

Psychoanalyzing the Late Victorian Psyche: Sigmund Freud's Influence on 19th-Century Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud's ground-breaking findings in the late 19th century caused a massive upheaval and predicted the revolutionary influence on society in the 20th century. His immediate impact was limited, nonetheless, in a time of severe social, political, and religious conflicts. Marxist academics criticized Freudian psychoanalysis for its disregard for material history and dependence on patriarchal families. In spite of this, Freud's lasting impact endured, most notably in late Victorian literature. Michel Foucault, who encountered resistance, connected Victorian prudery to the emergence of capitalism and contrasted it with Freud's emphasis on sexuality and the unconscious. Early in the 20th century, Freud's psychoanalysis, which was a scientific discourse, depersonalized discussions of sex and challenged preconceived ideas about sexuality and the self. As late Victorian society struggled with sexual obsessions, Freud challenged established standards by delving into early experiences and the unconscious. Due to his emphasis on sexuality and the conflict it caused with social norms, same-sex relationships are now illegal. Efforts to validate non-traditional sexualities brought attention to the self's volatility. The struggle of the late Victorian era to reconcile the public and private spheres resonated with Freud's thesis of the psychic divide. Through biological sciences, the period attempted to naturalize ideological categories. Freud identified the supposed disease of the age, highlighting the negative consequences of sexual repression and predicting the collapse of society as a result of the incapacity to control sexual drives. There was a clash between sexual aberration and normative ideals during the decadence of the fin de siècle. Thinkers of the late Victorian era welcomed this tension, seeing it as the impetus for transforming society and rejecting normative ideals in favour of an aberrant aberration.

KEY WORDS: Freudian Psychoanalysis, Late Victorian Literature, Sexual Norms, Psychic Divide, Fin de Siècle Decadence.

INTRODUCTION

As if the late 19th-century social and intellectual climate wasn't already tumultuous enough, Freud arrived on the scene with his thunderous and terrifying discoveries. These were initially meant to generate ripples, but when its unequivocal ramifications became apparent, they transformed into a maelstrom. Given the turbulent effect his theories had on the social, cultural, and intellectual life of the twentieth century, one would think that Freud would have had a greater mark on the late

nineteenth-century intellectual scene. However, this was not the case. The era in question, having been split up along many social, political, and religious lines, found itself unable to understand what this brilliant lunatic was attempting to accomplish. Numerous academics who belong to various Marxist schools have produced a good number of critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis. However, the main points of contention center on how it bases its arguments on the institution of the family—that is, exclusively patriarchal—as the constant postulate and how material history is obscured in the process of creating a subject. However, to deny Freudian psychoanalysis its rightful place as one of the most influential theories in the modern era would be an intellectual betrayal. If one were to dismiss the enormous influence that Freudian psychoanalysis had on Late Victorian fiction, it would be intellectually deplorable for a student of literature to do so.

Regarding Victorian prudery and potential explanations for its perpetuation in the late 1800s, Foucault has written a great deal. He contends that there is a definite relationship between the Victorians' newly discovered Puritanism and the consolidation of capitalism, which he attributes to the sharp increase in the demand for physical labor brought on by the speeding industrial revolution. This idea is explained in the following excerpt from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*:

The trivial history of sex and its struggles is rewritten into the solemn history of the means of production, obscuring its modest significance. After the event, an explanatory principle appears, which states that the reason sex is so strongly suppressed is that it conflicts with the general and intensive labor imperative. How could labor capacity, which was being systematically exploited at the time, be permitted to disperse in enjoyable activities other than those that, when reduced to the barest minimum, allowed it to reproduce itself? Perhaps it is more difficult to understand sex and its effects, but it is simpler to analyze how it is repressed. Additionally, the sexual reason the demand that sexual freedom—as well as the knowledge that can be acquired from it and the freedom to discuss it—become rightfully linked to the honor of a political cause, placing sex on the agenda for the future. (5–6).

This clarifies why many of the guardians of the established order of his day felt that Freud was deserving of the animosity he aroused. However, it is difficult to understand the kind of reaction his theories elicited because, at the time, it was unclear what anyone stood for. Freud was astute and clever enough to conceal his ideological inclinations and his intentions behind a great deal of mystery because, in the late nineteenth century, sincerity was not seen as a praiseworthy quality. Every effort to participate in public discussions on sexuality and related topics was perceived as an outright challenge to authority and power structures. A striking parallel can be found between the radical suggestions that Freud's theories could make about how individual subjectivity and sexuality come to be structured and the dangerous implications that the Victorian era saw in Darwinian theory. Regarding both of the accused renegades, it was not so much the scientific value of what they proposed that portended epistemological cataclysm as it was the implications of their theories that were intellectually, philosophically, and metaphysically subversive. Freud concealed his beliefs behind the cover of more tolerant scientific discourses. According to Foucault, Freud

succeeded in totally dehumanizing sex, which lessened the offensiveness of participating in its discourses:

Maybe there was some progress made by Freud, but it was done with such caution, such medical wisdom, a scientific assurance of safety, and so many safety measures to keep everything contained, fearing no "overflow," in that most secure and private of places, between the couch and conversation: another round of whispering on a bed. And would things have turned out differently? We are told that since repression has been the essential connection between knowledge, power, and sexuality since the classical era, then it makes sense that we won't be able to break free from it without paying a high price: It will take nothing less than a breach of the law, the relaxation of restrictions, an infringement on free expression, the restoration of pleasure in reality, and a whole new economics in the workings of power structures. Politics shapes even the tiniest shred of truth. Therefore, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot expect to get the intended effects from a theoretical discourse or from a medical practice alone. Thus, one condemns the normalizing effects of psychoanalysis, the blatant shyness beneath Reich's vehemence, the conformist practices of Freud, and all the integration effects guaranteed by the "science" of sex and the hardly ambiguous practices of sexology. (5)

Before Freud could finally take the world by storm, he spent many years wandering aimlessly through the intellectual wilderness because the ideas he was trying to convey were too absurd and grotesque to be taken seriously. He is among the extremely select few illustrious minds in human history who compelled people to adopt a more self-aware perspective. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the greatest impact of his writings, but it is easy to find striking parallels between the compassionate lifestyle that Late Victorian society had chosen to lead after placing their trust in a specific. Trained as a physician, he became intrigued by the notion that hysteria was a disease that only affected women. This curiosity led him to investigate how hysteria affected women in his day, which ultimately led him to identify psychoanalysis as the "talking cure."

Freud developed a comprehensive theory of psychoanalysis that is based on a thorough examination of a person's childhood traumas and sexual trauma, which are thought to resurface in complexly disguised forms at various points in the person's life. This was meaningless until Freud dared to analyze dreams that people had, claiming they were derived from the unconscious, which he had conclusively shown existed. Descartes' philosophical claim that human consciousness was fundamentally indivisible and unitary remained uncontested until Freud provided evidence to the contrary, which had numerous metaphysical and epistemological ramifications. The fin de siècle generation, who, like Freud, was more genuinely concerned with discovering the truth via self-examination, found resonance in this outrageously radical interpretation of the subject as inescapably divided at its center. The identification of unconsciousness marked the ultimate conclusion to the hunt for the cause of evil, yet this much-needed insight did not come with the intention of curing humanity's moral diseases at their root. The job of mapping unconsciousness was the result of his attempts to decipher the true nature and aim of our seemingly inexplicable

deeds and irrational motifs; this process gave rise to psychoanalysis. The following excerpt from *Encyclopaedia of Nineteenth-Century Thought* clarifies the importance of his early writings:

Early theories of Freud's psychological disorders focused on demonstrating how a traumatic early life event (the primal scene) is repressed by the infant but is recalled in adolescence. This recall occurs when the memory becomes so offensive to consciousness that it is repressed again, but the energy of that idea seeks release through other channels, leading to symptoms of neurosis. But Freud gradually came to the conclusion that, should this theory be accurate, adult sexual abuse had to be rampant in Viennese society, and that even his own sister had been duped by an adult. Then, he had to posit one of his most extreme theories, which he had long opposed: the childhood event was a fiction brought on by infantile sexuality, not an actuality. As a result, the infant's unmet want or desire took the place of the traumatic incident. The natural makeup of humans was beginning to include more and more sexuality. Since deep, unconscious wishes and desires might be used to explain evident symptoms, neurotic behavior was to be viewed as significant. (p. 234)

Because Freud persisted in arguing until the end of his life that our psychic disorders are best understood in terms of our psychosexuality—that is, as psychological attempts to cope with our own traumatic sexual experiences, fears, and anxieties—he was unable to win social acceptance for his theoretical positions. The fin-de- siècle society that was fixated on macabre sexual obsessions aligned with Freud's ideas. While Freudian theories were a major source of inspiration and information for the new research on the various facets of sexuality, particularly male sexuality, a number of cultural practices revealed a remarkably similar understanding of non-traditional sexual orientations. The age's patriarchal tendency was evident in the way the society blamed the liberated woman for the widespread spread of sexual diseases like syphilis. The society was deeply divided regarding its attitude toward the alleged sexual "perversion," making it impossible for it to tread an unambiguous line. A socio-cultural crisis developed in the colonial countries as a result of the criminalization of same-sex partnerships in many European societies due to preconceptions about presumptive sexual "disorders," which also had an impact on the codification of laws in colonized nations. Numerous well-known authors and artists were among the numerous victims of the harsh legal environment, who forced them to turn to more obscure and quiet means of self-expression. The dramatic drop in Europe's birth rate during this time is one of the reasons for the inflated fear of homosexuality at the time.

Over the past few decades, a great deal of effort has been made to pinpoint the exact moment in Western history when the social and cultural category of homosexuality first emerged. This effort has mostly been directed toward mapping the circumstances that led to the emergence of this category. It is crucial to contextualize our theorization of nineteenth-century sexual behavior and orientations because our study aims to use the potential of the theory of cultural materialism to understand literary texts of a period in conjunction with non-literary texts of the same period. This is because our theorization will undoubtedly be conditioned by the intense pressure we live under to be politically correct. Being conscious of the ongoing efforts to denaturalize heterosexuality—

which may be viewed as a specific type of political agenda—is likely to have an impact on our attitude toward all forms of purported sexual deviance.

Disclosing one's non-heterosexual romantic inclinations has become much easier and more accepted, and this is often equated with a sense of self-realization and emancipation. Regarding the alleged deviant subjects' attempts to justify their subject positions in respect to the monitored, mastered, and legitimated sexualities, we know very little. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, queer identity politics have become widely acknowledged as a crucial component of the process of shedding a culture's pre-modern traits, even in an ostensibly orthodox society like India.

The amount of space available for intrapersonal maneuvers to decelerate oneself is enormous, and its boundaries are constantly being pushed past our most extreme fantasies. The expansion of our personal liberty that our unconventional self-narrating modes seem to bestow upon us seems to come at a price: the elimination of the dialectical relationship between the self and the other, as well as the mistaken multiplicity of the self, have undermined the agency of change's fundamental political potential. The late nineteenth-century subject was forced to rely on extremely basic and occasionally disguised methods of announcing the appearance of a certain sexuality because they did not have easy access to the store of techniques of self-narrativization that was available to us.

It was difficult for late Victorian men and women who were gay or lesbian to justify their sexual preferences in light of the erotic norms that pervaded their social and institutional frameworks. They focused on the fundamental instability of the self in an attempt to justify their nontraditional sexualities. Subverting the basic binary opposites of sexes, the underlying indeterminacy of subjecthood was sometimes pushed in a clandestine manner. Men and occasionally even women have attempted to explain their "queerness" by pointing to the two subjectivities that are imprisoned within their bodies. It was necessary to carefully undercut the much-overstated virtue of self-consistency in order to make the restrictive social space more accommodating of the non-conventional sexual narrative categories.

Freud's investigations into the narrative modes intended to depict the unrepresentable serve as the foundation for his theory of psychic split, which is founded on this fundamental finding. The existential dilemma of balancing the private sphere of truth, which is at odds with social norms and the public arena, which is motivated by altruistic and utilitarian goals, traumatized Victorian individuals. When people of this era attempted to replicate the experiential representations, they did so with an awareness of the interruptive potential of their narratives to destabilize the socially, politically, and sexually sanctioned agent. Both male and female subjectivities were defined in terms of exclusion that were in line with larger social, political, and ideological structures. Any non-normative conduct or behavioral pattern was labeled as abnormal in Victorian culture, which as a whole chose to naturalize the ideological categories of the time in terms of biological sciences. It was argued that social propriety was a necessary prerequisite for both psychological and financial well-being. The creation of pathologically normalized narratives about the self at conflict

with itself in order to be socially acceptable posed the most difficult challenge associated with the process of self-representation. Freud was left to unravel the complex network of sexual desire that was apparently imprisoned in the human body and that the West had long since theorized was ingrained in the reproductive instinct. Any desire that contradicted this reproductive impulse was automatically categorized as a deviational disorder in the Western civilization, which was shaped by Christian theology. Contrary to the opinions of contemporary psychologists and thinkers, Freud strongly advocated that the suppression of sex in civilized societies had a negative impact on people's psychological health. These individuals contended that the age's problem stemmed from a morbid obsession with sex and a craving for pleasure that defied morality. Freud's diagnosis of the presumed illness of the fin de siècle period differed greatly from their perspectives. According to Freud, this might be one of the causes of the severe and widespread degeneration that is afflicting Europe. He believed that people could not master their sexual urge or get the spiritual fulfillment that came from happy marriages through the structure of marriage. He was adamant that human civilization will collapse due to neurotic and intellectual debility as a result of the impending inability to control sexual drive.

This leads Freud to the conclusion that sexual health and civilization are mutually exclusive; he appears to be suggesting that the narratives of civilization's progress cannot adequately provide a space for sexual desire to go wild. However, Freud does not intend to dismiss the possibility that society will be unable to tolerate an unbridled and transgressive space for sexuality; rather, his perspective vacillates around the vague notion that sexuality may actually be extremely beneficial to society by giving legitimacy to its unhealthy demands. As a result, societies that uphold normative ideals and sexual abnormalities come to depend on one another.

Since it is believed to be the driving force behind human existence, there is no attempt made to find a solution to this deep struggle, which lies at the core of fin de siècle decadence. The foundation of the fin de siècle worldview is a verified rejection of normative values, which are seen to be historically particular. Despite this rejection, normative values are permitted to exist within radical conceptual frameworks because they offer justification for the persistence of deviational abnormality. This happens in all the Late Victorian philosophers and writers.

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