Imagined Human Beings

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Preface

What fascinates me most about literature is its portrayal of human beings and their relationships. For many years I have been developing a psychological approach in which I try to understand the behavior of realistically drawn characters in the same way that we understand the behavior of real people. These characters are not flesh and blood creatures, of course, but are imagined human beings who have many parallels with people like ourselves. Numerous critics have maintained that it is inappropriate or impossible to explain the behavior of fictional characters in motivational terms, but I argue in chapter 1 that the rejection of psychological analysis has been a major critical error.

One reason why I find it possible to analyze literary characters psychologically is that I employ the theories of Karen Horney, which explain behavior in terms of its function within the present structure of the psyche rather than in terms of infantile origins. While literature gives little or no information about infancy, it reveals a great deal about the adult. A Horneyan approach does not force us to invent a character’s early history but permits us to utilize exactly the kind of information that literature supplies. For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with Horney, I provide an account of her ideas in chapter 2.

Among the virtues of Horney’s theory are that it is free of arcane terminology and is readily intelligible. I have aspired to the same virtues in this book. I have written it not only for fellow critics, but also for all students, teachers, and lovers of literature who are drawn to novels and plays because of their human interest. For the sake of readability, I have chosen not to become a combatant in the theory wars that are raging in the fields of psychoanalysis and literary studies these days. I have discussed Karen Horney’s place in psychoanalytic thought in my 1994 biography of her, and I have defended various aspects of my psychological approach to literature in previous critical works (Paris 1974, 1978b, 1986a, 1991a, 1991b).
I have entitled this book *Imagined Human Beings* because it is largely about mimetic characters who can be understood in psychological terms. As the subtitle suggests, it is also about various kinds of conflict. There are conflicts, first of all, within and between the characters. In part 2, I analyze the inner divisions of the central characters and the dynamics of their relationships in works by Sophocles, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Barth. I want to show not only the ability of the Horneyan approach to yield clarifying readings of controversial texts but also its range of application.

Perhaps because the title of her first book was *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, some people have the impression that Horney's theory is limited to the time and place in which she wrote. It is not a universal theory, of course (no theory is), but it deals with human needs and defenses that are portrayed in the literature of many periods and cultures. While not ignoring cultural differences, a Horneyan approach enables us to see an underlying similarity in human experience. It can help us to understand the behavior of characters in literature from the past, to enter into their feelings, and to enrich our knowledge of ourselves and others through an understanding of their inner conflicts and relationships.

There are other kinds of conflict that I explore as well. I argue in part 3 that in realistic literature there is usually conflict between plot and rhetoric on the one hand and mimesis on the other. When concretely drawn characters are understood in psychological terms, they tend to escape their roles in the plot and to subvert the view of them advanced by the rhetoric. I look at two patterns of action in particular, the education and vindication plots. When I examine the protagonists of education plots from a Horneyan perspective, they do not seem to have matured but to have switched from one defensive strategy to another. In vindication plots, noble characters are unappreciated at the outset but eventually receive the admiration they deserve. From a Horneyan perspective, these characters appear less admirable than the vindication pattern requires them to be.

There is almost always conflict between an author's interpretations and judgments, which are part of what I mean by "rhetoric," and the mimetic portrait of a character. Authors tend to glorify characters who embody the defensive strategies they favor while accurately portraying their behavior as damaging to themselves or others. A Horneyan approach helps us not only to see disparities between rhetoric and mimesis
but also to understand the forces in the implied author's personality that generate them. There are sometimes inconsistencies within the rhetoric itself, as the author presents conflicting interpretations and judgments. A Horneyan approach can help us to make sense of such inconsistencies by seeing them as a product of the inner divisions of the implied author.

The conflicts between rhetoric and mimesis that are a consequence of realistic characterization can be either exacerbated or reduced by the choice of narrative technique. In part 3, I compare six novels that employ a variety of narrative techniques and try to show that the problems created by both omniscient and first person narration are illuminated by a Horneyan approach and resolved by the use of multiple narrators, such as Emily Brontë employs in *Wuthering Heights*.

This book is a product of the continuing evolution of the psychological approach to literature that I have been unfolding since 1964. It illustrates some of applications of the approach that I have discussed before, but it emphasizes some things that my previous books do not, such as plot and narrative technique, and it applies the approach more systematically and to a wider range of literary issues and texts. It provides distinctive readings, I think, of a dozen major works of Western literature. If read in conjunction with part 1, each chapter can be understood by itself, but the chapters are connected to each other by a series of comparisons and are part of an unfolding story that reaches its climax in my discussion of *Wuthering Heights*. In the concluding chapter, I review what I have done here and elsewhere and suggest additional applications of the approach.

I have been working out the interpretations presented here in my classes for several decades, and I have found the Horneyan approach a joy to teach, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Perhaps my greatest debt is to the students at Michigan State University and the University of Florida who challenged me with their questions and bore with me as I groped for answers. In some cases it took me decades to arrive at a reading with which I felt satisfied.

I have chosen to summarize preceding criticism rather than to document it in detail, but I hasten to say that I am deeply indebted to the critics who have gone before me. I believe that my interpretations are substantially different from theirs, but I have benefited greatly from engaging with their points of view, as I hope others will benefit by engaging with mine. Critical controversies have often alerted me to
contradictory elements in literary works that I might not have seen on my own.

I have profited from having presented papers on some of the works discussed in this book. I formulated the earliest version of my reading of *Madame Bovary* for a conference on Flaubert that was organized by Herbert Josephs at Michigan State University. I presented a paper on *The End of the Road* at a meeting of the Popular Culture Association, in a session chaired by Branimir Rieger, and a partial version of my reading of *Hedda Gabler* at a conference of the International Karen Horney Society. I later presented fuller versions of my reading of this play to a seminar at Trinity College, University of Toronto, and to the Group for the Application of Psychology, University of Florida. I presented an early version of my interpretation of *A Doll's House* at a scientific meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis and a later version to the Literature and Psychoanalysis Group of the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society. All of these presentations were followed by discussions from which I learned a great deal, and I wish to thank those who participated in them.

I have received particular help with my chapter on “The Clerk’s Tale” from Marie Nelson, my medievalist colleague at the University of Florida, and astute comments on my chapter on *The End of the Road* from Andrew Gordon, my Americanist colleague and fellow member of the Institute for Psychological Study of the Arts at UF. Diane Hoeveler and Beth Lau made valuable suggestions for improving the much briefer version of my reading of *Jane Eyre* that was published in the MLA volume they edited on approaches to the teaching of that novel (Paris 1993a).

1982) and another portion in “Third Force Psychology and the Study of Literature, Biography, Criticism, and Culture” (Paris 1986b). The Conclusion draws on Third Force Psychology and the Study of Literature (Paris 1986a), “A Horneyan Approach to Literature” (Paris 1991c), Bargains with Fate (Paris 1991a), and Karen Horney: A Psychoanalyst’s Search for Self-Understanding (Paris 1994a). I wish to thank the journals and presses that have previously published portions of this book for allowing me to include this material here.

I wish to extend my deepest thanks to Jeffrey Berman, the General Editor of the New York University Press’s Literature and Psychoanalysis series, and to my wife, Shirley. This book probably would not have been written without Jeffrey Berman’s invitation, and he has given me sound advice and encouragement at every stage. It was a great help having him in mind as my reader as I sat at my word processor. As always, Shirley has lived through the process of creation with me and has given me the benefit of an immediate perceptive response. She has been my first and best critic and my most precious source of support. I dedicated my first book to her in 1965. It is time for me to dedicate another book to my very dear wife.