

The Freudian Method: Reading *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*

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Abstract

The Freudian Method has been compared to the method of Sherlock Holmes – logical conclusions derived out of seemingly petty signs. However, Freud's method is much closer to the methods of a literary critic where meaning is multiple and always speaking through different modes of language. Freud's key understandings of sexuality were made in the *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* but they are more constructively problematized for the modern reader with a juxtaposition of *Dora: A Fragment of an Analysis*. Freud's understanding of sexuality may have revealed certain trappings of the prudish Victorianism but it also broaches a since-discovered territory where sex-gender-sexuality may not necessarily be aligned normatively. A close reading of Freud is possible only by positioning his key concepts in the network of his larger oeuvre.

Keywords: Sexuality, Freudian Method, Gender, Psychoanalysis, Semantics, Literary Criticism

Pamela Thurschwell identifies three key themes in the work of Sigmund Freud: sexuality, memory and interpretation. (2) *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* is the fundamental text to deal with the first thematic as it was revised again and again by Freud throughout a career which spanned nearly five decades. On the other hand, *Dora: A*

Fragment on an Analysis is simultaneously the practice of a treatment the cornerstone of which is to rekindle repressed memories as well as an act of interpretation of all kinds of signs that the hysterical woman's silent speech throws up. Therefore, the two texts lend themselves to different kinds of assessment. Therefore, the analysis undertaken here, which is an attempt to map the claims made in *Three Contributions* onto *Dora* to bring out the contradictions, will have certain limitations which are discussed in the conclusion. In doing so, the interplay of the three key aforementioned themes that actively occupy Freud's work will be highlighted.

Freud's early acquaintance with hysteria, developed while working at an asylum in Paris with French neurologist Jean Charcot, clearly has a deep effect on his vocation. Freud's procedural inventions in the field of psychoanalysis shift emphasis to the devious ways in which memory functions such that interpretation of speech and body language becomes an essential practice to recover repressed memories, constitutive of the partial amnesias, suffered in the course of psychical development. In the course of these sessions of talking and listening, Freud was led to making his expansive claims about the centrality of sexuality in the life of the mind. These claims that are foregrounded with an unprecedented security, if not certainty, in *Three Contributions to The Theory of Sex* have a history that is significant to our purpose.

Gerald Izenberg has shed light upon Freud's move away from the "seduction theory" which was his initial explanation for cases of hysteria (25). Freud's "seduction theory" maintained that early experiences of abuse were retrospectively traumatized and manifested themselves in symptoms of neuroses after the attainment of puberty. Freud eventually rejected the seduction theory as a universal explanation of psychoneurosis as it was unable to ground all cases in childhood trauma of abuse. Wilhelm Fliess, Freud's confidant and colleague,

received a letter from Freud in September 1897 announcing his rejection of this explanation as “the collapse of everything valuable” (qtd. in Izenberg 25). Before the end of the same year, Fliess received another letter in which Freud proposed his theory of infantile sexuality and its relation to neurotic symptoms in later life.

Three Contributions embarks upon a process of articulating that alternative explanation for psychoneurosis and “aberrant” sexual behaviour. Beginning from the establishment of infantile sexuality, the lively presence of the sexual instinct in children, Freud charts a process of maturation that involves a latency period, infantile amnesia and sexual re-organization at puberty. Freud claims here, and repeats the same in *Dora*, that all psychoneurosis involves interference at some level with this process of sexual development.

Freud grounds infantile sexuality in that first sense of satisfaction produced in children through the experience of certain organic processes such as suckling at the breast of the mother or defecation (*Three Contributions*). The stimulation of erotogenic zones in these organic processes, according to Freud, becomes the seed of an auto-erotic interest in the child who delights in repetition and recreates the original satisfaction through activities such as thumb-sucking. Similar activity is analysed by Freud in the anal stage of development as the child recreates the sensations of defecation by retention of faeces. The concept of the erotogenic zones in children is a flexible one, not limiting the notion to specific bodily organs, but rather he states that “any other part of the body can acquire the same susceptibility to stimulation as is possessed by the genitals and can become an erotogenic zone.” (Freud, *Three Contributions*) In fact, the genital zone does not have any primacy as an erotogenic zone in children and sexual difference doesn’t manifest itself in terms of sexual pleasure at this stage. One must insert a cautionary note here to the effect that Freud does

underline subtle differences even at this stage manifest in the masturbatory instinct which he considers to be more active in males. But more significantly, the organization of sexual pleasure in the infant's body is firstly, auto-erotic, and secondly not hierarchized in the sense that no single auto-erotogenic zone has primacy over other zones.

Freud is able to explain certain ways of socialization in relation to his theory of sexual development. He argues that the organization of sexual life in children changes after a "latency period" during which sexual energies are sublimated into other activities for the cultivation of the barriers of incest, and internalization of social codes of morality. "Infantile amnesia", the blurred memory of early childhood as Freud posits it, is followed by a re-organization of the sexual instinct takes place. The auto-eroticism of childhood is replaced by a sexual desire for an object and sexual-difference begins to manifest explicitly in terms of the activity/passivity of desire. The erotogenic zones which were independent in childhood are now brought under the primacy of the genital zone whose satisfaction through "discharge of sexual products" orients the entire process of sexual excitation (Freud, *Three Contributions*). These two phases, distanced by the latency period, retain a deep underlying connection according to Freud. The search for the sexual object in later life, for instance, is still driven by the infantile instinct that had earlier lead little boys to desire their mother and little girls to be consumed by "penis envy" (Freud, *Three Contributions*). The objects are displaced in puberty due to which the heterosexual orientation is eventually produced as the final constellation. The barrier of incest entails the impossibility of the realization of this phantasy but through a process of displacement the final destination of genital heterosexuality is arrived at.

As I mentioned earlier, Freud maintains, that a disturbance during this course of sexual development (which can also take the form of child abuse as it did in ‘seduction theory’) manifests itself in neurotic symptoms. It is here that we can make a clear connection with *Dora*. While presenting “The Clinical Picture”, Freud argues that in all cases of Hysteria that he has dealt with he has never “failed to discover the psychological determinants which were postulated in *Studies on Hysteria* (1896), namely, psychical trauma, a conflict of affects and -an additional factor which I brought forward in later publications – a disturbance in the sphere of sexuality.” (Freud, *Case Histories* 54) Freud identifies the traumatic moment that triggered Dora’s hysterical symptoms in an incident that happened then she was 14 years old during which Herr. K forced a kiss upon her lips. Freud’s response to the event is noteworthy: “This was surely a situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached. But Dora had at that moment a violent feeling of disgust...” (*Case Histories* 59). Freud continues, “I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom occasion for sexual excitement elicited feeling that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable.” (*Case Histories* 59) Freud argues that the disgust evoked in Dora due to this event is a sign of “repression in the erotogenic oral zone which had been over-indulged in Dora’s infancy by the habit of sensual sucking.” (*Case Histories* 61)

The analysis of this particular narrative, one of the many narratives that can be isolated from a complex and layered interpretation, indicates a general pattern of analysis in Freud: the expression of the sexual instinct in childhood through activities such as thumb-sucking can become sites of repression and inhibit the formation of the destined constellation of genital heterosexuality. Any aberration on this path is the location of psychoneurosis and that is what

Freud argues for in *Dora*. The influence of *Three Contributions* is evident in the following passage from *Dora* which is remarkably similar to Freud's approach to perversion in the earlier text:

“The sexual life of each one of us extends to a slight degree – now in this direction, now in that – beyond the narrow lines imposed as the standard of normality. The perversions are neither bestial nor degenerate in the emotional sense of the word. They are a development of germs all of which are contained in the undifferentiated sexual disposition of the child...” (*Freud, Case Histories* 84)

This awareness in the consciousness of a nineteenth-century mind is to be marvelled at but the tragic predicament of Dora, the patient, and *Dora* is that it doesn't materialize into a movement away from “normality” which is still a force in the Freudian paradigm. The child's sexual disposition remains merely a phase to be passed before arriving at the “normal”. The necessity of this movement towards genital heterosexuality is the primary reason for Freud's refusal to believe in Dora's rejection of Herr. K's offer which Freud interprets to be the natural choice of sexual object post-puberty after the disappointment suffered in childhood in pursuit of her father. Freud's belief that Dora's rejection of Herr. K. is an attempt to avoid the revival of a painful memory of childhood leads him to the notion of transference through which Freud, once again, rationalizes Dora's rejection of himself as yet another rejection of a sexual object.

Toril Mui has argued for the presence of “counter-transference”, or the projection of the analyst's subjectivity upon the patient, which can be understood as the actual cause of the failure of the process of free-association (65). Freud is unable to entertain any ideas of female homosexuality inspite of the fact that such a constellation is very much possible, albeit as an aberration, in the framework outlined in *Three Contributions*. Freud's inability to extend the

domain of “normality” in practical treatment, away from rigid genital heterosexuality, results in the counter-transference that inhibited the process of analysis in Dora’s case.

It would be naïve to ignore Freud’s contribution to psychoanalysis as he extended our boundaries of knowledge by providing an accessible and insightful account of infantile sexuality. He is able to bombard the idea of sexuality splitting it up into constitutive components such as sexual aim, object, erotogenic zones which when aligned in different combinations open up a sphere a sexuality that posits possibilities much beyond the narrow constraints of genital heterosexuality. However, even more significant is his method of interpretation that is an attack on the instrumental model of language that has been perfected under capitalism. Freud’s treatment of the hysterical woman’s silent speech, the interpretation of symptom, is a literary practice of a progressive nature that celebrates a multiplicity of meaning and understands that truth can manifest itself in contradictions. He argues, “...a single symptom corresponds to several meanings simultaneously.” (Freud, *Case Histories* 87)

Dora doesn’t lend itself easily to an analysis that attempts to map upon it a theoretical model charted in a doctrine such as *Three Contributions*. The attempt made here was to bring out the loopholes of that model which manifest evidently in Freud’s counter-transference in the process of analysis. However, in the process the Freudian method is redeemed even if the Freudian conclusion is falsified. The cautionary comment regarding the Freudian method is necessary. *Three Essays* participates in an active and continuing intellectual discussion and hence negotiates with contemporary research questions while addressing a peer group as well as lay readers. He draws and cites the work of Havelock Ellis and Kraft-Ebbing on multiple instances in the text and hence many of his limitations apart from being conditioned by contemporary state of knowledge are also explicitly admitted in his works. The Freudian

claim is always a tentative claim, a proposition on the basis of available data whose reliability is often questioned by Freud himself in a long series of valuable footnotes. It is a claim made in the field of psychoanalysis the predicament of which is well articulated by Toril Mui in her analysis of *Dora*. She says, "Freud's texts oscillate endlessly between his desire for complete insight or knowledge, and an unconscious realization (or fear) of the fragmentary, deferring status of knowledge itself." (Mui 64) There is no better text to illustrate this predicament than the contrasts formed by *Three Contributions* and *Dora*.

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