

A Psychoanalytic Study of Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* and *The Bingo Palace*

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Abstract: Psychoanalytic literary criticism, which emerged in the 1960s, was developed by the famous Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. It is the most influential interpretative theory that explains the workings of the human mind. One of Freud's most important contributions to the field of psychology was the development of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Among the key concepts to be studied while analyzing a literary work from a psychological perspective include the unconscious, the early sexual development, dreams, repression, death and life drives, and the Oedipal Complex. This paper aims to critically analyze the psychological motivations and actions that lay behind certain characters' behaviors as they are presented in Louise Erdrich's novels. The bisexual Karl Adare is among the most enigmatic characters in Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Beet Queen* (1986). The novel does present enough information about Karl's background to suggest that some explanation of his adult nature might be found in his formative experiences, and, indeed, a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of this puzzling character's behavior can offer some speculations. In *The Bingo Palace* (1994), Louise Erdrich not only uses psychoanalytic terms to portray her characters' natures, but she also presents scenes of dreams or visions wherein her characters recognize and confront impulses that arise from the unconscious.

Keywords: Freud, psychological criticism, Oedipal Complex, the unconscious mind, Louise Erdrich, *The Beet Queen*, *The Bingo Palace*

1. Introduction

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is one of the most well-known and most controversial literary theories. There are two influential theorists in the realm of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The present paper will focus on Sigmund Freud's theories that play major roles in interpreting literary works. Freud developed theories on the Oedipus Complex and the interpretation of Dreams. He also developed ideas about our unconscious mind and separated the human psyche into the id, the ego, and the superego. Psychoanalytic readings focus on the relationship between literature, the unconscious mind and our conscious actions and thoughts. More specifically, psychoanalytic literary criticism is used to analyze a piece of art by closely investigating the author's life and mind, the characters' behavior and inspiration, the audiences' appealing and motivation, and the text.

Greatly influenced by reservation life which was the main source of their sufferings and suppression as well as for their successful writings, native American writers produced literary works and included characters who prove the universality of Freud's theories regarding Oedipus Complex and the unconscious. Among those writers, Louise Erdrich is remarkable. Through her novels, *The Beet Queen* and *The Bingo Palace*, she presented many characters whose behaviors can be best analyzed using a psychological perspective.

Oedipus Complex; The Theory

"The sexual wishes in regard to the mother become more intense and the father is perceived as an obstacle to the; this gives rise to the Oedipus complex."

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923)

The theory of the Oedipus complex was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* which was published in 1899. The Oedipus complex is named after the eponymous main character of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC). Oedipus was abandoned as an infant after a prophecy that he would grow up to kill his own father and marry his own mother. He was eventually rescued and adopted by another King until he came across the prophecy himself and, unaware that he was adopted, left his parents in order to protect them from his fate. On the journey away from his supposed parents, Oedipus unknowingly meets his biological father and kills him in an argument. He then arrives at Thebes, where he solves a riddle from the Sphinx and marries the newly widowed Queen Jocasta, as a reward. After a plague strikes Thebes, Oedipus makes the gradual discovery that he has married his own mother, whom he widowed by killing his own father, thus fulfilling the oracle's prophecy.

Drawing from this story, Freud puts forward the suggestion that both modern and classical audiences were captivated by Oedipus as it depicts a subconscious desire that all humans experience as children. According to Freud, all sons and daughters develop a sexual attraction to their parent of the opposite sex. Not only do they desire that parent, but they also desire to kill the other parent due to viewing them as competition for their desired parent's affection. For Freud, this was an essential part of a child's development process.

Concept of the Oedipus Complex in *The Beet Queen*

The Beet Queen depicts characters whose weaknesses and failures are fully in view. The young Karl is depicted as a frail and delicate child, one who often faints in times of duress. The boy's fainting spells can be understood to be a form of emotional escape, a kind of flight from a reality that seems threatening to the child. This early pattern of flight obviously persists throughout the course of Karl's life. His continuous leaping can be interpreted as failed attempts to fly his circumstances. Near the end of the novel the eternal

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wanderer pauses to take stock of the life he has lived. Suddenly seeing himself as part of an overwhelmingly "senseless landscape," Karl acknowledges to himself that "I give nothing, take nothing, mean nothing, hold nothing" (318). Critics have variously described him as a wanderer, a demon, or a trickster or have linked him with the figures of the confidence man or the archetypal fool.

Freud believed that for human beings to lead productive and satisfying lives as stable adults, they needed to experience certain phases of psychological development. In cases where this development might be arrested for one reason or another, people's passage into adult maturation would necessarily be blocked. One possible reading of Karl's character that takes into account both his unstable adult identity (his bisexuality, for example) and his sometimes infantile behavior (his frenzied leaping up and down on the bed in the hotel room, for instance) suggests that he might indeed have suffered some form of arrested development. When Mary describes the Adares' family life prior to Adelaide's departure, she does offer clues as to the origin of the problems Karl experiences during his adulthood, and the scenario she presents closely corresponds with Freud's conception of the human experience he chose to call "the Oedipal drama." Freud of course believed that all infants strongly desire to claim for themselves complete possession of their mothers. Recognizing their fathers as rivals for their mothers' attention, young boys experience fantasies wherein these rivals are destroyed. Sooner or later, of course, boys arrive at the understanding that their fathers' powers are clearly superior to their own, and they then begin to fear the powerful figure who now represents the embodiment of authority.

Freud argued that normal psychological development requires that boys pass through and thus resolve their Oedipal crises. After the boy comes to fear his powerful father, he first learns to repress his desires for his mother and then to identify with his father's position. In this way he associates himself with the power and authority embodied in his father. When the boy has acknowledged his father's superiority, the Oedipus complex is destroyed, and the boy passes into manhood. If the Oedipal crisis is not resolved, the boy will continue to desire or experience a repressed desire to possess his mother. Such a person, as Freud also believed, is likely as well to find it difficult to acknowledge the social institutions that represent sources of authority and power.

As a boy, Karl does not know his father, and, as readers can tell from Mary's description, he is thoroughly attached to his mother Adelaide—in fact, there apparently exists a great deal of sibling rivalry between the brother and the sister. There is, however, a father figure in the household, a Mr. Ober who visits two or three times a week, late in the evenings. Mr. Ober is clearly Adelaide's long-time lover, and Karl deeply resents this man's all too frequent intrusions. Mary reveals that she enjoys these visits because she can see that they brighten her mother's life.

"Karl hated Mr. Ober's visits, but I looked forward to each one because my mother always brightened." (Mary Adare, 12)

If Karl wishes, as indeed he seems to, that Mr. Ober could be expunged from his mother's life, then his wish is surely granted, for one day it so happens that this rival is smothered under bushels of wheat. It is Karl who first notices the report about Mr. Ober printed in the newspaper, and when he shows it to his mother, apparently he cannot conceal his deep satisfaction. In Freudian terms, the young Karl has clearly realized his deep-seated desire to overcome the power of his father, to eliminate this rival for his mother's love.

[...SHE fell full length across the floor when she read the news. Karl and I huddled her into a chair. . . She threw her head back and forth, would not speak, shuddered like a broken doll. Then she looked at Karl.

"You're glad!" she cried. Karl turned his head away, sullen.

"He was your father," she blustered.

So it was out. (Mary Adare, 13)

In his mind, another rival appears when the baby boy is born several months later, and all his life he blames this brother for Adelaide's disappearance. It is, of course, for this reason that Karl is cruel to Jude Miller when he recognizes him many years later at the Orphans' Picnic.

[... KARL decided that he disliked his brother as intensely now as he had long ago. . . Karl laughed. "Just like your mother. Now who am I?" He let the light flood his face, and looked expectantly at Jude.

The boy didn't hesitate. "You're the devil," he said.

Karl touched his moustache, and laughed again.

"That's what Father Mullen said. Tell him Karl Adare come back to say hello." (Erdrich, 90)

With the death of his father, Karl has no opportunity to resolve his Oedipal crisis. He cannot acknowledge his father's superiority, for with the realization of his childish fantasies he has proved himself superior; he might even feel guilty that his wishes have come true and therefore blame himself for the wrongful usurpation of his father's power. Unable to identify with the authority vested in his father's position, Karl clings to his mother. He screams when she flies away, and when he later tells himself that Omar is a kidnapper and therefore no rival, he swears that one day he will kill the aeronaut and claim his mother back. For the first time, Mary feels that she is equal to her brother since both of them are left behind.

"I shook Karl's arm, but he pulled away from me and vaulted to the edge of the grandstand. "Take me!" he screamed, leaning over the rail. He stared at the sky, poised as if he would throw himself into it [. . .] For once she had played no favorites between Karl and me, but left us both. Karl dropped his head in his hands and began to sob into his sick wool sleeves. I looked away." (Erdrich, 19 & 20)

The Unconscious Mind; The Theory

"The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind." Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)

The unconscious links the adult and their behavior to their childhood experience. According to Freud, the unconscious is a part of the mind that you are not aware of. It sits outside

the conscious mind, and contains elements of repressed or forgotten memories and urges that the individual either cannot acknowledge or refuses to acknowledge in their conscious mind. As an example, the childhood experience of the Oedipus complex is part of the unconscious: no child explicitly and consciously desires to replace their mother or father, but unconsciously they do.

The unconscious mind contains the 'laws of transformation', which are rules that explain how we repress memories when we ignore the presence of the memory entirely or 'sublimate' memories when we express unconscious desires via a more socially acceptable channel.

The concept of the unconscious in *The Bingo Palace*

Believing that human beings' mental processes are mainly unconscious and that people's actions are frequently motivated by forces of which they are completely unaware, Freud looked to the unconscious in his search for an understanding of the problems that troubled his patients' conscious lives. Although many of Freud's theories have been contested or revised in recent years, his conception of the human psyche as essentially dual in nature—as consisting of both the conscious and the unconscious—has been generally accepted in the Western world.

The Bingo Palace's cast of characters is large and includes several figures who play small albeit significant roles in the novel's plot. Readers are told that Alberine Johnson is controlled by her mother's repressed past life. A reference to the fact that Albertine's first name comes not from her father, but rather from a suitor her mother had rejected, Erdrich's language clearly invites the reader to consider the unconscious motivations that have shaped Zelda's "history" of repression. Albertine has never liked her name, but she understands very well the hidden reason why her mother selected it. In her choice of name, Zelda reveals what is buried in her unconscious mind. This is but one example of many in which Erdrich draws upon Freud's model of the dual nature of the psyche to characterize her fictional figures.

"EVEN IN DIRECT AND SKILLED COMPETITION WITH DEATH itself, Albertine did not escape the iron shadow of her mother's repressed history. Her name was the feminine of the middle name of her mother's first boyfriend, Xavier Albert Toose. When, as a little girl, she had complained about it to her mother, Zelda had looked sternly at her and asked if she would rather have been named after Swede, her father, morose and handsome in a fading photograph." (Erdrich, 23)

Erdrich's conception of character is often expressed in psychoanalytic terms. Her depiction of Zelda serves well to illustrate this point. Zelda is a person who must exercise control. When Lipsha sees her at the powwow, he reminds himself that she is one of the reasons coming home cannot be simple. He is certain, in fact, that she will somehow interfere in his affairs, for he remembers well her strong intentions for running things. Zelda is obviously a character who is portrayed as a busybody, but Erdrich uses the account of her vision to explore the psychology that underlies her desire to manage others.

"My aunt knows all there is to know. She has a deep instinct for running things. She should have more children or at least a small nation to control. Instead, forced narrow, her talents run to getting people do things they don't want to do for other people they don't like. Zelda is the author of grit-jawed charity on the reservation, the instigator of good works that always get chalked to her credit." (Erdrich, 14)

After her heart attack, Zelda sees the image of her father as he looked on the day he burned Lulu's house to the ground. When she envisions Nector's face and recalls the passion in his eyes, she experiences once again her anger at her father. She remembers that as a child she understood that it was his unbridled passion that had led to the betrayal of her mother and to the destruction of Lulu's house. To get even with her father, she decided at that time that she would never allow herself the extravagance of passion. Although she was later not consciously aware of it, readers recognize that it was clearly for this reason that she denied herself Xavier's love. Zelda learned as a child to control her desires and her emotions, and out of this impulse for control emerged her compulsion to arrange the lives of others.

"She was afraid to look in the mirror, afraid to see an old woman with her father's stern face, so instead she peered into the dawn window. But her father was there, watching her with her own eyes, the fire of the sunrise surrounding his features. . . It was the same fire that bent behind him thirty years ago, peculiar and sudden, the wall of bursting darts. Flames rose in her eyes again, the brand and shame of Lulu Lamartine's house, raging out of control. And she there to see it and see her father, she the one who had to drag him back home to her mother, while she left the witch burn. But she wouldn't burn. . . That was the effect of passion on a life. . . She never would be subject to love, never would be overtaken." (Erdrich, 243)

Through the experience of her vision, Zelda is able to bring to consciousness her repressed anger at her father and to finally admit to herself her passion for the man whose love she will not again refuse.

[. . . ALL of her grown life she had cared for him with a secret unkilld feeling stronger than acids, unquenched, a coal fire set inside of her and running through each vein with a steady heat. She loved Xavier Toose. . . "And I always will, and I always will," she said out loud, beating a fist on her chest."] (Erdrich, 245)

Lyman also experiences a vision when he makes his quest into the woods and hears the voice of his dead brother, Henry. The account of his vision quest offers additional psychological insight into his feelings about the brother he has lost. While he is dancing in honor of the memory of his brother, Lyman admits that he once resented Henry for his superior dancing skills. When he acknowledges the ambivalence he felt toward the brother he both loved and resented, Lyman finds that he is ready at last to come to terms with Henry's ghost. Realizing that when he danced in Henry's shadow, he danced in a friendly shade that indeed obscured the sun, but also protected him from its glare, all his resentment disappears. When Henry's voice instructs

him to put those old dance clothes to rest, Lyman finally understands that he no longer dances in Henry's shadow.

"In younger days there had been times he resented his dancing in the shadow of his brother, always hearing those words from the announcer. *We have here our most promising grass dancer, Henry Lamartine Junior. And his brother there, Lyman, he's pretty good too.* As the sun rose, heating the ground, as he continued to dance, Lyman began to wish for that shadow. For Henry not only danced before him and blocked out the sun, but the glare, too. He had absorbed it and folded his brother back into his friendly shade. . . . When you dance, Lyman Jr., you are dancing with my ghost. . . . The sun vanished and then, very clearly, from just beyond the trees, he heard Henry tell him that he should put those old dance clothes to rest." (Erdrich, 204)

2. Conclusion

To conclude, psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary interpretation that employs the terms of psychoanalysis as the unconscious, repression, the Oedipus complex, etc. in order to illuminate aspects of literature in its connection with conflicting psychological states. It adopts the methods of reading employed by Freud to interpret literature. It argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author; that is a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche. Freud believed that all infants recognize their fathers as their rivals and strongly desire to claim for themselves complete possession of their mothers. After the boy comes to fear his powerful father, he first learns to repress his desires for his mother and then to identify with his father's power and superior position. In *The Beet Queen*, the young Karl does not know his father. He feels that Mr. Ober is his rival and is very happy upon hearing the news of his death. But, it was revealed that Mr. Ober is his real father. Thus, Karl has no opportunity to resolve his Oedipal crisis because he cannot acknowledge the superiority of his father.

The Bingo Palace serves to illustrate that Erdrich's vivid characterizations particularly lend themselves to psychological interpretation. In the novel, Erdrich not only uses psychological terms to portray her characters' natures, but she also presents scenes of dreams or visions wherein her characters recognize and confront impulses that arise from the unconscious. Zelda and Lyman become conscious of unresolved tensions from their past by experiencing a vision, a form of a dream – Zelda about her father and Lyman about his brother.

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