

**The Application of Psychoanalysis to Literature: Mary Shelley's
*Frankenstein, and Beowulf***

Cyril Connolly describes literature as 'the art of writing something that will be read twice'.¹ Implicit in this statement is the notion that a further reading of a text will offer something more to the reader. The question then remains: what does the text subsequently bequeath? Historically, there has been emphasis on the author as creator of meaning and, as Martin Montgomery et al state, 'in the eighteenth century in particular, literary works were considered to be products of conscious intention'.² The Romantics challenged this assumption, and noted that 'authors are not always fully conscious of the meaning, or implications of their own literary works'.³ This view was advanced in the 1920s, with the advent of psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious mind as holding 'a decisive role in our lives'.⁴

Peter Barry defines psychoanalysis as a 'form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders', where the patient is encouraged to 'talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts [...] are brought into the conscious mind' (p.96). This focus on speech already highlights parallels between psychoanalysis and literature, for it is in talking that people construct narratives about themselves and their lives. A psychoanalyst will interpret a patient's discourse in much the same way that a reader might analyse a text.

Dreams, and their symbolic representation through condensation and displacement, are central to psychoanalytic theory. They are vessels for repressed material, which is forced into the unconscious due to the patient's inability to confront the issues raised. The notion of repression is paramount to Freudian interpretation, for as Josh Cohen states, 'the unconscious idea continues to exist after its repression', and this can cause problems in the patient.⁵ Barry makes the connection that 'dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements', signalling the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary interpretation (p.98).

Freud has been parodied for his foregrounding of sexual motivation in the analysis of his patients. The notions of the Oedipus complex, and phallic symbolism, are ubiquitous in our culture, and although many theorists still foreground repressed desires in their readings of texts, I am largely going to avoid this area. I feel that Freud's ideas have a lot more to offer literature than glib interpretations of perversion and incest, and

¹ Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Routledge, 1938), p.19.

² Martin Montgomery and others, *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.172.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.96.

⁵ Josh Cohen, *How to Read Freud* (London: Granta, 2005), p.30.

whilst sexuality invariably appears in many works, it is unrealistic to attempt an entire analysis on this basis.

Indeed, psychoanalysis has many detractors. Feminists, in particular, are critical of the discipline for being ‘deeply masculinist in bias’, and psychoanalysis has also been accused of overlooking issues of race and sexual orientation.⁶ However, I wish to discuss the ways in which psychoanalysis is a useful and constructive approach to literature so shall not dwell on opposition. I intend to assess the benefits of Freud’s ideas through psychoanalytic readings of *Beowulf*⁷ and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*⁸, for as Cohen notes, ‘psychoanalysis [...] is a way of reading everything’ (p.8).

Both texts deal with ‘monsters’ for their respective heroes to face, and it is the relationship between these monsters and the protagonists that I shall explore. A key factor in this analysis is whether to view these monsters as ‘real’ or symbolic, as this changes their function. If the texts are taken literally then one must analyse the drives that Frankenstein follows in his desire to create his monster, or alternatively the monster himself could be psychoanalysed. In *Beowulf* the consideration is whether Beowulf is fighting physical beings, or facets of his own psyche.

My feeling is that reading the monsters symbolically offers a richer ground for interpreting what the monsters represent for the characters. Paul Sherwin’s literal translation of Frankenstein’s monster asserts that ‘the Creature is alternatively or simultaneously the accusatory phallic father, the rephallicised mother and [...] the castrated self’.⁹ This is a typically Freudian reading, with emphasis on the sexual, but it is not the most useful or original explanation. Freud’s Oedipus complex is a redundant line of enquiry – if it is something we all suffer from, there is little point in discovering it in a text. It provides nothing new or illuminating, merely tenuous ‘proof’ that such a complex exists.

Reading the monster as a reflection of Frankenstein’s mental state is a more fruitful line of enquiry. Frankenstein states that in his early life his ‘dreams were [...] undisturbed by reality’ (p.22) – a tradition that ended when ‘the first misfortune of [his] life occurred’ (p.24). It is at this point, when his mother dies, that Frankenstein’s mind ‘changed its bright visions of extensive usefulness into gloomy and narrow reflections upon self’ (p.21). This bears a striking resemblance to the primary symptom of depression, in which, as Constance Hammen asserts, ‘mood is [...] dominated by profound inward dejection and gloomy hopelessness’.¹⁰ This hopelessness is expressed throughout the text, with Frankenstein frequently referring to himself as ‘so miserable a wretch’ (p.147), or reflecting that ‘it was during sleep alone that I could taste joy’ (p.142).

⁶ Barry, p.97.

⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by J Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1996).

⁹ Paul Sherwin, ‘Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe’, *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 883-903 (p.883)

¹⁰ Constance Hammen, *Depression* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1997), p.2.

Psychoanalysis is one of many therapies used in the treatment and diagnosis of depressives. The diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode, as devised by the American Psychiatric Association (1994), highlights nine main symptoms, of which five or more must be suffered from in order to consider the patient to be depressed.¹¹ Treating Frankenstein as my patient, I shall assess his mental state with reference to these criteria, as a psychoanalyst would.

Depressed mood most of the day. Frankenstein's discourse provides ample evidence of this. 'My life,' he says, 'was indeed hateful to me' (p.142), and his friend Clerval picks up on this fact, asking "are you always to be unhappy?" (p.46). 'I was destined to become the most wretched of human beings', portends Frankenstein, and Walton confirms that 'he is often overcome by gloom' (p.16).

Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities. Frankenstein observes that 'winter, spring, and summer, passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or expanding leaves – sights which before always yielded me supreme delight' (p.33). He reflects, 'the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent' (p.33).

Significant weight loss [...] or weight gain. 'My person had become emaciated' (p.32), recalls Frankenstein, and Clerval is shocked by how "thin and pale" (p.36) he has become. By the end of his life, Frankenstein is so diminished that Walton confesses he 'never saw a man in so wretched a condition' (p.14).

Insomnia or hypersomnia. During the 'creation' of his monster, Frankenstein tells Walton, 'I had deprived myself of rest and health' (p.34), but once his monster is 'complete', this shifts into a love of sleep: 'I persuaded myself that I was dreaming until night should come' (p.142), he says.

Feelings of worthlessness or excessive inappropriate guilt. Frankenstein frequently claims responsibility for the murders of 'William, Justine, and Henry – they all died by my hands' (p.128), and considers himself 'the author of unalterable evils' (p.60).

Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness. Frankenstein undergoes several periods of dementia during which he cannot function and must be taken care of by Clerval, his father, or Walton – who remarks that he 'often feared that [Frankenstein's] sufferings had deprived him of understanding' (p.14).

Recurrent thoughts of death. 'Could I behold this, and live?' Frankenstein asks himself; 'life is obstinate, and clings closest where it is most hated' (p.136). This desire for death is expressed frequently, and if Frankenstein is not contemplating his own death, being 'tempted to plunge into the silent lake' (p.60), he is ruminating on how best to achieve the monster's. But I would argue that the monster does not 'exist' other than as a projection of Frankenstein's mental illness, thus he cannot kill the monster without destroying himself. It is Frankenstein, after all, who describes the monster as 'my own spirit let loose from the grave' (p.49).

¹¹ Quoted in Hammen, p.10.

There is clearly a relationship between Frankenstein's deteriorating mental condition and the emancipation of his monster, but did Frankenstein create the monster, or the monster create Frankenstein? This unanswerable question parallels the key problem of attempting to cure depression, for its self-perpetuating nature, as Hammen agrees causes 'negative thoughts', which in return 'make people more depressed' (p.5).

I prefer to read the monster as a personification of Frankenstein's illness rather than a physical being. He is described as large and powerful, a horrific jigsaw of incoherent parts who is shunned, repressed, attacked and isolated. "All men hate the wretched" (p.65), reflects the monster; "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (p.66). Reading the text this way draws the reader's attention to the way the Other is treated in themselves. The monster is spurned for its lack of beauty, becoming a canvas for the projection of the aspects of the reader that cannot be addressed. Anthony Elliott argues that 'our deepest unconscious feelings and passions are always expressed [...] through other people',¹² and, to use Freud's own words, "there is always a return of the repressed".¹³

The monsters of *Beowulf* represent more general societal anathemas that any individual could become: the hideous male, the hideous female, and the selfish creature who does not share their wealth. In fighting the monsters, Beowulf must fight his own monstrous potentiality, and Jeffrey Helterman agrees that 'we must ponder the question, "to what extent is Beowulf Grendel?"'.¹⁴ If Grendel is a perversion of the male, then Beowulf must confront his own masculinity in order to triumph. Unferth's doubt of Beowulf's abilities mirrors the reader's scepticism and taps into the hero's inner fears; "this time you'll be worsted" (527), Unferth warns, and Beowulf's defensive, arrogant retort indicates that the seed of self-doubt has been sown. Grendel also has parallels with Frankenstein's monster, for both are the exiled, loathed creatures, horrific in their Otherness.

The battle with Grendel's mother must be fought alone. Beowulf will not face her without armour as he did with Grendel, indicating that the feminine represents something more dangerous from which the hero needs greater protection. Martin Puhvel highlights a dichotomy between this threat and the fact that 'the notion of female physical inferiority is [...] unmistakably woven into the fabric of the poem', which signals that it is the feminine energy which poses danger rather than the literal female.¹⁵ Beowulf must confront Grendel's mother in his most masculine state, and it is only 'the mesh of chain mail' (1547) that 'shielded his life' (1548) from her 'savage talons' (1504). His weapon could not defeat her and 'melted as ice melts' (1608); there are obvious sexual overtones to the descriptions in this passage, and the phallic shape of a sword. The hero must come to terms with the inadequacy of his own masculinity and use a weapon that can only be

¹² Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.92.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, quoted in Barry, p.100.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Helterman, 'Beowulf: The Archetype Enters History', *ELH*, 35 (1968,) 1-20 (p.3).

¹⁵ Martin Puhvel, 'The Might of Grendel's Mother', *Folklore*, 80 (1969), 81-88 (p.82).

obtained by travelling to the depths of his enemy's female realm. Grendel's mother symbolises the unattainable woman, the self-sufficient female who lies with no man and has her own domain. She cannot be conquered sexually and thus must be extinguished, contentment coming only when 'the sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated' (1569).

In the dragon, Beowulf must face another archetype – that of death. He tells his men to "remain here on the barrow" (2561) and goes into battle alone. Beowulf has sensed his end coming near, and recognises the need to meet his mortality directly. Death is the alien force of the unknown, which must be confronted, alongside the dragon, as something forever nebulously present but never manifest until the final moment. Heroic satisfaction comes with the downfall of the enemy, but the ultimate passage from life can only come with the destruction of the heroic identity and a reversion to the vulnerable, birth-like state.

The monsters are a symbolic representation of the archetypes everyone must face in what Helterman calls 'a projection of a battle of the inner self' (p.9). Each reader has an inner Grendel, Grendel's mother and dragon, and their reading of the text illuminates these internal conflicts, for as Marshall W. Alcorn and Mark Bracher observe, 'reading literature can influence if not actually mold [sic] the structure of the reader's self'.¹⁶

This is the most interesting element of psychoanalytic criticism, for it could be argued that there is no greater act of projection than in interpreting a text. The reader's repressed and unconscious feelings can be expressed in a 'safe' way by attributing them to characters. In this sense, the interpretation can be psychoanalysed in turn, to show as much about the reader as about the text. Peter Brooks agrees that in the process of analysis, 'parts of the story [...] seem to belong to the interpreter rather than the person whose story it is, or was'.¹⁷ Psychoanalysis is useful in literature only as far as it is useful to ourselves – and the same goes for any other critical perspective. 'Why one interpretive path should be preferred to another may be impossible to determine', says Sherwin (p.891). I would disagree only in that it is fully possible to determine – it should be preferred when the interpreter prefers it. If, as Wolfgang Iser says, 'in a literary text we can only picture things which are not there', it stands to reason that each reader will picture something different.¹⁸ Therefore all critical perspectives are useful and constructive, whether one agrees with them or not – a fresh point of view is always informative and illuminating. Psychoanalysis particularly lends itself to this as it erodes the notion of authorial intention, for the subconscious speaks through the conscious

¹⁶ Marshall W. Alcorn and Mark Bracher, 'Literature, Psychoanalysis and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction for Reader Response Theory', *PMLA*, 100 (1985), 342-354 (p.342).

¹⁷ Peter Brooks, 'The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism', *Critical Enquiry*, 13 (1987) 334-348 (p.346).

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

without the writer being aware of it. It is also possible to move away from the notion of the author towards a focus on the reader's desires.

There is no monopoly of meaning and no last word: the text, as with all things, means whatever the individual makes it mean. Those texts which have enjoyed such longevity as *Beowulf* and *Frankenstein* prove that the success of a text is in its multiplicity of readings and the freedom to return to a text from a psychoanalyst's perspective, a feminist point of view, or a combination of the two, and garner very different, but equally valid, interpretations of the same material.

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