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Literature, Theory and Application: Reading Stopping by Woods from Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Abstract

The literary communication, unlike our daily ways of communication, is something special, having deeper meanings beyond the literal one, which in turn opens a new window giving us glimpses of certain universal aspects of our lives. Poems, in this respect, seem all the more elusive as having more layers to it than a cursory reading might reveal and Robert Frost's famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is no exception to this. Now the question arises – How to know the meaning of a poem (or any other literary text for that matter) that lies beneath its surface? Firstly, it should be pointed out, following the poststructuralist literary critics, that there can never be 'the meaning' of a text, but rather multiple meaning can be derived from a single piece and secondly, that derived meaning will depend on which literary theory one is applying to that particular text.

Keywords: Communication, Theory, Psychoanalytic, Interpretation, Feminism, Postcolonialism

Although the term is all pervasive in the literary arena, it is almost impossible to define what 'literary theory' is. This term or concept is deceptively simple and yet a definition is hard to reach to. Here, I'll be giving you a few of the accepted definitions of what one means by the term. The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines 'literary theory' as follows ~ "Literary theory" is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles; one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature." Pramod K. Nayar has given the following definition in his book Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory; "Literary Theory is the organized, systematized analysis of literary texts, the institution of Literature...and a reflection on the interpretative strategies 'applied' to these texts." (Nayar P. 1). This is what Jonathan Culler has to say; "Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study...It's a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define." (Culler, P. 3)



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Armed with all these definitions we can now probe deeper into the realm of Literary Theory and will learn about the different schools of theory albeit briefly.

Schools of Literary Theory

For our convenience we will be discussing here the more important theories which are still widely used in the academics to read and ‘decode’ literary creations.

1. **Structuralism:** “Structuralism usually designates a group of primarily French thinkers who, in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language, applied concepts from structural linguistics to the study of social and cultural phenomena...In literary studies structuralism promotes a poetics interested in the conventions that make literary works possible; it seeks not to produce new interpretations of works but to understand how they can have the meanings and effects they do.” (Culler, P. 123-124)

Structuralism looks at the relationships between the various elements within the self-contained, well-organized structure of a text in order to understand the ways [...] by which the text produces meaning. It focuses on the form of a text by looking at elements like voice, character, setting and their combination.” (Nayar, P. 3) Structuralism intends to uncover the ‘structures’ lying underneath every literary (and non-literary) texts which give meaning and validity to them.

2. **Poststructuralism:** “Poststructuralism names a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings. On the one hand, poststructuralists affirm, consciousness is not the origin of the language we speak and the images we recognize, so much as the product of the meanings we learn and reproduce. On the other hand, communication changes all the time, with or without intervention from us, and we can choose to intervene with a view to altering meanings – which is to say the norms and values – our culture takes for granted.” (Belsey, P. 5). As an off-shoot of structuralism Poststructuralism questions the adequacy of structuralism and emphasises that the meaning of any text is not fixed rather it is unstable, a claim which was exactly the opposite of that made by the structuralists.
3. **Feminism:** “A development and movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was...an attempt to describe and interpret (and reinterpret) women’s experience as depicted in various kinds of literature...” (Cuddon, P. 315) Feminist critical theory is an off-shoot of Poststructuralism and its main aim is to ‘deconstruct’ the long established man/woman binary in which man is always the privileged entity and thereby demanding social, economic, political, sexual and religious rights for women in order to create a world of equality. Although began as a unified ‘feminism’, it has now embraced numerous stances and now better known as ‘feminisms’.



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4. **New Historicism and Cultural Materialism** coined by Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980), New Historicism can be defined as “a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period...new historicism...practises a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other.” (Barry, P. 172) Cultural Materialism, although sometimes is seen as a mere British version of New Historicism, has a clear distinction from the latter in that it “accuse the New Historicists of being pessimist, of seeing no way out of the unequal power relation. They suggest that the texts must be read as sites of power relations, but as they *connect to the present*.” (Nayar, P. 201) They emphasise of political reading of texts.
5. **Postcolonialism:** Postcolonial theory is an “attempt to understand the problems posed by the European colonization and its aftermath.” (Culler, P. 130). As Nayar points out so succinctly, “Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonial power where it proposes that the exercise of power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation.” (Nayar, P. 154)

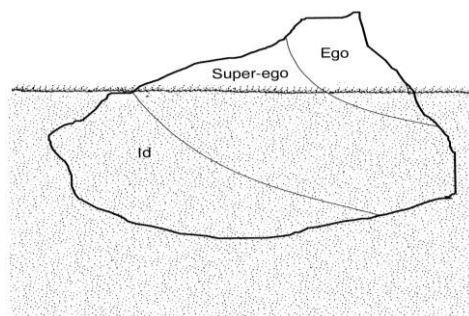
We have now grasped the basics of some of the more important literary theories but as the title of this essay/article suggests, we will be reading Frost’s famous poem from a psychoanalytic point of view. So, before embarking on that journey, we must get ourselves familiarised with the psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalytic Criticism/Theory

Definition– Pioneered by the Austrian Sigmund Freud, Psychoanalysis or Psychoanalytic theory/criticism is a way of interpreting the inner realism of a human mind. Unlike the Victorian ‘realists’, Freud emphasised our need to delve deep into the human ‘unconscious’ to ‘know’ a person, he says that it is the desires, fears, anxieties which are repressed in our unconscious mind that genuinely answer who we are in ‘reality’.

Aspects of Psychoanalysis

Here, for the sake of our convenience and the demand of our argument we will only be discussing Freud’s idea of the human mind – its structure and its workings, although I will provide a very brief overview of how a Freudian psychoanalytic criticism works.



(Fig. 1)

(28)



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(Image Courtesy ~ http://www.intropsych.com/ch11_personality/11iceberg.jpg)

While explaining his psychoanalytic theory Freud proposed a tripartite model of the human psyche. (Fig. 1)

1. The Ego – The ego is our conscious mind, “which we work with, use and are most aware of.” (Nayar, P. 65)
2. The Id – The id is our unconscious, the storehouse of our deep, dark, repressed desires, ideas and fears.
3. The Superego – The Super-ego can be termed as our conscience. “It is drawn from social settings and cultural codes and influences the way consciousness works.” (Nayar, P. 65) In other words, the Super-ego acts as the ‘moral police’.

We need to keep these ideas clear to understand the hidden meanings in Frost’s “Stopping By Woods”, but now I’ll be giving the overview of a typical Freudian interpretation of a literary work.

As Peter Barry has succinctly pointed out in his book, the Freudian critics, at the very beginning reads a text in two different levels – conscious and unconscious. “They associate the literary work’s ‘overt’ content with the former, and the ‘covert’ content with the latter” (Barry, pp 105) and in doing so they give the covert meaning the most importance in that it is that meaning which constitutes the reality of that particular work. What follows is the enquiry as to whose unconscious feelings are being expressed covertly – is it of the author or of the characters depicted or both? In the next stage they tend to read the text in order to show the presence of “classical psychoanalytic symptoms” (Barry, pp 105) and so on.

Let us now read Stopping by Woods applying what have we learnt so far under the light of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

As we have seen, that according to Freud our mind has a tripartite structure, comprised of – ego, super-ego, and the id. The id, among other things, stores our desires which are generally not accepted by the society and thereby get repressed and locked away inside the id. However, those desires frequently try to resurface into the ego, our conscious mind, only to be thwarted by the mighty super-ego, our conscience, which acts as a moral police of some sort. However, it should be remembered that those desires, fears, anxieties do defeat the mechanisms of the super-ego and resue face through dreams, slips of tongue, jokes etc. With this basic understanding of Psychoanalytic criticism being clear, let us now take a closer look at the poem itself, what does it tell on the surface, its ‘overt’ meaning, and what lies beneath, its ‘covert’ meaning.

We encounter a traveller, unnamed and alone, who stoops by a forest, on a ‘snowey evening’ to admire the beauty of the woods covered in snow. He then goes on to say that the owner of the woods is someone whom he perhaps knows although at that moment there is no possibility of their meeting each other as ‘his house is in the village.’ He then shifts his focus



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on to his little horse imagining that his “little horse must think it queer” to stop without a farmhouse nearby on the “darkest evening of the year.” (Endnotes)

However, he then contemplates on the calm and serene atmosphere of the place where the only other sound besides that of the “downy flakes” is the sound made by the harness bell of his horse. In the last part of the poem we see that the speaker, still captivated by the beauty of deep and dark forest, decides not to continue with his somewhat romantic enjoyment of the natural scene as he has “promises to keep” and hence, he starts his journey again, perhaps towards his home.

The forest, “lovely, dark, and deep” holds much attraction for the speaker and its so sublimely beautiful that he stops to relish its beauty even in such a dreary snowy evening. The forest with all its dark and deep aspects can be likened to the id, the repository of our repressed desires. Notice what the poet tells us in the very first line of the poem – “Whose woods these are I think I know” – he knows the owner of the woods (although logically no person can owe an entire forest), but how? Simply because the forest, here represents his own id and how could he not recognise his own repressed desires, no matter how deep they are buried? Interesting, right? Well, now that we have identified the id, now its turn to locate the ego and the super-ego.

The ego, as we have already seen, is our conscious mind, it stores the ideas that we are consciously aware of – like I’m aware of what I’m typing on my laptop’s keyboard and like you are aware that you are now reading this paper. In this poem, the speaker has the awareness of what he is to do and what his duties are, as he tells us at the very end of the poem –

But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.

But in our lives, sometimes we encounter such situations in which we are most vulnerable and in such moments our id starts influencing our ego, even though we are not dreaming, situations like any kind of celebrations or station in which we exude passion unbounded. Here too, we find that the id of the speaker (the forest) holds him captivated by its alluring charm and he gets fascinated by its beauty, as he describes the woods as “lovely” (The woods are lovely...). However, in those intense and passionate moments we also find our super-ego in work which makes us aware of our ‘true’ selves, our duties and our promises ‘to be kept’. Now where is the super-ego here in this poem, you might ask.

Perhaps, after having identified the ego and the id and having a firmer grasp of the concepts of psychoanalysis, locating the super-ego becomes an easy job. Yes, right, the super-ego is the speaker’s horse which by shaking its harness bell brings the speaker back to his conscious existence, helping him make sense of the whole situation and also making him aware of his promises to be fulfilled. The sound of the bell acts as the word ‘forlorn’ in



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Keats's famous "Ode to a Nightingale" which "tolls him back" from the world of the immortal bird to his own world of harsh reality, of "weariness, the fever and fret."

We try to escape our daily hectic and tiring existence to a utopic world of everlasting happiness, not bound by rules and laws, some through imaginative flights, like Keats's speaker who says, in order to transcend his real existence he wants to "leave the world unseen" and travel to the nightingale's world "on the viewless wings of poesy" and some others by musing on their unfulfilled desires, like that of enjoying a breath-taking natural scene, which one otherwise cant pause to enjoy being part of a civilisation characterised by "sick, hurry and divided aim", repressed deep down their unconscious, i.e. the id, as in Frost's speaker in this poem.

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