

# Getting into character: On psychoanalysis and literature in the classroom

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**Abstract** This article reflects on literary criticism's longstanding disciplinary aversion to psychoanalytic character study, using personal experience to rethink the value of this method in the undergraduate classroom.

**Keywords** psychoanalysis · literature · literary criticism · teaching · character

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a literature student in possession of a rudimentary understanding of the Oedipus complex is to be considered a very dangerous entity indeed. Equipped with the most transportable and therefore most desiccated versions of psychoanalytic theory, these students often reduce great works of literature—replete with ambivalence, contradiction, conflict, and transformative world-making—to a single, preset psychological pathology. “Hamlet cannot resolve his Oedipus complex!” “The governess is a hysteric and the ghosts are her projections!” “The knife represents a penis!” Every year, the terms return the same: Oedipus, Electra, incest, penis-envy, repression. Paranoid-schizoid, projection, delusion, transitional object. And, of course, penises, penises: everywhere. For these students, psychoanalysis is deployed as a kind of clean-cut characterological typology; it becomes the subject-knower while the unwitting work of fiction is reduced to the position of object-unknown. As Shoshana Felman (1982) puts it in her early critique of this tendency, literature is subordinated to the will and authority of psychoanalytic theory: “literature's function, like that of the slave, is to *serve* precisely the *desire* of psychoanalytical theory—its desire for recognition” (p. 6). A tautological equation is thus established. Apply, confirm, repeat. Even for

those students who manage not to pathologize their chosen text or character—that is, for those who are less inclined to hierarchize the great variety of psychic life through normative diagnostic rubrics—literature is still typically approached as through it provides direct, unmediated access to “real people.” When psychoanalysis enters the literature classroom, the fear is that questions of form and representation go out the window.

This, at least, represents the customary anxiety of the literature professor who endeavors to teach psychoanalytic theory alongside fiction. The sense that there is something uneasy, hazardous even, in the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature has been a hallmark of professional literary criticism for many decades. Whereas literary critics define the contributions of their craft through attention to matters of form, narrative, and language—typically giving literature credit for cultivating ontologies and epistemologies more complex than those afforded by the so-called real world—psychoanalysis’s most distinctive contribution comes at the level of its nuanced theorization of personal subjectivity. Both fields are, in their best iterations, concerned with elaborating particularity and challenging common-sense truths; both implicitly diagram the triangulation of language, representation, and subjectivity. Yet, too often there is a ritual of sacrificing one in the service of the other when they are brought together. Either psychoanalysis ascends and literature becomes a vehicle to illustrate and substantiate its prescribed truth, or else literature rules and psychoanalysis becomes yet another fiction among fictions.

Tracing the origins of this tension would be a vast project in and of itself. But it is worth noting that at least one thread of this story runs back to professional literary criticism’s longstanding disciplinary hostility to treating character (rather than form) as its appropriate “good object.” In a recent essay, Toril Moi (2020) charts the disciplinary history of what she describes as the “taboo” of treating characters as though they are real people. Going back to the interwar origins of English literature as a distinct field of study, Moi describes how early literary critics like L. C. Knights established the legitimacy of their emergent profession by deliberately privileging form over character. Buoyed by the modernist groundswell in the first half of the twentieth century, Knights and company argued that the study of character was the mere pastime of dilettantes and amateurs while the interrogation of form and pattern was the esteemed pursuit of true professionals. The formalist literary critic, purged of all his soft-minded feminine interest in humanism and character, thus emerged as literature’s authoritative professional par excellence. In this way, form became the byword for an entire profession.

In the decades since this founding gesture, professional literary criticism has grown far more capacious than the formalism Knights sanctioned. Indeed, new historicism has arguably been the field’s dominant *modus operandi* following Stephen Greenblatt’s intervention in the 1980s. Yet, the injunction against character study that defined Knights’s original imperative still remains. Knights’s qualm was not with psychoanalysis *per se*, but one can easily see how his condemnation of character had knock-on effects for the discipline’s willingness to embrace that interpretive lens. To be sure, this reluctance has not been absolute: strains of Freudian criticism flourished throughout the late 1970s and, in the 1980s, psychoanalytic literary criticism was revitalized by the surge of interest in Jacques

Lacan's more semiotically minded rendition of psychoanalytic theory, which gave literary critics what they had long desired: a version of psychoanalysis attentive to questions of language, structure, and interpretation that was not tethered to overly characterological diagnostic schemas.<sup>1</sup> However, in contemporary scholarship, that trend in Lacanian-inspired psychoanalytic criticism has largely abated without leaving in its wake much renewed interest in psychoanalytic theory. The few psychoanalytic literary critics that remain—and there are still some—are typically held in lower regard than their more formalist (or Marxist and historicist) colleagues for trespassing this disciplinary boundary.

For a long time now, I have been deeply invested in many of literary criticisms' credos and shibboleths. I was drawn to the study of literature—first as a student, and then professionally—because I believe, profoundly, that different forms of representation structure every encounter we have with the “real world” and that our experience of that world, of other people, and even of ourselves is always and necessarily mediated. The more I worked in and on literature, the more I came to consider that reflecting on questions of representation and interpretation was an ethical and political act, a necessity even. Representation is, after all, always both aesthetic and political: it names how art mediates life *and* how governments stand in for people. On my mark, there is a continuity between the interpretation of a text and the interpretation of everyday life. Thus, I have long hoped that my teaching would make students more nuanced, sensitive, and engaged readers—of fiction, yes, but also of their lives. For me, studying literature was a way to realize this wish.

Although I still hold this priority, I have recently begun to question the equation that literary criticism habitually makes between character analysis and “bad reading.” Four years ago, I began teaching as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. This department had historically been a psychoanalytic training center and, when I arrived, it was in the process of transitioning to become a fully-fledged department catering to undergraduate education. In my first year, I took over a course called “Literature and the Unconscious” that was designed for and taught to second year undergraduates. As a scholar who works between psychoanalysis and literature, I had learned to mitigate the danger of what I jokingly describe to my students as the game of “Spot the Oedipus Complex!” by treating psychoanalysis itself as literary text. Because psychoanalytic knowledge is produced in and through language, it is necessarily structured by the same conventions that govern all narrative art, including plot, genre, foreshadowing, symbolism, allusion, metaphor, and allegory. Indeed, as Felman points out, literature is psychoanalysis's interior; without terms like narcissism and Oedipus, without the authorial sobriquets of Sade and Masoch, psychoanalysis as we know it would not—*could not*—exist. Thus, I designed my syllabus to think about, for instance, the genre of the psychoanalytic case study and

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here the early work of Harold Bloom and Frederick Crews as representative examples of the psycho-biographical and content-focused psychoanalytic literary scholarship from 1970s and Shoshana Felman, Peter Brooks, Barbara Johnson, Leo Bersani, and Jane Gallop as some of the more well-known Lacanian (and often Derridian) affiliates from the 1980s. For further accounts of the relationship between literary theory and psychoanalysis, see Terry Eagleton's canonical *Literary Theory: An Introduction* and Maud Ellman's edited collection *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*.

Arthur Conan Doyle's detective cases; the trope of the haunted house in "The Uncanny" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"; the relationship between melancholia and Irish nationalism in Joyce's "The Dead;" and the different narratives of internalized racism elaborated by Morrison and Fanon. As so often happens when making syllabi, the course I designed was the one I, as a devout literature student, had always wanted to take.

I have now taught this class for four years running and, despite my effort to foreclose the characterological, my students continue to find this angle the most interesting point of entry for their inquiries. For instance, when I teach Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, students are far keener on talking about the relationship between Max's aggression and his unconscious phantasy than they are in considering why aggression becomes a keynote concern in both fiction and psychoanalysis during the postwar period. Similarly, when we discuss John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, students are eager to think about Gene's envy and identification; they alternately condemn and defend his character as though he were a friend or peer. When I try to turn the conversation back to the terrain of the literary, I am met by silence and disengagement. Even my attempts at asking questions about character construction—"why do you think Knowles chooses to give us direct access to Gene's thoughts but not Finny's?"—come off as stifling. Students shut down, check out, check their phones. As a professor who feels compelled to both foster students' genuine interest *and* to improve their interpretive capacity, this experience has left me at a loss.

From this, I have begun to reflect on my own pedagogical priorities in teaching literature to and for psychoanalytic students, specifically. At an institution like Essex where the average attendance rate is below 50%, and where the percentage of students who actually *do* the reading is much lower still, I have become increasingly aware of the value of students' interest in, and excitement about, their education. This experience has led me to rethink the potential value of character study as a legitimate means of helping students to become more self-reflective and sensitized members of their communities. What if, I have begun to wonder, questions of representation and interpretation are not fundamentally at odds with character analysis? Is there a way to sustain a conversation at the level of character-as-person that does not surrender literary theory's most valuable insights?

These questions remain open ones for me as I try to reorient my teaching in a way that communicates the vitality of literature for cultivating a more expansive and imaginative understanding of psychic life. Ultimately, I still find it important to move students away from their pathologizing proclivities since I consider this to be a reductive and potentially harmful way of treating both characters and persons. But, these days, I am far more willing to carry on a conversation about Gene's envy in the hope that doing so might help students make sense of the complexity of their own friendship relations. Through Gene, I hope that students might come to think of envy—a condemned relational affect in much popular culture *and* psychoanalytic theory—as both more complex and more commonplace than they might otherwise. Because the students I now teach are no longer literature students but psychoanalytic students, many of whom want to be clinicians, I have begun to think about the value of the literature classroom in terms of how it can usefully expand, rather than

critique or contest, their perceptual preference for individual psychology. This position still involves a challenge for my students: they must learn to see literature as a psychological resource whose insights are different from—but *no less legitimate than*—those proffered by psychoanalytic theory. They must thus work to multiply, rather than to contract, the number of psychological templates they are willing and able to read into the world. This is hard work for students since it involves them accepting, however temporarily, that an epistemology as complex, exciting, and ostensibly totalizing as psychoanalysis might too have its limitations.

But, through this process, I have begun to think that getting into character is not, itself, the adversary. Naturally, the enterprise is imperfect: I still get a range of final papers that spend 2000 words mapping Freud's structural theory onto *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Many students still leave my classroom entirely unconvinced that literature has anything to offer them. However, it is hard for me to imagine how this could be otherwise given that the class concerns the intersection between two of what Freud described as the three "impossible professions." As Freud himself certainly maintained, failure too can be productive. Thus, while many of my students may never come to fully appreciate just how structured their lives are by various forms of interpretation and narrative-making, my hope is that some might nevertheless feel that there is continuity between fiction and their so-called real lives—and that, through literature, they might come to embrace lives with a bit more character.

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