

## **The contribution of Freud's theories to the literary analysis of two Victorian novels: Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre**

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### **Abstract**

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories can be used with reference to the analysis of literary works. Reading novels, poems and other compositions through the lens of psychoanalysis gives the opportunity to analyse and evaluate the works of literature in their genesis and presentation. Freudian doctrine can be considered as a reading tool that allows the investigation of the enigmatic areas of human experience and, therefore, its main contribution to literature is related to the discovery of hidden aspects of the text, of the writer and of the reader as well. In this article, the main characters of two Victorian novels, Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre are analysed with reference to Freud theories concerning the tripartite structure of the mind (Id, Ego and Super-Ego) along with the Oedipus complex, the analysis of dreams and other aspects of sexuality. Several passages from the two works are highlighted and discussed according to the psychoanalytical theories with a main focus on the characters: Heathcliff and Catherine and then Jane and Mr. Rochester. The importance of the interpretative capacity of psychoanalysis is widely emphasized.

**Key words:** Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, literary analysis, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre.

### **Introduction**

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories can be used with reference to the analysis of literary works. Reading novels, poems and other compositions through the lens of psychoanalysis gives the opportunity to analyse and evaluate the works of literature in their genesis and presentation. Freudian doctrine can be considered as a reading tool that allows the investigation of the enigmatic areas of human experience and, therefore, its main contribution to literature is related to the discovery of hidden aspects of the text, of the writer and of the reader as well. In this article, the main characters of two Victorian novels, Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre are analysed with reference to Freud theories concerning the tripartite structure of the mind (Id, Ego and Super-Ego) along with the Oedipus complex, the analysis of dreams and other aspects of sexuality. Several passages from the two works are highlighted and discussed according to the psychoanalytical theories with a main focus on the characters: Heathcliff and Catherine and then Jane and Mr. Rochester. The importance of

the interpretative capacity of psychoanalysis is widely emphasized. Key words: Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, literary analysis, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre. Anyway, psychoanalytic theories can be very helpful to the analysis of literary works for several reasons as Barry outlines in his theoretical approach to literature (Barry, 2002). Firstly, it is possible to make connections between the hidden content of a novel or poem and the unconscious mind as well as between the explicit content of a text and the conscious. Secondly, the repression of emotions and the disclosure of unconscious elements can be related either to the characters of a novel, poem and play or to the author himself. Thirdly, theories of sexuality can be associated to the representations of emotional suffering and mental dysfunctions in the form of psychological complaints or even madness. Fourthly, the Oedipus complex plays a relevant role in influencing gender dynamics and the relationships between men and women in social contexts as it clearly appears, for example, in the Shakespearean play Hamlet. Lastly, the belief that the analysis of psychological elements is more important for the critical reading of literary works than any other social or historical approach. In this paper, two novels of the English literature of the nineteenth century, Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre, will be analysed according to specific Freudian concepts in relation to the texts and with particular attention to the exploration of the main characters of the novels: Heathcliff and Catherine, Jane and Mr Rochester.

### **Wuthering Heights**

In WH Volume I, the parts of the mind theorized by Freud, the Id, the Ego and the Super-Ego, are represented by three characters, respectively: Heathcliff, Catherine and Edgar Linton (Gold, 1985). The Id is characterized by being unconscious, chaotic, impulsive, energetic, has no moral rules and is governed by sexual and aggressive impulses which need to be discharged regardless of any possible consequence. The peculiarities of the Id can be associated with Heathcliff's behaviour since he is described by Mr. Lockwood, in Volume I chapters I-II (Bronte et al, 1998), as "rather slovenly", "an aversion to showy displays of feeling – to manifestations of mutual kindness" and "the tone ..... I no longer ..... call Heathcliff a capital fellow". According to Gold, Heathcliff represents the Id since he is wild and uncivilized and, as Nelly describes in Volume I chapter IV, as an infant, he was "a dirty, ragged, black-haired child" and a "gipsy brat", likely a primitive or a person of brutish nature. Furthermore, he is soon judged in the novel as sinister: "it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil", with the use of the pronoun it likely to depict him as a thing rather than a human being. Such a description may be confirmed by the analogies, made in Volume I chapter I, to the place where Heathcliff lives since Wuthering Heights is compared to "the atmospheric tumult" and also to the aggressive behavior of the dogs; both similarities reflect the nature of the owner. In contrast, Edgar's nature is clearly the opposite since he is civilized, rich and good-mannered and, as Gold argues, he represents the Super-Ego, an area of the mind which is distinctive for its morality, religiosity, parental and social prohibitions, disapproval of misconduct. These aspects are clearly in contrast with the Id. In order to highlight Edgar's disposition, it is worth to mention the description of Trushcross Grange given in Volume I

chapter VI: “a splendid place carpeted with crimson and shimmering with little soft taper”, “We should have thought ourselves in heaven”, which is in antithesis to the representation of Wuthering Heights’s place. Therefore, the Lintons are depicted as polite and civilized: “Then the woman-servant washed her feet; and Mr Linton mixed a tumbler of negus, and Isabella emptied a plateful of cakes into her lap, and Edgar stood gaping”, definitely in opposition to the attitudes of the “wicked boy”. Catherine, instead, can represent the Ego because of her rationality, her attachment to the real world and the efforts, apparently conscious, to control her natural disposition. As a matter of fact, Catherine is first described as similar to Heathcliff and, hence, as a person living her life according to her peevish nature as told by the words of Nelly in Volume I chapter V: “A wild, wicked slip she was”, “She was much too fond of Heathcliff”, “wakened in her a naughty delight to provoke him ” and “turning Joseph’s religious curses into ridicule, baiting me”. Catherine is, in part, aware of her true nature as shown in the famous quote from chapter IX: “I am Heathcliff!”, an expression that underlines the strong likeness between the two or, in a psychoanalytic perspective, it suggests the existence of an identification, a psychological mechanism by which aspects or parts of a person can be interiorized by another individual. Catherine may or may not be completely aware of her analogy with Heathcliff, but what appears as astonishing and strange to Nelly is her decision to marry Edgar because “I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood...” which is in stark contrast with the assertion “...- in my soul, and in my heart, I’m convinced I’m wrong!”. It is evident that Catherine is ambivalent and smothers her true feelings by repression, a mechanism that Freud emphasized as being unconscious, and makes the decision to marry for convenience, an aspect that is likely driven by the Ego. It is possible to infer that her choice is linked to an identification with Edgar or to the influence of moral and social norms and, eventually, to her wish to increase in wealth, as Gold argues, since a good marriage was a primary concern for many women in the Victorian age. Catherine’s tendency to repress sexual drives or feelings of love, and also Heathcliff’s flight, are both motivated by a sense of humiliation and distance because “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff”, aspects that somewhat foresee the tragic events that will follow in the novel. The apparently destructive nature of the novel is a topic that is discussed by Iwase (2005), who states that Heathcliff and Catherine are both responsible of the tragic quality that can be attributed to the composition. The conjecture is that both characters are indeed egoistic and narcissistic, have an aggressive disposition towards the others and display unrestrained animal impulses if not a diabolical conduct, which may confirm the association with the Id. As a consequence, they can never live in peace but repeatedly suffer and end up destroying their lives and the happiness of those who surround them, an example being Isabella’s marriage with Heathcliff. Catherine’s aggressiveness and insensibility emerge in Volume II chapter I in the words used by herself: “I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn’t you suffer? I do.” and later in the text, the theme of suffering is depicted in the lines: “Are you possessed with a devil, I shall writhe in the torments of hell?”. It seems that Freud’s theories on sadomasochism can help to understand the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff since they both struggle for love and fight unsuccessfully against their aggressive drives. In the end, they can do nothing but let their nature express itself. As Iwase argues, Heathcliff is

so afflicted that his madness and vulnerability result in his pathological obsession for Catherine's ghost as shown in Volume I chapter III: "He got on to the bed my compassion made me overlook his folly". A madness that makes the moment of his death even more impressive as described in the final chapter: "I could not think him dead. Ech! what a wicked un he looks ginning at death!" In the end, their love was impossible either for a matter of tragic fate or for the decisions and natural inclinations of the single individuals. Further evidence to support the contribution of Freud's theories to the analysis of WH is given by Hoeveler (2006). The first dream described in the novel is that of Lockwood's, Volume I chapter III, "I began to dream to my unspeakable relief, they woke me." This dream can be interpreted according to the following psychoanalytical concepts: condensation, in which different elements of a dream may be united in a single image or context; displacement, a mechanism by which a latent content and the emotions attached to it are displaced to a manifest content that is more acceptable for the individual; representability, which is characterized by the transformation of thoughts or ideas into visual images. In the beginning, Lockwood is going home with Joseph but, in a second part, to a chapel where he listens to a sermon and is then beaten up because of the objections he makes. All things considered, it is possible to argue that phallic symbols are represented in the dream by the "weapon" which Lockwood does not possess while Joseph has a "heavy-headed cudgel". The discrepancy between these two characters may reflect their true natures since Joseph is depicted as rude and aggressive, aspects linked to masculinity, while Lockwood is rather inoffensive and gentle, traits which are typical of females. In addition, fear of castration emerges under the form of being beaten by other people in the chapel, a scenario that can be correlated to the reading that Lockwood made of Catherine's account of the "awful Sunday" and of the service that "lasted precisely three hours" or, additionally, to his previous and unpleasant encounter with the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights, which was characterized by coldness and aggressiveness.

### **Jane Eyre**

In JE, the Freudian theories concerning the Oedipus complex can be taken into consideration to explain the relationship between Jane and Mr Rochester. The Oedipus complex concerns a peculiar stage of the individual psychological development of a little boy or girl, and is generally characterized by intense feelings of love for the parent of the opposite sex, while death wishes and aggressive behaviour are expressed towards the parent of the same sex (Laplanche, and Pontalis, 1973). In the novel, Jane can be compared to a little girl since she has positive feelings of affection for Edward, who is twenty years older. Dell'Olio highlights the fact that Jane's love for Rochester is a consequence of the absence of a father figure in her childhood (Dell'Olio, 2010). Little is told in the novel about Jane's parents and the first family picture that appears in chapter I (Bronte, 1994), is characterized by coldness and solitude as shown by the weather conditions: "the dreary November day a long and lamentable blast" and by the distance between Jane and Mrs Reed who cannot be considered a caring and affectionate alternative mother. In fact, the following description of her aunt is

worth mentioning: “She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance” and again: “she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children”. The initial picture of emotional deprivation, unhappiness and prolonged loneliness may explain the fact that a young girl is so in need of true love and of attachment to a parental figure. As Dell’Olio argues, the relationship between Jane and Edward is so strong and intense that no disagreement or argument between an idealized father and a hypothetical daughter can hinder or diminish the affection they have for each other. In fact, after many tribulations and much sufferance on both sides, the final consideration made by the author in the last chapter is: “No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: flesh of his flesh”, an intimacy which underlines the idea of blood relationships or gene sharing that is typical of family ties. The Oedipus complex is comparable to a love triangle in which a third person, the parent of the same sex, intervenes to impede or mitigate the expression of the unconscious sexual drives by the child. Jane’s rivals can be represented either by Blanche Ingram or Bertha Mason. In the former case, the rivalry is not a matter of love since Rochester does not have genuine feelings of attachment to Blanche, but the point here are Jane’s beliefs about Miss Ingram which mainly concern their social discrepancy. She is a threat for Jane, as shown in chapter XVI: “the belle of the evening”, “was certainly the queen.”, “A very rich and powerful one: she sang delightfully”. Therefore, Jane is overtly jealous and struggles with the fear of being neglected by Edward and makes sharp comments about Blanche, likely to emphasize the differences between them as shown by: “Oh! yes. But you see there is a considerable difference in age: Mr Rochester is nearly forty; she is but twenty five”, while Jane is even younger. Moreover, when talking about the Ingram sisters, Jane says that “Mary had a milder and more open countenance than Blanche; softer features too, and a skin some shades fairer (Miss Ingram was dark as a Spaniard)”, this last aspect is clearly in contrast with “this one little English girl”, as Rochester defines Jane in chapter XXIV. It is clear from this comparison with Blanche Ingram that Jane Eyre belongs to a lower social class since she is a person, at least initially, with no money or fortune and forced to work as a governess. Since the beginning of the novel the heroine struggles against her inferiority as shown in chapter II where she refers to her cousin John: “Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?” differently from her attitude towards Rochester, her master, as it appears in chapter XVII: “My master’s colourless, olive face, full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me”. An interesting work concerning the analysis of dreams and artistic production in JE provides important insights into the psychoanalytic reading of the social condition of women in the Victorian age (Arnautu, 2002). Firstly, Jane’s dreams are used in the novel to express fears of motherhood since their manifest content and verbal description are frequently characterized by anxiety and a sense of failure and incapacity to deal with little children. This is apparent in chapter XXV: “I was burdened with the charge of a little child and wailed piteously in my ear” and again: “- however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it”. The elements that emerge in these dreams are likely connected to the events of Jane’s life: her marriage to Rochester which can be interpreted as a sort of imprisonment for a young girl and a limitation of her freedom and independence. Other girls at the time might have been overexcited by the idea of marrying a rich man and climbing the social ladder, but

Jane goes against the tide, an attitude which is confirmed by her rather cold and ambivalent relationship with Adele, her constant feelings of emancipation and lack of showiness. Secondly, Jane's painting ability is the expression of an artistic quality which allows the heroine to emerge from her social inferiority since she is much appreciated as shown in chapter X: "That is one of my paintings over the chimney-piece. Well, that is beautiful, Miss Jane!". At the same time, it prevents her from being conformed to the upper classes as she is not trying to draw people's attention, unlike Miss Ingram as depicted in chapter XVII: "Miss Ingram, who had now seated herself with proud grace at the piano her air seemed intended to excite not only the admiration, but the amazement of her auditors". Exhibitionistic and voyeuristic drives are expressed also by Jane since her paintings may reflect an unconscious wish to show herself and to be watched by others, as Arnautu argues, along with a need for admiration. In chapter XIII, Jane's self-gratification in painting is described in these words: "Were you happy when you painted these pictures? asked Mr. Rochester presently. .... yes, and I was happy. To paint them, in short, was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures.... Apart from personal satisfaction, it is important to consider that the heroine's artistic skills symbolize the opportunity to distinguish herself as she possesses noble and elevated qualities. It does not necessarily follow that she belongs to an upper social class, indeed she represents an alternative to the maternal role imposed on women by society. The second rival for Jane's oedipal dream is Bertha Mason, a rather ambiguous figure who, according to Atherton, represents the animal, instinctual and disruptive side of the heroine, an aspect that, in a psychoanalytic perspective, can be associated to the typical sexual and aggressive drives that characterize the Id (Atherton, 2014). Moreover, in chapter XXVI Bertha is referred to with an impersonal pronoun, which dehumanizes her, and she is also compared to some kind of beast: "it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing...". A figure that apparently lacks any form of moral principle or self-control like Heathcliff. She is an example, as another scholar argues (Showalter, 1985), of the madwomen who, in the Victorian society, were commonly confined in an asylum or at home in a segregated area, an attic, and abandoned to the cure of a single assistant, typically another woman. Isolation was an experience that occurred also to Jane when, as a child, she was unjustly shut up into the Red room because of her tantrums and irritable behaviour. It seems that antisocial attitudes along with madness or any other troublesome behaviour that could emerge from the discharge of the Id and especially if expressed by women, had to be adequately dominated or kept under control because of the moral rules that governed society.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, psychoanalytical theories can provide useful insights into the understanding of these two masterpieces of English literature since it is possible to assume that the suppression of individual desires and wishes, either consciously or in an unconscious way, the difficulty to find an adequate compromise between the energies of the Id, Ego and Super-Ego along with the pressures women may encounter in a patriarchal and misogynous society. All these

factors, taken individually or in association, can cause an intense emotional suffering and even a great amount of psychological distress. In WH, Heathcliff becomes mad because of the uncontrolled energy associated with aggressive drives and the impossibility to fulfil love wishes or to find some personal satisfaction in life, while Catherine behaves in a hysterical manner because of the conflict between the repressed expression of the instinctual component and the demands of society. Both characters are, consequently, unhappy and dissatisfied and it is evident that there will never be in peace on earth for them. In the same way, Jane is constantly discontent and restless until she reaches economic independence and unless she could emerge as a respectable and wealthy woman, which is likely what she always struggled to achieve. Her determination and obstinacy to raise the social ladder are also correlated to the suppression of motherhood as discussed above, an attitude that reflects an unconscious and strong control over maternal instincts and the nurturing nature of females: the Ego strives for selfrealization but is in contrast with social pressures (SuperEgo) and sexual appetites (Id). Edward Rochester represents the fatherly affection that Jane could never experience in life and, therefore, it is not surprising that their relationship is characterized by strong feelings of attachment and by incomprehension and controversies which are frequently observed in familial contexts, particularly between a caring father and an adolescent daughter who is living an inner turmoil. Rochester is also the symbol of a society in which men were powerful and strong individuals and assumed leading roles, but in the novel a reversal of social roles is likely highlighted. Jane developed into a mature and independent person while her husband is transfigured into a disabled and dependent individual, thus reflecting the frailties and weaknesses of a masculine society. It seems that the psychoanalytic antithesis between masculinity and femininity finds a new equilibrium in the relationship between these two characters and in the future social models. In the end, the analysis of WH and JE from a Freudian perspective can provide a better understanding of the characters of the novels as well as the reader's response to the text and the authors' lives and personalities.

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