

Psychology and Literature (1930) – Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961)

Summary:

Carl Gustav Jung's *Psychology and Literature* (1930) can be read as a critique of the classical Freudian psychoanalytical approach to literary studies.

The essay is notable for its ambitious attempt to discuss the social role of a creative writer from a psychological and psychoanalytical perspective. It is also remarkable for its similarities with the impersonality theory' of creative process put forth by T.S. Eliot in the early part of the twentieth century.

Carl Jung (1875–1961) believes that though the psychologist's approach to literature varies significantly from that of a literary critic, there is a possibility of an interesting dialogue between the two as all the sciences and arts have a common origin—the human psyche.

Jung notes that the primary difference between the literary critic's approach and the psychologist's approach is that the psychologist may be interested in the works that might be of little artistic merit for the critic, such as pulp romances or popular detective fiction. For a psychologist, a 'psychological novel' may be the most uninteresting one, as most of the elements of fiction, like motives or thoughts of the characters are explained and made explicit by the author. The more interesting novels for a psychologist would be the works where these things are not explained and made explicit by the author and there is a room for interpretation.

Jung goes on to make a distinction between 'psychological' literature and 'visionary literature'. Jung points out that, as a psychologist, he would hardly be interested in 'psychological literature', which primary deals with the material drawn from the conscious mind. 'Visionary literature' draws its imagery and content from materials drawn from the unconscious mind and hence is of great interest to a psychologist.

Jung points out that the first part of Goethe's *Faust* is an example of 'psychological literature' while the second part is 'visionary' in nature.

Jung critiques Freudian emphasis on the personality of the author in interpretation of the text by stating that the author's personality is not the most important aspect of a literary work, as the writer usually has to transcend the personal and the subjective in order to make his work appealing to others. The Freudian approach, which hardly goes beyond deriving the work from the author's neurosis, fails to explain why not all neurotics are authors. Moreover, such an approach cannot understand the function of a creative writer in society.

Jung notes that the contents and materials of 'visionary' literature are not just drawn from the author's psychosexual history, as Freudians would insist, but are also from 'racial memory' or the collective unconscious of the entire human race. Such images, figures and symbols are primordial and not specific either to an individual or even to a culture. Such contents of 'collective unconscious' are called 'archetypes' by Jung. He gives an example of the figure of cross which becomes a sacred symbol among the Christians as well as other pagan cultures (like 'swastika' among Hindus). Archetypes manifest themselves not just in mythology, folklore or 'visionary literature' but they affect human behaviour deeply.

Some of the most important archetypes in Jungian psychoanalysis are the persona, the shadow, the anima and the wise old man. The goal of human life, according to Jungian theory, is 'individuation' of the becoming complete and whole by synthesising the varied fragments of our being.

The persona is the mask that human beings carry around all the time and when it drops, they have to encounter their dark repellent side—their shadow. As the process of individuation continues, one comes across the anima or the creative and feminine aspect of our unconscious self. In Jung's scheme of things, visionary creative writing is often a manifestation of this feminine component of our selves. The archetype of the wise old man is the archetype of guiding higher wisdom, which leads us towards completion of our individuation. Individuation is often represented archetypally as closed geometric figures like the mandalas.

The function of a creative artist, according to Jung, is to express the contents of collective unconscious in a society that is gradually losing touch with this side of its personality due to the processes of modernisation and secularisation. A work of art, thus in Jung's scheme, would lead to man's reconnection with the collective unconscious, thus assisting him in the process of individuation.

The shifting of the focus of psychoanalysis from personal psychosexual history to collective spiritual history in Jungian 'analytical theory' made it extremely influential among the writers and critics. However, Jungian theory fell out of favour with more materialistic-oriented and relativist cultural theorists, along with scientific psychologists, due to its universalising and idealistic notions and its preoccupation with vaguely spiritual orientation.
