his desires so successfully that his prime emotion was one of admiration and love of his father. The murder of his father, however, since it is in effect the realization of his childhood wish, revives his Oedipal 'thoughts' of patricide and incest, and the inner conflict which this causes makes Hamlet hesitate. In *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949) Ernest Jones develops Freud's theory by suggesting that although Hamlet's guilty feelings, as expressed by the ghost, cause him to plan revenge, he unconsciously identifies with Claudius since, by killing Old Hamlet and marrying Gertrude, Claudius has merely carried out what he, himself, unconsciously desired. Hamlet's hesitation to act stems from the fact that in killing Claudius he would be killing himself. The relationship between Hamlet's conflict and Shakespeare's own psyche, can be better understood in the light of Freud's observation that the play is not the dramatization of a wish fulfilment but is rather a representation of the inhibitions and repressive facets of the writer's mind. Freud believed that events in Shakespeare's life, the death of his father and son, fulfilled in part his unconscious Oedipal wish. However, the guilt and taboos associated with this demand inhibition and self-punishment, and it is this unconscious conflict which surfaces in his plays.

Later Freudian critics took his methods a stage further and saw *Hamlet* as neither a direct wish fulfilment nor a circuitous inhibited one but as a highly elaborate defence mechanism. Edmund Bergler (1979) points out that the then-underdeveloped nature of psychoanalysis prevented Freud from seeing the deeper defensive layers in Shakespeare's psyche. He argues that the overt Oedipal representation in Hamlet is made accessible by Shakespeare in order to screen a 'deeper, repressed guilt', that of his frustrated homosexual impulses.

> It seems to me that Hamlet's crime of Oedipal fantasies, so brilliantly elucidated by Freud, is but a camouflage obscuring a deeper conflict which antedates the Oedipal one.... That Shakespeare himself saw male homosexuality only in terms of femininity is one of the poet's rationalizations (for example, the queen in Hamlet compares her son with a 'female dove').

However, this 'deeper reading' is still tied to Freud's assumption that art transmits under repression the artist's taboo drives, wishes and impulses and that the work's form is both a disguise and a 'forepleasure' for the forbidden desires lurking in the unconscious layers of the psyche.

In *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* (1908), Freud argues that the artistic work is a vehicle for externalizing in a socially acceptable way, a combination of the role-play games of children and the daydreams and fantasies of adulthood. The artist masks his egocentric daydreams to transform primitive desires into culturally acceptable meanings and, in so doing, creates a surrogate neurosis in which the audience or reader can participate safely, its enjoyment being based on illusion. For Freud, aesthetic pleasure is derived from this release from repression. The therapeutic value of art, both for the artist creating it, and for the audience witnessing it, is that it allows emotional identification with its protagonist, while remaining remote enough for the ego not to be completely submerged by the fiction. It is worth noting here that the period in which Freud was evolving his theories (the beginning of the twentieth century) was also the time of the modernist revolution in literary writing. It was hardly a coincidence that the techniques of this style included stream of consciousness, disjointed time sequence, free verse, etc., all of which shifted linguistic expression closer to its mental (subconscious) origins (see Unit 16, p. 453, and Unit 17, p. 489).

The early psychoanalytic critics therefore adopted a variety of approaches to the text. They could begin with a study of the elements in a writer's biography that helped to shape and condition his imagination and apply this to the work. One example of this is Edmund Wilson's essay (*The Wound and the Bow*, 1941) in which he attempts to show how Dickens's works were influenced by the circumstances of his childhood: his father's imprisonment for debt, the humiliation of working in a blacking factory and the bitter indignation and resentment he felt towards his mother who tried to force him to continue working there. Wilson argues that Dickens's whole career was an attempt to digest these early shocks and hardships and to explain them to himself. The danger of the literary critic constructing a psychoanalytical diagnosis of the writer from the hearsay of external writings such as letters, diaries and autobiographies and using this to illuminate the works in this way is all too apparent.

A more common approach of psychoanalytic criticism is to use the work as the equivalent of the confession on the analyst's couch and proceed to draw conclusion about the writer from this, in other words to argue like Bergler (1949) from *Hamlet* about Shakespeare's life and state of mind. Another example is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which, as already shown in Unit 10, is replete with repressed, subverted references to childbirth and procreation and expresses a fear of pregnancy and its connection with death, all of which lends itself to this form of psychoanalytic reading. Ellen Moers (1977) links the creation of Frankenstein's monster with its 'motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences' (p. 142) to fears about monstrous childbirth engendered by Shelley's mother's death in bearing her and by her stressful experience as an outcast's daughter, teenage mother and illegitimate wife. Critics of

psychoanalytic literary criticism have tended to deride the reductivism of Freud's 'art out of neurosis theory' with its compulsion to uncover the secret obsessions of writers and characters and the reduction of Shakespeare's genius to a subliminal mastery of homosexual impulses and Swift's satire to anal sadism (see Norman O'Brown's essay on Swift in Lodge, 1972). But just as the discrediting of Freud's methodology and the questioning of the validity of his case studies have not halted advancements in clinical psychoanalysis, neither have the crudities of early Freudian literary criticism halted more subtle developments in that sphere.

Elizabeth Wright (1984) gives a comprehensive account of the changes which have occurred in this field. Wright explores the ego-psychology of Ernest Kris (*Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, 1964); the reader-response work of Norman Holland (*The Dynamics of Literary Response*, 1968; *Recovering 'The Purloined Letter'*, 1980) and the theories of Carl Gustav Jung (*Man and his Symbols*, 1978) who saw the unconsciousness as a common reservoir of highly charged symbols. This notion of the 'Great Memory' has been made familiar through the poetry of W.B. Yeats, while Doris Lessings in her novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* (Lessing, 1974) makes use of Jungian typology in the plot, the characterization and the metaphoric imagery. Lessing calls this novel an 'autobiography' because it is the story of every immature soul. The novel ends with a Jungian vision of the renewed primal family following the female 'Shining One' through the opened gates to the new era, trailed by an archetypal procession of children of all races and the Great Mother's lion mascot.

A further development in psychoanalytic theory occurred with the object-relation theories of Winnicott and Klein. As we have already seen, in the traditional psychoanalytical view human psychology is driven by the impulse to express instinctual drives and in order to do this, relationships with others are formed. In object-relation theory this is reversed with the assumption being that the ego is always striving to form relations with others. In Melanie Klein's view (*Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, 1975) the newborn infant is imbued with the instincts of life and death as well as enough ego to experience anxiety and to employ certain defences against this anxiety. The infant defends itself by means of projection – expelling the bad, and introjection – absorbing the good. The primary object, the breast, is experienced as a 'good object' when it gratifies the child's hunger, and a 'bad object' when it is withheld. Human development, in Klein's account, involves the gradual increase in the complexity and strength of the ego so that both of these contradictions can be tolerated. When the child learns to see the mother as a separate person, it fears that it has caused the mother injury by its previous 'split' fantasy about her body, and wishes to make reparation. This desire to restore the mother is seen to play a crucial part in the creative process which strives after 'wholeness'. Klein's theories of infantile sexuality and primal terrors figure largely in modern horror films such as Ridley Scott's *Aliens* with its portrayal of Kleinian formulations such as nurturing figures, especially the mother, who become destructive; aggressive tendencies which punish internally and externally, and a place where self and world are not sharply delineated from each other. In this art form we can re-encounter our infantile anxieties and primal terrors in order to have another chance to resolve them and to make reparation.

> Reparation proper can hardly be considered a defence, since it is based on the recognition of psychic reality, the experience of the pain that this reality causes, and the taking of appropriate action to relieve it in phantasy and reality. (Segal, 1973, p. 95)

Klein's theory therefore emphasizes a dialectical process in which the contradictions of the external world and the internal world meet, intertwine and resolve.

D.H. Lawrence's short story *The Prussian Officer*, although written from a self-consciously Freudian perspective, in many ways anticipates these later object-relation theories. The story rather overtly makes the point that the officer's sadistic treatment of his orderly is an attempt to deny his homosexual attraction to him. Traditional Freudians could regard the officer's horror and fascination with the orderly's scarred thumb as a fear of retaliatory castration for these repressed wishes, and his overaction to the spilled wine as fear of arousal to ejaculation. This, of course, is part of the story, but it is also possible to see the relationship between the officer and the young orderly as a parody of the symbiosis between mother and child. What at first appears to be a denial of sexual attraction reveals itself, both for the officer and for the orderly, to be a denial of symbiotic fusion, which is shown by the way in which the two shadow each other and by their sensitivity to each other's eyes – the essential communication between mother and child during nursing. The killing of the officer and the semi-delirious wanderings of the orderly afterwards can be understood better in the light of this relationship.

In this early object-relation theory, as in Freudian and ego-psychology, the human subject is a battleground for conflicting instincts. However, under the influence of structuralism, critics such as Jacques Lacan challenged this notion of the human subject. For Lacan, there is nothing, not even the unconscious, that has pre-existent form as a germ of a 'self' or 'ego'. Instead the subject is constructed in and through language. As we have already seen in Unit 19, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early part of the century emphasized the significance of the relationship between things over and above the things themselves. In his study of language he laid the foundations for a theory of the linguistic 'sign' that stresses the arbitrariness of the links between words and meanings (loosely, 'signifiers' and 'signified') and the way these links can be constructed as a series of differences, from other possible links. Psychoanalysis, with its concern with the interchange-ability of symbols and the distorted significations that arise through the effect of the unconscious on mental life, invites a decoding of its underlying relationship structures, but Lacan goes further than employing the methods of structuralism to psychoanalysis: he makes psychoanalysis a branch of structuralism, specifically, cultural linguistics.

Lacan borrows Jakobson's two poles of verbal organization, metaphor and metonymy (see Unit 18, pp. 528–32) and equates these with Freud's characteriz-ations of displacement and condensation. Condensation (*verdichtung*) corresponding to metaphor, i.e. an image or item linked to others by their apparent similarity in the mind of the subject (the paradigmatic axis) and metonymy corresponding to displacement (*verschiebung*), i.e. item being associated with item by being next to it in a chain (i.e. continuity or syntagmatic chain). Lacan's concern was not merely to

align each linguistic term with a mode of unconscious mental functioning, the terms 'metaphor' and 'metonymy' play a signifying game of their own. Whereas Freud regarded subconscious images (e.g. dreams) as pre-existent and variously transformed by the structures of language (such as metaphor and metonymy), Lacan argues that these same linguistic terms form and determine relations between our conscious and subconscious states. This distinction has a counterpart in literary genres. Poetry tends to foreground metaphor (or condensation), i.e. any unitary relation between word and meaning is replaced by a surface relation between words and other words (perhaps as a substitute for repressed meaning). The novel on the other hand is more closely related to metonymy (or displacement) in that it relies upon a chain or sequence of events or items. In Lacan's theory narrative involves an endless chain of signifiers in pursuit of 'real' truth or satisfaction.

When Lacan states that the human subject is constructed in and through language, he is not implying that there is a pre-existent subjectivity which learns to express itself in the words made available to it by language, but rather that the initially 'absent' subject becomes concrete through its positioning in a meaning-system which pre-exists it and is greater than it. The infant is placed in a flux of a signifying system it does not possess and is created according to the possibilities offered to it by words.

> It is the world of words that created the world of things – the things originally confuse in the *hic et nunc* of the all in process of coming-into-being – by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been. (Lacan, 1953, p. 65)

The 'word' then dominates over the construction of psychic organization through the medium of pre-existent cultural categories, and the way in which our 'selfhood' is actually constructed is through a series of shifts, first from the mother, and then from the illusory identification of the self as a perfect unity, until the subject's place in the symbolic world is found and the unconscious produced.

According to Lacan, the child begins life as a primordial non-subject, an 'hommelette' whose desires spread in all directions, unfettered and unorganized, with no sense of the self or of the boundary between desire and gratification. The child lives in a 'symbiotic' relation with its mother's body which blurs any sharp boundary between the two. Lacan calls the first split from this uncoordinated stage 'the mirror-stage' since it is bound up with the child's perception of him/herself in the mirror or in the gaze or responses of the other with whom the child interacts. Finding this reflection of itself, the child mistakenly imagines a unified image of itself, for the image reflected back to the child both is and is not itself, there is still a blurring of subject and object. The child's perception thus produces a fiction, the fiction that he/she is whole and has a clearly ascertainable identity, when what is really happening is that the child is identifying with a vision that comes from elsewhere. What the mirror phase achieves is an alteration of the infantile psyche from the immersion in fragmentary drives to the experience of integration which at least allows for the possibility of an individual self being recognized, but it is only when this narcissistic relationship is interrupted that a fully social human subject is formed. Wordsworth's 'We are Seven' provides a useful example of the

'hommelette' stage since the child in the poem seems to be unable to distinguish between life and death. The poem therefore would appear to be an exploration (metaphorically) of Wordsworth's intuitive sense of the arbitrary relation between language, reality and identity. In this way, the adult properties of 'life' and 'death' can be seen to be functions of our command of their linguistic distinctions (see Unit 10, pp. 241–2).

The second developmental split comes with the child's entry into the language system. The symbolic order of language – what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father, emphasizing its patriarchal nature – conveys the values of the social system which it reflects, supports and encompasses. In order to produce meaning and communicate with others the child must adopt its functioning system. Language therefore moulds the child into a speaking subject and shapes its perceptual world. In this way language confers individuality on the child as it positions the subject as a separate, speaking entity engaging in a dialogue with others, but it also confirms its alienation from those others: 'What I seek in speech is the response of the other. ... I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object' (Lacan, 1953, p. 86). One of the lessons the child learns unconsciously from language is its place within the pre-given social and sexual relationships which form the underlying structure of society. Like Freud and Lévi-Strauss, Lacan believes that the symbolic structuring of kinship patterns takes the form of the Oedipal complex. In this case it is the symbolic order of language, what Lacan calls the Law of the Father, which threatens castration. The child is defined by *exclusion* (the incest taboo), and by *absence*, since it must give up its earlier bond with the mother's body, and in so doing it negotiated its passage through the Oedipus complex. However, as in Freud's theory, a residual unconscious desire for the symbiotic union with the mother remains. Symbolically, language stands in lieu of the absent mother and is equivalent to her death: 'the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire' (Lacan, 1977, p. 104). The language system therefore creates a sense of lack in the separation from the mother and the desire to fill that lack through language. Although language implies that it 'stands in' for objects beyond the words, it is merely an endless chain of signifiers, there is no transcendental meaning or object to ground this continual yearning. Lacan therefore sees the unconscious as a 'sliding of the signified beneath the signifier', a constant sliding and hiding of meaning that will never yield up its secret to interpretation. The unconscious mind makes itself manifest only in distorted forms of language in puns and word-play. In his interpretation of *Hamlet* therefore Lacan moves away from analyzing the character or the writer and focuses instead on the text:

> One of Hamlet's functions is to engage in constant punning, word play, double ententre – to play on ambiguity. Note that Shakespeare gives an essential role in his plays to those characters that are called fools, court jesters whose position allows them to uncover the most hidden motives, the character traits that cannot be discussed frankly without violating the norms of proper conduct. It's not a matter of mere impudence and insults. What they say proceeds basically by way of ambiguity, of metaphor, puns, conceits, mannered speech – those substitutions of signifiers whose essential function I have been

> stressing. Those substitutions lend Shakespeare's theatre a style, a color, that is the basis of its psychological dimension. Well, Hamlet, in a certain sense must be considered one of those clowns. (Lacan, 1977, pp. 11–52)

It is only by means of Hamlet's word-play that the underlying trauma of the Oedipus complex is revealed. It is in the 'play' of literature with its multiplicity of meanings and shifting signifiers that we can, time and time again, re-experience unconscious desires. (For a full Lacanian reading see his *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'*, 1972, discussed in Wright, 1984, pp. 114–22 or Terry Eagleton's reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* in *Literary Theory*, 1983.)

As we have seen, although the perspective of psychoanalytical interpretation has shifted through the years, the constant feature of the theories has been the Oedipal complex. The phallocentric nature of this concept is obvious and it is hardly surprising therefore that, in recent years, feminist literary critics have focused on psychoanalytic theories of sexual identity. Freud creates a development theory for woman as little-man-minus. In his view, in the genital stage the little girl recognizes the inferiority of her sexual organ, her lack of a penis, and feels a sense of her own inferiority and her distance from power. This engenders a hatred for her mother for having created her in her own image, and a passionate envy of the penis possessed by father and brother alike. The girl thus shifts from mother love to father love.

> No phallus, no power – except those winning ways of getting one. ... The girl's entry into her feminine 'destiny' is characterised by hostility to the mother for her failure to make her a boy; it is an entry marked by penis-envy, that in its turn must be repressed or transformed. (Mitchell, 1974, p. 96)

The recognition of herself as already castrated pushes the girl into the Oedipal situation in which her desire is to displace the mother in order to get a share of the father's power. Finally the desire for the penis must be renounced and replaced by the desire for a baby, and Freud suggests that the mother's happiness 'is great if later on this wish for a baby finds fulfilment in reality and quite especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him' (Freud, 1953, Vol. XXII, p. 167).

Lacan, too, gives an account of women which makes them marginal outsiders. The little girl is a 'little man' with no existence in her own right. For Lacan a child's sense of identity comes through its introduction to language, the symbolic order, which the child enters only as a result of culturally enforced separation from the mother and his – though not her – identification with the Father, the male in-family representative of culture. Thus Lacanian theory reserves the positive symbol of gender for men. Women, because they lack the phallus, the symbol of authority around which language is organized, occupy a negative position in language. Moreover, because masculine desire dominates language and presents woman as an idealized fantasy fulfilment for the emotional lack caused by the separation from the mother, woman in Lacanian theory is merely a gap or a silence, the invisible and unheard 'other'.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* has already been discussed in Unit 8 and, from a feminist perspective, in Unit 24, but the following extract from Book IV, in which

Eve looks into the lake, provides an interesting illustration of Lacan's view of women:

> A shape within the watery gloom appeared
> Bending to look on me; I started back,
> It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
> Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
> Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
> Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire
> Had not a voice thus warned me, what thou see'st
> What there thou see'st fair creature is thyself,
> With thee it comes and goes: but follow me
> And I will bring thee where no shadow stay
> Thy coming.
>
> (ll. 461–72)

This passage gives rise to many questions about psychoanalysis and gender. Eve at this point is like the child at the 'mirror stage' in Lacan's theory – she desires an image of herself. A voice (God/man) advises her that her desire is vanity and tells her that 'He' will bring her to a correct realization of what she really is and how her mind should respond to instinct and desire. It is significant that Eve has to hear 'a voice' and that her image of herself 'comes and goes' since this demonstrates Lacan's contention that woman's identity is 'fixed' by her entry into the phallocentric system of language. If, as this would suggest, woman's image of herself is shaped by a language system which defines her according to a purely male perspective, the question then arises as to what a 'purely' female perspective might be.

Lacan himself speculates on what this 'otherness' of women might be and considers the possibility of a 'jouissance', an enjoyment of the body that goes beyond the phallic order. French feminist critics such as Luce Irigary, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva have all argued that women must challenge the phallocentric discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis which exclude them as subjects, and to do this they must write themselves into the text.

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history. (Cixous, 1975, p. 245)

Psychoanalysis has therefore been one of the major influences in recent feminist poststructural criticism since it has foregrounded the way in which woman-as-sign has been negatively constructed by the hierarchical binary oppositions of language. Increasingly, feminist criticism has tended to expose and dismantle the claim of the primacy of the phallus, and to explore the way in which literature, with its dislocation of the network of signifiers, reveals the cracks in the social and cultural façade of the subject.

> Whether written by a woman or by a man, a linguistic intervention which ruptures accepted (acceptable) discursive practices, reverts us to the constitution of the social subject which is predicated on the repression of the maternal. Through disruption of the symbolic function of language, we are able to give expression to the repressed, or to detect traces of

repression, but in so doing we are, even if only momentarily, in breach of the Law-of-the-Father. (Furman, 1985, p. 74)

The interconnection between psychoanalysis and literature has therefore involved a complex interweaving of ideas and theories which have changed and developed over the years with disputes arising between theorists as to the precise relationship between language and the subconscious. What is clear and significant, however, is that literature provides the most fruitful and complex battleground for psychoanalytic theory. By emphasizing the way in which literature foregrounds elements such as metaphor-metonymy, or condensation-displacement, psychoanalysis contributes to the contention that literature is special and different; that it reveals to us things about the relation between the mind, language and reality that are not manifest in our habitual, routine use of language.

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