Seminar on Hamlet

Question: *"Classical psychoanalytic approaches to characters in literature rest on the assumption that literary characters may be treated as though they were living beings with psychological complexities and complexes of their own. Consider whether or not this assumption can be justified and illustrate your answer with reference to Shakespeare's Hamlet."*

In my seminar I will take the position that while characters can appropriately be analyzed through a psychological lens, the psychoanalytic process specifically is flawed in it's ability to recon with the changed nature of fictitious characters.

This stance is especially applicable to *Hamlet*, which was an early depiction in literature that deliberately showcases mental health quite holistically. Much of the text of *Hamlet* focuses on the title character and those closest to him trying to understand why his mental health is in the state that its in, and so a literary theory which focuses on the dissection of mental health is therefore extremely applicable.

My disagreement with psychoanalysis in specific is largely to argue that it is too narrow for the holistic approach that *Hamlet* takes on the subject. Freud and Jones argue that Hamlet's anguish is driven almost singularly by a desire for his mother. While evidence for this is present in the text, it disregards many aspects of Hamlet's experience described by himself and others, and oversimplifies the conflict between Hamlet and Gertrude.

Using the works of Ernest Jones, Freud, and the text of *Hamlet*, I will argue that the use of the psychoanalytic framework in literature is ultimately doomed to be an incomplete reading, even when it is accurate in many assessments.

1. Thesis statement: Here is what I will prove
    - While there is much to be gleamed from a psychological reading of characters, psychoanalytical theory has proven to be too limited to reveal information about the text to people who do not already buy into psychoanalysis.
    - I will also argue that while psychoanalysis has been a powerful tool for some, those in the medical field of psychology have broadened their horizons significantly and literary criticism should try to keep step with this

2. Discuss the reason we attempt to use critical theory in the first place
    - Critical theory is one tool people who study literature can use to gain more information about how the text their reading interacts with the world around them.
    - Because of this almost all critical theory uses a framework which relates to wider social ideas which are being explored.
    - While critical theory often attempts to reveal the entire truth of a text, this aim is hindered by the nature of the fact that more information is often gleaned by being limited in what we're looking for and providing a framework.
    - An example of one I consider a very functional theory is feminism. Under feminism there are many different schools of thought, and through this disagreement of what feminism is, could be, should be, has been etc, the framework furthers the discussion of both feminism and the text in a way that is dynamic
    - There are limits inherent to the practice of critical theory in that we cannot really ever know the intentionality of the author in many subjects, nor can we be so bold as to declare we understand truth. I only have 10 minutes though so I'm not getting into that.

3. Define Psychoanalytical theory, and contextualize it being more specific than just being a psychological theory.
    - Psychoanalytical theory is based around psychoanalysis, which is a school of thought within psychology developed by one Sigmund Freud. This was developed pretty early on, with the earliest theories being penned less than 30 years after what is considered to be the modern birth of psychology. [1]
    - Without describing the entire theory which everyone else has also been studying, I will say that Freud had some very interesting ideas and, even in areas where he has since been proven to be way off the mark, he did get the ball rolling on several conversation topics. My main criticism of psychoanalysis, (especially Freudian psychoanalysis moreso than Jungian but that is a tangent) is that everything seems to always come back to a singular and unfalsifiable source: sexual feelings for your parents, your own genitals and the genitals of others, and wishing you were your dad.

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[1] Kendra Cherry, 'Timeline of the History of Modern Psychology', *Verywell Mind*, 24 October 2005 <https://www.verywellmind.com/timeline-of-modern-psychology-2795599>

4. Introduce Hamlet as an ideal candidate for testing whether psychoanalysis is capable of achieving the aims that critical theory seeks to achieve.
    - Hamlet is a play about someone going through a very intense psychological process, in large part because of his parents, and the people around him believe him to be going insane. The play has been widely beloved and widely analyzed from many perspectives. This is the perfect stomping ground where we can test the ability of psychoanalytic theory to reveal truths about the text.
    - Quote from King Claudius, Act 3 Scene 1:
      "And can you by no drift of circumstance
      Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
      Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
      With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?"[2]

5. Ernest Jones already sought to do that and here's how he did that
    - Ernest Jones, by way of Freudian analysis, already explains his definition of lunacy quite well, which he calls psychoneurosis:
    - "A psychoneurosis means a state of mind where the person is unduly, and often painfully, driven or thwarted by the 'unconsious' part of his mind, that buried part that was once the infant's mind and still live on side by side with the adult mentality that has developed out of it and should have taken it's place" p.52[3]
    - Ernest then goes on to diagnose Hamelt, and here is where my frustrations with the method begin: he provides conclusions before contextual evidence, not as a thesis statement but rather as a given, without explaining where these conclusions have come from.
    - He explains the source of Hamlet's psychoneurosis as such: "If, in fact, Hamlet had in years gone by, as a child, bitterly resented having had to share his mother's affection even with his own father, had regarded him as a rival, and had secretly wished him out of the way so that he might enjoy undisputed and undisturbed the monopoly of that affection? … [the murder of his father gave way to] The actual realization of his early wish in the death of his father at the hands of a jealous rival." p.52-53[4]
    - This is the first place he suggests that Hamlet secretly did want this father dead, and he does not spend any time in his essay explaining why he believes this.

6. Explain where I think he succeeds
    - While Jones avoids using textual evidence for many of his claims there are two cases in particular where he took the time to tie his conclusions back to actions within the text, and those were the places where I felt most convinced. I'm not going to use full quotes here to explain because everyone has read this already and I'm already running over time.

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[2] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet / Hamlet* (Alianza (Buenos Aires, AR), 2005)
[3] Jones, Ernest, *Hamlet and Oedipus.* (Macmillan, 1949)
[4] Jones, Ernest, *Hamlet and Oedipus.* (Macmillan, 1949)

- His anger at ophelia being mixed up with his anger at his mother, where both are taking the side of other men in their lives without considering their pre-existing relationship, such that when he yells at ophelia 'get thee to a nunnery' when he feels she's flip-flopping on being with him or not, he is simultaneously yelling at his mother for a similar case of trying to come back after what feels like a betrayal. I do however, disagree with the idea that its because he wants to have sex with both of them.
- It's a very long section but I essentially agree with Jones' analysis of why Hamlet puts on a play of the circumstance within the play, again because he uses the text to support his stance that Hamlet is hoping the play, the dream within this dream, will be enough to resolve what he doesn't want to do.
- Hamlet's inability to kill his uncle without killing himself, because he sees so much of himself in his uncle, this being proven somewhat in the text of the play. I disagree with the conclusion being that its because he wants to let his uncle keep doing the incest he wants to do, so he can't kill him until his mom is no longer available. There is a total lack of curiosity about the possibility that Hamlet pauses on the prospect of killing the murderer, because in doing so he would become the thing the seeks to kill. This lack of curiosity takes me to my next point.

7. Explain why those successes are not enough to make psychoanalysis viable as a complete framework
    - Even within Jones' essay, he openly admits to disregarding other possible motives in pursuit of proving psychoanalysis as the central cause for everything.
    - "In this discussion of the motives that move or restrain Hamlet we have purposely depreciated the subsidiary ones." p.61[5]
    - There is a lack of curiosity in other potential explanations for Hamlet's behavior, such as the question of how justice can actually be achieved, the morality of revenge, being paralyzed by grief, a deep sense of isolation in his task at hand, or even feeling betrayed by his mother for reasons other than sexual desire. A lack of defense for opposing ideas in combination with a functionally unfalsifiable statement makes it very difficult for me to consider this suggestion legitimately.
    - I accept the possibility that Ernest Jones is simply a bad writer and is not an adequate representation of the entire theory. In reading Bonepart's analysis of the black cat I was still unconvinced of it's conclusions, but she did a much better job at providing relevant textual evidence to the claims she was making.
    - Where I go from disagreement to discomfort is that this theory, at the time this essay was written, was predominantly explored by practitioners. Using fictional characters, created for metaphor in play, to make massive leaps of logic without providing evidence makes me feel a huge amount of concern that Jones performed this line of thinking on his patients- which he admits to doing himself.

[5] Jones, Ernest, *Hamlet and Oedipus.* (Macmillan, 1949)

- “This is at all events the mechanism that is actually found in the real Hamlets who are investigated psychologically” p53[6]

8. Argue for an evolution in the framework, the future of how literary analysts can develop on this and continue with it, much how psychology has grown away from Freud
    - I wish I had the time to discuss modern takes on psychoanalytical theory, and how it’s being used today, but the short version is this: Psychoanalysis has scientifically fallen out of favor.
    - From the National Library of Medicine, Joel Paris writes “Almost no scientific theory or medical treatment that is a century old can be expected to survive without major changes. In fact, one of the main reasons for the decline of psychoanalysis is that the ideas of Freud and his followers have gained little empirical support.[8] Freud’s theoretical model of the mind and of child development has been challenged and refuted by a wide range of evidence.[9]”[7]
    - Critical theory using a psychological lens was built on the science available at the time, and as such when the science changes, those who wish to use the field of psychology to discuss fiction must acknowledge that change, especially when these stances have been so repeatedly disproven.

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[6] Jones, Ernest, *Hamlet and Oedipus.* (Macmillan, 1949)
[7] Paris, Joel, ‘Is Psychoanalysis Still Relevant to Psychiatry? - PMC’, *PMC Home*, 31 January 2017 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5459228/>

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