

The Charm of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory: A Study on Reasons Why It Always Has New Interpretations in Different Times

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Abstract:

The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud is one of the most important and long-lasting influential theory in the literary field. Not only Freud himself contributed to literary research, but also his successive researchers refreshed literary criticism through giving it new interpretations. This essay will show reasons why Freud's psychoanalytic theory has so many potentials to refresh itself repeatedly, which contain its comprehensive content, wild usage and high flexibility and concludes that there is still space for this theory to be prosperous again, by combining with sociology, narratology, and Marxism.

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Sigmund Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, not only paved the way for the development of psychoanalysis but also put forward a lot of concepts and theories which have a deep influence on later literary criticism. During the whole process of development of literary criticism, since the appearance of Freud's famous notions, like unconsciousness, the Oedipus complex, and so on, many following literary critics frequently used these concepts combined with their own thoughts to form new theories, which also constantly gives Freud's psychoanalytic theory new life. But not all the theories can be remembered and renewed as frequently as this theory and can be combined with so many other literary theories.

Therefore, the question of why Freud's psychoanalytic theory is so important and charming that there are always new interpretations at different times in the field of literary criticism appears naturally. This essay is mainly to analyze this theory deeply and figure out its imitate relationship with literature to list several reasons why it is charming and demonstrate its developing potentials in the future.

I. Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

In Sigmund Freud's early period, the concept of unconsciousness and the structure of human personality are two of his most important views. Freud broke up traditional notions that consciousness occupied the largest part of our mind and that human can control their thoughts most of the time. Freud thought that unconsciousness was the largest part of the mind and was human's original instincts and desires which governed people's behavior

to a great degree (Huang 28). In his system, Freud divided human personality into three entities: the id controlled by the pleasure principle, the ego directed by the reality principle, and the superego representing morality. During this period, Freud also paid much attention to dreams which in his opinion was also a path towards unconsciousness. His notion of libido and sexual instinct also raised public attention.

Then, due to the influence of wars, Freud refined his theory about instincts and added death instinct on the basis of life instinct. Eros, or life instinct, helps the individual to survive and directs life-sustaining activities such as respiration, eating, and sex (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis: A Course of Twenty-eight Lectures Delivered at the University of Vienna* 237). Thanatos, or death instinct, is a set of destructive forces in all human beings, and he even declared that "the aim of all life is death" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 181). The concept of death instinct also shows Freud's later notion of repetition-compulsion. And Freud also divided the process of personality development into five stages.

Finally, to apply his own theory more widely, Freud also put forward some views connected with literature directly. To show the importance of unconsciousness, he thought writers were daydreamers and what they wrote could be seen as their own dreams which showed their desires. Freud thought of art as a path linking fantasy and reality and objectified the subjective to the public (Hutcheon 313). He held an ambivalent attitude towards the value of art because he not only regarded art as a way of spreading psychoanalysis to the large public but also reduced art as a personal illusion.

II. Theoretical Notions Applied To Literary Criticism

Although Sigmund Freud puts forward a lot of theoretical notions as said above, literary critics initially just focused on his theory of Oedipus complex and personality structure to analyze characters in the literature. The most famous examples are *Hamlet* and *Jane Eyre* which give the reader a new perspective to interpret these classical characters in English and American literature. In addition, his own perspective to view literature as a dream and the author as a daydreamer is also used by many literary scholars according to the author's personal experience. Freud himself used this theory to analyze the *Mona Lisa* and gave a totally new angle to see this famous picture (Hu 35). But this approach to analyzing literature totally based on the author's own psychological experience is not used very frequently partially because of the intentional fallacy put forward by New Criticism and its own limitations. Also, the most important notion of Freud's final period, repetition-compulsion, can be seen as the origin of today's trauma theory, which illustrates that one person will experience his painful life repeatedly and unconsciously.

The other theory to which needs us to pay attention is that a person's mind is essentially dual in nature. Based on his personality structure, he divided a person's self into id and ego, and the superego is outside of the self (Niaz, et al. 41). Therefore, this theory and the later words "alter ego" can be used to analyze two characters who have almost the same initial starting situation and ending but have different life experiences because of different choices, just like Wilson and Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*. After Freud's thinking spread out, his theory was also used widely to analyze a character's psychological state, especially in psychological literature.

Above all are all the applications in the literary field just according to Freud's own notions and thoughts, and with the development of literature criticism, many other literary critics put forward many new ways to analyze literature based on Freud's concepts. Freud's student, Karl Jung, firstly based on his theory gave the concept of unconsciousness new life. In the original notion, consciousness is just a personal part of one's mind while Jung thought every particular group had their own collective unconsciousness which members universally had and got

it due to heredity. This enlarges the meaning of unconsciousness put forward by Freud and gives Freud's theory a way to be used in the social perspective.

After the summit of the development of psychoanalytic theory in the literary field, Marxism's representative, Herbert Marcuse, combined Freud's thought with Marxism to form a special way to analyze literature. With criticizing civilization history as repressed development process whose primary demonstration is alienation of labor, he linked Freud's Eros with labor and thought that the liberation of humans was the liberation of Eros, which also influenced his idea of revolution. So, in Marcuse's mind, the real revolution or liberation must let people pursue happiness freely and the real liberation must contain art liberation. In this sense, he thought that art, including literature, should be unfettered from the ideology of capitalist society and can freely express human Eros. This combination made Freud's psychoanalytic theory attract people's attention again.

And Freud's contribution to psychological analysis can also be found in many later literary criticisms. Except above myth and archetypal criticism and Marxist theories, reader-oriented theory can also find its origin in Freud's theory. The writer's disguised unconscious fantasy shown in literature caused pleasure so great that repression was lifted and the audience could "derive consolation and alleviation", which means that Freud also implied the function of unconsciousness from the aspect of readers (Hutcheon 315). Althusser's symptomatic reading, especially the interpretation of the text from the perspective of unconsciousness, was inspired by Freud's theory of dreams. Also, Freud's repetition-compulsion can be used to analyze female literature and black literature, which can be seen as a very powerful tool for feminism and post-colonialism. The struggling psychological state can never be ignored in these types of literature criticism.

III. Reasons For Its Lasting Influence

The first reason why Freud's psychoanalytic theory can have such a lasting influence on literary criticism is that his theory can be used to interpret four aspects of literature: author, character, reader, and text. For writers, Freud defined the artist as "one urged on by instinctive needs that are too clamorous" (*Negation* 314). Although this statement to some degree seems too extreme, this theory can be used to analyze authors and their lives through their literary works as evidence, which is often called psychobiography. For characters, except analyzing their complex personalities according to Freud's structure, scholars can also use the Oedipus complex to analyze their behaviors. Their psychological actions can be seen as tools to show their painful experience in the past and their complexities. For readers, Freud thought literature can personify common human psychological processes and motivations to which the readers react unconsciously (Nazi, et al. 42). This can be used to describe the appeal of the work for those who read it. For text, Freud saw literature as daydreams so he interpreted literature as dreams. In dream analysis, Freud used a mixture of free association and symbol decoding. So, it also can be used to examine the role of language and symbolism in the work. These four aspects of literature almost cover all perspectives that scholars can use to analyze literature. So, if Freud's theory can be used in these places and literary criticism focuses on one of them, the analysis of literature can hardly avoid using Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

The second reason is that Freud's thoughts about literature can be used by both romanticism representing emotion and subjectivity and realism featuring truth and objective. In Lionel Trilling's essay, he figures out the relation between Freud's thoughts and the Romantic tradition (Donnelly 155). They both made efforts to explore the human's self, found hidden elements in human nature, and thought spirit can be divided. But, in another sense, Freud's psychoanalytic theory can also be used to show reality rather than just personal and emotional state. The core of his theory, unconsciousness, personality structure, and so on, all can be used to analyze the inner

unconscious mental conflict of characters, which can be seen as a part of representations of social reality (Wormhoudt 220). There is also a genre of novel called psychological realism. Just like in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Caulfield is an example of a young teenager who suffers from psychological struggle, which can be seen as the struggling ego according to the reality principle. From this, it is found that Freud's final purpose is to let people accept reality and to let ego dominate the id, which also shows its realism feature. So, in this sense, Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be applied in these two famous and long periods in the literary field, which greatly lasted its influence and enlarged its application range.

The third reason is that since Freud emphasized the importance of unconsciousness and put forward sublimation theory, almost all writers have more or less paid attention to the character's psychological activities. Before the appearance of Freud's thinking, there had already been psychological descriptions but no writers realized their big function for readers' interpretation. For example, when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, it is almost impossible that he deliberately set Hamlet's Oedipus complex as one of the reasons for his procrastination. However, influenced by Freud's sublimation theory, many writers, such as James Joyce and Romain Roland, just explored human's inner world and externalized deliberately character's psychological activities. With the development and spread of Freud's theory, more and more writers use this theory to shape their characters, and more and more people notice the importance of this new psychological perspective in enriching characters' personalities. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between literature and Freud's theory. Freud's theory gives writers a new way to shape or describe characters while this kind of literature also gives Freud's theory more materials which scholars can use to analyze. It makes people remember and use Freud's psychoanalytic theory when they read these literatures so this theory can never be forgotten by literary scholars.

The final reason is that Freud gave a new angle to interpret literature which can be used in almost all literature and can be easily combined with other literary thoughts. For emphasizing unconsciousness, Freud's psychoanalytic theory gives many new interpretations to classical literature, like *Hamlet* and *Jane Eyre*. Also, nearly all literature has a description of characters' psychological activities, which means that there is always space for scholars to use Freud's theory to analyze the repressed desires and inner mysteries of fictional characters in all literature. To pay attention to the unconsciousness of the author, scholars and readers can always explore more potential deep meaning of the literature, although sometimes, it seems like over-interpretation. It not only gives a new angle for writers to write but also gives a totally novel perspective for readers to read. In addition, because Freud's notions can be used from the aspects of author, reader, character, and text, later literary criticism, no matter which aspects it focuses on, can be easily combined with it. Once these combined literary theories are applied to literature analysis, Freud's theory is not only improved and remembered but also given new life and the possibility to be accepted by more people.

IV. Future Prospects

Although there are many limitations in Freud's psychoanalytic theory in both psychological and literary fields, there is no way to deny Freud's contribution to the world. After being improved several times by different literary critics, it becomes more applicable to analyzing literature. Nowadays, Freudian literary critics seem to give less importance to the role of sex and although they still emphasize the psychological or unconscious actions of authors and characters, they do not reject other objective literary thinking ways, like social reference. The focus of Freud's theory shifts from Freud's example of the author's unconsciousness representing their own personal suffering experience to the deep exploration of the character's psyche. After all, not every author has a painful experience the same as the main character in their works, but every character has his or her own way of thinking.

Therefore, the worth of Freud's theory seems to be drained completely and there seems no space for its further development. But, in fact, in today's literary field, there are a lot of directions that Freud's theory goes towards to enrich itself and give itself a new life. First, Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be combined with sociology which seems to some degree controversial with each other. In fact, according to the above content, many scholars took the subjectivity of Freud's theory for granted, which lets them ignore its function to show the social reality. Maybe in the future, with the development of digital humanities, literary scholars can use artificial intelligence to analyze the psychological content in many literatures which can produce many charts with statistics to show the psychological status at that time. Also, this combination can be used reversely by using social real statistics to explore the author's psychological creating status which can give the literature more objective features.

Second, many scholars seem to ignore the potential combination possibility between narratology and Freud's psychoanalytic therapy. For psychoanalytic theory, narrative is a process of exploring one's inner psychological track, and the notion of time is important both in narratology and in psychological therapy. Time structure can be seen as a tool of narrative and also a representation of the author's psychological status. According to Freud, creative people, like writers, always step back in the darkest places to see the future and reshape their past experiences (Huang & Jiang 63). Therefore, Freud always focused on the irregular narrative ways and places, which in his opinion can show the symptoms of the author. These irregularities also always raise the attention of scholars in the narratology field. This can be used to perfectly combine Freud's psychoanalytic theory with narratology and gives them a new way to be applied to analyze literature.

Finally, in China, when Freud's psychoanalytic theory meets Marxism again, there is also much space for it to gain new life. This theory can also be applied to analyze the capital hegemony in consumption, culture, or other important fields. Human psychological actions in literature can also show the opportunities for opposition to hegemony and show the mass psyche when they face hidden cultural control. To make it combine with Marxism, scholars can focus much on Freud's psychological reality and find ways to harmonize the relationship between freedom and repression from literature. Freud in this sense may through analyzing literature tell the proper degree of repression and control from the society, which can be beneficial to liberate people.

Therefore, there are a lot of ways to give Freud's psychoanalytic theory new life and in the future, it can never be forgotten and abandoned but be always explored for more value. These potential developing directions fully prove the charm of Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

V. Conclusion

Freud's psychological theory seems to have many limitations and always be criticized by many other literary critics, but its particular charm gives itself lasting influence and an important position in the field of literary criticism. From Jung's collective unconsciousness to the necessary Freudian elements in many post-structuralist thoughts, Freud's psychoanalytic theory has already combined with many other literary thoughts to enrich itself. For its comprehensive content, wild usage and high flexibility, Freud's psychoanalytic theory did show its special potentials of further development. And, its charm is so great that there is still space for it to gain new life, such as by combining it with sociology, digital humanities, narratology, and Chinese Marxism. Freud's psychoanalytic theory has a hopeful future in literary criticism.

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