

**Introduction to Literary Theory**  
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**Lecture – 26**  
**Literature and Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud (III)**

Hello and welcome back to yet another lecture on this series on Literary Theory. During the course of our previous two lectures we have familiarized ourselves with most of the key ideas in forming Freudian psychoanalysis. In today's lecture we will discuss how these key ideas can be brought together to produce a general understanding of literary creativity.

Now, in our previous lecture we have mentioned that psychoanalytic literary criticism primarily proceeds through the critic engaging with a piece of literature, in order to uncover the drama of repressed desires and fears seething underneath the surface. Now, instances of such an approach to literature can be found in Freud's own writings.

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“Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*” (1907)

So, for example, if we read Freud's 1907 publication titled “Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*”, we find an analysis of Wilhelm Jensen's novel *Gradiva* from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Freud shows through his reading of the novel how the hero suffers from psychological complications which arise out of his repressions, and how those psychological complications gradually gets cured as the novel progresses. Apart from this psychoanalytic profiling of fictional characters appearing in novels and piece, psychoanalytic theory can also be used to profile author's or creative artists.

One of the finest examples of this approach where a piece of artistic creation is used to delve deep into the recesses of the creators mind is Freud's 1910 psycho biography titled Leonardo de Vinci, "A Memory of His Childhood".

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*"Leonardo de Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood"*  
(1910)

In this particular piece of work Freud relates how Leonardo de Vinci's repressed childhood sexual fantasies animate his creative work in later life. And though Freud accesses the unconscious of the creator Leonardo de Vinci via an analysis of one of his paintings and not any piece of literature perceive, but we can use the same method that we find in this particular essay and apply them to literature to understand the author's repression and how those repressions and repressed desires create a particular literary piece.

In this lecture however, we will not take up for discussion Freud's psychoanalytic readings of specific literary characters or creative artists, rather we will focus on Freud's views on literary creativity in general and see how we can connect them with the intricacies of human psychology. One of the best pieces through which we can study

Freud's interpretation of literary creativity in general is his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming".

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"Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"  
(1908)

Now, this was first delivered in 1907 as an informal lecture at the house of the bookseller and also a member of the Vienna psychoanalytic society, Hugo Heller. And this particular lecture was later published under the title that I just mentioned "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" in 1908.

Now, this essay broadly divides itself into two parts, the first part works out the relationship between child's play, fantasy and day-dreaming. And the second part connects this relationship or this network of relationships with the process of literary creativity. And in our lecture today we will follow the pattern laid down by the essay because that will help us understand the chains of equivalent relationships through which the argument progresses.

Now, to begin with Freud draws our attention to the aura of uniqueness that usually surrounds the creativity of a writer. Some of us can author wonderful stories, wonderful poems or other literary pieces while others like me for instance, we cannot do that. So, within almost every society creative writers are regarded as special beings, they can do something special which others cannot.

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Freud writes:

“we laymen [...] always [remain] intensely curious to know [...] from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable.”

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Now, please note here that in this particular quotation which I just read out Freud focuses on two aspects of the creative writer, the first aspect is the way in which the creative writer creates his literary product by drawing upon certain kinds of materials. And the second is the way in which that literary product influences the readers by arousing in them strong emotional responses. We will have to come back to each of these aspects later on, but for now let us follow how the essay develops.

Freud in order to study this unique phenomenon of literary creativity tries to equate it with a more mundane and more universally occurring psychological phenomenon, so that it becomes relatable to everyone. He finds this universal phenomenon in the play of children, and he discovers in the psychological dynamics underlying the mind of a child at play the equivalence of an author’s creative energy. Let me quote here from the essay.

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“Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?”

“Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood the child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?”

For the child at play this imaginative recreation of a world of its own is not a jest, as Freud observes the child is in fact, quite serious when it is playing with the things around him and he treats the world created by him through his imagination with utmost earnestness. A child’s play is therefore, not to be contrasted with its other activities performed in seriousness. Rather in Freud’s words, “The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real.”

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Now, this distinction that Freud draws between child's play and reality brings us to the already familiar terrain of wish fulfillment. As we have noted in our previous discussions on hysteria for instance or on dreams or on para praxis, one of the crucial aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis is a study of how those wishes are engaged with and at least partially satisfied which cannot be enacted or even admitted in reality. These wish fulfillments therefore, always proceed by creating a cleavage with reality and opening up a zone of fantasy.

Now, if you have followed the previous lectures carefully you will know that fantasy is defined from within the field of Freudian psychoanalytic studies as the creation of an imaginary scene. It is an imaginary scene which allows one to live out the repressed wishes that cannot be fulfilled in reality, because our mind is too inhibited to even acknowledge them in public. Freud explains that a child's play is an early form of fantasy or rather I should say it the other way around. Freud says that fantasy is a adult substitution for the child's play. Now, this needs some explanation, so we will proceed slowly step by step.

A child as we will know from our own experience of having watched them usually once to be like the adults that he sees around himself. Now, the way in which the child fulfills this wish is through creating an imaginary scene in the form of play in which the child enacts out his desire of being an adult. If for instance a child has seen his father driving a

car then in his play he might create an imaginary scene in which he assumes the role of a driver, and he will keep zooming around the room sitting on a chair and pretending that that chair is his car. Now, this fictional situation that the child plays out produces for him a high yield of pleasure which is otherwise denied in reality.

Now, Freud argues that as the child grows up such mechanism of wish fulfillment through playing games are no longer available to him, yet the pleasure that the playful creation of an imaginative scene of wish fulfillment offered someone as a child cannot be very easily forfeited by him as an adult. So, rather than completely giving up playing, what the adult does is he transforms it into an activity of creating fantasies. Let me read some lines from the essay to make this point clear.

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Freud writes:

*“As people grow up, [...], they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams.”*

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So, here we encounter the word day-dreams, which will be one of our key terms in understanding literary creativity through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. But before we can take up the concept of day-dream for further discussion let us dwell a little longer on the transformation that happens between the child's play and the adult's fantasy.

Freud observes that one of the key distinctions separating child's play from fantasy is that the imagined objects and situations that constitute the former that is a child's play are often linked with tangible and visible things in the real world. Thus for instance the child trying to fulfill his wish to be a driver like his father might make use of a real chair and pretend that that chair is his car. In case of fantasy however, no such linkages with real tangible objects can be observed. Indeed the adult very carefully protects his fantasies from any external manifestations. So much so that if asked an adult would even deny the existence of his fantasies, this is however sharply different from how a child plays because a child may not have any desire to exhibit his play in front of the adults but then again he does not make any special effort to hide his play from anyone.

A child at play is in other words indifferent to whether someone else is observing him at that particular point of time or not. This contrast between the child's indifference to observers spying on his play and the adults desperate attempt to keep his fantasies a secret is however, not very difficult to understand. The wishes that the child enacts in his imaginary world while playing are not particularly repressed wishes because the entire mechanism of repression and repressing desires only gradually develops as one grows up. However, for an adult the mechanism of repression is already well established and consequently the imaginary engagement with wishes that cannot be fulfilled in reality becomes an embarrassing fact.

These imaginary engagements or fantasies are pleasurable for an adult but they represent a form of guilty pleasure which the adult needs to keep hidden. Thus, as Freud notes the form of fantasy which he identifies as day-dream is rarely admitted by anyone in spite of it being almost a universal phenomenon. And this gives us a clue as to what kind of wishes and desires constitute our day-dreams. But before we can move on to these wishes and desires let us focus on the term day-dream for a moment, and let us focus on its relationship with the other kind of dream with night dream for want of a better word that we experience while asleep.



Well as we have already discussed, a dreams which arise from within the limbo between consciousness and unconsciousness mini fists our libidinal desires and they allow us to engage with these libidinal desires. Now, since these are desires which an adult person has come to regard as shameful, they appear in the dream only after being sufficiently distorted by the mechanism of dream work we have already discussed this.

Now, the fantasies offered a dream there are also similar engagements with quote unquote shameful desires with the only difference being that in day-dreams these desires are engaged in the woken state itself. The stigma associated with these desires nevertheless remain very strong even in a day-dreaming adult and consequently it becomes very difficult to make a person who day-dreams confess his fantasies. Indeed as Freud notes it is often easier to make a person confess his misdeeds than confess the fantasies that plays out in his day-dream.

Now, let us come to the contents of the fantasies that constitute our day-dreams. So, we already have a number of clues as to what the content might be of our day-dreams, but let us look at it more elaborately. Well Freud states that the nature of day-dreams differ from person to person and it depends for instance on the persons sex, on the persons character, circumstances and a number of other things.

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But irrespective of these individual variations day-dreams according to Freud primarily fulfill two different kinds of wishes. The first Freud calls ambitious wish and the second he calls erotic wish.

Now, ambitious wish relates to a person's desire to be regarded as socially elevated and powerful whereas, erotic wishes relate to a person's repressed sexual desires. According to Freud in the day-dreams of young men the ambitious wishes mostly surface whereas, a young ladies day-dream is more likely to be dominated by erotic wishes. And this distinction also makes clear the motives of concealing ones day-dreams, because as Freud explains a young lady is allowed only a minimum of erotic desires by the patriarchal bourgeois society. Therefore, any excess of erotic desire has to be repressed by her and engaged with only in the private imaginative space offered by day-dreams.

And this is very important to remember that repression has a social angle to it. For instance when Freud is talking about the repression of erotic desires in young women he is talking from within the context of a patriarchal bourgeois society. So, does that mean that if the society changes if the societal norms changed the content of the day-dreams will also change? If for instance a young lady is no longer supposed to repress so deeply her erotic wishes will that create different kinds of day-dreaming in her? Well, this is a question that I will leave hanging in the air for you to consider.

But let us move on with the essay and Freud contrasts the day-dreams of a young lady with the day-dreams of a young man. And he says that in case of a young man what he needs to do is he needs to and I quote "Suppress the excess of self regard which he brings with him from the spoilt days of his childhood, so that he may find his place in a society which is full of other individuals making equally strong demands."

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Freud says that a young man on the other hand needs "to suppress the excess of self-regard which he brings with him from the spoiled days of his childhood, so that he may find his place in a society which is full of other individuals making equally strong demands".

But having made this distinction Freud also goes on to point out that the distinction does not mean an absolute opposition, or any kind of a rigid compartmentalization. And this is because often the day-dreams overlap both the wishes, overlap ambitious wish with erotic wish. Thus for instance a young man who in his day-dreams fantasize about performing some heroic exploits is actually trying to fulfill an ambitious wish, but in that same day-dream the young man might also imagine himself to be performing these exploits to win the affection of his ladylove which then connects with his erotic wish. And therefore, as we can see in the same day-dream both of these wishes can be juxtaposed.

Now, we need to note one thing here, which is that though day-dreams might have at their core either ambitious wish or erotic wish or a mixture of the two the (Refer Time: 24:34), which means the setting of the day-dream of each individual person differs and it changes from one day-dream to another. This is because and I am quoting from the essay here.

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Day-dreams “fit themselves in to the subject’s shifting impressions of life, change with every change in his situation, and receive from every fresh active impression what might be called a ‘date-mark’”.

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To explain this Freud gives the example of a possible day-dream that a poor orphan might indulge in on his way to meet a prospective employer. Now, in his day-dream this poor orphan boy might imagine himself as meeting the employer, then getting the job from him and then the boy might also imagine himself performing brilliantly. And wonderfully succeeding in the job that he has got and then winning the trust of the employer, and finally, getting accepted within his family. In his day-dream the brilliant carrier might culminate in the boys marrying the charming young daughter of the employer and then finally, inheriting the business after the death of the employer.

Now, note here that the setting of the day-dream is almost entirely influenced by the poor orphan’s present situation. He is on his way to meet a prospective employer and therefore, his day-dream is about getting the job and about doing exceptionally well in that particular job. But what happens when we look beneath the surface of the story that plays out in this particular day-dream and that is of course, shaped by the unique situation of the moment.

Well, we find the same cluster of ambitious wish and erotic wish that provide the universal content for all day-dreams. Thus the exceptional carrier that the poor orphan

imagines fulfills his desire for social elevation whereas, the part about his getting married with the charming young daughter of the employer fulfills is erotic wish. So, a day-dream just like a usual dream a night dream or like para praxis presents us with a narrative. And if we analyze that in additive, if we look deep into that narrative we can interpret it from the psychoanalytic perspective and that will reveal to us the presence of some very deep seated desires. Now, while elaborating on the example of this possible day-dream of a poor orphan, Freud draws our attention to the sequence of time that underlines the fantasy.

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*“The relation of a phantasy to time is in general very important. We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times - the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject’s major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfillment of the wish.”*

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This comment becomes easier to understand if we go back to the example of the day-dream of the poor orphan. Now, that particular day-dream is of course, integrally connected to the orphan’s present situation. As I explained just a few moments ago, the orphan’s day-dream is about a job because he is at present on his way to a prospective

employer. But this event that informs the present of the orphan boy triggers a day-dream precisely because it strongly harks back to a memory of an earlier experience. And in case of the poor orphan it might be the memory of his family and the affection that he used to receive while his parents were still living.

The reason the present event triggers this past memory is because the future holds a prospect of his regaining his position within an affectionate family, in this case the family of his prospective employer. So, what the day-dream does for the orphan boy is to allow him in his imagination of the future a chance to regain what he has lost in the past. In other words the day-dream strings together the 3 times of the past, the present, and the future. But the obvious question is that what has all of this got to do with our understanding of literature or literary creativity.

Well, Freud argues that just like the fantasies of the day-dream are transformed forms of child's play popular novels, romances and short stories are transformed forms of day-dream. So, here we reach at the culminating point of the chains of equivalent relationships that Freud has been creating throughout his essay. So, from child's play we come to day-dream and from day-dream we now come to creative writing.

Now, here it is important to note that Freud begins his discussion of literature and literature the creativity in the second part of the essay by making a distinction. He says that his focus in this particular essay will be on popular novels romances and stories which are entirely products of their author's imagination. And he will not focus on literature produced either by critically acclaimed writers or on ancient epics and dramas which use readymade materials to build their story.

So, does that mean psychoanalytic literary theory can only be applied to certain kinds of literature and not to certain other kinds of literature? Well, this is a question that I will leave open for you to decide, but while considering this question do not go by only what Freud has written in this essay you also need to consider the kind of literary work which Freud himself engages elsewhere. And I think you will find him engaging not only with a lot of critically acclaimed literary pieces he engaged with Shakespeare for instance, but also with ancient literature think about his use of the Oedipus myth.

But anyway moving on with Freud's essay, the argument that is being made here by Freud is that popular fiction produced by author's are similar to day-dreams produced by

each one of us. Thus just like a day-dreamer the creative writer too gets inspired by a strong experience in the present which triggers in his mind some earlier childhood memory. This childhood memory appears in the present as a desire or a wish which then finds fulfillment in the creative work. In other words just like a day-dream a creative work too is underlined by its author's desire for wish fulfillment, and again just like a day-dream the creative work strings together the past, the present and the future.

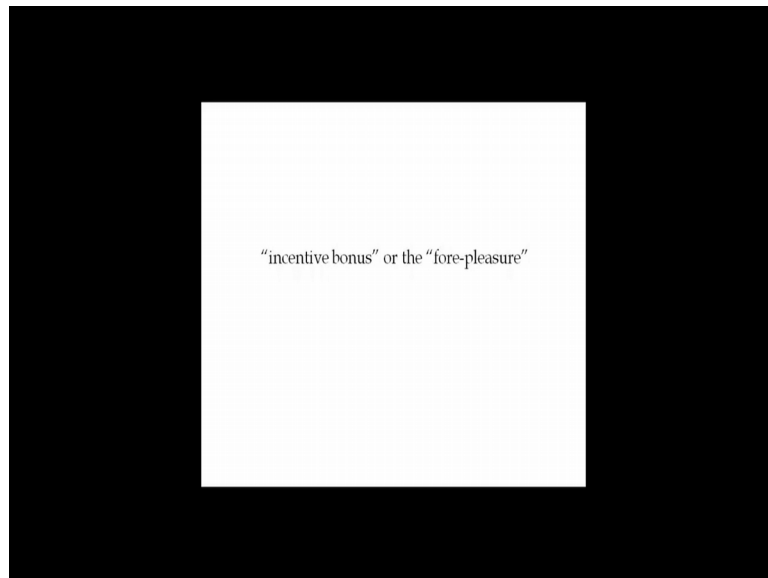
Moreover, popular creative writings like novels, romances and short stories also resemble day-dreams in having ambitious and erotic wish at their core. Thus for instance, the hero of a popular romance or a novel seldom comes to any harm or seldom dies even if he is found to be injured or in deep trouble at the end of a chapter he is seen recovering or making an escape soon enough mostly even in the next chapter. Now, this is a manifestation of the ambitious wish in which the subject always imagines himself as supremely powerful and as absolutely invincible.

Think here for instance of all the run of the mill Bollywood scripts where even if the hero is beaten black and blue, even if he falls from a high rise, even if he is caught in a car crash, he comes out of it unscratched, almost like a divine figure. The erotic wish also plays an important part in popular creative writing and if you come to think of it also in popular Bollywood scripts as well. In these stories we see the hero being imbued with such charm that it becomes irresistible for all the young beautiful women around him, and they cannot stop falling in love with him, and this clearly connects to the subject's repressed sexual fantasies. But having pointed out these similarities between day-dreaming and creative writing Freud brings up for discussion at the very end of his piece a crucial difference between the two.

Now, he points out that our day-dream is a fantasy of an individual and is associated with the fulfillment of his personal desires. And Freud also notes that if we were to tell our day-dreams to others our narration would most probably repel them or at the very least leave them cold. This is a not very difficult to understand in fact, because imagine one of your friends telling you of his day-dream in which he performs great heroic acts and in which he saves the world from destruction and in which he ends up marrying a young beautiful woman.

Now, this day-dream though it yields a high degree of pleasure to your friend would leave you uninspired because, it does not fulfill any of your desires or wishes, that is to say your friend's day-dream does not make you feel heroic. Yet a popular novel or a romance or a short story in spite of being akin to the day-dream of its author seems to yield pleasure to the reader as well. Now, how does this happen? Well, Freud argues that a creative writer allows others to participate in his day-dreams and to re-pleasure from them by two different ways. The first way is that the creative writer uses his ability to write and to structure his narrative beautifully, and this formal beauty of the creative writing attracts the reader and for it calls this the "incentive bonus" or the "fore-pleasure".

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This fore-pleasure experienced through the literary form leads the reader to experience a still greater pleasure from the content of the creative writing.



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A reader can experience this pleasure from the content because the creative writer is able to and I am quoting “soften the character of his egoistic day-dream by altering and disguising it.”

In other words the creative writer narrates his own day-dream in such a way that it loses its private or personal character and it allows the reader to participate in that day-dream. The personal fantasy of the author is in fact, sufficiently altered and disguised for us readers to be able to project our own images on to the hero of the fiction, and thereby fulfill our ambitious and erotic desires through him. And since through literature we can indulge in these wishes ambitious wishes and erotic wishes more openly than through our day-dreaming you remember that we need to very closely guard our day-dreams as a top secret. But when we read literature we can indulge in these wishes more openly and therefore, Freud sees that we feel liberated from the tensions of our minds.

That is to say that the feeling of shame that is attached to day-dreaming is gone when we engage with literature. Yet in both cases, in the case of day-dreaming and in the case of literature the goal remains the same as far as Freud is concerned which is the fulfillment of our repressed desires.

So, as you can see here Freudian psychoanalysis can help us create not only an author centered literary theory, but also a reader centered literary theory. And indeed as Freud tells us in his essay approaching literature through the lens of psychoanalysis and

through psychological phenomenon like day-dreaming brings us to the threshold of new interesting and complicated enquires.

We will continue with these new and complicated enquires in our next lecture, when we take up for discussion the work of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

Thank you.