Imagined Human Beings
Paris, Bernard Jay

Published by NYU Press

Paris, Bernard Jay.
Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76192.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76192

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2689031
Conclusion

I have tried to show that Karen Horney's mature theory has an important contribution to make to the study of literature. Like any other theory, it does not apply to all texts, but it fits many works from a wide range of periods and cultures, and it illuminates a variety of issues. It yields a distinctive set of insights and is a valuable critical tool.

One use of Horney is in the analysis of mimetically drawn characters. Such characters have always been appreciated by readers, but their study is one of the least developed areas of literary criticism, in part because we have lacked conceptual systems that would permit us to see and talk about them in detail. For many characters, Karen Horney's theory supplies this deficiency. It helps us to make sense of their often puzzling behavior and to see them, however different their cultures, as imagined human beings who are very much like ourselves. It permits us to recover the psychological intuitions of the great realistic writers and to appreciate their genius in mimetic characterization. Horneyan theory is especially suitable for character analysis because of its emphasis on the current structure of the psyche rather than on infantile origins, about which there is rarely much information. If childhood material is present it can be utilized, but if it is absent it need not be invented.

When we analyze characters in motivational terms, we often sense a disparity between rhetoric and mimesis. Authors tend to glorify characters whose solutions are close to their own while realistically portraying the adverse effects of their defenses. A Horneyan approach can help us to distinguish between the implied author's view of a character and the character actually portrayed and to understand the defenses that govern the rhetoric.

Such an approach can also help us to see how patterns of action are driven by defensive strategies. Some plots celebrate or vindicate a preferred strategy, some deflate a despised strategy or show it leading to a character's downfall, and some show a change from a failed strategy to
a favored one. Plots ending in disenchantment portray irreconcilable inner conflicts and the inability of protagonists to find a viable solution.

Two of the most frequent patterns of action in Western literature are education plots, in which flawed characters grow as a result of their mistakes, and vindication plots, in which noble but devalued protagonists prove their worth and receive the recognition they deserve. From a Horneyan perspective, education plots portray the collapse of narcissistic and arrogant-vindictive solutions, which are usually replaced by self-effacement. Sometimes self-effacing characters must learn to be even more self-effacing, and sometimes detached characters discover the sterility of their solution. These plots do not portray psychological growth but rather create the illusion of education by replacing a failed or condemned defensive strategy with one approved by the author and better adapted to the culture. Vindication plots justify perfectionistic, self-effacing, and, occasionally, detached protagonists, who are not as wonderful as plot and rhetoric suggest. Mimetic characters are "creations inside a creation" who often escape their thematic roles and subvert the patterns of action within which they exist.

There are sometimes disparities not only between plot and rhetoric on the one hand and mimesis on the other but also between different strands of the rhetoric. An author may have contradictory attitudes toward a character because of his or her own inner divisions. One of the virtues of Horney's theory is that it enables us to make sense of inconsistencies as part of a system of inner conflicts, without resorting to the sort of rationalization that is common in literary criticism.

The psychological analysis of character, plot, and rhetoric can help us to understand the personality of the author. When we speak of "the author," we can mean one of three things: the "implied author" of a particular work, the "authorial personality" we can infer from some or all of a writer's works, or the historical person who creates the works but also has a life independent of them. We can take a Horneyan approach to all these forms of "the author."

A Horneyan approach can help illuminate authors through their works because in the course of artistic creation their defensive strategies tend to express themselves in a variety of ways. Their works are, among other things, efforts to reinforce their predominant solution and to resolve their inner conflicts by showing themselves, as well as others, the good and evil consequences of the various trends that are warring within
them. They will tend to glorify characters whose strategies are similar to their own and to satirize those who embody their repressed solutions. Their rhetoric will affirm the values, attitudes, and traits of character that are demanded by their dominant solution, while rejecting those forbidden by it. Their plots will often be fantasies in which their claims are honored in magical ways, while their repressed strategies are shown to bring misery and retribution.

Because authors cannot help also expressing their subordinate trends, their works will frequently manifest their inner conflicts. Their attitudes, values, and beliefs will often be inconsistent or self-contradictory. Their conflicting trends will lead them to criticize each solution from the point of view of the others and to have toward their characters the mixed feelings they have toward the aspects of themselves the characters embody. Moreover, the relationships among their solutions may vary in the course of their lives, and this will be reflected in shifts in the kinds of characters they portray, in their rhetoric, and in their dominant fantasies.

In this book I have analyzed the implied authors of a number of works, and elsewhere I have described the authorial personalities of Thomas Hardy (1976a), Jane Austen (1978b), and Shakespeare (1991a). To illustrate the kinds of conclusions we can reach about an authorial personality, I shall draw on *Bargains with Fate* for a brief account of a basic conflict in Shakespeare's personality that can be inferred from a study of his corpus.

From *1 Henry VI* to *The Tempest*, a frequent concern of Shakespeare's plays is how to cope with wrongs and remain good in an evil world. In the histories and the tragedies, the tendency of the main characters is to respond to wrongs by taking revenge, but this contaminates the revengers and eventually results in their destruction. In Horney's terms, the arrogant-vindictive solution, with its emphasis on retaliation and vindictive triumph, does not work. But in these plays the self-effacing solution does not work either, as many innocent, well-intentioned, but weak characters perish. Hamlet's problem, as I see it, is how to take revenge and remain innocent. The problem is insoluble and nearly drives him mad. In a number of the comedies and romances, Shakespeare explores a different response to being wronged—namely, mercy and forgiveness. Because of the conventions of these genres, with their providential universe and miraculous conversions, wronged characters do not have to take revenge: either fate does it for them or they forgive their enemies, who are then permanently transformed. In these plays, the self-effacing
solution, with its accompanying bargain, works very well, but only because the plays are unrealistic.

What I infer about Shakespeare from his plays is that he has strong vindictive impulses, but even stronger taboos against those impulses and a fear of the guilt and punishment to which he would be exposed if he acted them out. He does act them out imaginatively in the histories and tragedies and is purged of them through the destruction of his surrogate aggressors. He also has a fear of his self-effacing side, however; and he shows both himself and us through characters like Henry VI, Hamlet, Desdemona, and Timon of Athens that people who are too good and trusting cannot cope and will be destroyed. In the tragedies he portrays the inadequacy of both solutions. In some of the comedies and in the romances he fantasizes the triumph of good people and avoids guilt either by glorifying forgiveness or leaving revenge to the gods. In *The Tempest*, through Prospero’s magic, he imagines a solution to Hamlet’s problem; for Prospero is at once vindictive and noble, vengeful and innocent. He takes his revenge through his magic by raising a tempest and inflicting various psychological torments, but he does not really hurt anybody, and when he has had his vindictive triumph, he gives up his magic and forgives everyone.

From a Horneyan point of view, one of Shakespeare’s major projects was to find a way of giving expression to the hostile, vindictive, aggressive side of his personality without violating his stronger need to be noble, loving, and innocent. Recognizing this helps us to understand many of his plays and also a number of the sonnets. *The Tempest* is perhaps the most brilliant solution he ever imagined to this essentially insoluble problem, and it is not surprising that it was his last great play. In *Henry VIII*, which followed, the self-effacing side of Shakespeare is overwhelmingly predominant, and we no longer feel ourselves to be in the presence of a complex and fascinating personality. Shakespeare’s inner conflicts have much to do, I suspect, with the richness and ambiguity of his greatest art.

The relation between authors and their works is a vexed question, of course. We must always make allowances for artistic motivations, for generic requirements, and for the inner logic of individual works. Even so, it is possible to tell a good deal about authors from their literary creations when we examine such things as their recurring preoccupations, the personal element in their fantasies, the kinds of characters and relationships they habitually create, and their rhetorical stance.
In order to determine what the implied author and the authorial personality tell us about the writer as a person, we must test our inferences against biographical data that are not drawn from the works—the sort of information that is not available for Shakespeare. So far I have not attempted a biography of a literary artist, but I am convinced that there are many instances in which a Horneyan analysis of the authorial personality could contribute a great deal to our understanding of the writer’s inner life, and I hope to undertake such a study in the future. It might throw a good deal of light on the relation between art and neurosis and the nature of the creative process (see chapter 8, note 1).

Such a study has been undertaken by Lawrance Thompson in his monumental biography of Robert Frost. Thompson accepted Frost’s invitation to be his official biographer in 1939, when Frost was 65, with the understanding that nothing was to be published until after Frost’s death, which did not occur until 1963. As he collected material in the intervening years, Thompson became aware of Frost’s many cruelties, self-contradictions, and inner conflicts, which he set out to describe in his biography.

After completing a draft of the first volume, Thompson read Neurosis and Human Growth and found in it the analytic concepts he needed to make sense of his bewildering subject. If “it mentioned Frost on every page,” he wrote in his notebook, “it couldn’t have come closer to giving a psychological framework to what I’ve been trying to say in the first volume of the biography” (Sheehy 1986, 398). Thompson’s notebook contains one hundred and thirty pages of notes and excerpts from Horney interspersed with such applications to Frost as the following: “Frost’s pattern involved . . . an affectionate clinging to his mother; a fear of beatings (which he got) from his father and a consequent attempt at compliant appeasement; but more than these, his ‘conflict’ caused him to ‘keep aloof.’ The first story he ever tried to write, he said, was the story of his running away to the Happy Valley where the Indian tribes were so nice to him” (quoted by Sheehy 1986, 405). Although Horney’s ideas give an interpretive structure to the biography, she is not mentioned in the text, the footnotes, or the index of any of the volumes. We owe a knowledge of Thompson’s use of Horney to the work of Donald Sheehy (1986).

After studying Neurosis and Human Growth, Thompson revised his first volume to reflect his Horneyan interpretation of his subject. He saw Frost as a man who developed a search for glory in response to early
humiliations and who longed to triumph over and retaliate against those who had hurt him. Frost's contradictory accounts of his life were a product both of his inner conflicts and of his need to confirm his idealized image by mythologizing himself. His poetry reflects these dynamics. Sometimes Frost used it to "escape from his confusions into idealized postures," while at other times it served "as a means of striking back at, or of punishing" those he considered his enemies (Thompson 1966, xix). Horney argues that works of art, like dreams, can originate in our effort to "create solutions for an inner conflict that is disquieting us" (1950, 330), and Thompson claims that Frost's poetry often had such a genesis. The central problem of his life "was to find orderly ways of dealing with the dangerous conflicts he found operative within himself or between himself and others" (1966, xxii). "At his artistic best," he "tried to make his poems provide an effective way of coming to grips with his inner and outer confusions, honestly, for purposes of resolving them" (xix-xx). Thompson concludes that the widespread appeal of Frost derives from the fact that "no themes are more universal and attractive than those which try to offer affirmative resolutions for the conflicts dramatized in his life and in his poetry" (1970, xix). To many, Horney's theory has a similar appeal.

When I first began developing a Horneyan approach to literature, I felt that authors with inner conflicts were bound to produce works full of inconsistencies, but I have come to see that disparities between rhetoric and mimesis and thematic contradictions can be exacerbated, reduced, or even eliminated, in fiction at least, by the choice of narrative technique. Although convention calls for omniscient narrators to be authoritative in their interpretations and judgments, they are often misleading, confused, or defensive, thus frustrating the reader's expectations. In first person narration, similar inconsistencies, misjudgments, and blind spots belong to the character rather than to the work, and they can be strengths rather than weaknesses if they contribute to the richness and accuracy of the psychological portrait. If the first person narrator's perspective is endorsed by the implied author, however, as is the case with Pip and Jane Eyre, the problems are the same as in omniscient narration. The best solution seems to be first person narration in which the implied author cannot be identified with the narrator, as in Notes from Underground (Paris 1974) and The End of the Road, or narration from several dramatized perspectives, as in Lord Jim (Paris 1974) and Wuthering Heights. If we are to understand what motivates
the telling of the story, we must analyze both omniscient and dramatized narrators, along with the implied author. With many works, a Horneyan approach can help us to accomplish this.

If the telling of the story is psychologically motivated, so also is the reader's response. We tend to react to works in terms of our own defenses, inner conflicts, and struggles toward growth. Horney observed that analysts have a "personal equation" that leads them to respond to the solutions and conflicts they encounter in patients in terms of their own personality structures, and the same thing is true for readers responding to texts. An interpretation often tells us as much about the critic as it does about the work. Readers are bound to have different reactions; but, while recognizing the subjectivity of perception, a Horneyan approach can help us make sense of conflicting interpretations by seeing each one as responding to some aspects of the text while suppressing awareness of others.

In the criticism of *Vanity Fair*, for example, most commentators feel that Amelia and Dobbin are presented in a favorable light and that Becky is consistently portrayed as a villain. However, an important minority feel that Thackeray has contempt for Amelia and Dobbin, that he admires Becky, and that he is inconsistent toward the end when he characterizes her as a monster. In *A Psychological Approach to Fiction* (1974), I argued that the implied author of *Vanity Fair* has a personality in which self-effacing trends predominate but in which suppressed aggressive drives get themselves expressed in disguised or indirect ways. The self-effacing side of Thackeray exalts Amelia and Dobbin and condemns Becky, while his aggressive side delights in Becky's triumphs and scorns Amelia as a parasite and Dobbin as a spooney. Both groups of critics can find evidence to support their interpretations, but those who are sympathetic to self-effacing behavior are likely to emphasize Thackeray's glorification of Amelia and Dobbin, while more expansive critics will dwell on his secret admiration of Becky.

There is also a good deal of detachment in *Vanity Fair*, which is manifested by the theme that all is vanity and by the narrator's often unfocused irony, which is the means by which the implied author negates what he has affirmed and protects himself from being identified with the folly of his characters. There are critics who defend Thackeray against charges of sentimentality, cynicism, and inconsistency by pointing to his
irony. The irony is there, but these critics ignore the self-effacing and
expansive components of the novel.

I have found a similar state of affairs in the criticism of Shakespeare
(Paris 1991a) and Jane Austen (Paris 1978b). Those who offer the
orthodox Christian reading of Shakespeare are responding to the side of
him that believes that right makes might and virtue is rewarded, while
those who claim that his portrayal of reality is closer to the modern
absurdist position are more sensitive to the expansive side of Shake-
spere that sees through conventional beliefs. In the case of Jane Austen,
some critics emphasize the aggressive, satirical component of her art;
some stress her gentleness and conservatism; and some focus on the
detached, ironic quality of her vision. Each group overemphasizes an
important component of her work while showing little awareness of
conflicting elements.

All of the interpretations offered in this book are instances of my own
psychologically motivated responses to literature. To me, Horney seems
highly congruent with the texts I have chosen, but I know that this is not
the case for many other readers. Horney works for me because she is
compatible with my temperament, experience, and modes of under-
standing, and my readings will be most appealing to those who share at
least some of my premises.

Although I have wanted to focus on literature, or at least on my
perspective upon it, rather than on the epistemological problems that
beset all interpreters of texts, I am not unaware of those problems. The
disparity between rhetoric and mimesis of which I so frequently speak is
really a disparity between my interpretation of the author’s view of a
character and my understanding of what I regard as the mimetic portrait.
I know that my approach to character, plot, rhetoric, and narrative
technique will be of interest mainly to those who are receptive to Hor-
ney. It is my hope, of course, that that receptivity will be increased by
my Horney-inspired readings of major works of Western literature from
Antigone to The End of the Road.