

DISCERNING FREUDIAN METAPHORS IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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Abstract: *Psychoanalysis is the theory about structure of human mind and its functioning. This theory gained enormous recognition in 1920s. Psychoanalytic literary criticism has its roots in Romanticism. The Romantic view in literature claims that the author's persona is exhibited in the work of art. Psychoanalytic criticism helps in investigating author's intensions, hopes, fears, motives, prejudices etc. It also reveals the functioning of mind and its relation with the conscious and the unconscious.*

Discerning Freudian Metaphors in Robert Frost's Poetry

Sigmund Freud, who is considered as the father of psychoanalysis, explored the human mind more comprehensively than any other who came before him. Freud is one of the most influential people of the twentieth century whose enduring legacy has influenced not only psychology but also art and literature. Freudian theory of psychoanalysis has been the major contribution in the fields of literary theory and criticism. He is of the view that people are always motivated by fears, motives, desires and conflicts which are present in the unconscious part of mind. These desires remain repressed in the unconscious part of the mind. According to Freud people are unconsciously guided by the unconscious. This unconscious is primarily responsible for our overt behavior and emotions. Without being aware of the unconscious, we are always under the strong influence of it. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Robert Frost's poems in context with Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Robert Lee Frost, an American poet is known for his realistic depictions of rural life. His poems are often complex, due to the use of complex images and visual imageries. His poems are preoccupied with the philosophical themes and nature imageries. The aim of this paper is to explore or find the Freudian psychoanalytic metaphors in Robert Frost's poetry.

Sigmund Freud is of the view that language conceals, reveals or modifies hidden desires, anxieties and fears. He believes that desires never express themselves overtly because culture do not allow or facilitate them. Therefore, we need to pay attention to language or creative writings, to discover those desires and anxieties, which are embedded in the unconscious part of the writer's mind.

Freud explored the link between the language and the unconscious. It helps us to analyze poet's hidden desires, wishes and repressive thoughts which usually finds its outlet in the form of a beautiful work of art or dream. The work of art allows the manifestation of the 'unconscious'. The 'unconscious' acquires the language of its own and it cannot be unraveled completely. We can only have a partial access to the unconscious through dreams and through creative writings. Freud in his theory of psychoanalysis also gives the concept of defenses by which we keep our unconscious in check. These defenses are: 'transference' and 'projection'. There is yet another defense in Freudian psychoanalysis which is 'regression'. Regression is a therapeutic tool in which one relives the past experience and is cured by reliving it, once again. This urge for regression is visible in Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken", where the speaker wants to relive the moment, when he had made the choice of travelling on a particular road. The speaker by reliving the moment wants to make another choice. He wants to take the other road for travelling. This urge for regression is primarily because he wants to know what would have happened, if he would have chosen another road, instead of the one he chose. Further transference is the unconscious redirection of the feelings and desires from one object to another. This is usually the reproduction of repressed experiences. The repressed memory is transferred to a new object. The concept of transference is visible in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" where the poet transfers all his unconscious desires, to the symbol of "woods" in the poem. It seems as if the ultimate pleasure can be sought in the "woods". Here, "woods" stands for the object with which the repressed memories are associated. Another conscious defense of Freud is psychological 'Projection'. According to Sigmund Freud, human beings define themselves against irrational and unpleasant impulses and attribute them to others. The person who carries the impulses constantly denies of carrying it and instead projects them to others. This is seen in Frost's "Mending Wall", where the speaker constantly blames his neighbor for fencing the orchards and dividing them by building the wall.

The speaker says that there is no need of the wall to be set against their orchards, but he himself arranges for mending that wall in every Spring Season. Speaker blames his neighbor for blindly following the traditional notion that "good fences makes good neighbors". In his projection, of blaming his neighbor as an orthodox lies his own desire to remain attached to his traditions. He attributes his own negative impulse of being an orthodox to his neighbor.

Frost's poems are usually preoccupied by the nature imageries which stand for the metaphors of human desires. Frost gives free vent to his imagination while depicting the nature. His unconscious desires are manifested in the form of creative writing. In his poems we often encounter his struggle between the conscious and the unconscious. In his poem "Mending Wall" we see that there is something mysterious about the wall. The "wall" always fell down, no matter how much the two neighbors struggle to fix it up.

Considering Freudian theory of psychoanalysis we see that "wall" stands for the symbol of societal norms, which are usually responsible for the repression of our conscious desires. Freud believes that all unconscious desires are guided by the sexual drives, which he termed as "Libido". These desires are often very powerful and it finds its way out, in some way or the other. The overpowering desires of the unconscious leads to the fall of the wall which is rebuilt by the conscious part of the mind in every Spring Season. Frost asserts that there is no need of the wall as "He is all pine and I am apple orchard" (Frost 24), but our conscious mind builds up the wall again and again in every Spring Season. According to Freud human mind always suppress the unconscious as it is socially unacceptable. It is evident in the poem that although the "wall" is not necessary, but because of the conscious notion that "good fences makes good neighbors", the two neighbors are bound to build the wall.

Again Spring Season is the season of hope, desires and vitality. Hence, the overpowering unconscious desires that become overly intense in the Spring Season are shunned down by the conscious mind. Mending of the wall symbolizes conscious effort on the part of the speaker to repress those unconscious desires. Poet also says that nobody wants to act in a way, which is socially unacceptable. Hence, “the stone grasped firmly” by the speaker in the poem “Mending Wall” signifies that people want to remain clinched with their traditions. According to the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis conscious part of the mind repress the unconscious as it is socially unacceptable. Also unconscious constitutes those desires which people are generally ashamed of expressing. Therefore, a person’s conscious self does not allow them to be expressed overtly. Hence, “wall” acts as a repressing force against the unconscious part of the mind.

According to classical Freudian theory, unconscious generally consists of the sex drive in an individual. Freud uncovers the “subject” of the author. It reveals the unconscious desires hidden beneath the images, codes and language of his works. Freud seems to ask questions on the author’s attempt to conceal his desires and drives. Also, it questions the cultural code that forces him to do so.

Freudian structure of human psyche is made up of three components: the Ego, Superego and the Id. Ego is the conscious mind with which we work. This part is used very frequently and of which we are most aware of. It mediates between the superego and the Id. It is the source of our decision making and rational thoughts. Ego governs our psyche rationally. With regard to the

Ego and Id Freud points out, “In popular language, we may say that the ego stands for reason and circumspection, while the id stands for the untamed passions.”(Freud). The ego is governed by the reality principle. Consequently, the ego serves as the intermediary between the world within and the world without.

The Superego is regarded as the conscience of an individual. The superego is the representative of all societal prohibitions. It is dominated by the morality principle. Superego is drawn from societal norms and cultural codes.

The Id is irrational and is the source of all desires. It is regarded as the pleasure principle and has dangerous potentialities. Id is the area of instincts, dreams and all that do not come to the fore in our consciousness. This is the unconscious. Hence, ego maintains the balance between the two opposing forces.

Freudian psychological journey is visible in the poem “Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening” where the character “I”, influenced by the “Id” principle finds solace amidst the charming “woods”. His overwhelming emotions plunges him to seek pleasures amidst the woods but his moral obligations reminds him of his obligations, which he is supposed to fulfill before his eternal sleep. In the struggle between the “Id” and “Superego”, it is the “Ego” which balances the two opposing forces. The character ‘I’ in the poem after seeking a short time pleasure heads forward to fulfill his obligations. Freud is of the view that forbidden desires, if expressed can lead to guilt. Thus, our conscious plays an important role in shunning those desires from surfacing, thereby forcing it to the area of unconscious from where the retrieval is least possible. This process is termed as “Repression” by Freud. According to him “Repression” is hiding away of something in our minds. Hidden content finds its way into the unconscious. Guilt inducing desires and traumatic events are relegated into the unconscious which emerge only at particular moments, usually in the form of a dream or a beautiful work of art. However, what is repressed does not stay repressed forever. The unconscious emerges at particular moments, in the form of images, dreams, Freudian slips or parapraxes (jokes) and art. “Woods” stands for the Freudian metaphor of unconscious in the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. Here, one can see how Frost after viewing the woods becomes aware of his desires. Therefore, he stops by the woods and admires it. “He will not see me stopping here, to watch his woods fills up with snow”. Here, the speaker is not noticed by anyone, which symbolizes that there are no external or societal restraints. The speaker does not have to repress his desires as nobody is watching him. The speaker can give free vent to his desires. He can derive pleasure from the mesmerizing effects of the beauty of the woods. This is where the pleasure principle i.e. “Id” surfaces and comes into play and his unconscious is eventually revealed. After a short admiration of the beauty of the woods, the speaker becomes conscious of the “Reality principle” which Freud termed as “Superego”. The speaker says that although the woods are tempting but he has responsibilities which needed to be fulfilled before his death. Hence, “woods” here primarily stands for the “unconscious”, and “promises” stands for the “conscious” part of the mind. The work of “ego” is to maintain a balance between the two. The “ego” accepts and realizes that the pleasures cannot be fulfilled in the way we want them to. Thus, after experiencing a short time pleasure in the woods, the speaker moves forward to fulfill his moral obligations.

According to Freud “Id” constitutes sex drive, which Freud termed it as “Libido”. Hence, Frost’s image of “woods” acts as a “libido” which is an “unconscious” sexual desire of the speaker in the poem. The “woods” tempts the poet, but the conscious self of the poet tries to shun the tempting effects of the woods. This struggle is vividly portrayed in these lines: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep.” (13-16).

The Freudian metaphors can be decoded in Frost’s yet another poem “Mending Wall”. In “Mending Wall”, the speaker’s unconscious desire or “Id” does not want the wall to be built as “wall” also stands for the symbol of external power or force that subdues our unconscious desires. The “superego”, on the other hand wants the wall to be built. Superego works on the all pervasive societal notion that “good fences makes good neighbors”. This struggle between the “Id” and the “superego” is visible in the poem, where under the influence of “Id”, the wall falls down but the “Reality principle” or “Superego” builds it again. The “ego” finds a way out to establish a compromise between the two contradictory forces.

The Freudian Psychoanalysis can also be applied to “the creative work of art”. The interpretation of symbols in a creative work of art is referred to as “Vulgar Freudianism”. Psychoanalytic criticism treats literary texts synonymous to dreams. Freudian theory of Psychoanalysis says that art and dreams are both means of expressing desires. Art and dreams are mechanisms of avoiding the censorship that prohibits desires or its exhibition. This view is exhibited in Freud’s *The Interpretation Of Dreams*. Art and dreams bypass consciousness when they express the repressed. Dreams too reveal the unconscious like literature. “The purpose of a work of art, like the purpose of the dreams, is the secret gratification of a forbidden infantile wish” (Nagarajan 217). Freud says that “dream” and “art” are expression of desires and fantasies. The desires which are considered as taboo in real life, finds its expression in the form of art and dreams. Freudian theory describes “art” as the royal road to the unconscious. ‘Art’ has multiple layers of meanings. One can gain access to those meanings through psychoanalytic criticism. The writer finds a measure of fulfillment when he expresses the desires in the form of art. Freud says that “Art” consists of several codes beneath which lies the indirect expression of desires. These codes present themselves in the form of the complex images. Art is a distorted expression of desire which needs to be decoded by the analyst in order to understand the “unconscious” of the writer. Art has the language, which is the language of the “unconscious”. The work of the psychoanalytic critic is to explore the latent content of the metaphors employed in the language. “Art” gives the view of the “unconscious” in the indirect form. The language of “Art”, therefore, has two contents: the “Latent content” and the “Manifest content”. The Latent content is the actual content of the unconscious that need to be expressed in the form of symbols. The Manifest content are those symbols and images by which the Latent content seeks expression. The Latent content of the poem or any piece of art is generally concealed beneath the complex structures and

codes. In any work of art, these complex structures and codes can be decoded through analysis of the Manifest content. Freud argued that latent content before it expresses itself in the form of Manifest content in any piece of art undergoes four stages namely, Condensation; Displacement; Representation and Secondary revision. In the process of condensation, the Latent content is condensed in the Manifest content. This condensation is visible in the poem "Mending Wall", where, the symbol of "wall" stands for all the societal inhibitions and external forces. The wall seems to be set against the unconscious desires. The "Spring Season" stands for all the earthly desires or Freudian "Libido". Hence, "Spring Season" is the manifest content in the poem and "Libido" is the latent content. According to Freud the Manifest content needs to be unraveled to have the complete understanding of the Latent content. Similarly, in the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the symbol of "Woods" stands for the Freudian "Libido" which is so tempting and mesmerizing that it leads the poet into the state of oblivion. He forgets everything for a time being. Being under the influence of the "Id" or pleasure principle, the poet forgets all his obligations. The two roads manifested in the poem "The Road not Taken", stands for the pleasure principle and the reality principle i.e. the "Id" and "Superego". Poet's urge to travel on the other road is his unconscious urge to choose the path which is forbidden by the society. In "Displacement", the "Latent content" is associated with the "complex images" or 'codes'. Freud gives a great deal of importance to the concept of "displacement". In Frost's poem "Mending Wall", we see the displaced image of the Latent content, where Frost portrays the image of a Person "Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage mind". This image of a person with a stone in his hand refers to the displaced identity of the people of the "Stone Age" who remained ignorant since the primordial times. They prefer to stick with their own culture and tradition. Similarly, in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the image of horse could be the symbol of the knight who in ancient times used to embark upon a journey with a particular aim. "He give his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake". The horse here stands for the displaced image of the knight's horse. In ancient times knights used to take journey on their horses. They were very determined about their aims and obligations. They never took rest until their aims are achieved. Hence the bell shake by the speaker's horse reminds him of his aim with which he started his journey. The sound of the bells may stand for the displaced identity of the speaker's own conscience which reminds him to fulfill his duties. Again, in the poem "The Road not Taken", the two roads stand for the speaker's "road to life". The speaker stands where the two roads diverge and tries to peer into his future when he says that "...Long I stood / And looked down one as far as I could".

Hence, the two roads stand for the displaced image of his "road of life". Freud says that sometimes the Latent content takes recourse to an obscure language or image in a piece of art. That image seems to be irrational and incongruous. The language of the poem or any other piece of art often uses complex images that have no apparent basis in reality. No apparent meaning can be traced from the highly complex language structure. The connection between the idea and its meaning appears to be ambiguous. Many of these obscure images may be unconsciously related to the cultural or mythological texts, of which the writer may not be even aware of. Like, the symbol of "Wall" in Frost's poem "Mending Wall" may be the representation of "phallic symbol" or the external pressure or force. Even though there is no logical connection between the "wall" and "phalliccentricism", but the language establishes a connection between the two. In the same way the symbol of the "two roads" may represent the "two choices", where the poet is bound to choose one. The "two choices" has been portrayed by the poet unconsciously in the form of "two roads". The conscious mind of the artist tries to ignore or forget the unconscious element of the mind as it is unacceptable. The conscious mind organizes the elements of the unconscious into recognizable and acceptable themes or images, and ignores the rest. By this secondary revision, the writer portrays their thoughts into acceptable patterns, so that it is identified and accepted by the society. In the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the "Woods" stands for the complex symbol of Freudian "Libido". This direct portrayal of the unconscious may offend the conscious of the people. Therefore, the acceptable image of "woods" is portrayed by the poet so as to avoid any repulsion from the society.

Sigmund Freud gave another concept of "Screen Memory". Retrogressive screen memories are produced when a contemporary thought is repressed but, which finds associative contact with an earlier memory. Screen memory does not refer to the actual incidents which becomes the part of the memory but is mainly concerned with how events appear to be at the later stage of life. Screen memories take the form of scenes which involves visual representation. Like in the poem "The Road not Taken", the visual representation of the "two roads", acts as a "screen memory" for the inaccessible original memory. Screening process modifies the actual content of the memory in many aspects. Memories are never original or natural, but are always formed as an after effect of thoughts. Freud says that Memories are never transparent but layered and coded. Freud believes in the indelibility of the memory and argues that the original memory is always inaccessible. Therefore, the "screen memory" acts as the "screen" for the inaccessible original memory. Freudian concept of "screen memory" can also be traced in Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall". The poem gives the account of the screen memories formed by the poet during his childhood days. The visual representation of the rebuilding of "wall" acts as the screen memory to the inaccessible memory. This "screen memory" of rebuilding the wall may correspond to his desire of mending for some mistake of his childhood. Similarly, the portrayal of the "woods" in his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", also acts as a "screen memory" to the inaccessible memory of Frost, which may stand for the unfulfilled desires. Yet, another concept given by Freud is the notion of "Fantasy". In a psychological sense "Fantasy" is used, to cover the two different senses, "conscious" and the "unconscious". In the unconscious sense the "fantasy" is spelled as "phantasy". According to Freud, a "Fantasy" is a situation, imagined by an individual which expresses certain desires. The basic idea of "phantasy" is something which is not "real", but exists as an "imagined situation" of the object to the subject. These desires can also take the form of the aims by the creator of phantasy. A person who has a high percentage of intrinsic motivation strives hard in turning his wishful phantasy into reality. The artist transforms his phantasies into artistic creations. Similarly literary writing also imparts freedom to the writer to portray his fantasy into artistic creations. Freud considers that these phantasies include a great deal of true constitutional essence of the subject's disposition. In Frost's poem "The Road not Taken", the speaker phantasized about his course of life, if he would have travelled on the other road. The urge of the unconscious mind to travel on the other road is explicit in the poem. Similarly, in the poem "Mending Wall", the speaker phantasize of the society free from orthodox beliefs.

Sigmund Freud, in "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" explains the sources of inspiration and the imagination, which the creative writer uses in creating his work. A kid playing in his own imaginary world is compared by Freud to the creative writer creating his own fictional world. The creative writer has the ability to extract those feelings and tensions from the reader, which otherwise lay repressed in the unconscious part of the mind. The writer, by sharing his own phantasies compels the reader to come to a belief that, he is not the only one carrying those feelings. The creative writer is able to liberate himself from his deep phantasies and wishes, by the portrayal of the art form. The artistic creation is such that it does not provoke any repulsion in the minds of the reader. Freud says that every creative writer creates his own world. He rearranges the things of his world in a new way, which pleases him. Creative writers go through a great deal of painstaking effort while portraying their ideas into words. In doing so, they generally land up into the state of oblivion, where they become entirely oblivious of the reality. They are only aware of the beautiful world which they create while creating a beautiful work of art. Freud says that

while creating a work of art, the writer loses his ability to differentiate between fiction and reality. This is what happens to Frost when he portrays the charming “woods” in his poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. Frost while creating this piece of art became extremely mesmerized and enchanted by the beauty of the “woods”. Frost as a creative writer imagines himself into the woods and derives the same aesthetic pleasure as the speaker of the poem. Hence, while creating a work of art, the creative writer loses his ability to differentiate between fiction and reality and finds the fulfillment of his desires in the portrayal of the artistic creation. Freud believes that things which impart pleasure in a work of art, does not necessarily gives the same pleasure in reality. Therefore, some of the things should dwell within the circumference of literature so as to impart pleasure to the spectator or reader. Readers seek aesthetic pleasure in the art forms because they are the source of entertainment that liberates their mind, without letting them actually participate in the real event. In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming”, Freud suggests that, creative writers “...creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously-that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion- while separating it sharply from reality”(Freud).

The human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up the pleasure which he had once experienced. Human mind do not give up anything, instead it only exchange one thing for another. The renunciation of one thing is actually the substitution for the other. Hence, the desires which cannot be fulfilled in reality are fulfilled by the creative writers in their work of art. Frost by talking of the “Elves” in his poem “Mending Wall” finds a fulfillment of his desires to be amidst the supernatural and mystic creatures, which does not exist in reality. In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming”, Freud exclaims, that creative writing is also the substitute for the fantasy. The writer acquires a sense of fulfillment by giving his phantasy, a form of artistic creation. Frost in his portrayal of “Woods”, in the poem “Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening”, actually experiences the charming serenity of the woods. He experiences a sense of fulfillment of his desire while structuring his phantasy into words.

Hence, the “hermeneutic of suspicion”, has been presented rightfully in this paper. “Hermeneutic of suspicion” refers to the act of probing into the “unconscious” of the text. In order to reveal the “dream work” by the writer, the psychoanalytic critics probe into subtext of the text to decode the complex language. The psychoanalysis of Robert Frost’s poetry is seemingly justified in this paper. By applying the Freudian metaphors of psychoanalytical criticism to Robert Frost’s poetry, the author’s unconscious, his motives and desires are revealed.

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