

## **The Interpretation of the Unconscious: From Freud to Lacan**

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**Abstract:** *Psychoanalysis is the study of the unconscious mind, especially offering new clues to the inner workings of the mind. It began with Sigmund Freud and was later developed in different directions, mostly by Jacques Lacan, known as "the French Freud," who also studied the inner workings of a language apart from his study of the unconscious mind. This paper, thus, aims to show that human desires are hidden in the works of literature, which are structured like the unconscious mind. In order to identify this process, this paper has taken into account the dream-like process in John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci".*

**Keywords :** *Unconscious mind, Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacanian psychoanalysis, interpretation of dreams, human desires, the self*

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Date of Submission: 03-01-2018

Date of acceptance: 17-01-2018

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### **I. Introduction**

The major purpose of psychoanalysis is to deal with complex human desires that are reflected in the works of literature. As cultural theories such as New Historicism and Marxist theories see power structures in cultural contexts, psychoanalysis sees power structures within an individual. In other words, psychoanalysis exposes the inner self and its system. In doing so, the theory formulates certain kinds of ideology within an individual that extends to the evaluation of cultural and social phenomenon. Thus, psychoanalysis has become one of the major phenomena over a couple of decades in many areas including cultural studies. It has taken many turns and forms since its inception during the 1970s and 80s as it is formulated by different theorists in different ways. Like many other theories have come up with many different approaches, it has become one of the influential approaches to literature, especially Freudian and Lacanian approaches in the study of inner workings of both mind and language. So to study literary as well as cultural texts, the most important theorists like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva have formulated the theories of inner workings of literary texts. This study has discussed two models of psychoanalysis such as Freudian and Lacanian. These two models explain the concepts of these two individual theorists.

### **II. Psychoanalysis: Freud**

The psychoanalytic approach to literature rests on the theories of Sigmund Freud. His theories are directly or indirectly concerned with the workings of the unconscious mind. The unconscious is a part of human psyche, which is related to the needs of the body. Freud had developed an idea that the human mind has three different components: id, ego, and superego. The id represents the predominantly unconscious part of the human mind. The ego is his term for the predominantly conscious part which regulates and opposes the unconscious part. The superego though seems to be outside of the self, makes moral judgments that have been learned from our parents, our schools or our religious institutions. One of the salient elements of Freud's psychology is the theory of repression. He says that the ego and the superego control human desires what Freud (1972) calls repressed or forced into the unconscious mind (p. 39). Repression is the means whereby socially unacceptable desires and wishes, manifested by the id, are held in check by the ego. The repressed desires emerge only in dreams and in creative activities that produce a work of literature. According to Peck & Coyle (1993), the literary work can be considered as "a symptom of the author who produced it, or as analogous to the relationship between the dreamer and his or her dream, as if the work is a symptomatic reproduction of the author's infantile and forbidden wishes" (p. 188). It is, thus, natural to consider a work of literature as a dream that Freudian theory explains the workings of the mind that has produced it. Psychoanalysis can therefore be an important approach to analyze the unconscious desires of an individual hidden in literature.

According to Freud, a literary work is like a dream. Both have certain common elements. In both, the unconscious processes are at work and they share the elements of fantasy (Trilling, 1972, p. 282). It describes a number of dreams and "the key to the secret of dreams is that their meaning is the fulfillment of a wish" (Freud, 1972, p. 40). Like in the dream, the writer's purpose in literature is to gratify some secret desires that have been

repressed into the unconscious mind. In fact, literature is "the expression of the author's unconscious mind" (Selden, 1988, p. 224).

Psychoanalytic critics imply certain terms and procedures to discover the wish in dreams. Freud has used the term "dream-work" to mean the complex process of the dream. According to this process, the unconscious desires are disguised in dreams which appear in symbolic forms. In Freud's dream-work, two terms occupy an important place: the "manifest" content and the "latent" content. By "manifest" content he means the image as remembered in the dream and by "latent" content he means the hidden meaning of the dream. So Freud used dream analysis as a tool for uncovering our repressed feelings and memories. The repressed urges of the id surface in dreams, disguised in symbolic form, and therefore require analysis to reveal the true meaning. His belief in the significance of dreams was no more original than his belief that there is an unconscious side to the psyche (Murfin & Ray, 1997, p. 311). Freudian theory tries to use a literary work to uncover the unconscious workings of the mind of the writer at its origin and then to explain the inner meaning of the work.

### **III. Psychoanalysis: Lacan**

Modern psychoanalysis evolved as an elaboration of and also as a reaction to the Freudian psychoanalysis. Modern psychoanalysis had Jaques Lacan, a French philosopher, as its proponent. Lacan presented a reworking of Freudian principles with the focus on the human subject, its place in society and its relationship to language. Thus, language, the most vital of the elements of human civilization, has been drawn as a model to study the development of a human subject. In drawing a linguistic model for psychoanalysis, he has also helped to establish the relation between psychoanalysis and another famous modern-day concept of post-structuralism. His theory tries to explain the recurring question of the nature and construction of the human self in relation to the social. The self in a human subject is developed in a dialectical manner. It is the dialectics of the reality of the world and the as-yet-non-existent self of a child. It begins to formulate as it is at a certain point past the symbiotic oneness with the mother. It will be right to claim him a due position, which John Forrester (1990) offers as "the foundation of a new theory of culture, a new world view encompassing the relation between individual destiny and social law" (p. 3).

Lacan roughly designates three stages of an ego's evolution: the l'hommelette phase, the mirror phase, and the symbolic phase. The l'hommelette phase is the one when the child does not have any idea about his existence as a being in the world. This lack of self-knowledge is a moment of perfect bliss, which he names the "primordial oneness". Once the primordial union with the mother is gone, the child enters an imaginary world of a separate existence as a self. Although the child has a preliminary departure from the union with the mother in the imaginary or the mirror phase, its self is not yet fully developed as an individual. The child knows and yet does not fully know about its separate existence. It sees its reflection in the mirror and gains a false idea of a self (Eagleton, 1996, p. 16). This mirror stage illusion leads a child even further to the symbolic stage, where he finds himself in need of a position, an identity, all by himself. Here, he enters the world of difference and contrast. For example, as Weber (1991) says, "The child between the age of six and eighteen months, as a subject – in-the-making, recognizes itself in the Gestalt of its mirror image" (p. 102). At a time when motoric control is still inadequate, the child can grasp coherent images that make a whole. He now makes a difference between the mother and himself as well as between himself and the father. However, with this realization alone the child cannot tear itself asunder and he enters the symbolic world of signification that will provide him a communion with his primordial days, as well as an arbitrary position all by himself. The otherwise taboo will be practiced by the child in a free manner in the symbolic world of language. This lost happiness of the infant, the union with its parents of opposite sex, remains in mind, which keeps him always hankering for the blissful past. This desire is known as the Oedipus Complex.

Viewed in details, Lacan's mirror stage is a formative beginning of a thinking subject although it is a part of the imaginary (Murfin & Ray, 1997, p. 316). It presents a locus for the self. The mirror stage has a narcissistic self-indulgence. It is also the beginning of an "I", a thinking subject capable of enunciation.

To develop this model of an infant's journey towards the independence, Lacan exploits the post-structuralist concept of the disjunction between words and their meanings. For the post-structuralists, the language is inherently unable to convey any message in a successful or a univocal way. Likewise, the Lacanian model provides an undecidable and ever-moving place for a subject in the realm of language. Just like the meaning derived arbitrarily out of an expression, the human subject also assumes an arbitrary position. So the human unconscious is linguistically structured. Firstly, it is because the subject comes into being with the intervention by the system of signification if the world of the mirror stage. Secondly, it is so because the whole of the subject's life, the division from the mother onward, will be a symbolic existence like the signifiers in a language system. When a child assumes an identity, it is the realization through a language. Thus, a realization through a language, which is non-referential, leaves the subject in an uncertainty of position. The subject that has evolved in a linguistic mode must be a subject cleft from the very inside like a signifier-cleft between the

referential dimension and the symbolic one. The subject thus originated in linguistics must share the sad fate of the post-structural site.

Lacan's concept of a human subject after the symbolic stage gives an insight into the creation and consumption of works of art as a typical mode of expression of the very lack or the gap between the real and the alter ego. The concept "I" that is gradually developed over time cannot be taken separated itself from the "other". This process can be seen in the mirror as it gradually starts knowing itself and then identifying itself that creates a divided subject in language (Peck & Coyle, 1993, p. 187). The desire thus created is tried to fulfill by the creation of a situation where the self will have an ideal assimilation with its desired object, which it missed with the advent of the symbolic stage. The pre-oedipal desire is fulfilled through artistic creation. In art, the border between the real and the imaginary melts and the subject feels perfection in him. This ideal and hypothetical point of *jouissance* is recreated in a work of art. So, for Lacan, the process of creation of art is no coincidence like Freud's tongue-slip but an endeavor to bridge the gap between the two poles of our life: the real and the imaginary. This is a bridge of language, across the real and the alter-ego the other. This attempt on the part of the infant substitutes Freud's parapraxis in Lacan. But for Lacan it is but a certain and regular phenomenon of approximation which also shows that there is not a concept which can be stated in a word, words cannot articulate meaning and meanings never come out in an intended manner.

The moment the subject separates from its primordial oneness with the mother, a radical split occurs in its being. It is divided between the conscious life of the ego and the unconscious, repressed desire. The child will suffer this bereavement from the mother. It will haunt him a dim memory from past life, the newly born subject will, however, try towards the union with another. But this Oedipal Complex is a taboo, forbidden by civilized societies. Then, the child, a mature person, now, will have to rely wholly on the oblique reference of language to point to the desired goal in a manner unprovocative to the society. The subject will have some alternative way to reach the desired object, his mother's body, and the alternative here is the work of art. In creating a work of art, the subject will enjoy something like Freud's substitute gratification or wish fulfillment through dreams.

Lacan's theory has been of immense help to many modern thoughts. For example, the feminists have taken much from him. The feminists owe greatly to Lacan and his concept of the upcoming ego and its unattainable "real". It provided the feminists with a force to challenge the age-old belief that the male self is an unwanting, self-sufficient and complete entity as opposed to the female self, lacking in assertiveness and meaningful only with respect to its male counterpart. However, the feminists have condemned Lacan for the fictionality in the notion of gender and the weak psychic identity and the mobility of desires he discusses (as cited in Braidotti, 1994, p. 187). For example, Kristeva was interested in psychoanalysis because she was influenced by Jacques Lacan's structuralist interpretation of Freud though she contracts herself with that of Lacan. Thus, she developed her own psychoanalysis, what she calls it a poetic language used by the females, by making a distinction between 'semiotic' and 'symbolic'. So she rejects the ideas that discuss the theories of Freud and Lacan. Kristeva, thus, reconsiders the sexual progress that revolves around the discourse of feminine. This is again important to know that such a process like this can be more important when talking about theories of sex and gender. Thus, the modern psychoanalysis of Lacan has given a new dimension to the study of literature by opening up new vistas of its relation with other human disciplines like feminism and post-structuralism by associating the evolution of the human subject to its social context and the nature of language in use.

#### **IV. Psychoanalysis of Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci"**

A psychoanalytic approach is a unique form of criticism which is built upon the theories of psychology, interpreting a text. The connection between the world of psychology and literature brings forth the study of literary criticism. The paragraphs below will deal with John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci":

##### **I**

O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,  
And on birds sing.

##### **II**

O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.

##### **III**

I see a lily on thy brow,  
With anguish moist and fever dew;  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withered too.

**IV**

I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful – a faery's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.

**V**

I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too and fragrant zone;  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.

**VI**

I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long;  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
A faery's song.

**VII**

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew,  
And sure in language strange she said –  
'I love thee true'.

**VIII**

She took me to her elfin grot,  
And there she wept and sigh'd full sore,  
And there I shut her wild sad eyes  
With kisses four.

**IX**

And there she lulled me asleep  
And there I dream'd – Ah! Woe betide!  
The latest dream I ever dream'd  
On the cold hill-side.

**X**

I saw pale kings and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
They cryed – 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci  
Hath thee in thrall!'

**XI**

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here,  
On the cold hill's side.

**XII**

And this is why I sojourn here  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing. (815-16)

### V. Freud on Keats' Poem

So far as the analysis of Keats' poem is concerned, we regard the text in terms of a dream. But we no longer assume that the dream is meaningful in the way that a work of literature is. Therefore, the poem is read as the dream that allows Keats to fulfill his own repressed wishes. The poem deals with frustrated love. The medieval knight is looking pale, wild and sad. In that condition, he is wandering about all alone in the biting winter. The night tells that he had been captivated by the bewitching charms of a beautiful lady. The lady had assured him of her love for him. The knight was brought to a fairy cave where he was lulled to sleep. He saw a horrible dream, pale and ghastly princes and warriors, who cried to him that the merciless lady had victimized him with her treacherous charms. The knight awoke out of horror and found himself heart-broken by the cold hill-side.

The medieval knight here corresponds to Keats himself and the merciless lady referred to is his beloved Fanny Browne. Keats' own miserable existence is reflected in the poem as Freudian theory finds the solution to the mystery of such a work of literature. Keats had a painful memory of his brother Tom's death in 1819. He had also become painfully aware of his fatal disease and had fallen deeply in love with his beloved. He did not hope for the fulfillment of his love due to his failing health. It was under the force of such romantic and painful circumstances that he was inspired to write this poem as such. Hence, he was certain that his love would remain unfulfilled. This seems to have been at the back of his mind at the time of writing this poem. The circumstances of his romance and its resulting frustration and desolation are almost similar to those of the victims of love. The analysis of the poem takes us into the deeper workings of his mind. His unconscious aim is to portray the inner and internal working of the mind. The poem is a day-dreaming in which he gives himself a certain pleasure by imagining his desire being gratified.

### VI. Conclusion

The unconscious is important for both Freud and Lacan. As Freud deals with the human mind only, Lacan goes beyond the human mind and interprets the inner workings of a language in terms of how the mind works in a human being. According to Lacan, the structure of the unconscious is similar to any other natural languages such as English, Spanish, Nepali, Hindi, or Chinese. However, both psychoanalysts consider the unconscious as the mental processes that influence everyday life of a person. But for Freud literature works like a dream. In order to prove this, this study has analyzed Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as an example of this sort.

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