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Application of Freudian Concepts to the Explication of Literary Texts: A Case Study of Walt Whitman’s “The Sleepers”. (pp. 436-450)

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Abstract:

This article established and proved the age old relationship between Psychology and Literature together with the application of Freudian concepts to the explication of literary texts. The interest of literary critics from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan has been noticeable and remarkable in the field of psychoanalytic criticism. It is known that the closest connection between literature and psychoanalysis has always been deployed by the academic field of literary criticism or literary theory. Thus, this discussion, once again, endeavored to emphasize the importance of using the method of psychoanalysis to interpret literature and how literature has also used psychoanalysis for creative purposes. Moreover, this has assisted the artists, novelists, dramatists, and poets etc., to make use of this creative approach to enrich their own work. In order to re-emphasize this point, the researcher has selected Walt Whitman’s poem “The Sleepers” as a case study, since his approach or method is characteristic of psychoanalytic research. The discussion reviewed the prevailing fascination between the two disciplines of Psychology and Literature and has succeeded in bringing them together with the powerful tool of literary criticism.

Key Words: Freudian concepts, literary criticism, psychoanalytic, conscious mind, unconscious mind, experience.

Introduction:

Psychological analysis of literary texts evolved just as modern psychology began its development during the early 20th century. This method of critiquing used the concepts advocated by noted sociologists, including Carl Jung, Alfred Adler and Otto Rank and above all Sigmund Freud. Freud developed the method of psycho analysis as a means of therapy for neuroses, but very soon expanded it to account for many developments and practices in the history of civilization, including warfare, mythology, religion, literature and other arts. Additionally, Holland (1990), who was a leading exponent of the application of psychoanalytic concepts to the relation between the individual reader and the literary text, described each individual's response as the product of a 'transactive' engagement between his or her own unconscious desires and defenses and the fantasies that the writer projects into the literary text. In this 'transactive encounter' the reader transforms the fantasy content he/she has found in the materials of the story into a 'unity' or 'meaningful totality' which makes up the reader's particular interpretation of the text. In this way Holland accounts for the responses of a reader to a text by recourse to Freudian concepts. Moreover, the interest of literary critics with psychoanalytic theory from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan has been greater than the interests of historians in the same conceptions. However, the field of psycho-history remains relatively untapped, whereas the psychoanalytic concepts have disseminated into most branches of literary studies.

The chief function of the psychoanalytic critic is to reveal the true content, and thus to explain the effect on the reader of a literary work by translating its manifest elements into the dormant, unconscious determinants that make up their suppressed meanings. Since the onset of psychoanalysis, the field of study has displayed a powerful set of connections to 'literature'. Literary Criticism has played the major role of a mediator between these two disciplines, namely, Psychology and Literature. Psychoanalysis has attempted to explain literature and while trying to do so has used literature as a source for psychoanalytic conceptions. Thus, we noticed that literary criticism has used psychoanalytic theory to interpret literature and literature has also attempted to exploit and use psychoanalysis for creative purposes. Such psychological criticism deals with the work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the state of mind and the structure of personality of the individual author.

Psychoanalytic Concepts:

There are certain psychoanalytic concepts expressed by Sigmund Freud that influenced the psychoanalysis of authors and the books they write. Among the many, there are five Freudian concepts that form the underlying principles of 'psychoanalysis'—(a) The Primacy of the Unconscious, (b) The Iceberg theory of the Psyche (c) Dreams are an expression of our Conscious mind (d) Infantile behavior is essentially Sexual and (e) The relationship between Neurosis and Creativity.

Of these, Freud's last theory applies more to the author than the characters in the literary works. Freud believed that artists, poets, novelists, dramatists, etc., use their creativity as a sort of therapy. They release their neurotic tension through creative work. Such creative work provides us insights into the nature of reality and the people who exist in it. Thus, psychoanalyzing a literary text gives us a profound understanding of the 'unconscious' of the author which is supported by Freud's first theory "Primacy of the Unconscious". One or all of these five Freudian concepts can be deployed in the study of characters and their actions in a literary text, and at the same time provides us with a thorough understanding of the nature of man in general. Freud also asserts that artists possess special abilities that set them apart from the neurotic personality. This special genius not only enables the artist to overcome, at least partially, personal conflicts and repressions, but also makes it possible for the audience or readers to obtain comfort from their own unconscious sources of gratification which had previously become inaccessible to them. Thus, literature and art, unlike dreams and neuroses, may serve the artist as a mode of fantasy that opens "the way back to reality".

The concepts of psychoanalysis can be used with reference to the narrative or poetic structure, thus offering us a method or theory of psychoanalytic literary criticism. Thus, we can begin to perceive that there is a mutual fascination between the field of 'Psychoanalysis and Literature' and 'Literary Criticism' is the major 'mediator' between the two disciplines.

Method:

Case Study is the most appropriate method which is characteristic of Psychoanalytical research. Hence, the researcher has selected this approach to study Walt Whitman's poem "The Sleepers", which for at least the past fifty years, has been considered one of Whitman's most haunting and most accomplished poems. The entire discussion will be put forth in three main sections, that is,

the background of the poem selected, “The Sleepers”, the critical views and analysis, and finally the psychological readings.

Discussion:

Background of “The Sleepers”:

‘The Sleepers’ first appeared in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) without any title. Next in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman called it “Night Poem”, and then “Sleep Chasings” in 1860 and 1867. However, in the 1871 edition, Whitman gave it its final title, “The Sleepers”.

The context of “The Sleepers” as it appeared in the first edition of Leaves of Grass, revealed Whitman’s new democratic ‘I’. The ‘I’ in this poem, “The Sleepers” was able to cross all boundaries of gender and race, could penetrate and invade the minds of people around the world.

Whitman portrays ‘sleep’ as a ‘state’ in which we feel the conscious control of our thoughts slipping away. We also have weird and frightening experiences that are different from the experiences of our waking lives. Thoughts, images and scenes that are repressed during the daytime are released in the dreaming state of sleep. Sometimes such experiences are embarrassing when we think of them in our waking condition. The following lines exemplified this situation:

O for pity’s sake, no one must see me now! My clothes were stolen
while I was abed,

Now I am thrust forth, where shall I run?

(The Sleepers, line: 61-62)

And Again in line 77, the poet says:

A shroud I see, and I am the shroud—I wrap a body, and lie in the
coffin ...

Thus, throughout the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman emphasizes the experiences that go beyond the boundaries of class, gender and race. Whitman’s sensuality develops from his belief that such an appeal to physical experience pulls down hierarchies and discriminations among his readers. Therefore, Whitman feels that sleep is one of the democratic experiences, because we all sleep, and at sometime or the other we have felt the “breakdown” of “sleep-chasings”. We have all experienced that ‘losing of control’ (sleep) and have had different kinds of dreams and have wandered through worlds beyond our ‘waking experiences’. In this poem “The Sleepers” Whitman indicated that ‘sleep’ permits us to move into deeper and

deeper levels of common psychic territory, where we descend during the night to explore the depths of human emotion.

Critical Views and Analysis:

According to Schyberg (1951) “ ‘The Sleepers’ has a unique position as one of Whitman’s most remarkable poems, so skillfully executed that we are inclined to place it much later in his poetic evolution- - - (He explores) the great fellowship of sleep, that is, the expansion and encompassing, the synthesis of all inanimate things into one. The poet goes from bed to bed and his vision shares the dreams of all the other dreamers---he actually ‘is’ all the other dreamers.”

I go from bedside to bedside---I sleep close with the other sleepers,
each in turn,
I dream in my dream all the dreams of other dreamers,
And I become the other dreamers.
(The sleepers, lines: 29-31)

The above lines signified one of the major principles behind Whitman’s poetry, that of ‘empathy’. He strongly asserts that he can identify himself so completely with another human being, so as to dream the same dreams and have the same experiences. Whitman’s described ‘sleep’ as a ‘leveler or democratizing force’ (just like death) wherein all consciousness becomes accessible. At the same time, we noticed that Whitman does not wish to destroy the diversity of individuals and experiences, as he knew that we are not all the same.

The dream motif that Whitman uses is the core of the structure and reflects the quality of the dream itself. In section 1 of “The Sleepers”, the poet described his condition as confused in the beginning where he says:

The prisoner sleeps well in the prison, the runaway son sleeps,
The murderer that is to be hung the next day, how does he sleep?
And the murder’d person, how does he sleep...
(The Sleepers, lines: 16-18)

These lines depict Whitman’s confusion and then gradually we notice that he gave himself up to the mysteries of the night and the unreal world of dreams. A close look at the progression of the first section is similar to the ‘semi-rational and ‘semi-erratic’ quality of the consciousness. In this context, we

perceive the Freudian concept that dreams are an expression of our 'unconscious mind' where Freud states that the conflict between the 'ego' and the 'id' is continued while we sleep. The above statement finds a reflection in the criticism of Chase (1957), where he says that the poem, " 'The Sleepers' portrays the descent of the as yet unformed and unstable 'ego' (the part of the 'id' modified by contact with the external world) into the 'id' (the deepest level of the unconscious dominated by the pleasure principle). As a part of this change, there is a confrontation of the dark, human tragedy with its emergence to a new, more stable form...." Further, the above insight brings us closer to Freud's belief that id-driven dreams were outbursts of instinct and repression and that realistic dreams were an example of our ego's iron control over our soul even while we sleep.

In section 2 of the "The Sleepers", the poet while identifying himself with other dreamers, also begins to assume different roles as he sees different objects. For example:

A shroud I see and I am the shroud, I wrap a body and lie in the coffin,
It is dark here under ground, it is not evil or pain here,
It is blank here, for reasons.
(The Sleepers, lines: 77-78)

The above lines tell us that the poet is trying to assume different roles, so that he can vicariously experience 'death' and this 'experience' by contrast would make him more aware of the value of life. All the poet's experiences thus become the facets of his total vision of life. He observed 'life' from the condition of birth to that of death. Simultaneously, the poet identified with the emotions of the sleepers, and thus became one with the night and darkness. He manages to "pierce the darkness" in order to observe and appreciate the beauty of the eternal. In turn, this leads the poet to his mystical vision that is able to penetrate the world of matter and reach the reality of the spirit, where he can experience much clearer and more meaningful images.

Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear,
The earth recedes from me into the night,
I saw that it was beautiful, and I see that what is not the earth is beautiful.
(The Sleepers, lines: 26-28)

This merging of the poet with other beings established a spiritual and psychological relationship with them. The unity underlying the images and

structure of the poem slowly and gradually emerges through the 'stream of consciousness' technique used by Whitman. The poet descends deeper and deeper into the abyss of unconscious, "it is new moon and twilight", connoting the loss of day and consciousness. He goes deeper into the caches of the deepest recesses of the mind where the reality of ground and sea are non-existent.

Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea,
and where it is neither ground nor sea.
(The Sleepers, line: 35)

This passage indicates a crisis; it is the only point in the process of identification and realization at which the poet made a positive gesture. From now onwards, he played a passive role and was carried on by forces beyond his control. Having once given himself unto his experience, the poet was carried along through a series of increasingly erotic images which present in fact, the picture of sexual union between the poet and the night. Here he saw everything, the innermost secrets of the soul where from him, "- - - they hide nothing and would not if they could."

In section 3 of "The Sleepers", we noticed that the poet's experiences of loss and despair were only beginning. The 'sea' symbolizes the "unconscious anima", the darkness that has engulfed the poet. The poet portrayed himself on the sea-shore, observing a beautiful, "gigantic swimmer swimming through the eddies of the sea". The swimmer struggles for his life, but was defeated in the end. This struggle is an unequal one wherein the swimmer (a human being) was confronted with the force of the sea. Finally, we see that the swimmer is dead. Here, the sea was symbolic of the world of the spirit, and made us realize that spiritual reality can be received only through death.

Steady and long he struggles,
He is baffled, bang'd, bruise'd—he holds
out while his strength holds out,
The slapping eddies are spotted with his blood—they bear him
away- -
they roll him, swing him, turn him,
His beautiful body is borne in the circling
eddies, it is continually bruise'd on rocks
Swiftly and out of sight is borne the brave corpse.
(The Sleepers, lines: 87-91)

Section 4 portrayed the poet as one who was deeply involved and was unable to “extricate” himself from the experience of death on the sea-shore.

I turn but do not extricate myself,
Confused, a past-reading, another, but with darkness yet. (The Sleepers, lines: 92-93)

The above experience provoked Whitman to establish a link with the past by recounting a scene of General Washington in Brooklyn that was personal and spiritual. (Section 5)

Now of the older war-days, the defeat at Brooklyn,
Washington stands inside the lines, he stands on the
intrench'd hills amid a crowd of officers,
His face is cold and damp, he cannot repress the weeping drops,
He lifts the glass perpetually to his eyes- - the color is blanch'd
from his cheeks,
He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their
parents.
(The Sleepers, lines: 101—105)

A keen observation of the above lines revealed Whitman's technique of a backward and forward movement over time and space---this in psychological term is similar to a 'sensory recall' or 'moments of time'. Here, we were reminded of the basic postulate of psychoanalysis, 'the concept of a dynamic unconscious mind'. It was based on Freud's observations that physical symptoms in a patient of hysteria tended to disappear after 'forgotten material was made conscious'. For Freud, the unconscious was an area of great 'psychic activity' that influenced personality and behavior of an individual.

Next when we moved on to Section 6 of “The Sleepers” we find that Whitman recalled an experience that his mother had had, with the visit of an Indian woman. The ‘red squaw’ was a classic, primitive example of purity and beauty. The poet's mother was so captivated by the woman that, “the more she look'd upon her, she loved her;” (line 119). However, this experience of a deep spiritual love between the two women was short-lived as the Indian woman never returned. This spiritual bonding between the poet's mother and the squaw was described in a realistic, down-to-earth and precise manner. Long after the visit, the poet's mother retained the memory.

The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward the middle of

the afternoon she went away,
O my mother was loth to have her go away!
All the week she thought of her- - she watch'd for her many a
month,
She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer,
But the red squaw never came, nor was heard of there again.
(The Sleepers, lines: 123-27)

Sections 3 and 4 can be juxtaposed with sections 5 and 6. The former portrayed scenes of separation and frustration and the latter portrayed scenes of union and fulfillment. In each of the above sections, the destructive aspects of the darkness or death swallowed the living. But, just before the losses were about to overwhelm him, (the poet) the darkness of the anima yielded and he began to emerge into a more replete awareness and understanding of all that has passed.

The poet now emerged from:

A show of the summer softness! A contact of something unseen!
An amour of the light and air!
I am jealous, and overwhelm'd with friendliness,
And will go gallivant with the light and air myself,
And have an unseen something to be in contact with them also.
(The Sleepers, lines: 136-39)

The contact of something "unseen" is a new and imaginative tactility; a new love and understanding which were born like a child out of darkness. In the poet's ascent to the conscious state, to daylight, he was again "overwhelm'd with friendliness".

The 'restorative or therapeutic' power of sleep and night, the darkness which was unfolded, showed the poet disturbing but truthful visions of the processes of life and death. "Night", which in the opening lines produced nothing but chaos, now becomes the giver of life of procreative and creative energy. The "Night" now unifies all in the vast 'collective unconscious' and was symbolically joined to the 'conscious mind' of the poet. The primary point that the poet made in the lines of section 7 is his supreme faith, gained, perhaps, from his spiritual experience, in the existence of a divine plan that makes life more meaningful.

The universe is duly in order, everything is in its place,

What has arrived is in its place and what waits is in its place,
(The Sleepers, lines: 175-76)

And again he goes on to say in line 180:

The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they
shall flow and unite----they unite now.

Another memorable image in the beginning of section 7 is that of “light”:
A show of the summer softness! A contact of something unseen!
An amour of the light and air!

This imagery is suggestive of Whitman’s epiphanic revelation resulting from his mystical experience. Here, the poet began to describe the expansion of his poetic vision of pervasive unity.

.....
They flow hand in hand over the whole earth, from east to west,
as they lie unclothed,
The Asiatic and African are hand in hand- - the European and
American
are hand in hand,
Learn’d and unlearn’d are hand in hand, and male and female
are hand in hand. . . .
(The Sleepers, lines: 182-84)

In terms of vision or dream-framework it describes the poet’s emergence from the dream or unknown state of mind which some sociologists call “race memory”.

I too pass from the night,
I stay awhile away O night, but I return
to you again and love you.
Why should I be afraid to trust myself to you?
I am not afraid; I have been well brought forward by you,
I love the rich running day, but I do not
desert her in whom I lay so long,
I know not how I came of you, and I know not where I go with you-
- but
I know I came well, and shall go well.
(The Sleepers, lines: 197—202)

The above lines represent the poet's realization that he is a part of an endless and immortal cycle, 'birth-death-birth'.

Finally in section 8, we observe a sense of harmony. Everything was beautiful and barriers were broken down and the miraculous effect of the "night" was felt. Here, there was a hint of 'reincarnation' as the poet passed from the night but duly returned:

I will stop only a time with the night, and rise betimes;
I will duly pass the day, O my mother, and duly return to you.
(The Sleepers, lines: 203—204)

Thus, the night becomes a vast reservoir of spiritual energy.

Psychological Readings:

Richard Maurice Bucke, a friend and disciple of Whitman, described "The Sleepers" as a poem that represents the 'mind' during 'sleep'. He went on to say that the mind is made up of connected, half-connected, and disconnected thoughts and feelings as they occur in dreams. Furthermore, Dr. Bucke warned the readers that the poem "requires a great deal of study to make anything of it", though to some readers, he believed, "it would, no doubt, be plain at once."

This psychological reading of Dr. Bucke, laid the foundation for the growing interest in "The Sleepers" during the twentieth century. Literary critics began to view the poem as a proleptic examination of a model of the mind developed by Freud and Jung, who had put forth theories related to submerged psychic levels that were inaccessible to the 'conscious mind'. The conscious mind is divided into the 'id' or 'libido' or 'collective unconscious' that played a great role in the shaping of an individual's personality. This aspect showed that Whitman had anticipated the modernist literary and artistic movements that were founded on the new psychological models. Miller, Jr. (1957) read the poem "The Sleepers" as a "psychological dramatization of a flow of images with only eccentric relationships one to another, closely resembling the stream of consciousness technique of a later era" (p.130). On the contrary, Blodgett and Bradley (1965) argued that the poem "is perhaps the only surrealist American poem of the 19th century, remarkable in its anticipation of later experiment" (p.424). Psychological critics like Miller and Black (1968), described the poem "The Sleepers" as "an evocation of psychic depths" and said that until very recently the poem has not been understood in its entirety.

A critical study of the poem “The Sleepers” advocated a democratic equality and tries not to destroy the diversity of people and their experiences. As we go deeper, we sense that there is something highly erotic about the communion of two souls--the friendship and attraction between the poet’s mother and the Indian squaw. Whitman believed that the ‘body’ is an indispensable part of the ‘soul’ and he felt that sex represents not just physical eroticism but also the highest form of emotional and intellectual discourse. Lines 183 and 184 of “The Sleepers” support this view---“The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American are hand in hand./ Learn’d and unlearn’d are hand in hand, and male and female are hand in hand...”

In Freudian terms The Sleepers, is the sexual maturation of a young boy as he grows into manhood. It is a poem of night-time consciousness, which revealed the poetic identity in its purely private context. The dreaming narrator lost to himself wandered in the choice of the psyche’s underground confronting his anxieties one by one. The poem went through an implied cyclical process: implied innocence or oneness, psychic fragmentation, incompleteness, despair and then a unifying process in the last section. The poet became aware of the endless cycle of life, from birth to death to rebirth, and this motif of constant return and renewal is linked to the sexual imagery, in that the product of sexual union was a new rebirth. The imagistic connotations of “I” and “night” gradually shift through the course of the poem in relation to one another; they were simply “spirit” and “darkness”, but they soon became one another’s lover and finally the night became a mother and the “I” her child.

The opening word in The Sleepers is the pronoun of the self which announced the subject matter of the poem in ironic contrast to the third person plural title The Sleepers, whose presence in the work immediately created tension between them and the persona and serves as a past, present and future backdrop to the drama of the poet becoming, as the persona wanders, his motion was spasmodic, “Pausing, gazing, bending and stopping”, (line: 5) aptly paralleling his “confused” and “ill assorted” mental state, and this brings us to a consideration of the way in which the poem expresses the gradual development of the poet’s vision and his gradual realization of that vision. With the next two lines:

How solemn they look there, stretch’d and still,
How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles.

(The Sleepers, lines: 6-7) the movement into the vision was completed and as Whitman shifted from the first to the third person to describe what he saw. In the picture of the little children were expressed innocence and new life and also the idea of peace, which the poet will ultimately enjoy when he too became a little child in relation to the night and comes to his full realization of the unreality of death and the reality of the universal and immortalizing rebirth cycle.

The poet had to identify with the 'night and darkness' as the night progresses because the darkness was symbolic of the 'collective unconscious' from which his vision and poetic powers emerged. The night took on added connotations; no longer merely the time of darkness and of sleep, it became a healing and soothing agent, it pervades them (the sleepers) and enfolded them much as a lover or mother would do.

Psychologists divided the mental or psychic phenomena of human life into the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mental phenomena were further divided into intellect; feeling or emotion and volition of these were then separately anatomized in their historical development in the growing individual. The unconscious part, the vast region of mental 'twilight' in which the primordial forces of the cosmic nature disport themselves without the interference of the will or the prying of the consciousness, is undoubtedly very important, if not the most important part of the inner life. Whitman and some psychologists, by studying mental life as a whole, felt that by including both the 'conscious' and the 'unconscious' factors in it, we shall soon get beyond the range of the purely psychological.

Thus we can say that among the mid-nineteenth century divers into the unconscious, Whitman emerged as one of the most daring. His imagery revealed his awareness of a dark, mental underworld, a submerged 'self' from which so many of his poetic utterances sprung. The poet is ecstatic about the changes that occur during maturation of the 'individual' and the realistic and naturalistic considerations shown by Whitman immortalize his poetry.

Conclusion:

In view of the above study and argument, we came to understand that psychoanalysis is a powerful tool in the critical analysis of a literary text. Its influence on the literary production is to add 'legitimacy' to the text. This

paper highlighted the ‘application of Freudian concepts to the explication of literary texts’ thereby equating the text with the ‘psyche’, perhaps of the writer, and providing us with a profound insight into the unconscious of the writer.

Furthermore, we understood how dreams are an expression of our ‘unconscious mind’ and that they fulfilled the function of safeguarding our sleep through the fulfillment of wishes that were ignored by the ‘conscious mind’. This concept was best exemplified in Whitman’s “The Sleepers”, that has always seemed strange and haunting to the readers, since it provoked a great deal of controversy. The poem also focused on the way that ‘sleep’ dissipates a sharp sense of ‘self-identity’. The in-depth critical analysis and psychological readings of the poem “The Sleepers” revealed that ‘sleep’ allows us to move into the deepest possible levels of ‘psychic territory’ enabling us to comprehend the depths of human emotion.

Finally, this paper has attempted to establish the relationship between Psychology and Literature and thus proved that ‘literature’ uses ‘psychoanalysis’ for creative purposes which, in turn, enriches the quality, value and legitimacy of the literary text. Literature can help us alter our cognitions, the internal structures of the self, and this transformation can be well explained through psychoanalytic criticism; in turn, this enables us to explore new possibilities for reading, studying, and teaching literature.

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