



## Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Literature

Kumar Sawan

ORCID 0000-0003-2018-9739

**\*Corresponding Author:** Kumar Sawan, [sawan9175@gmail.com](mailto:sawan9175@gmail.com) Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

### Abstract

**Aim:** *This paper explores in detail the psychoanalytic turn in literature. Psychoanalysis originates with the works of Sigmund Freud and was later developed by many psychologists including Jacques Lacan. We shall do a psychoanalytical reading of Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte. This would necessitate a 'psychoanalytic' mode of reading that attends to a specific dynamic of the literary relation, rather than merely 'importing' knowledge from another field.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *This study is based on Jacques Lacan's concept of psychoanalysis. It also traces some elements found in Sigmund Freud's works and uses them to approach the novel Wuthering Heights through a psychoanalytical lens.*

**Outcome:** *A psychoanalytic reading expands the horizon of literary criticism and explores the state of mind of the characters as well as the author who created them.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *In Wuthering Heights we get to witness all three orders of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Psychoanalysis can further be applied to explore the changes in literary history.*

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytical Criticism, Literature, Desire, Mirror Stage, Jacques Lacan, Wuthering Heights

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Literature is commonly defined as a ‘reflection of society.’ But how is it able to do that? Certainly, there must be some mechanism that works inside literary texts that helps achieve the desired result. Since the advent of structuralism in 1915, there have been various theories that have tried to analyze texts as the producer of meaning. ‘Theory’ is a way of seeing, a way of looking very, very close at texts. “Theory is a way of seeing how meaning emerges in any cultural practice whether film or fiction, architecture or fashion” (Nayar 2017). It helps to ensure that a text is read properly. But why such emphasis on the process of meaning-making? The answer to this is that when we understand the process through which meaning comes out of the text, it is then and only then we’ll be able to create texts that will be beneficial for society.

Society consists of human beings. So, literature must also be a reflection of the human psyche. Many of us, when we read books or watch films, begin to think about the characters in them and how they possess vices and virtues. The characters, though they are fictional, seem real to us. Even after knowing that the novel we are reading is not a real story, we, for a short period, believe it to be real. Why? Well, literature might turn to psychology for such an answer.

In the 1930s the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan advocated a 'return to Freud' movement. Psychoanalysis originates with the work of Sigmund Freud. Every generation of analysts that came after Freud has sought to update those theories. Lacan believed that this constant revision of psychoanalysis has made it lose sight of its original aims. By laying down some aspects of the theory, especially the underlying presence of repressed, unconscious desire in our mental lives, psychoanalysis has gained respect but it has lost its radical edge. That is why Lacan felt a necessity to return to the texts of Freud himself and have a close reading and understanding of those texts. What is psychoanalysis? And how does it help in the analysis of literary texts? Before answering these questions let us have a look at some rather obvious things. We use the term 'Oedipus Complex' with much ease, and in fact, it has become a part of the everyday language now. The notion of an Oedipus Complex came to the surface after the analysis of the play *Oedipus Rex* by the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles. The protagonist kills the father and marries his mother, unaware of the true nature of either of the acts. Various critical interpretations of this play yielded a theory of the human psyche and proved to be one of the most controversial intellectual ideas of the twentieth century.

Today, we read texts for the 'desires' they seem to hide, for the 'drives' in characters, and the 'unconscious' in them. This critical move of exploring the human psyche by exploring the deeper, hidden meaning of texts and their characters is known as 'psychoanalytic criticism'. Psychoanalysis is a theory of

the psyche. It was originally developed as a method to treatmental disorders. With time, psychoanalysis rose above its purely clinical interest, taking into account society, and life. There are still many who believe that psychoanalysis deals with madness because they don't know what it has to do with healthy people. All these people need to read *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* by Freud, published at the beginning of the last century, which proved that normal life also has its abnormal phases. One should also have a reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which one gets all the answers to questions such as why we dream what we dream, the connection of dreams to one's life, and the hidden desires in one's mind. We all have some 'desires' in us. Desires exist in our minds since our birth. Some desires are that about which you can speak to others openly, but some you can't, especially, sexual desires. Because you think they are not right, they are taboo, they won't fit in the preexistent social codes. And here comes the function of our psyche. Freud distinguished three components of the human psyche:

1. The ego (or the conscious mind)
2. The superego
3. The id (or the unconscious mind)

The ego or the conscious mind is that which we work with and use when active and awake. It is by this mind we express our desires, have our rational thoughts, and take decisions. The superego influences the way the conscious works. It is drawn from social orders and cultural codes. The id or the unconscious mind is Freud's favorite area. The desires that don't find expression in the real world are hidden here. Certain desires, especially sexual, are pushed into the unconscious so that they do not affect our daily life. This process of pushing thoughts away from the conscious mind is called 'repression'.

However, these hidden desires do not remain hidden for a very long time. The unconscious emerges in moments such as dreams, jokes, and even art. So, the

main task of a psychoanalyst is to uncover the hidden desires that have been repressed.

To understand Lacanian criticism, it was important to throw some light on the ideas of Freud. He combined Freudian theory with the linguistics of Saussure. Lacan's major works *Écrits* (1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977) proved highly influential to feminists and poststructuralists. He appeared for the first time at the annual Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1936, held at Marienbad. He developed his research work on the 'mirror phase' and presented a paper on it.

Lacanian psychoanalysis begins, like Freudian, with childhood. But he replaces Freud's trinity structure of the psyche with the structures of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It is in these three stages or 'orders', the formation of identity takes place.

The mirror stage (also known as the Imaginary) is based on the belief that infants recognize themselves in a mirror from the age of about six months. When a child sits in front of a mirror and moves his limbs, he observes that the reflection does the same. The child associates the movements in the mirror with itself and thus forms a sense of self. But this sense of self is similar to the child's conception of the relationship between himself and the mother. Just as the child is not able to distinguish between himself and the mother, he does not see any difference between himself and the reflection. The mirror stage is a part of an infant's development from 6 to 18 months, as outlined at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936. By the early 1950s, Lacan's concept of the mirror stage had evolved: he no longer considered the mirror stage as a moment in the life of the infant, but as representing a permanent structure of subjectivity, or as the paradigm of 'Imaginary order'. This evolution in Lacan's thinking becomes clear in his later essay titled "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in Freudian Unconscious". An important point to note here

is that the Imaginary stage precedes language. This is also known as the pre-Oedipal stage.

The Symbolic stage is the stage when the child acquires language. And this is perhaps the most important area in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this stage, the child enters into society and social relations. Identity assumed in the Imaginary phase is constructed in the Symbolic phase. The child now learns that society has different names for 'mother', 'father', and 'child'. He learns the difference between 'I' and 'not-I'. He discovers that which is external to himself- the Other, and realizes that the Self is different from the Other. "Lacan, here, is working with the language of the Symbolic order where 'Mother' stands for the desire of the absent mother and 'Father' stands for the threat of the absent." (Nayar 76). Desire is primary for Lacan.

The Real is the order that both the Imaginary and the Symbolic try to control and the psyche is caught between the 'lack' (i.e., the desire for the absent mother discovered during the Symbolic stage and pushed into the unconscious) and the need to fulfill this 'lack'. Lacan reformulated his concept in several places in his work. In 1953, he proposed that the Real is simply what isn't symbolized. It is excluded from the realm of language. The Real order means neither being trapped in the Imaginary nor exposed to the laws of the Symbolic. The Real would represent precisely what is excluded from what we call 'reality', the margin of what is without meaning and which we fail to explore or situate.

Language, it must be noted, is used when we feel some kind of 'lack' in our lives. When we desire something, we use language. Lacan links language with desire and the unconscious. He believes that the unconscious functions by signs, metaphors, and symbols, and in this sense, it is 'like' language. Now that we have understood the basic concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, we will try to understand what psychoanalytic criticism is. This article is useful as it will provide one with the methods to approach a literary text through a psychoanalytic

lens. We shall look at a famous text in our literature and try to analyze it. First of all, we should look very, very closely at texts. We should focus on its language because language conceals, reveals, or modifies hidden desires and anxieties. The desire in the characters may not express itself because of the cultural codes, and we need to pay attention to the symbolic expressions like sounds, facial expressions, and gestures- to discover it. The desires in the unconscious mind, as stated earlier, do not stay hidden for long. This expression of the unconscious is allowed in literary texts and language. In his book, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pramod K. Nayar defines psychoanalytic criticism as:

Psychoanalytic criticism, therefore, explores the language of the unconscious, of the repressed and the hidden as embodied in literary or cultural texts such as art or fiction, with particular attention to the repression of sexuality and its desires. (Nayar 64)

We should focus on the characters and their behavior. We should focus on how they engage in a conversation, express their concerns and make decisions, etc. If the character behaves quite childishly, or immaturely if he or she doesn't learn from any difficulty that life throws at them (and this mostly happens in picaresque narratives) then they might be suffering from personal problems or they happen to be in the Imaginary stage. If the characters develop to become a better version of themselves, have answers to their questions at the end of a narrative, or simply learn to adapt the 'way of life', they might then be said to have moved to the Symbolic stage. If the characters are neither able to stay in the Imaginary nor able to settle in the Symbolic, they might be searching for something that cannot be defined, they might be searching for the Real.

*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte is one of the gems of English Literature. Various critics have tried to approach the novel from a different psychoanalytical point of view, focusing on the mental processes of its characters- Catherine's insanity, Heathcliff's love, and hate. However, the interest of the

critics has been largely in the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine. Throughout the novel, we find that there is an ambiguous atmosphere and it is primarily because of the problematic relationship between its two main characters.

We shall look at this relationship through a psychoanalytical lens, try to decipher the hidden meanings in the behavior of the characters, and understand their psyche. At the beginning of the story of the Earnshaws (narrated by Nelly Dean to Mr. Lockwood), we are introduced to Heathcliff. Only Catherine Earnshaw and old Mr. Earnshaw admire Heathcliff and the rest of the family detests him. Catherine is represented as a girl with free spirits. She is unaware of the conventions that society imposes on women. She is unaware of the manners of the elite. In other words, she is in an Imaginary state. Jacques Lacan says that ego comes through the sense of maintaining wholeness or what he terms 'jouissance'. After the arrival of Heathcliff, Catherine spends most of her day with him. With time, she begins to identify with him and desires him. She loses the sense of Self and the Other. When Nelly tries to explain to Catherine that she cannot be with Heathcliff (she acts as a tool to separate the characters from their desires and get them into the realm of the Symbolic), Catherine is shocked to the core and says:

I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. [...] My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am



Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, and more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So don't talk of our separation again: it is impracticable; and--.  
(Bronte 69)

When Catherine spends five weeks at Thrushcross Grange; it's an attempt to send her from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. As Lacan says that the Symbolic is the stage when the child learns language, she will now learn the language of the elite, the 'manners of a lady'. When she returns to Wuthering Heights after her stay, Hindley exclaims, "Why Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you: you look like a lady now" (Bronte 45).

The questions of language and literacy have often surfaced in the novel. They have been paralleled with the questions of civilization and uncivilization. We must understand that the Lacanian subject goes from Imaginary to the Symbolic when the law of language is accepted. But with time we discover that this does not happen. She is never able to accept the Symbolic. Even after marrying Edgar, she is not able to have a sense of Self, to distinguish between "I" and "not- I".

Language plays a significant role in Wuthering Heights in its relation to the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The inability to speak language indicates the inability of the subject to shift to the Symbolic stage. Especially, when Heathcliff comes to the Heights with Mr. Earnshaw at the beginning of the novel, Bronte describes not only his appearance but also the language he uses: "repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand" (Wuthering Heights 32). This focus on his inability to speak indicates the Lacanian presymbolic when the infant has not been subjected to the law of language and the Symbolic.

Catherine accepts death as a solution to the impossibility of fulfilling her desire for Heathcliff. This acceptance is an attempt to achieve the Real instead of accepting herself as a subject in the Symbolic. As said earlier, the Real is the stage

where the Imaginary and the Symbolic seek power and the psyche is caught between the “lack”. Catherine’s psyche is caught between her desire for Heathcliff and the need to fulfill that desire. The Real is excluded from both, the realm of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The will to die is substantial for both Catherine and Heathcliff because they want to achieve the supposed ‘wholeness’ with one another. As they come to know that they can’t be together in the Imaginary, they aim to unite in the Real. Although the “intense longing for the lost primal oneness remains powerful in the novel” (Wion 378), “the novel recognizes that the return to lost symbiotic unity in life is ‘not a realistic possibility’” (Wion 374). Heathcliff, like Catherine, isn’t able to see himself as a subject in the Symbolic Order. When he runs away after being referred to by Catherine as a ‘wild animal’ and returns after years to see her, he is much transformed- “He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man;” (Bronte 79). This transformation of Heathcliff is also an attempt to move to the Symbolic order. But as the narration progresses, we don’t spectacle a significant change in his behavior. That appearance is a façade. He is never able to accept the laws of the Symbolic. After Catherine’s death, Heathcliff comes into the spotlight. He attaches himself to the desire for revenge directed towards, Hindley, Hareton, and Edgar. He even fakes love for Isabel, marries her, and leaves her, yet he cannot achieve satisfaction in his revenge plan. His desire to die is a representation of the search for the Real and uniting with her lost object of desire. So, we have two things- first, he is a subject that cannot get out of the Imaginary state, and second, he is not able to accept the law of the Symbolic state. The only solution left for him is the Real.

From the above analysis, we come to know that Catherine and Heathcliff are never able to evolve as characters because they never come out of the Lacanian Imaginary Stage. When Heathcliff is found dead, there is a grin on his face because he believed that Catherine is waiting for him on the other side and they

will be together again. He even had his grave dug beside Catherine's. At the end of the novel, the gothic scenes imply that Catherine and Heathcliff merge and achieve a kind of jouissance and the Real.

But the country folks, if you ask them, would swear on Bible that he walks there, some speak to having met him near the church, and the moor, and even within this house. Idle tales, you'll say and so say I. Yet the old man on the kitchen fire affirms he has seen two of 'em looking out of his chamber window on every night since his death. (Bronte 265-266)

Although they desire to achieve wholeness, it is impossible to achieve complete wholeness or jouissance. The Real, the lost object of desire is impossible to attain in Lacanian psychoanalysis. There is no symbolization for Lacanian Real. However, in this realm of language, everything is symbolized. As soon as you define it through words, it ceases to be Real. That's why it is said that Real should be stated out of the language and the Symbolic. "Death" is the only phenomenon not existing in the Symbolic order, it is the only thing closest to Real. Yet, because of this un-symbolizable condition of the Real, "death" cannot be a tool to achieve absolute jouissance. So, what is achieved at the end of *Wuthering Heights* is pseudo-Real according to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

So, in *Wuthering Heights* we get to witness all the orders in Lacanian Psychoanalysis- the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The reason I chose this novel was that the characters, although they are fictional, reflect the anxieties, concerns, and desires of real human beings. Through psychoanalysis, we are better able to know what's going on in the minds of the characters and why are they behaving this or that way. We are better able to know about their psyche and judge where they went wrong.

There is no doubt that literature has always been a great teacher. But when we say literature is about the human experience, we are limiting it to the experience of the West. The human experience is not a homogeneous entity. We

cannot equate the conditions of a woman who is fighting for her basic rights in the tribal areas of India to that of a woman who is earning a six-figure salary in London. And that is why we need to read more non-western literature, only then we will be able to provide a concrete definition of literature's imaginative essence. In the same way, *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe is a narrative of a girl that is in her Imaginary throughout the novel. It is only, in the end, she transcends into the Symbolic realm. Now, we have answers to all our questions. Why do we forget while reading fictional characters that they are fictional? Because the characters behave like real human beings. They not only express their desires but also the desires of the readers. Reading literature is fun because it gives identification to our repressed thoughts. Every day there are myriads of thoughts that cross us, some are those of which we think as a conjuring of our mind. But it happens often that we find the same thoughts written in some or the other book. And it gives us a sense of relief to find that someone else is also thinking the thoughts we think. And if you want to decipher those thoughts from literary texts, if you want to find the state of the psyche of a character, then you now have psychoanalytical criticism.

There is no doubt that literature has always been a great teacher. But when we say literature is about the human experience, we are limiting its scope. A critical method that presumes to explain literature as vast as 'human experience' should apply to something equally vast: all of literature. The study of the psyche is important because the psyche may be the worst enemy in that it traps us into patterns of struggling without limit. The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real simplify complex human qualities and separate the fundamental from the secondary. Moreover, the interpretation of the three orders shows how narratives like *Wuthering Heights* end by putting their main characters in different relations to the Symbolic. By such an analysis, we find a contrast in which these relations (to the Symbolic) occur in different texts, and this contrast reflects the

changing circumstances of literary history. Literature, with a critical method that explains human sameness and difference, teaches us what is unsentimentally 'human'. The theory of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real can teach us to understand human desire as clearly as we understand. And when we understand the mechanism of desire, we can perhaps control it.

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### Kumar Sawan

Kumar Sawan is a postgraduate in English from the Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. His work has been published in various journals like the *Contemporary Literary Review*, *India*, *Teesta Review*, and *Rhetorica Quarterly: A Literary Journal of Arts*.