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“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”: Readers’ Reflections on Literature through Literary Theories

Editor’s note: The following text supplements the article, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”: Readers’ Reflections on Literature through Literary Theories” (*EJ* 93.5 [2004]:42–46). Because of space limitations in the print journal, we chose to publish two additional critical approaches to the Web as an “*EJ* Extension.”



As a high school English teacher and a university professor, we became interested in implementing theories in the classroom and collaborated on exploring ways to link the required curriculum with literary theories to deepen the students’ experiences with literature. Due to time and curricular constraints, we found a short text to illustrate literary theories prior to using longer works. Sophomores in two English 10 World Studies classes were introduced to literary theories through the Grimm brothers’ tale “Snow White” and then applied these theories to the analysis of D. H. Lawrence’s “The Rocking-Horse Winner” and George Orwell’s *1984*. We selected “Snow White” because of its familiarity and length. Aspects of five theories were chosen because critics have analyzed “Snow White” from these perspectives. Two of the theories are presented here, followed by the students’ application of these theories to a short story and a novel. For the other three theories, please see the print version of the May 2004 *English Journal*.

The Literary Theories

Archetypal Theory

Archetypal analysis addresses a wide system of universal unifying systems and what the images signify across time and cultures. Archetypes are “universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (Jung 5). These images appear in the “myths of peoples” and “tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions” (Guerin et al. 160).

Jung characterizes archetypes as “the content of the collective unconscious” (42).

Some archetypal images include water, sky, colors, and shapes. Other archetypes and symbolic meanings include the archetypal woman as good mother, evil witch, or soul mate; the wise old man; and the serpent. The hero archetype of transformation and redemption is reflected in the hero’s quest, initiation, tasks and trials, and return home (Campbell). In this quest, the hero passes from ignorance and immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood. Whereas structuralist analysis focuses on the rules that generate meaning in a hero tale, archetypal analysis is concerned with specific tales with hero archetypes as well as their connections to a wider world of hero myths. Other archetypes include the golden age; god-teacher; loss of innocence; the flood; the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and change or metamorphosis; and the seasons in the human year (Jewkes and Frye).

Archetypal Analysis and “Snow White”

N. J. Girardot analyzed the initiatory archetype in “Snow White” both symbolically and structurally. “Snow White” is a moral tale concerning the triumph of the heroine over the malevolence, jealousy, and pride of the evil stepmother. It is also concerned with human maturation, depicting essential experiences in personal growth and socialization. The theme, coming of age, entails a series of essential transformations: passages from childhood to adulthood, natural to cultural life, and asexual to sexual life. Snow White is separated from her home and retreats to the dwarves’ cottage, where

she learns the basic feminine crafts of spinning, weaving, and other tasks necessary for adult married life in her culture. The last phase involves her rebirth and return to society, where she receives a new name, gifts symbolic of her new identity, and status as an adult woman. In contrast, her stepmother fails to pass the test of life and growth, selfishly attempting to perpetuate her beauty when she must grow old and be replaced by new life and beauty. Initiation, then, is a metaphor of life, a cyclical process of birth–death–birth reflected in the birth of Snow White, her apparent death, and her rebirth when the apple falls from her mouth. She experiences the loss of innocence when she yields to the stepmother’s temptation and eats the poisoned apple. With the death of her stepmother and her marriage to the handsome prince, a “golden age” begins in the kingdom.

Psychoanalytical Theory

Freud’s psychoanalytical theory is rooted in a biological determinism suggesting that “behavior is determined by irrational forces, unconscious motivations, and biological and instinctual drives” (Corey 68). Understanding behavior and problems of personality resides in the concepts of consciousness and unconsciousness. By uncovering the unconscious, which holds experiences, memories, and repressed materials, individuals may

deal with neurotic symptoms and behaviors.

Snow White’s defense mechanisms include denial when she “closes her eyes” to her stepmother’s trickery.

The id, the biological component of the personality, is the primary source of psychic energy and instincts; it is ruled by the pleasure principle. The ego, the psychological component, is in contact with the external world

that governs and regulates personality. Ruled by the reality principle, it conforms to realistic and logical thinking. The superego, the social component, includes a moral code that determines whether an action is good or bad and represents the ideal that strives for perfection. Conflict arises “over control of the available psychic energy” (Corey 71).

Ego defense mechanisms help individuals cope with anxiety and prevent the ego from being overwhelmed; they either deny or distort reality. Some of these mechanisms include repression of painful thoughts and feelings, denial of threatening situations,

projection of one’s own unacceptable desires and impulses onto another, displacement of threatening objects, rationalization of behavior, regression to early behavior, introjection of others’ standards and values, identification with successful people or causes, and compensation for limitations (Corey 71–73).

Psychoanalytical Theory and “Snow White”

Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim interpreted “Snow White” as a story dealing with the Oedipal conflict between stepmother and daughter, childhood, and adolescence. The main conflict reflects the competition between stepmother and daughter for the husband’s/father’s love. The narcissistic stepmother desires to incorporate Snow White’s beauty by eating her internal organs. The adolescent girl wishes the hunter, an unconscious representation of her father, would challenge her stepmother’s will. She projects her anger toward his ambivalence onto her stepmother. The voice in the mirror is actually that of Snow White, who thinks she is more beautiful than her stepmother. Her sojourn with the dwarves symbolizes the time when she works out her conflicts and acquires more independence. Snow White does yield to her stepmother’s temptations, reflecting her maturing sexual desires. During her gestation period in the coffin, she becomes ready for a partner of the other sex. The stepmother with her runaway id is destroyed by the evil and destructive aspects of her personality.

Snow White’s defense mechanisms include denial when she “closes her eyes” to her stepmother’s trickery. This defense may explain why she is so gullible in trusting the disguised stepmother despite the dwarves’ warning. Because she measures her value by identification with outward appearances, the stepmother’s defenses are pathological.

Application in the Classroom

The introduction to literary theories was completed in three phases. In the first phase, I (Joanne) briefly related to the students the purpose of studying literary theories and emphasized the differences between this approach and the traditional formalists’ way of looking at literature. I shared our rationale for using “Snow White” because of its brevity and the existing analyses of the tale that provide insights into aspects of the theories. After the tale was read aloud, students were given a

handout highlighting aspects of the theories, placed in small groups, and assigned different theories that they applied to the tale and presented to the whole class.

“The Rocking-Horse Winner”

In the second phase of the lesson, in a Readers Theater format, students read D. H. Lawrence’s short story, “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” about a family’s self-destruction because of their obsession to acquire more money. Each group reviewed the theory handouts, took notes guided by a brief summary handout to focus the analysis, and presented their analysis to the whole class.

An archetypal theory group wrote the following statements in their notes:

A little boy named Paul at the beginning of the story was a very innocent child, who by the end was very corrupt and money hungry . . . This signifies the loss of innocence that all children go through [that] can also be compared to metamorphosis. The boy makes a complete change when he begins to gamble and bet on the horse races.

In a psychoanalytical theory group, Miranda observed that “he [Paul] uses it [the pleasure principle] to lessen tension inside the house and gain pleasure from gambling; with the reality principle, he’s formulating a plan to satisfy the needs of his family; morality principle he lacks it because he’s too young to gamble but he don’t care that it’s wrong.” In terms of defense mechanisms, Kaitlin noted that “the mom in the story also has defense mechanisms. She chose repression by choosing not to think about her lack of love for her kid; she chose denial when she keeps spending money that she doesn’t have . . . [and] lets her family get in debt; and she chose compensation, she tries to act like a loving mother though she’s cold-hearted.”

1984

In the third phase, students answered questions prior to their literary analysis. After responding to these questions, each student selected a theory to apply to *1984*.

In an archetypal group, Luke opened the presentation with the following observations:

a few of the archetypes in *1984* were loss of innocence and metamorphosis and they’re shown by how

Winston changes during the book, like, it starts out . . . I really don’t know if he starts out orthodox, but throughout the book he turns more orthodox, and eventually he turns back to being, like, the perfect orthodox person by the end. So he goes through, like, metamorphosis.

Susie stated: “[A]nd one of the archetypes is the god-teacher and that’s just someone who, like, has a connection between, like, heaven and earth and they’re, like, really wise . . . we thought that with O’Brien because he’s always wiser than Winston, and whatever Winston says he has a comeback and proves him wrong with how the government works.”

Vincent added that “when Winston is with Julia in the golden country is his golden age where there seems to be a perfect world with peace and harmony.”

Another group drew a comparison between Winston’s sexual coming-of-age as similar to the

movie *Pleasantville*, where sexual interaction is colored in the black-and-white picture. Another comparison was made between Goldstein as the god-teacher and the director in the movie *The Truman Show*.

In a psychoanalytical group, Dillon observed that with Winston “the id is, like, being in denial and protecting him from the threat of the party—ego part is just he was expressing his beliefs by writing in his diary and reduces his anxiety or insanity and superego is like his moral code definition between right and wrong, good and bad.” Tyron referred to the unconscious that Winston suppressed as occurring in “these dreams . . . it’s really that he’s trying to hold back these memories of how bad he used to treat his sister and his mother . . . and yet he would do these things unconsciously to keep himself sane.” Sam viewed Winston’s disobeying of the rule against having sex and eating chocolate as the pleasure principle. Andrew added that the ego “is basically how you think of yourself and how good you think you are . . . and Winston started out with an ego when he was a kid . . . but then when Big Brother came along, [he] kind of killed his ego . . . he’s only allowed to think what Big Brother wants him to think of himself.” Joel linked that to unconsciousness “within the people cause they don’t really have any of their own ideas. . . . They can’t really think for themselves.”

Another comparison was made between Goldstein as the god-teacher and the director in the movie *The Truman Show*.

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