

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories: Introduction Lecture 8

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Psychoanalytical Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of “reading” employed by Sigmund Freud and later theorists to interpret texts.

It argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses.

One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche.

Psychoanalytical Criticism

One interesting facet of this approach is that it validates the importance of literature, as it is built on a literary key for the decoding.

Freud himself wrote, “The dream-thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech” (26).

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work.

The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work.

Psychoanalytical Criticism

But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as “**symbolism**” (the repressed object represented in disguise), “**condensation**” (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and “**displacement**” (anxiety located onto another image by means of association).

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with “what the author intended.” But what the author never intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

Psychoanalytic critics will ask such questions as, “What is Hamlet's problem?” or “Why can't Brontë seem to portray any positive mother figures?”

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Three layers of mind as envisaged by Sigmund Freud (the Father of Psychoanalysis)

Id: the unconscious mind

Ego: the conscious mind

Superego: the voice of conscience

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