Psychology and literary criticism: examining critical theories of William Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot

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Abstract

Psychology considers art as the expression of artists’ unconscious self under the influence of Freud, whose Interpretation of Dreams aroused a serious interest in the study and psychology of dreams. For a psychological critic, the poem does not originate from conscious self of the poet, but from the unconscious and, sometimes, from the sub-conscious self. T. S. Eliot’s critical theories indicate that he has ignored the working of psychology upon the minds of the poet as well as of the reader. William Wordsworth’s theory of poetry seems to be more psychological as compared to the theory of T. S. Eliot.

Psychology has its effect upon the criticism to the extent that a new school of criticism, i.e., Psychological Criticism emerged in the twentieth century; although, some critics have found criticism psychological from its very beginning, but systematic psychological studies have emerged only in the twentieth century. For a psychological critic, a poem is the expression of a poet’s unconscious self. The poem does not originate from conscious self of the poet, but from the unconscious and sometimes even from the sub-conscious self. So, in psychological criticism, attempts are made to delve deep into the psyche of the poet in order to find out as to what lies hidden within his subconscious and unconscious; and it is only through such psychological study that the true understanding of the poetry becomes possible. Psychological criticism, thus, is an attempt to find out the basic cause of the production of poetry. Psychological critics make attempts to find out and analyse the basic cause of its production. For them, the subconscious and the conscious selves of the poet are responsible for determining his actions. Whatever impressions the poet receives from time to time during the course of his life, go down to his subconscious, and with the lapse of time, settles down in his unconscious self. In the event of production of poetry, the impressions received by the poet, which rest in his unconscious self, play a dominant role; rather they solely, are responsible for the creation of poetry. These impressions which later on, stage-wise turn into emotions, experiences, and ideas cannot get separated from the personality of the poet and the poet’s personality is merely an expression of all such impressions he receives from time to time. These constitute the personality of the poet. For a psychologist, the study of unconscious mind has the prime importance, because without finding out and understanding what lies hidden deep within the subconscious and unconscious of the poet, it cannot be determined as to which particular impression is responsible for creation and production of poetry. So, in psychological criticism as well as in its other forms, attempts are made to delve deep into the psyche of the poet in order to find as to what impressions are responsible for creation of such emotions in the poet as are expressed in the poetry; and it is only through psycho-analysis of the poet’s personality, the poetry or the poem can better be understood. The poet’s personality cannot be kept away from the poetry; rather, it plays the most significant part in the creation or production of poetry. The psychological critic goes to the extent of studying not only the psychology of the poet, but also the psychology of the reader. Archetypal criticism advocated by Maud Bodkin is also a form of psychological criticism. “Her very conception of archetypes implies that images endowed with such universal significance – images rooted so deep in the human psyche – must have yielded much of their significance to both poet and reader in the past” (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1964, p. 715). The psychology of a poet is not only a study of his subconscious or unconscious mind, it is also a study of the psychology of the society, the country and the world the poet lives in – it is not only the study of the psychology of his present, but also of his past. Thus, psychological criticism seems to be adequate in bringing forth all that lies hidden within the mind of the poet and also to find out as to what is responsible for the creation of poetry. The poet cannot express any such emotion in the form of poetry as he himself has not experienced, and, so, his poetry can be understood only after keeping in mind the factors that have shaped and moulded his personality. The poem certainly is an expression of his unconscious self, because it keeps on guiding and motivating all his actions. So, the critic has to employ psychological methods to judge the merits of the poetry. Carl Jung “has been more directly influential on recent literary criticism than Freud has been” (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1964, p. 716). He has also developed the notion of myth criticism. He assigns myths a great role to play and says that myths and dreams play an important role in the psyche of man. “One aspect of the seriousness, with which he takes the function of myth in our psychic life, is his insistence that one must discriminate very carefully among myths and even among dreams” (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1964, p. 715). He assesses that the unconscious mind is superior to conscious mind. Thus, psychological, myth, and archetypal – all the three forms of criticism – assign primacy to unconscious mind or self.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.


14th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium

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When one goes through T. S. Eliot’s critical theories, one finds that he has totally ignored the working of psychology upon the minds of the poet as well as of the reader.

He does not take poetry to be an expression of personality; for him, it is rather an escape from personality. Critics like Ransom might have defended his views, but his criticism, yet he may be said to have found his theories. For Eliot (1962, p. 300), “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”. Eliot, after refuting Wordsworth’s theory, gives his own views on creation of poetry. He writes, “It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from concentration, of a very great number of experiences. Which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experienced at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation” (p. 300). He discards emotion and writes: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (p. 300). He does not want the poet to express his emotions and personality; rather he wants him to escape from these both. But, at the same time, he wants the poet to possess both emotion and personality and writes: “Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things” (p. 300). He also gives due importance to emotions when he writes, “Business of the poet is not to find new emotion, but to use ordinary ones” (p. 300), and also maintains that “Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality” (p. 299). He also writes, “The poet has not a ‘personality to express’, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experience combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (p. 299). All the above statements seem to be contradictory; and it seems that since his sole aim was to oppose Wordsworth’s theory of poetry, therefore, he did not pay attention to these contradictory statements.

His concept of poetry is found to be against the psychological theory of poetry which gives topmost priority to the study of poet’s psyche and his personality. He declares the emotion of the art as impersonal, whereas, according to psychological theories, no art can be impersonal; since it has been created by a person, his personality will definitely find a place in it and will definitely get reflected in his art. The artist or the poet cannot keep away from his art or poetry. Eliot also says that even the emotions, which the poet “has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him” (p. 300), which also is against the psychological concepts. The experience which the poet has never felt cannot originate from his unconscious, so his theory of poetry weakens.

Even his concept of “objective correlative” does not have any mention of psychology. It may be true that the poet may be able to find an equivalent to his emotion and can express it with the help of an objective correlative, but it may also be said that the images or the correlatives the poet discovers will definitely be determined by his own psychology. Even to understand his use of correlative, psychology will be needed to be applied in order to find out as to why he uses a particular objective correlative, and attempts will be needed to find out as to what are the factors that determined his choice of a particular correlative. For instance, the poet’s choice of objective co-relevant mugs or mugs that are not like his mugs or his society, his hobbies, and so on. So, psychology cannot be totally ignored. When Eliot says that the emotion has “its life in the poem and not in the history of poet” (p. 301), he commits the mistake of ignoring psychology, because the history and psychology of the poet will definitely shape and mould his poetry. He cannot keep outside the domain of his poetry and so, the poetry written by him will definitely be an expression of his personality, and it can better be comprehended only by probing deep into his psyche. All objective correlatives, in the same way, thus, will be determined by the psychology of the poet and these correlatives cannot be comprehended and understood without studying the psychology of the poet and without probing deep into his psyche. So, it is apparent that Eliot has not taken psychology into consideration while propounding his theory of objective correlative, thus, the theory has its loopholes—it is incomplete—and, therefore, deserves a criticism. Eliot should have taken psychology into consideration for a better understanding of objective correlatives and also for a better understanding of poetry itself.

William Wordsworth’s theory of poetry seems to be more psychological as compared to the theory of T. S. Eliot. Wordsworth’s contribution to English literary criticism is also very significant. He not only pioneered Romanticism, but also gave a comprehensive theory of poetry and poetic diction. He also described the process of the creation of poetry. In Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth (1962, p. 180) writes: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity”. He then moves on to describe the process of creation. In his own words: “The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindled to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins”(p. 180). In the light of Wordsworth’s above definition of poetry, it may be said that poetry is the expression of the emotions or the personality of the poet. His emotions form an integral part of his personality and, thus, his theory is more psychological as compared to the theory of T. S. Eliot, who does not find poetry an expression of the poet’s personality.

Wordsworth moves on further and advocates the use of the language of men in the poetry. Wordsworth, in this connection, writes that his purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men”(p. 167). He brings the language of poetry closer to the language of men, which is his great service to Romanticism, which sought to free itself from the bonds and shackles of the so-called artificial language used by the neo-classicists. When Wordsworth says so, he also seems to be a psychoanalyst, for the language also has to do with the psyche or personality of the poet. The language of a poet is certainly determined by the society he lives in; and by the upbringing or the education he receives in his life. So, when Wordsworth talks about the language of the poetry, he knows that the psyche of the poet is important, as it is an integral part of his personality.

Wordsworth also describes the qualities of a poet in Preface to Lyrical Ballads. In this connection, he says that the poet is “a man speaking to men, a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive understanding of the world, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them”(p. 171). Thus, for Wordsworth, the poet is a man speaking to men, who has more sensibility than the common man and also has more enthusiasm and tenderness. The poet possesses greater knowledge of human nature and has a more comprehensive soul; or more comprehensively, the other man’s otherness is not the kind, but the degree of possessing the qualities. He possesses every human quality in greater degree. He has been blessed with the power of expressing himself. In the words of Wordsworth, “Other men are accustomed to feel in themselves: - whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitation” (p. 171). So, his poet is not having common qualities of men. He is superior to them in so far as the degree of the possession of human qualities is concerned. The above description of the qualities of a poet makes it clear that the person—the poet’s personality is very important for creation of poetry. He expresses his emotions and feelings which emerge out of the impressions he receives from time to time in his life. He cannot write without using his emotions; and his personality must get expressed in his poetry. So, Wordsworth’s theory is very psychological, for he does not ignore the poet or the creator of poetry. He knows that, psychologically, the poet must be found in each and every word of his creation or poem.

The poems contained in the Lyrical Ballads are written with a definite purpose, as Wordsworth himself makes it clear that “the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference that each of them has worthy purpose” (p. 165). And, that purpose is to establish romantic poetry as a reaction against the pseudo or neo-classical poetry. The end of the poetry is to give pleasure and to produce excitement. In his own words, “the end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure”, (p. 178). Wordsworth has done great service to English literary criticism; and through his ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, he pioneered Romantic Movement in English Literature. In this very Preface, he deals with every aspect of poetry and so, it a complete essay that lays
down the principles of Romantic Poetry. It is also an example of Romantic as well as Philosophical criticism, which arises out of the necessity of earning a place for romantic poetry in the contemporary literary world. It may also be said that Eliot, knowingly or unknowingly, seems to be opposing subjective poetry and advocating objective poetry, which was the hallmark of the pseudo-classical or neo-classical poetry. In other words, he favours objectivity on the part of the poet and opposes subjectivity altogether. He seems to be emphasizing on the objective approach to writing or creation, for an “objective work is one in which the author presents the invented situation or the fictional characters and their thoughts, feelings, and actions and undertakes to remain detached and noncommittal” (Abrams, 2003, p.197). Eliot, thus, discourages subjective approach to writing in which “the author incorporates personal experiences, or projects into the narrative his or her personal disposition, judgments, values and feelings” (Abrams, 2003, pp. 196-197). He seems to be regressing rather than moving ahead in the Modern age. He, thus, directly or indirectly, seems to be favouring pseudo-classicism or neo-classicism of the eighteenth century.

So, it may be concluded that Romantic poetry is more psychological than the Pseudo-Classical or Neo-Classical poetry. It is closer to psychology as compared to Eliot’s theory of poetry. Rather, it may be said that Wordsworth was a better judge of human nature and psychology, so his theory of subjective poetry is more psychological than the theory of objective poetry, which ignores the poet’s personality altogether and prohibits its entrance into his creation or poetry. An objective author or poet “ maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in work of literature, and as opposed also to an author who uses a literary work to present and to make persuasive his or her personal beliefs” (Abrams, 2003, p. 174). So, subjective poetry is more psychological than the objective poetry and the writer of objective poetry will have to make deliberate attempts to ensure that his personality does not enter his creation. He also has to make sure that his personality does not get expressed anywhere in his creation or poetry. So, psychoanalysis is required in order to find as to which emotions were involved in writing a certain kind of objective poetry. The part played by the psychology of the poet in creation of such an objective poetry also needs to be analysed. It may be, thus, said with certainty the William Wordsworth’s theory of poetry was more psychological than the theory of T.S. Eliot.

References