The Contribution of Psychological Theories in Literary Criticism

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Abstract

Dealing with human behavior in almost all aspects of human endeavor, psychological theories have made their contributions into different fields of studies. Literature study is not an exception. Literary criticism, for instance, is conspicuously based on psychological theories. Acquaintance with these theories in the literary criticism is so significant that understanding it will be close to impossible unless one has good grasp of psychological theories. Most of these theories such as humanism by Rogers, Maslow and Erickson, evolutionary psychology by Bolles and Freud’s ideas are of paramount importance in literary criticism. This study aims at introducing the psychological theories used and the contributions in literary criticism.

Key words: psychological theories, literary criticism, humanism, evolutionary criticism.

1. Introduction

In order to understand any genres, it is essentially indispensable to catch up on literary criticism because it is considered as a first step toward developing an understanding of some rather difficult and at times provocative concepts, principles, and methodologies for textual analysis. Of all the critical approaches to literature, the psychological has been one of the most controversial for many readers. Yet, for all the difficulties involved in its proper application to interpretive analysis, the psychological approach can be fascinating and rewarding. In this paper we are going to discuss psychological theories such as humanism by Rogers, Maslow and Erikson, evolutionary psychology by Bolles and Freud ideas applied in literary criticism.

To fully grasp the nature of a piece of literature, you must consider if and how the ideas connect to your own experience-for that is how the meaning of a literary text is derived. This is a process that Rogers calls inter-subjective verification.

For instance, Maslow has a basic concept in human resources called "A Hierarchy of Needs". One of the individual needs that are more significant in understanding a piece of literature is motivation which is considered as a key to understanding the meaning of a text.

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Freud’s ideas are also of key importance in literary criticism. As in "Psychoanalytic Criticism" Freud says that an author's chief motivation for any piece of literature is necessary. He says that it would gratify some secret desires that probably developed during the author's infancy and was immediately suppressed and dumped in the unconscious. The outward manifestation of this suppressed wish becomes the literary work itself.

Another area influenced by the humanistic approach has been "Coaching Psychology" offered by Carl Rogers. It more generally refers to a focus on enhancing individual potential. This is also true in Post-Modernism in literary criticism. It realizes that the meaning develops as the reader interacts within the text itself. Post-Modernists assert that human being's emotions, feelings and intuitions provide us with valid interpretations and guidelines for a piece of literature. This is, in effect, the potential of readers in the process of the literary criticism. They also emphasize that to derive the concepts of a literary text is to consider the death of an author.

There seems to be a high similarity between Rogers and Maslow in their perspectives. Rogers like Maslow is just as interested in describing the healthy person. His term is "Fully Functioning" that involves one quality as "Openness to Experience". It is the accurate perception of one's experience in the world including one's feelings and being able to accept reality. In literature, "New Criticism" stands as one of the most important English-based contributions to literary critical analysis through aesthetic experience. It is the effects provide on an individual that can lead to truth. Rogers and Maslow's term "openness to experience" enrich theoretical and practical criticism and also would help generations of readers to become close readers of texts.

"Organismic Trusting" is another theory introduced by Rogers. He meant that we should trust ourselves, do what feels right, what comes natural. We get that the major striking point in Roger's theory is individual sense and his realization. This is true in postmodernism in literary criticism. It underlines that all definitions and depictions of truth depending on the creations of individual minds and sense. So the meaning of a literary text relies on the individual understanding of the reality existed within the text.

Rogers also in his term "Experiential Freedom" believes that we feel free when choices are available to us. He says that "fully- Functioning" person acknowledges that feeling of freedom and takes responsibility for his choices. In the "Reader-Oriented Criticism" in literature, according to Richards, human beings are basically bundles of desires called "Appetencies". In order to achieve psychic health, one must balance these desires by creating a personally acceptable vision of the world, that is, the responsibility for the reader choices in a text.

One of the qualities in" Full- Functioning" of Rogers is about "Creativity". He says a fully-functioning person, in touch with actualization will full obliged by their nature to contribute to the actualization of others, even life itself. This can be through Creativity in the arts. "Creativity" as Rogers uses it is very close to "Neo-Platonic Philosophical Assumption" to the nature of reading process in literary theory and the definition of literature. This theory empowers readers to examine their personal world views, to articulate their individual assumptions or creativity about the nature of reality, and to create how these assumptions directly affect their interpretation not only of a work of art but also of the definition of literature itself."Deconstruction" theory in literary criticism declares that a text has an almost infinite number of interpretations. Some deconstructionists assert that these interpretations themselves are just the creative ones. Each viewer creates his or her own picture of reality.

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"A Client- centered" is a term introduced by Roger. He believes that the client is the one who should say what is wrong, find ways of improving and determine the conclusion of therapy- his therapy is still very "Client-centered". It is very similar to a specific approach to literary analysis known as "New Criticism". This provides readers with a formula for arriving at the correct interpretation of a text using- for the most part- only the text itself. This approach gives both beginning students of literature and academicians a seemingly objective approach for discovering a text's meaning. So any intelligent reader can uncover a text's hitherto- so called "hidden meaning" within a text. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow describe the purpose of "Humanism" as the development of self- actualization, so
called "The Actualized Tendency", autonomous people. They believe that in humanism, learning is "Student-centered" and personalized. Affective and Cognitive needs are key.

The theories and practice of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) provide the foundation for psychoanalytic criticism in literature. He lays the foundation for a model of how our minds operate. Hidden from the workings of the conscious mind, the unconscious, he believes, plays a large part in how we act, think, and feel. In the interaction of the conscious and unconscious working together, argues Freud, we shape both ourselves and our world. In this method, Freud deals with emotional and psychological disorders. During psychoanalysis, Freud has his client talk freely in a patient-analyst setting about their early childhood experiences and dreams. When we apply these same methods to our interpretations of works of literature, we engage in psychoanalytic criticism.

Sigmund Freudian stages of human development known as Freud's Psychosexual stages or Freud's sexual theory. These concepts by their nature tend attract a lot of attention and criticism- sex, breasts, genitals and bodily functions generally do. Following Freud's theory in the interpretation of a piece of literature, the psychoanalytic critic tends to see all concave images (Ponds, flowers, cups or vases, caves, and hollows) as female or Yonic symbols, and all images whose length exceeds their diameter (towers, mountain, peaks, snakes, knives, lances and swords) as male or phallic symbols, perhaps even more objectionable to some is the interpretation of such activities as dancing, riding, and flying as symbols of sexual pleasure.

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Erikson in his psychological principle believes that his psychological principle is genetically inevitable in shaping human development. It occurs in all people. He also refers to his theory as "Epigenesis" and "Epigenesis principle" which signifies the concept's relevance to evolution (past and future) and genetics. Erikson's theory is so much close to one of the Critical Approaches to literature, "Textual Scholarship and Source Study". Textual Criticism plays an especially important role in studying the genesis and development of a piece of literature. It also assumes that the text before us has come down unchanged from its original form. In it the major question is; "Do we have an Accurate Version of what we are studying"? It means that Textual Criticism has its ideal the establishment of an authentic text, or the text which the author intended. Erikson, like Freud, was largely concerned with how personality and behavior is influenced after birth and especially in shaping human development.

In the "Nature vs. Nurture" (Genes vs. Experience) debate, Erikson was firmly focused on Nurture and Experience. He, in effect, emphasizes on personal awareness of the world and development or the person's external relationship with his environment. His theory is widely and highly considered in "Historical- Biographical Approach" in literary criticism. This approach sees a literary work chiefly as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work. This, actually, is the author's experiences of the world. This theory is also close to "Post- Modernism Approach" in literary criticism in such a way that Post- Modernists believe all definitions and depictions of truth are simply creations of human minds and his self-conscious within the work of art and his self-conscious and the creation of mind are concerned to his experience of the world and his environment.

Bolles's contribution to literary criticism in "Rhetorical Criticism" is clear. It focuses on the strategies, devices, and techniques author use to elicit a particular reaction or interpretation of a text. Bolles also underlines the item, Choices the seer use for gaining a new meaning.

Bolles was a founder of the "Movement" in animal and human being's cognition. He continued that learning and behavior are organized according to functional systems adapted to solving natural problems. Bolles in his article "Citation Classic" wrote: "... The human eyeball is the instrument of choice if you want to observe a new phenomenon and particularly if you want to gain a new understanding of it". In "Formalist Approach to Literature", what we demonstrate in its process of "Formalist Analysis" is a Close- Reading in practice. Intensive reading is very significant in this approach because it begins with sensitivity to the words of the text and all their denotative and
connotative values and implications. It would decode a new meaning by seeing a new code within a text. So it is, in effect, what Robert C. Bolles meant as "to observe a new phenomenon is to gain a new understanding of it".

"Structuralism" in the "Critical Approaches to Literature" has the same concepts that Bolles pointed out. "Structuralism" identifies structures, systems of relationships, which endows signs (e.g. words) or items (e.g. clothes, cars, table manners, rituals) with identities and meanings and show us the ways (functions) in which we think. "Structuralism finds meaning in the relationship among the various components of a system. When applied to literature, this principle becomes revolutionary. They believe that a study of the system of rules that govern literary interpretation becomes the critic's primary task.

Conclusion

Having surveyed the psychological theories and literary criticism, we come to the point that these are interwoven and abundantly clear. Psychological theories said in this paper by the eminent psychologists are very powerful for understanding the literary texts. They also enable us to have a meaningful comprehension of human being's development and the world. The better that people come through the literary texts, the better they will tend to deal with what psychological theories are reflected in a genre of literature.

References


