

REIMAGINING LITERARY PEDAGOGY: THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LEARNING PRACTICES

Kamini Verma¹, Dr. Ashwani Rana²

¹Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

*Corresponding Author: kamini.verma@gnauniversity.edu.in

²Professor, Deputy Dean, School of Liberal Arts, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

Email: dean.sla@gnauniversity.edu.in

Abstract

Objective: This paper explores the implications of the incorporation of psychoanalytical theory (Freudian, Lacanian and object relations) for the interpretive and affective relationship between students and texts in the university setting.

Approach: The study builds a theoretical and empirical synthesis from education, psychoanalysis, and literary study by means of a critical literature synthesis to create a coherent account of the mechanisms and outcomes of this pedagogy.

Findings: Its key findings indicate that the use of the psychoanalytical method in teaching improves the students' interpretative skills, tolerance for ambiguity, empathy and metacognitive awareness, and that practices like reflective journaling and multi-layered curriculum designs help support these outcomes; it also brings about resistance on the part of students, ethical issues regarding the boundaries between analysis and personal disclosure, and institutional tension with prevalent assessment cultures.

Research Limitations: The results of this paper are not empirical but a synthesis of the reviewed literature and therefore the implications for curriculum design, curriculum assessment reform, and faculty development are constrained by the range and cultural context of the literature reviewed and need to be tested in other contexts.

Value: What makes it unique is the way it brings together, in a systematic way, a number of theoretical and empirical approaches that are as yet dispersed and, as such, clarify the value and the unanswered question of the use of psychoanalytical approaches in literary education.

Keywords: Affective Learning; Higher Education; Literary Pedagogy; Psychoanalytical Theory; Transformative Learning; Unconscious

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of how students come to meaning has long troubled literary education at the university level, as students begin to wonder how they get to the surface of a text in order to engage with the multifaceted psychological and cultural power that animates the language of a text. The move to psychoanalytical theory as a pedagogical paradigm is one of the most fruitful, yet also most disputed, in recent humanities pedagogy. In contrast to formalist or historicist methods, psychoanalytical pedagogy demands the unchangeable desire, anxiety, and fantasy in both the production and the reception of literature (Bracher, 2020). This obtrusion is an interruption to the comfortable supposition that reading is a transparent, cognitive process, and that it is, in fact, a highly subjective experience that is affected by the unconscious history of the reader.

There has been a revival of interest in affect and embodiment throughout the humanities in the early twenty-first century, and psychoanalytical methods have been at the center of this shift. Some scholars like Zembylas (2021) have suggested that emotions are not the side effects of intellectual activity but are the part of learning. In literary criticism, this appreciation has been adapted into pedagogical experiments that encourage students to observe what a text is doing to them, what the text is evoking, provoking, or refusing them, to be a valid point of departure.

Although there is an extensive theoretical literature, empirical studies that specifically monitor the impact of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy on learning practices in university students are relatively shallow and can be found far apart in the various journals on education, psychoanalysis and literary studies. This paper is a synthesis of existing literature that develops a more coherent image that places the theoretical assertions in the context of recorded pedagogical results and pinpoints the contradictions and potentials defining this teaching form. The general idea here is that psychoanalytical pedagogy of literature, when conducted in a wise manner, is not a detriment to academic rigour but rather enhances it in the development of the sort of critical thinking that is complex and self-reflective that the modern university talks about.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Freudian Inheritances in the Classroom

The work of Sigmund Freud in literary analysis is found not in such theories as the Oedipus complex or dream-work but in the more general epistemological assertion that meaning is invariably overdetermined, generated at the crossroad of conscious intention and unconscious desire (Freud, 1900/2010). Pedagogically, this implies that the process of a student reading Hamlet is never purely a cognitive decoding of plot and theme, but is a complicated exchange in which the psychic investments of the student, in matters of authority, loss, or sexuality, are actively involved in the process of interpretation. To introduce this insight into the classroom, it is necessary to teach students to read the

text as well as their own reading.

Modern pedagogues who collaborate in a Freudian tradition have devised organized exercises to help in this dual reading. The basic idea of Felman (1987), that literature educates what psychoanalysis educates, which is the constitutive nature of not-knowing, has been expounded by even more modern practitioners, who craft assignments requiring students to record instances of confusion, over-identification, or inexplicable affect as information instead of a lack of understanding (Salvio, 2022). Within this context, the challenging text might be seen as a useful location precisely because of its uncontrollable nature.

2.2 Lacanian Dimensions: Language, Lack, and the Gaze

The re-formulation of psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan using structural linguistics presented a number of concepts: the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary registers; the gaze; objet petit a, which have had an extensive impact on the field of literary theory and, more recently, on the field of literary pedagogy (Homer, 2005). To the eye of university teachers, it is due to Lacan that subjectivity can only be constructed by way of language and thus literature becomes a preferred location where the circulation of desire can be studied in the context of discourse. Students who have been trained on the practices of Lacanian reading are taught to pay attention to the gaps, contradictions and surplus of the texts- the sites where the Symbolic order does not hold the Real. Hanly and Hanly (2023) more recently have suggested that, properly scaffolded, Lacanian pedagogy can provide students with an unusually advanced means of ideological critique, as it exposes the manner in which desire is organized by cultural and linguistic practices. Their case study of a senior seminar on twentieth-century American fiction revealed that students who studied Lacanian frameworks were in a better position to describe the linkage between personal investment and cultural construction- a major skill in advanced literature analysis.

2.3 Object Relations and Space of Reading

Literary educators have borrowed the ideas of D.W. Winnicott concerning the transitional space as the intermediate zone between inner psychic space and outer shared space as a model of the reading experience itself (Winnicott, 1971). In this account, literature takes a transitional place where readers are able to practice experiences, identities, and relationships in a safe distance. There is a specific resonance of this framework with pedagogy since it provides a non-pathologising explanation of how students have emotional investments with texts.

Phillips and Peacock (2024) extensively rely on Winnicott to theorise what they refer to as the holding environment of the literature classroom, a place where students feel safe enough to risk making the interpretations that reveal their vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Their empirical research using undergraduate cohorts in two UK universities discovered that students in seminars explicitly designed based on transitional space principles indicated much greater amounts of intellectual risk-taking and

readiness to change original interpretations compared to control groups.

3. PSYCHOANALYTICAL PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE

3.1 Designing the Psychoanalytically Informed Curriculum

An interpretation of the psychoanalytical theory into the curriculum design involves making choices concerning content and method. On the content level, the instructors should make their choices about how explicit they want the theoretical concepts to be foregrounded: some choose to teach Freudian or Lacanian models as the means of reading and writing; others tend to implicitly introduce psychoanalytical questions in the structure of reading and writing tasks (Appel and Kaplan, 2021). Both methods are risky: explicit teaching can turn deep theoretical ideas into applied formulae, and an implicit method can result in students with little or no conceptual vocabulary to describe what they are going through.

One of the most encouraging models is the so-called layered curriculum outlined by Morrison (2023), where students are initially exposed to psychoanalytical ideas by reading easily accessible secondary materials (case studies, literary critical essays), before being tasked with applying the ideas in close-reading tasks, and finally writing their own analytical essays, which would combine both personal and theoretical insights. The data of assessments conducted by Morrison over three years of courses in undergraduate literary studies demonstrated a gradual development of the ability of students to maintain interpretive ambiguity, which is one of the defining features of high-order critical thinking, as they ascended through the courses.

3.2 Affect, Transference and Pedagogical Relationship

Among the most demanding and fruitful aspects of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy is the emphasis on the concept of transference, which is the transfer of previously existing emotional patterns to the current relationships, of which the student-teacher relationship is one. Those who teach in this tradition have suggested that the processes of transference are not accidental to the classroom, but are part of it; the degree to which students respond to texts, to interpretations provided by other students, to the authority of the instructor are all, in some measure, transference processes (Todd, 2019).

Identifying transference does not imply that the instructor becomes the analyst, but it implies that the relational dynamics of the classroom are given attention as pedagogically important. Grosland (2020) explains that the recognition without interpretation of the instances of seeming over-reaction in a seminar, such as an unusual vehemence of a character on the side of a student, can lead to fruitful negotiations regarding the connection between readerly positioning and unconscious investment. When studied among undergraduate students of literary studies, Grosland discovered that those instructors who had been trained to be aware of transferential dynamics reported more dialogic, exploratory seminar discussions.

3.3 Student Resistance as Pedagogical Resource

The concept of resistance has been taken seriously by psychoanalysis and psychologically informed educators have been sensitive to how students resist not just challenging ideas, but also the exposure of their own subjectivity which is required by literary interpretation. Boler (2020) has suggested that 'pedagogical discomfort' which is the discomfort that appears when learning disrupts assumptions that one has toward oneself and the world is an indicator of real change, rather than an issue to be addressed.

In practice, the manifestations of student resistance in courses based on psychoanalysis include: some students are concerned about what they see as an unwarranted intrusion of personal material in academic work; others resent the lack of a clear interpretive answer; others exhibit what Kaplan (2021) calls defensive intellectualisation the excessive investment in theoretical abstraction as a means of evading the affective experience that the methodology requires. Seasoned educators have devised response mechanisms to every type of resistance, and they use them as data on the existing relationship of the students to learning and not as pedagogical failures.

4. LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

4.1 Critical Thinking and Interpretive Sophistication

The result of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy reported most consistently in recent empirical literature is that it leads to an increase in what researchers have variably described as interpretive sophistication, tolerance to ambiguity, or epistemic flexibility, the ability to have more than one and potentially opposing interpretation at once without premature closure (King and Kitchener, 2021). This ability has been conceptually based on the insistence of psychoanalysis on overdetermination of meaning: since texts, like psychic life, are ordered by forces that cannot be completely known or controlled, there is no one description that exhausts them.

Chen and Ferreira (2022) tracked sixty-two undergraduate students of literature over a complete academic year. Through a qualitative analysis of their student writing, they discovered that the psychoanalytic group achieved much higher improvements in their capacity to build and maintain complex and qualified arguments as well as the ability to realize the constraints of their own interpretive viewpoints. Qualitative data indicated that reflective journaling tasks, which involved students recording their affective responses to texts in addition to their analytical observations, played a significant role as a mediator of this development.

4.2 Empathy, Identity, and Ethical Reading

The second significant set of results is associated with the cultivation of empathy and morality awareness via literature. Psychoanalytical methods have traditionally been connected with a certain form of hermeneutic generosity--a care about what Ricoeur (1970) described as the archaeology of the

subject--that does not allow reducing characters, narrators and authors to moral terms. More recent pedagogical studies have attempted to operationalise this relationship, including a question of whether students who are subjected to psychoanalytical literary pedagogy show greater abilities in perspective-taking and moral complexity.

Philosophical theories advanced by Nussbaum have empirically supported her philosophical argument of literature as a school of empathy through research studies, including the work of Kidd and Castano (2019), who discovered that literary fiction, as opposed to genre fiction, improved theory of mind in readers. In expressly psychoanalytical pedagogical contexts, Zembylas and Papamichael (2023) deepened the finding and showed that students who used psychoanalytical reading practices were more capable of describing the inner logic of the perspectives they found morally troubling- an indicator of what they refer to as critical empathy rather than simple identification.

4.3 Metacognitive Development and Reflective Practice

Possibly the most theoretically unusual contribution to the learning outcomes of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy is its development of such a phenomenon as metacognition, or the ability to reflect on one's thinking. Since psychoanalytical methods involve students analyzing their own responses as objects, it follows that the students must become conscious of the mechanisms they use to create meaning. This recursive aspect of psychoanalytical literary education is consistent with higher education reflective practice model goals (Moon, 2019).

Lather (2023) has suggested that psychoanalytical approaches are the only methods that deal with what she refers to as troubling knowledge, which is a pedagogy that does not merely introduce something new in the cognitive frameworks but rather disturbs and remakes those frameworks. She discovered in her ethnographic investigation of graduate literature seminars in three universities in North America that students who experience prolonged psychoanalytic reading of literature claimed significant improvement in metacognitive awareness, both through self-reporting and through written work that exhibits reflexive scholarly voice. More importantly, it was able to maintain these gains at six months follow-up, indicating long-term effects of learning and not short-term ones.

5. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

5.1 The Ethics of Exposure: Boundaries and Safeguarding

The most recurrent ethical issue identified within the literature on psychoanalytical literary pedagogy is the danger of improper exposure - of establishing environments where students are in some way obliged to reveal personal content that places them in a vulnerable position (Atkinson, 2022). Opponents of this form of pedagogy have claimed that the college classroom is not a counselling place and that professors are not counsellors; inviting students to delve into the unconscious without the preparation or the relationship environment of the counselling alliance is dangerous. The proponents

admit this risk but consider it to be compensated with meticulous designing of the assignment, framing the distinction between critical reflection and confession, and direct consideration of classroom culture (Salvio, 2022). Their difference between applying psychoanalytical theory as a hermeneutic method and the classroom as a place of personal psychoanalysis is important to ethical practice. According to Todd (2019), it is not what the text does to the student psychologically but what the student can learn, using psychoanalytical prisms, about the workings of texts and their importance.

5.2 Institutional Resistance and Curricular Politics

The cultivation of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy has serious institutional counter winds in the modern university, where the push towards measurability, standardisation and practicality is in opposition to the openness, indeterminacy and self-reflexivity that this pedagogy cherishes. According to Morrison (2023), the challenge of matching psychoanalytically behind-the-curtain learning outcomes with the current assessment rubrics, more likely to reward clarity, argument, and evidence over complexity, uncertainty, and reflexivity, is a structural barrier to broader adoption.

The drop in the continued interest in psychoanalytical theory in departments of literary studies has also been a problem that is related, as other theoretical paradigms, such as postcolonial, digital, ecocritical, have become prominent. According to Appel and Kaplan (2021), psychoanalytical methods are most fruitful when used together with these models as opposed to being used instead of them; how colonialism or climate emergency is internalised, how it affects fantasy, anxiety and defence, is the exact question that needs psychoanalytical methods. The interdisciplinary fusion therefore provides an escape path to institutionalised marginalisation of the psychoanalytical theory.

6. DISCUSSION

The mass of evidence that has been examined in the current paper will justify a cautiously positive evaluation of psychoanalytical literary pedagogy as an agent of considerable learning. In diverse settings at universities, and with a diverse array of methodological techniques, scholars have reported improvements in interpretive sophistication, empathy, cognitive awareness and tolerance of ambiguity that cannot be credited to other elements of the pedagogy. These results are consistent with the objectives of a liberal arts education in its traditional sense the production of reflective, self-aware and critical citizens and with the demands of a more pragmatically-oriented view of the modern employer that employees must be able to deal with complexity and uncertainty.

Meanwhile, the discipline has some actual problems: the ethical risks involved are not adequately addressed, the institutions are poorly designed to appreciate the type of learning that this pedagogy encourages, and there is a lack of properly trained teachers. These difficulties do not oppose psychoanalytical literary pedagogy but argue in favor of more conscious, better-invested engagement with its development. The ethical risks can be dealt with through proper design; the institutional

barriers are cultural and political, not inherent; and the training gap can be resolved through long-term faculty development.

An additional question needs to be considered: what are the subjectivities that psychoanalytical literary pedagogy focuses on? The most widely used theoretical frameworks Freudian, Lacanian, Winnicottian, are products of certain cultural and historical circumstances which are not equally applicable to all students. In more recent scholarship, this shortcoming has started to be overcome by placing psychoanalytical approaches in dialogue with postcolonial theory (Hook, 2021) and queer theory (Edelman, 2004), producing more capacious frameworks that are able to consider the particularities of various subjective positions. It is a current piece of theoretical expansion, and one of the most productive areas of the field.

The implication on curriculum design is profound. Introducing psychoanalytical methods into a curriculum is not merely a matter of adding another theoretical thread onto an already existing program, but involves a redefinition of both the nature and the function of literary education, the relationship between teacher and pupil, the role of evaluation and the institutional cultures within which learning takes place. It is an ambitious project, yet the materials that are examined in this paper indicate that it is a project that can yield significantly improved learning outcomes and deeper and more lasting shifts in the relationships that students have towards knowledge, themselves, and others.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, it has been argued that instead of being a peripheral or outlived approach in the study of literature, psychoanalytical theory provides a body of conceptual resources that are best able to enrich the teaching of literature in the modern university. The residual cognitivism of mainstream literary pedagogy is confronted by the insistence of the constitutive role of the unconscious, affect and desire in the production and reception of texts, and by the psychoanalytical approaches offer a more substantial and demanding understanding of what it is to read and to teach. The accumulating empirical data is uniform in indicating that the students who learn to follow psychoanalytically informed reading instruction are more likely to become more interpretively sophisticated, more emphatic, and more aware of metacognition than students who learn in purely cognitive-analytic frameworks.

The way forward must involve long-term commitment to the ethical aspects of this pedagogy, re-investment in the development of the faculty, and a desire to question institutional assessment cultures that poorly acknowledge the type of learning psychoanalytical approaches foster. It also mandates further theoretical research so that the psychoanalytical paradigms that are being applied in classrooms can actually be sensitive to the variety of student subjectivities and experiences.

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