

## DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND LITERARY STUDY

BARTLETT C. JONES

It is legitimate and timely to ask whether sophisticated literary study is possible for those unfamiliar with psychoanalytic discoveries. We learn that authors are supposed to have common personality traits, that the creative effort has been reduced to such formulas as "a most favored form of manic depressive sublimation," that literature has been defined in ways that give the initiate a pre-eminent claim to interpret it, and finally that our aesthetic responses are allegedly conditioned by unconscious factors.<sup>1</sup> The psychologist and the analyst are trying to determine the degree of conscious rationality in creative literature and literary criticism. We may well ask what type of literature could not possibly be illumined by psychoanalytic concepts.

There is strictly speaking no such thing as a "psychoanalytic formula" for literature. The possible approaches are beyond calculation. If there is only one human character in a literary work, he may often be better understood through depth psychology. Any seemingly trivial act or trait may be meaningful: hesitating or proceeding boldly, looking neat or unkempt, keeping records or not, climbing a tree, or gazing at his reflection in a pool. If other characters are introduced, depth psychology claims to illumine all interpersonal relationships, particularly where thoughts, fantasies, dreams, indecision, anxiety, guilt, love, and hate are presented. As the plot unfolds, such themes as initiation, seduction, temptation, incest, cannibalism, and symbolic castration may require explanation. Should the work exclude human beings altogether, there appears to be nothing in the animal, vegetable, or mineral domains which depth psychology refuses to consider. Water, trees, snakes, and mountains, to choose the best known, have definite meaning for us according to Jung and others. If the critic feels it beneath his dignity to psychoanalyze a cat or a flower, he may yet explain the unconscious factors in the author's treatment of his subject and in our aesthetic response. Since depth psychology cannot be arbitrarily excluded from our study of any work, we must determine sensible criteria for its employment.

We should first examine the work, and any interpretations of it, developing as many approaches and alternative explanations as possible. An approach through depth psychology may not occur to us, but suppose that

one does. We must ask how fully it is documented and whether contradictory views are just as reasonable. Whether the hypothesis is improbable, possible, probable, or irresistible, we are primarily interested in its impact upon the work as a whole. Finally we achieve an eclectic view of the work taking what is meaningful and noncontradictory from each hypothesis. Depth psychology may have contributed much, little, or nothing to our understanding of the work in question; but it has had a profound influence on modern criticism.

Freud's insights into such characters as Hamlet and Oedipus are well known. His personality formula figures prominently in recent interpretations of the two most celebrated ante bellum American novels.<sup>2</sup> Each novel supposedly derives its peculiar power from the author's basic inner conflict, with specific characters representing personality components. Hawthorne's intense oedipal feelings are allegedly resolved in The Scarlet Letter. Pearl embodies his passionate id, Dimmesdale his weak ego, Chillingworth the author's punishing superego, while Hester represents his mother. Hawthorne's true mother died during the writing of the novel and Hester's burial beside her lover satisfies Hawthorne's need for a reunion with his parent. In Moby Dick, Melville, allegedly frustrated in the pursuit of Eros, strikes back at parental restriction, the Calvinistic Deity, a confining marriage, and other repressive forces. Against them he pits Ahab and most of the crew, who are the primal drives of the id. Starbuck is the rationalistic ego; the whale is the superego, the authority symbols, and repressive agents. Once Moby Dick becomes, among other things, a power which harms Eros maliciously, Ahab's mutilation by the whale takes on new meaning. Although these interpretations should be considered carefully by students of the two novels, they do not represent the best psychoanalytic criticism.

Both rely too heavily on inadequately based generalizations concerning the novelists' psyches, one of the most unsatisfactory types of extrinsic evidence. Both readings treat rich, complex characters as mere personality components, unfairly reducing them to mere abstractions. (Pearl is much more than Hawthorne's id; Hester far more than a mother figure.) These interpretations, moreover, are not sufficiently related to such elements as action, imagery, and structure. I should like to demonstrate a better methodology in the following analysis of a Flannery O'Connor short story. The evidence is entirely intrinsic, drawn from the story rather than the author's supposed personality. Although the major characters suffer from perverted appetites, they are not illegitimately treated as depersonalized abstractions. They remain people like Oedipus and Hamlet. The psychoanalytic aspects of the story are related to other elements and to the work as a whole. Finally, the interpretation is compared to prevailing critical generalizations about O'Connor's canon.

Flannery O'Connor has been received favorably by critics who consider her a keen analyst of the decadent South, following the Gothic tradition of Poe, and with some embarrassment by Catholics who have tried to explain away her interest in the grotesque by calling it the depiction of modern man in need of redemption.<sup>3</sup> (One Catholic apologist states that "it is the typical and essential which interest her, not the unique of abnormal psychology . . .")<sup>4</sup> Neither of these approaches is very helpful in analyzing her controversial short story, "Good Country People," in which she presents Southern victims of a classic neurosis. A brief plot summary must precede the psychoanalytic explication.

Thirty-two year old Hulga Hopewell lives with her mother on a farm. She had lost a leg at age ten in a hunting accident and, because of a weak heart, is unable to use her doctor's degree in philosophy to gain an academic post. Her mother's trite aphorisms and strong admiration of "good country people," plus the meddling of the tenant farmer's wife, drive Hulga to incessant rudeness. Deprived of companions who could perhaps understand and tolerate her atheism and nihilism, her sole consolation is reading erudite books. Then a youthful, countrified Bible salesman, bubbling with naivete and piety, arrives at the farm. On the conscious level, Hulga plans to seduce him in order to prove that even "good country people" are corruptible. Next morning the incongruous couple situate themselves in a hay loft where the Bible salesman takes Hulga's glasses and removes her wooden leg. After amorous advances, he opens his brief case and gets a hollowed out Bible, which contains a bottle of whiskey, a pack of obscene cards, and a box of contraceptives. The thoroughly alarmed Hulga now rejects him, first asking whether he is "good country people" and then shrieking that he is a typical Christian. The youth admits to being "good country people," although "it ain't held me back none"; but bitterly denies Christianity. He packs his belongings, including Hulga's glasses and leg, and leaves her in the loft. Both the main characters and the story's structuring owe much to a perversion first analyzed by Karl Abraham, M.D.

The noted psychoanalyst shows that scopophilia (pleasure in looking) may produce photophobia (hatred of light). This type of neurotic particularly wishes to protect his eyes from the sun, which is a bisexual symbol for certain unpleasant things he wants to avoid. "It not only represented his father (i. e. his watchful eye or his shining splendour) but also his mother, whom he must not look at for fear of calling down upon himself his father's anger."<sup>5</sup> The fear of the sun is partially the result of the patient's desire to view his mother's genitals. Since this was prohibited, the patient's scopophilia was directed to parts of the body far removed from the genitals, to the eyes and feet. According to Abraham:

Even these parts of the body were not themselves permitted to play the role assigned to them through the process of displacement, but had to yield it to acces-

sory parts that did not belong to the body itself. Thus girls who wore glasses or who had a false leg would attract him most of all; and a lame gait which suggested a stiff leg or an artificial limb would have the same effect on him.<sup>6</sup>

We learn that one "of the patient's most pleasurable phantasies was the idea of taking away her glasses from a short-sighted girl, or, better still, a one-eyed girl, or of depriving a young woman of her artificial leg. . . ." <sup>7</sup> (The Bible salesman boasts of stealing a woman's glass eye through the same method he used to trick Hulga.) O'Connor transforms the patient's phantasies into the salesman's perverted acts. We must reject the view that stealing the leg is "a familiar 'comic' device which may have originated on the American frontier, where mutilation was common."<sup>8</sup>

The story's structural unity is based on this neurosis. It begins with a description of the intense gaze of Mrs. Freeman, the tenant's wife, whose eyes "never swerved to left or right." O'Connor thus introduces the image of the strong parental eye; Mrs. Freeman watches everything and everybody, particularly her two daughters. As the salesman makes his escape in the story's final scene, "Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill." The story thus ends as it began, with the parental eye dominant. This image is reinforced by Mrs. Hopewell's close watch over Hulga, who is acutely aware of this scrutiny. When preparing breakfast, prior to keeping her tryst with the salesman, Hulga breaks open two eggs. The two yellow yolks must have suggested eyes, sun-like orbs, for she "perceived her mother's eye upon her." Disturbed as well by mention of the salesman, Hulga soon stumps from the room.

This reaction suggests that Hulga and the salesman are drawn together because they have the same neurosis. It is significant that both have lost their father, he through a fatal accident while Hulga's parents were long ago divorced. And Abraham's patient, whose father was dead, "had the idea that his father was standing in heaven next to the sun and looking down upon him in order to observe what he did," indicating that the father was "being likened to the sun without as yet having been united with it into a single being."<sup>9</sup> Hulga is "squint-eyed" and, in the loft scene, turns her head away from the sunlight. The salesman wears a wide-brimmed hat when he secretly meets Hulga and the description of his eyes during the loft episode suggests that, characteristic of such neurotics, sexual excitement brings an increased flow of blood to the eyes. Hulga's reactions to the salesman's advances also suggest the neurotic. Ordinarily Hulga did not like "nice young men," as the salesman appeared to be. "She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity." Hulga's affinity for this particular youth, whose ignorance and stupidity would usually repel her, is described when "she was thinking that she would run away with him and that

every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it on again." O'Connor surmises that the active desires of the male neurotic have passive female equivalents. Part of the salesman's pitch to Mrs. Hopewell was the claim that he would not live long because of a heart condition. Thinking of her daughter, Mrs. Hopewell was touched because both "had the same condition." This conclusion becomes highly ironic as we discover their similar neurotic afflictions.

Despite perversion's central place in the story, the possibility of a positive affirmation should not be ruled out. Hulga tells the youth that she sees "through to nothing," that she has removed her blindfold and found "that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation." Her formal education and wide reading culminate in nihilism. Through physical suffering and emotional privation, Hulga has been sustained by a sense of intellectual superiority to the "good country people." (In her phantasy prior to the seduction, she anticipates remorse from the youth. "True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life.") This superiority feeling must have been shaken by the salesman's final taunt, "You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" Nihilism is accessible to all, utterly sterile; the way is cleared for religious faith to work a redeeming miracle. But can we say that "all" O'Connor characters "are 'off center,' out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption"?<sup>10</sup> To what extent can the Church accept Freudian man? Should Hulga and the salesman consult a priest or a psychiatrist? O'Connor's readers must remember that modern man's subconscious and spiritual life is troubled and obscure.

Whatever final judgments are made concerning this virtually inexhaustible story, we should concede that the well established perversion affects the characters, structure, action, irony, imagery, and meaning. It makes the story universal, but neither dictates nor excludes a religious affirmation. The way may be cleared for faith, although such solutions to human problems as agnosticism, humanism, and psychiatry are not ruled out. It would be practically impossible to understand this story without help from depth psychology, but no one need fear that literary study will lose its independence. The ideal critic is supposed to be an expert in all academic disciplines. Psychoanalytic insights may partially explain all artists, literary works, and aesthetic responses; but not exhaust literature which is greater than the sum of its parts. However useful as an interpretive tool, depth psychology can not tell the artist how to write or the critic how to proceed.

## Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> In artistic achievement, there is said to be a displacement of narcissism from the creator to the art work. For a detailed analysis of writers' personality traits, see Edmund Bergler, The Writer and Psychoanalysis (New York, 1950). Simon O. Lesser says that "fiction deals, either manifestly or covertly, with our emotional problems" and cites the view that the "basic subject matter of fiction . . . is the struggle between impulse and inhibition." See his Fiction and the Unconscious (Boston, 1957), 61, 78. For unconscious factors in our aesthetic responses, see Lesser, 238-293, and Hanns Sachs, The Creative Unconscious (Cambridge, Mass., 1942).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Levi, "Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," American Imago, X (Winter 1953), 291-305, and Henry A. Murray, "In Nomine Diaboli," NEQ, XXIV (December 1951), 435-452. Other critics who have applied depth psychology to broad areas of American literature include Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York, 1960), and Alfred Kazin, "The Language of Pundits," Atlantic, CCVIII (July 1961), 73-78.

<sup>3</sup> For the view that O'Connor places Catholic themes in Southern settings, see Granville Hicks, "Writer at Home with Her Heritage," Sat. Rev. of Lit., May 12, 1962, 23; Riley Hughes, "Review of A Good Man is Hard to Find," Catholic World, CLXXXII (October 1955), 66; and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor: A Note on Literary Fashions," Critique, II (Fall 1958), 17. Dealing specifically with "Good Country People," one article in a Catholic journal criticizes Miss O'Connor for promoting a "cult of the Gratuitous Grotesque" and presenting "overingenious horrors." See William Esty, "In America, Intellectual Bomb Shelters," Commonweal, LXVII (March 7, 1958), 588. Most Catholic sources have defended her warmly against this and other charges. Besides Duhamel, Greene and Gordon, who are cited later, see James F. Farnham, "The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor," America, CV (May 13, 1961), 280; D. Francis, "Reply," Commonweal, LXII (August 12, 1955), 471; Robert McCown, "Flannery O'Connor and the Reality of Sin," Catholic World, CLXXXVII (January 1959), 285-91; and M. Bernetta Quinn, "View from a Rock: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and J. F. Powers," Critique, II (Fall 1958), 19-27. These defenders claim that Miss O'Connor's work shows the beauty of redemption through its absence, compassion for her characters, a relieving humor, a profound Christian concern for the spiritual and humane, and, generally, that "she is not just a writer who is a Catholic but a Catholic writer." The critic who makes the strongest assertions that O'Connor is a Southern Gothic writer does suggest that she transcends that influence. Jane Hart, "Strange Earth, the Stories of Flannery O'Connor," Ga. Rev., XII (Summer 1958), 215-22.

<sup>4</sup> P. Albert Duhamel, "Flannery O'Connor's Violent View of Reality," Catholic World, CXC (February 1960), 281.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Abraham, Selected Papers of Karl Abraham M.D. (New York, 1960), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>8</sup> J. Greene, "Comic and Sad," Commonweal, LXII (July 22, 1955), 404.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham, Selected Papers, 186.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Gordon, "Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Critique, II (Fall 1958), 9.